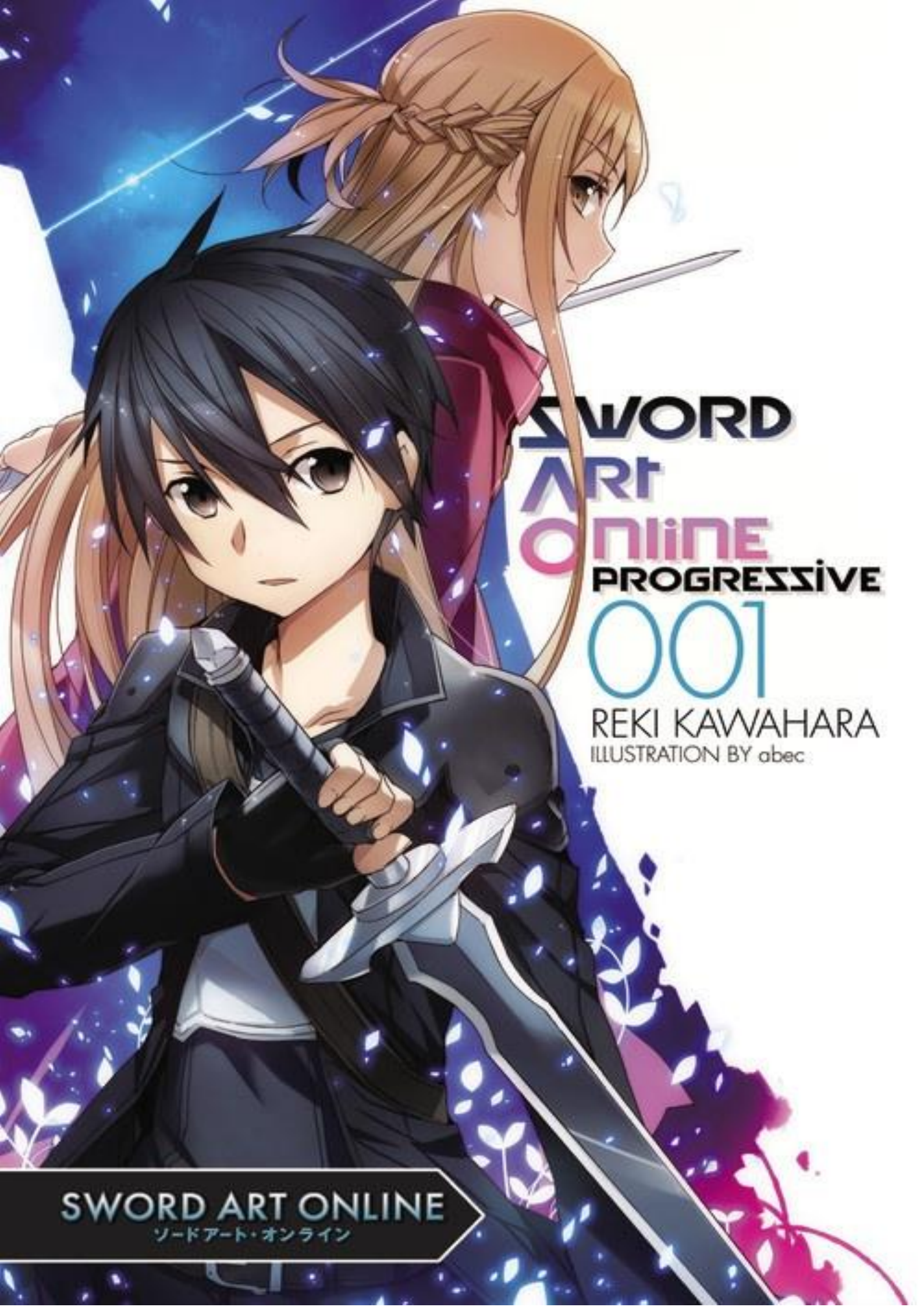
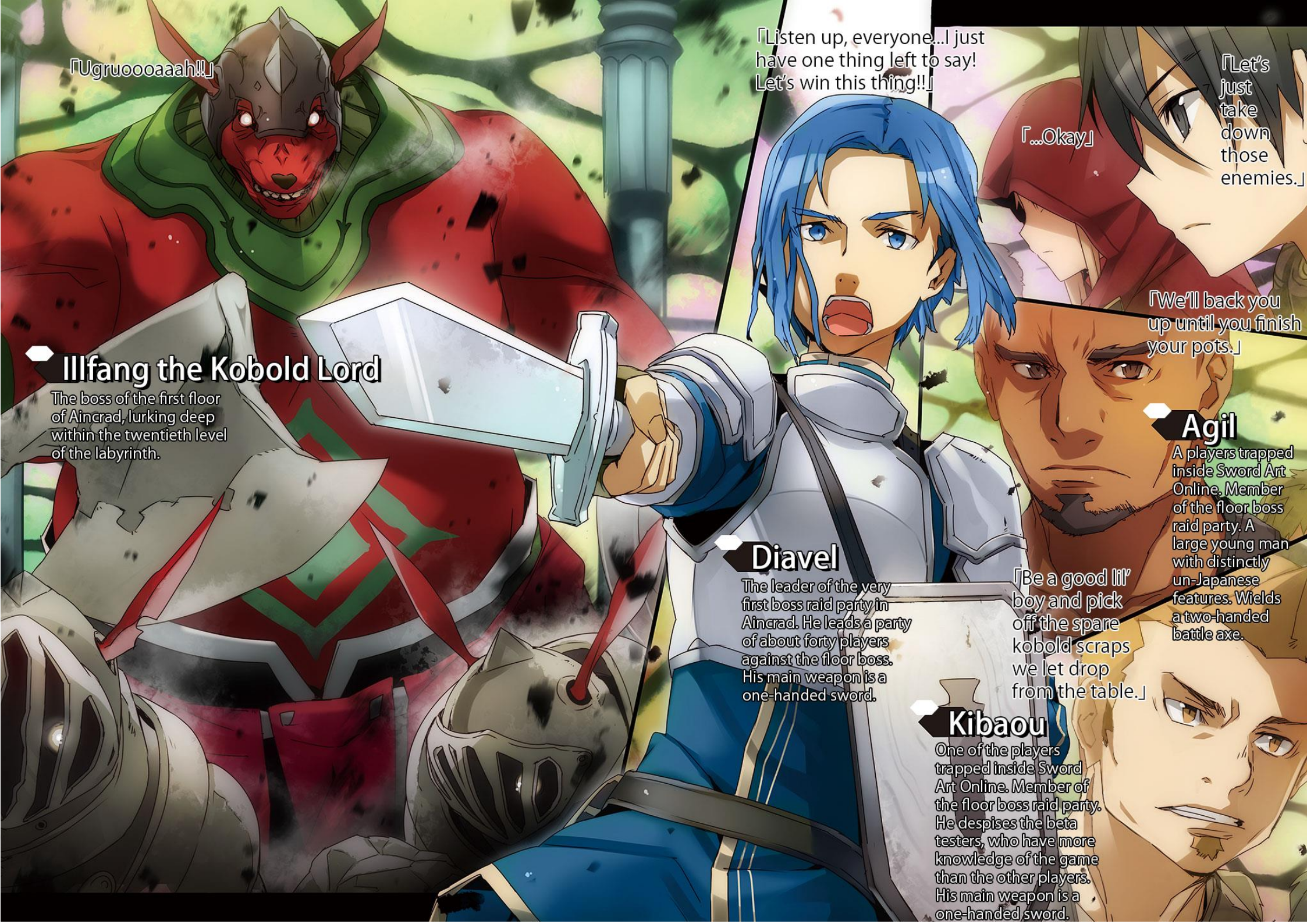

SWORD ART ONLINE
ソードアート・オンライン
プログレッシブ
001
川原 礫
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電撃文庫


SWORD ART ONLINE
PROGRESSIVE
001
REKI KAWAHARA
ILLUSTRATION BY abec
SWORD ART ONLINE
ソードアート・オンライン


「A little bit overkill, if you ask me.」
「...We're all going to die anyway.」
Asuna
A player trapped inside Sword Art Online. Without a care for her life, she throws herself into battle against monsters.
Kirito
A swordsman aiming to beat the top floor of Aincrad. He adventures as a solo player, working only to strengthen himself.


「You met your quota of upgrading materials for your Wind Fleuret during our hunt, right?」
「All right. I'll take your weapon and materials.」
Nezha
A blacksmith who runs his business in the east plaza of Urbus, the main city of the second floor.


「Ugruoooaaah!!」
Illfang the Kobold Lord
The boss of the first floor of Aincrad, lurking deep within the twentieth level of the labyrinth.
「Listen up, everyone...I just have one thing left to say! Let's win this thing!!」
Diavel
The leader of the very first boss raid party in Aincrad. He leads a party of about forty players against the floor boss. His main weapon is a one-handed sword.
「...Okay」
「Let's just take down those enemies.」
「We'll back you up until you finish your pots.」
Agil
A players trapped inside Sword Art Online. Member of the floor boss raid party. A large young man with distinctly un-Japanese features. Wields a two-handed battle axe.
「Be a good lil' boy and pick off the spare kobold scraps we let drop from the table.」
Kibaou
One of the players trapped inside Sword Art Online. Member of the floor boss raid party. He despises the beta testers, who have more knowledge of the game than the other players. His main weapon is a one-handed sword.


「Here it comes!」
「Vrrrooooooo!!」
Baran the General Taurus
The boss of the second floor of Aincrad, lurking deep withing the twentieth level of the labyrinth.



# Floating Castle Aincrad
## Floor Data

### ■FIRST FLOOR

Aincrad is broadly conical in shape, so the lowest floor is the largest. The circular floor is about six miles across with a surface of over thirty square mile. Because of its size, there is a large variety of terrain to be found. At the southern tip of the landmass is the Town of Beginnings, a city over half a mile across, surrounded by a semicircular wall. Outside of the city are rippling plains filled with boars and wolves, as well as insect monsters such as worms, beetles, and wasps. Across the field to the northwest is a deep forest, while the northeast holds swampy lowlands dotted with lakes. Beyond these regions lie mountains, valleys, and ruins, each full of powerful monsters.

Aside from the Town of Beginnings, the floor is dotted with a number of other settlements of various sizes, the most prosperous of which is Tolbana, a valley town closest to the floor's labyrinth. At the northern end of the floor is a squat tower three hundred yards across and a hundred yards tall—the first-floor labyrinth.

The boss of the first floor is Illfang the Kobold Lord, who wields a curved blade. Illfang is always accompanied by three Ruin Kobold Sentinels clad in metal armor and armed with halberds.

### ■SECOND FLOOR

A savanna realm covered in plains and boulders, the second floor is roughly the same size as the first floor. Mesas loom over the plains, dotted with small caves through which underground river run. The second floor is divided into a wide-open northern half and a narrow southern half. The western fields are home to dangerous wild oxen, while the wastelands beyond that are prowled by even more deadly creatures.

The main city of the second floor which contains the teleport gate that allows travel to other floors, is Urbus, a settlement carved directly down into a three-hundred-yard-wide mesa top, with only the outer perimeter left standing. Just two miles to the southeast of Urbus is a small village called Marome.

The boss of the second floor (according to the beta test) is Baran the General Taurus. Baran uses a golden two-handed battle hammer. He is accompanied by Nato the Colonel Taurus. Tauruses are a dangerous race in particular, due to their paralysis-causing sword skill, Numbing Impact.

# SWORD ART ONLINE PROGRESSIVE

## ARIA ON A STARLESS NIGHT



FIRST FLOOR OF AINCRAD, NOVEMBER 2022

# Chapter 1
# Aria of a Starless Night
*Aincrad 1st Floor, November 2022*

## *1*

Just once, I saw a real shooting star.

It wasn't during summer vacation; it was from the window of my house. For people living in town with crisp air and truly dark nights, shooting stars are not uncommon, but unfortunately, Kawagoe City of Saitama prefecture, where I have lived for all fourteen years of my life, has neither of those qualities. Even on a clear night, the most that can be seen with the naked eye are second magnitude stars.

But, late one midwinter night, when I happened to glance outside my window on a whim, I definitely saw it. On that deep night without many stars, the city lights formed a pallid shroud covering the sky. And in an instant, it was cut through by a quick flash of light. My soon-to-be 5th grade self thought childishly, "I must make some kind of wish"…which up to that point was fine, but the wish that appeared in my mind was, "I wish my next monster drop will be a rare item", without a hint of feeling in it. I suppose it sprang from the fact that I was playing an MMORPG I was hooked on at the time.

The shooting star I glimpsed that day, I saw once again three (or was it four?) years later, glowing with the same color, moving with the same speed.

However, this time, I didn't see it with the naked eye, nor was I beneath a dark grey night sky.

I saw it in the depths of a gloomy dungeon, produced through a Nerve Gear—the world's first full sensory type VR interface.

One could describe the fight as bloodcurdling.

The level 6 humanoid monster, «Ruin Kobold Trooper», was swinging a barbaric hand ax, and the person fighting the Kobold was barely able to dodge. I felt a chill run down my back as I watched the battle. But after the player dodged three consecutive strikes, the Kobold completely lost its balance and, without missing that chance, the person used a sword skill at full strength.

It was the first skill that could be learned in the rapier category: the single thrust attack «Linear». It was a simple basic skill that consisted of thrusting straight forward by first holding the sword in front of the body and then putting in a twist from there, but the speed was terrifying. Clearly, the speed hadn't been left to the system motion assist alone, but was boosted by the player's own movement commands.

During the beta test, I had seen with my own eyes numerous party members and enemy monsters use this very sword skill countless times. But this time, I could not see the rapier itself, only the trajectory drawn by the light effect that was characteristic of sword skills. That pure white flash, as it pierced through the darkness of the dimly-lit dungeon, made me recall the shooting star from that day.

The rapier user continued to dodge the Kobold's three strike combo, following with a counterattack using «Linear». After using this attack-defend pattern three more times, the player finished off the armed beastman, one of this Labyrinth's stronger monsters, without a single wound. Despite this, the battle didn't seem to have been an easy one. Once the lethal sword skill had pierced the center of its chest and the monster dispersed into particles as it collapsed backwards, the rapier user then staggered as if pushed by the insubstantial polygon shards and leaned back onto the corridor wall. The person slowly slid against the wall down to a sitting position, and began breathing heavily.

The person didn't seem to notice me standing about 15 meters away at the corner of the intersection.

To wordlessly distance myself and find my own prey was my normal procedure. A month ago, on that eventful day, I decided to selfishly live as a solo player. Ever since that day, I have never approached a lone person. The only exception was if I saw a player in battle who was clearly in danger; however, the rapier user's HP gauge was still near full. At the very least, the person didn't seem to need the help of some busybody at all.

Even so…

After about five seconds of deliberation, I left the shadows of the intersection and strode toward the still-sitting rapier user.

Skinny figure, somewhat slender. The torso was equipped with a dark red leather tunic with a lightweight copper breastplate, while the lower body was dressed in neat leather pants, with boots up to the knees. A hooded cape cloaked the body from head to below the waist, so the face could not be seen. Other than the cape, the equipment seemed to be that of a fencer, but my own appearance as a swordsman was almost the same as well. My beloved sword «Anneal Blade», the reward from a high-difficulty quest, is very heavy. So, to keep my skills on point, I wear very little metal armor—just a small chest guard with a dark-grey leather coat over it.

Noticing my approaching footsteps, the rapier user's shoulders trembled suddenly, but didn't move any further. The fact that I wasn't a monster should have been revealed by a green-colored cursor in that person's view. He had his face buried deep behind raised knees, giving a strong 'Just pass by and move on' impression, but—I stopped about two meters from the rapier user and opened my mouth.

"…That was an extreme overkill just now."

The small shoulders covered by the thick cloth of the cape moved slightly again. The hood jerked, moved up about 5cm, and from the darkness within, two pupils sharply shot towards me. The only thing I could discern were light brown irises. The features of the face couldn't be seen at all.

For a few seconds, the rapier user continued to watch me with that same sharp gaze he used in the battle earlier, but eventually his head tilted slightly to the right in an 'I don't get it' kind of gesture.

Seeing that, I thought, 'So it's as I thought'.

For what looked like solo play to me, there was one huge incongruity.

The «Linear» released by the rapier user was so perfect that I couldn't help but shiver. The conciseness of the pre-motion and post-motion, and, most of all, the speed of the thrust that prevented perception of the rapier itself. Never before have I beheld such a terrifying and beautiful sword skill.

So from the beginning, I thought that he must similarly be a beta tester. Before this world became a death game, extensive battle experience must have been accumulated to attain this speed.

However, seeing «Linear» a second time, I had doubts about my guess. The skill was perfect, but the pace of battle was too risky. Certainly, «Minimal Side Step Defense» has a higher counterattack speed over parrying or blocking, and won't decrease weapon/armor durability. However in exchange, when the defense fails, the danger is the greatest. At worst, counter damage may be applied and a stun could occur. In solo battles, a stun is fatal.

The imbalance between the perfect sword skill and the risky defense tactics. For some reason I wanted to know the reason why, no matter what. That's why I moved closer and greeted the person, saying that no matter what the circumstances were, it was overkill.

However, the opponent didn't seem to understand the well-known net game term. Meaning, the rapier user in front of me was not an original beta tester. Not only that, he might not even have been an MMO player before coming here.

I took a short breath, and explained anew.

"Overkill means…in comparison to the monster's remaining HP, the damage dealt was way too much. The Kobold earlier was almost dead after the second «Linear»…no, it was practically dead already. Its HP gauge had only two or three dots remaining. Instead of finishing it with a sword skill, a light normal attack would have been more than enough."

In this world, how many days…how many weeks had it been since I had talked so much? Pondering that question, I close my mouth.

Even after listening to my speech, the fruit of my hard work and poor speaking skills, the rapier user had no reaction for over ten seconds. Just when I thought I hadn't managed to get through, a small voice finally slipped through the lowered hood.

"……Overkill, is there any problem with it?"

At that moment, I belatedly realized this rapier user huddled in front of me was one of this world's extraordinarily rare—especially in the depths of a dungeon like this—«Female Players».

It had already been a month since the official launch of the world's first VRMMORPG, «Sword Art Online».

By this time, the average MMO would begin to see players approaching the level cap, and the world map should have been explored from end to end. However for SAO, even the current top class group was barely Level 10—I didn't know how high the cap was, but—there was no way that could have been it. The floating castle Aincrad, where the game is staged, had only been conquered by a few percent in total as well.

The reason was that the current SAO was a game that wasn't a game; in a sense, it had become a «Jail». Manual logout wasn't possible and death of the avatar amounted to death of the real player. With these conditions, not many people entered dungeons filled with dangerous monsters and traps.

Also, after the Gamemaster forced all avatars to be the same gender as their real-world players, females were very rare. Even after a month, I think almost all of them still stayed in the «Starting City». In the first sizable dungeon, the «First Floor Labyrinth[1]», I have seen female players only two or three times, and they were all members of big parties.

That's why I would never have imagined the solo rapier user I met in an unexplored area of the Labyrinth would be a female player.

For a moment, I thought about mumbling an apology and leaving the area. It wasn't because I found fault with the kind of male players that always spoke out to any female player they saw; I just sincerely didn't like to be thought of that way.

On the other hand, if the opponent had said something like 'It's my choice' or 'Leave me alone,' I would have said 'I see' and left immediately. However, the rapier user's curt reply had been a question. So, I stopped myself from moving away at the last minute, and once again answered by desperately putting to use all my language skills.

"……Overkill has no penalty or demerit from the system, but…it's bad for efficiency. Sword skills require concentration, so using them continuously is mentally exhausting. There's also the return path, so it's better to not fight in a way that makes you tired."

"……Return path?"

Again, a questioning voice emanated from deep inside the hood. Fatigue made it very faint and the intonation was also thin, but regardless, I thought her voice was quite beautiful. Of course, that's not something I'd say out loud, though.

Instead, I explained once more.

1 The tower connecting each floor is referred to as a 迷宮区(Labyrinth district), while regular dungeons are just called ダンジョン (Engrish for „dungeon"). Yen Press also translates 迷宮 as „labyrinth" instead of „dungeon". Thus the translation has been altered to use „labyrinth" to refer the tower and „dungeon" to refer to a dungeon in general.

"Yes. It takes about an hour to get from here to the Labyrinth exit, and from there to the closest town is about 30 minutes even when moving quickly, right? Exhaustion increases mistakes. You look like a solo player, and for a single person, any small mistake might cost you your life."

While my mouth moved, I asked myself, 'Why am I speaking with all my might?' Because the opponent is female—that couldn't be the reason, since I had given a long speech before knowing that.

If I were her, and an upper rank person had lectured me like this, I would have said, 'It's my choice, so leave me alone,' or something like that. So, with my personality and actions rather at odds, I was about to break a sweat, when the rapier user finally replied.

"…Then, there's no problem. I'm not returning."

"What? …N-Not returning to town? But…replenishing potions, repairing equipment…and sleep..."

I asked dumbfoundedly. The rapier user's shoulders shook slightly.

"I don't need medicine when I'm not taking damage, and I bought five of the same sword…As for resting, I use the nearby safe area."

As the murmur faded, I was speechless for a while.

Safe areas were certain rooms in a dungeon that monsters would not enter. A safe area could be recognized by a special colored torch placed on the wall in each of its four corners. While hunting and mapping, it's a nice place; but, even so, it could only be used for maybe an hour of short rest. The floor was made of cold stone and of course there was no bed, and the footsteps or growls of nearby monsters could be heard frequently. No matter how courageous a player was, deep sleep was absolutely impossible.

But, based on what I just heard, this rapier user had been using a safe area in lieu of a town inn and has continued secluding herself in the Labyrinth…is that what she means?

"……How many hours has it been?"

I fearfully inquired.

The rapier user answered after taking a long breath.

"Three days…or four days…Is that all? The monsters around here will revive soon, so I'll be going."

With her delicate left hand wrapped in a thick leather glove, she pushed off the wall and stood up unsteadily.

Her still-unsheathed slender sword drooped down heavily as if she were holding a two-handed sword one-handedly, and the rapier user turned her back to me.

As she took one, two steps away from me, her cape was in tatters all over, revealing that much of its durability had been lost. No, for cloth equipment that had been used for a four-day hunting expedition, the mere fact that it had maintained its shape was a miracle. The earlier 'As long as I don't take damage' comment might not have been an exaggeration…

After realizing that, I spat out some unthinkable words to her slender back.

"……If you fight like that, you will die…"

Suddenly stopping, the rapier user leaned her shoulder on the right wall and turned around slowly. From within the hood, her eyes, which I had seen were hazel before, pierced through me with a light red inner glow.

"……Everyone is going to die anyways."

The hoarse, cracked sound made the cool Labyrinth air even colder.

"In just one month, 2000 people have died, and still not even the first floor has been cleared yet. It isn't possible to clear this game. Where and how you die, and whether it's sooner…or later, is the only difference……"

The longest, most emotion-filled speech that I had heard up until now faltered in the middle and trailed off.

In front of me, as I stepped forward in reaction, the rapier user was struck by an invisible paralyzing attack and slowly sank to the floor.

# *2*

As she was falling to the dungeon floor, a prosaic thought drifted through her mind. 'How is it possible to faint in a virtual space?'

Loss of consciousness meant the brain's normal blood flow was momentarily delayed, and its functions stopped. The reason for this ischemia could be a malfunction in the heart or blood vessels, anemia or low blood pressure, hyperventilation or many other reasons; but while FullDiving in a VR world, the physical body is resting on a bed or reclining chair. Furthermore, the physical bodies of the players imprisoned by this death game «SAO» were probably currently placed in a hospital; their health would obviously be checked and continuously monitored, and if necessary, even medicine would be used. It's hard to believe that loss of consciousness would be due to some physical abnormality—.

After she thought that far within her fading consciousness, at the end she thought, 'That kind of thing doesn’t matter.'

Yes, nothing matters to me anymore...

Because, she will die here. Fainting in a dungeon full of violent monsters, there was no way she would be unharmed. There was another player nearby, but she did not think he would go so far as to endanger his life to help another who had fallen.

Anyway, how could he help? In this world, the maximum weight a single player can carry is strictly limited by the system. In the depths of a dungeon, everyone carries medicine and extra equipment to their weight limit, leaving space for monster drops such as gold and items. With all those combined, the act of carrying a whole person is absolutely impossible.

—Upon thinking to this point, she finally realized something.

What she thought as she was hit by a strong sense of dizziness and she fell to the ground was, 'Finally, I can relax without thinking for a long time'. The hard stone floor of the dungeon was what should have been under her body, but somehow, the feeling against her back was curiously soft and fluffy. Her body felt warm, and a light breeze caressed her cheek…

She opened her eyes with enough force to make a sound.

She was no longer in a dungeon lined by thick walls. She was in a clearing in a forest, surrounded by old trees covered in golden moss and thorny brushes with small flowers. At the center of a round space of about 7 or 8 meters in diameter, she seemed to have been lying on a soft carpet of grass while unconscious…no, asleep.

But—why? How had she, who had fallen in the depths of the dungeon, been moved to this far away field?

The answer to that question was found when she turned her view 90 degrees to the right.

At the edge of the clearing, there was a grey silhouette crouching over the root of a particularly majestic tree. He held a somewhat large one-handed sword both arms, and its sheath was propped up under his lowered head. Long black hair covered his face so that it couldn't be seen, but judging from his equipment and physique, there was no mistaking that he was the male player who had spoken with her before she fainted in the dungeon.

Most likely, that man had used some kind of method to move her out of the dungeon to this forest after she had fallen. She quickly looked past the grove of trees forest in the background. On the left side, about 100 meters away, a huge tower reaching up to the sky—the First Floor Labyrinth of Aincrad stood towering above there in deep black.

She returned her gaze to her right again.

Sensing her movement, the man's dark-grey leather coat covered shoulders shook and he lifted his head slightly. Even in the bright midday forest, the man's two eyes were black, like a starless night.

The moment her eyes met his dark-colored eyes, she felt small fireworks exploding in her head.

From between her grinding teeth, Asuna—Yuuki Asuna, forced out a low, hoarse voice.

"Unnecessary…effort."

After being imprisoned in this world, Asuna had asked herself hundreds and thousands of times.

Why, at that time, did she touch a new game machine that was not even hers? Why did she place it on her head, lie down on the mesh recliner, and issue the start command?

The dream VR interface and cursed killing machine, «Nerve Gear», and the game disc of the prison of an immeasurable number of souls, «Sword Art Online», hadn't been purchased by Asuna, but by her older brother Kouichirou. However, even for her brother, things like MMORPGs or anything with the name of 'game' had been unrelated to his life since his youth. Born as the first son to the president of the huge electronics-manufacturing company «Recto», he had grown up while receiving all the education and training needed for him to become his father's successor, and at the same time being excluded from everything unnecessary to that. Why that brother of hers would be interested in Nerve Gear…no, in SAO, was something that she did not, even now, understand.

Ironically however, Koichiro would not be able to play the first game he bought in his life. On the first day of game's official service, he was sent on a business trip overseas. On the day before his departure, when facing her from his seat at the dining table, he had complained about it jokingly, but she sensed that he genuinely had regrets about it.

Though not as extreme as Koichiro, the only experience of game playing that Asuna, a third-year middle school student, had previously had up until now were free games on her cell phone once in a while. She knew about the existence of net games, but with high school entrance exams closing in, she had no reason or motivation to be interested in them—or that was how it should have been.

That's why even she couldn't explain why, on that day one month ago, on the afternoon of November 6, 2022, she had visited her brother's vacant room, taken the fully set-up Nerve Gear from the top of his desk, placed it on her head, and said «Link Start».

From just one action, everything changed on that day…no, it could be said to have ended.

In the beginning, Asuna had locked herself within an inn room in the Starting City to wait for the incident to end, but after two weeks passed with no word from the real world, she gave up hope on being saved from outside. Also, having learned that the number of player deaths had already reached over one thousand at that time and yet in spite of that even the first dungeon had not been broken through, she realized that waiting inside for the game to be cleared was useless.

The only remaining choice was therefore «What kind of death?».

Staying in the only safe city for months, no, years like this could be one way. However, no one can be sure that the rule of «Monsters cannot enter cities» will continue forever.

Instead of continuing to huddle in a small dark room while fearing for the future, it's better to go outside. Use all her ability to learn, train, and fight. If she ended up dying after using all her strength, at the very least she would not need to lament whims of the past and regret a lost future.

Run. Charge forward. Then disappear. Like a fleeting shooting star burning up upon entering the atmosphere.

Holding onto that single thought, Asuna had left the inn, and stepped out into the wilderness of the MMORPG world, of which she didn't know a single piece of terminology. She chose her own weapon, and relying on the one skill she learned, reached the bottom of the dungeon that no one had been to before.

Then today, Friday, December 2, at 4 AM. Asuna had fainted due to, most likely, a natural neural reflex from the fatigue of continuously fighting, and her path should have come to an end. In the Starting City's «Black Iron Palace», near the left side on the «Monument of Life», the name 'Asuna', run through by a horizontal line, should have been neatly inscribed, and everything would have ended—is how it should have been. And yet.

"Unnecessary……"

Asuna again squeezed out that single word again. The dark haired, single-handed sword user crouching four meters away from her lowered his night-colored eyes. Her first impression of him was that he was a little older than she was, but that unexpectedly naïve gesture made her furrow her brow slightly.

However, a few seconds later, the man's mouth formed a cynical smile that overwrote her previous impression.

"I didn't save you."

A low quiet murmur. It sounded youthful, but something in it camouflaged his age this time, too.

"……Then, why didn't you leave me there?"

"What I saved, was the map data you have. If you secluded yourself near the front lines for as long as four days, you should have mapped a considerable amount of unexplored areas. It would be a bit wasteful if it disappeared along with you."

With this logic and pragmatism pushed onto her, she took a deep breath.

'The importance of life' and 'How everyone should team up and work together'; up to now, when people in the city had told her such things she had immediately cut them down—with words only, of course—and she thought of doing that now, but couldn't come up with any reasonable responses.

"……Then, just take it."

With a low mutter, she opened her main window. Navigating through the tabs with a hand motion that she had finally gotten accustomed to recently, she accessed her map data and copied it all to a parchment item. She turned it into an object and took it out as a small scroll, and then tossed it near the man's feet.

"With this, you've achieved your objective, right? Then, I will be going."

Pushing on the grass with her hand, she stood up but wobbled slightly. Judging from the window's time display, she calculated that she had slept for seven hours since she fell, but it seemed that she had not fully recovered from her exhaustion yet. However, she still had three spare rapiers left. She had decided earlier that she would not leave the tower until the last rapier had only half its durability.

She had many unanswered questions. Through what kind of means had the grey-coated one-handed sword user moved her from the depths of the dungeon to the forest clearing? Even accepting that he had moved her, why had he especially gone to the trouble of moving her outside, instead of a safe area in the dungeon?

Even so, she didn't think it was something that she needed to turn around and ask. Therefore, in order to return to the dungeon that towered darkly from above the tree grove to the left, Asuna tried to take a step forward. —But, just before she could.

"Wait, Fencer-san."

"……"

Asuna ignored it and took a few steps forward, but the speech that followed after made her feet stop.

"You, too, are basically working hard to clear the game right? Not just to die in the dungeon. Then, wouldn't it be better if you show your face at the «meeting»?"

"...Meeting?"

After she murmured that with her back still turned, the swordsman's voice reached her in an altered tone over the gentle breeze within the forest.

"This afternoon, in the town of «Tolbana» that is the closest to the dungeon, the first «First Floor Boss strategy conference» is supposed to be held."

## *3*

Since the floating castle Aincrad had a tapering structure, of course the first floor on the lowest level was the widest. The first floor was almost perfectly circular, with a diameter of 10 kilometers, and an area of about 80 square kilometers. To use a reference for comparison, Kawagoe City in Saitama prefecture has an area of 110 square kilometers, and a population of over 300,000 people.

For its huge size, the first floor actually held a lot of geographic variety.

On the southern edge was the «Starting City», surrounded by a rampart that drew a semi-circle around it with a diameter of 1 kilometer. In the grasslands surrounding the city, mainly boar- and wolve-type animals were prevalent with worm-, beetle-, and wasp-type insect monsters also inhabiting the area.

Northwest of the grassland was a deep wide forest, and towards the northeast there was a lake region. After passing through either of the two there were mountains, valleys, and ruins that contained monsters waiting to ambush passing players, and on the far northern-most edge of the floor, there stood a 300-meter wide, 100-meter tall squat tower—the First Floor Labyrinth.

In many places on the first floor, there existed many small- and medium-sized towns and villages other than the Starting City, but the largest of them—though even then, it was only about 200 meters from edge to edge—was the town situated in the valley closest to the Labyrinth: «Tolbana».

The first time players arrived at this town lined with huge windmills was three weeks after the official service of SAO began.

At that point, the total number of deaths had actually reached 1800.

The mysterious female fencer and I set out together—that is, while maintaining a certain distance between ourselves, we left the forest and arrived at Tolbana's north gate.

The purple letters [INNER AREA] flowed into my view, showing I had entered a safe town area. At that moment, I felt a heavy fatigue on my shoulders, and I involuntarily let out a sigh.

If I was so exhausted just from heading out from this town early this morning, I thought that the rapier user walking behind me must surely feel worse. But when I turned around, her feet covered by knee-high boots did not seem to waver. I didn't think it was at all possible for one to completely recover from the exhaustion of three continuous days of hunting with just a few hours of sleep, so she must be straining herself as always. I had thought about telling her that she should at least relax her body and mind (although in the virtual world, those two are essentially the same) when returned to town, but the atmosphere between us didn't seem to allow idle talk like that at all.

Instead, I turned toward the rapier user, and spoke very business-like words.

"The meeting is supposed to take place in the town center, at 4 PM in the afternoon."

"……"

The face hidden by the cloth hood moved slightly up and down. However, her feet did not stop, and the slender body passed by in front of me.

The breeze that blew in the valley town caused her cape to flutter behind her. I opened my mouth slightly, but unable to find anything more to say, I closed it wordlessly. Thinking about it, I, who had been solo playing hard for three weeks, was not qualified to seek interaction with others. Up until now, I had only been spending every day protecting my own life, after all…

"A strange girL."[2]

Suddenly hearing that murmured behind me, I turned my gaze away from the back of the rapier user and looked around once again.

"…I thought she would soon die, but she did noT. No matter how you look at it, she is a net game beginner, but her skill is fearsomE. What kind of person is shE?"

The high-pitched voice continued, ending its sentences with a special nasal inflection. The speaker was a truly nimble-looking player that was more than a head shorter than me, who by no means had a large build in the first place. Her armor, like mine, consisted of full-body cloth and leather. Her weapons were a small claw strapped on her left waist and throwing nails on her right waist. These were not weapons regularly used by those who reach the front lines, but this person's greatest weapon was something else.

"Do you know something about that fencer?"

I reflexively inquired, but knowing what the opponent's reply would be, I grimaced. The claw user did not betray my expectations, as she held up five fingers and said.

"I'll sell it cheaP. 500 Cor."

Her grinning face had one big distinct feature. On both her cheeks were three distinct animal-like whiskers drawn on with a make-up item. Matched with her curly auburn hair, her appearance was reminiscent of a certain rodent.

One time in the past, I asked why she used such markings. However, I only received the angry outburst of 'Don't ever ask the reason why a girl puts on makeuP' reply, immediately followed by, the statement 'I will tell you for 100,000 Cor', so I had no choice to hurriedly backed down.

2 Argo accents the last syllable in any sentence. This is reflected in the translation by capitalizing the last letter

Someday, when I find an ultra-rare item, I really will pay that 100,000 Cor—as this secret vow continued to stick in my mind, I sourly replied.

"I feel awkward about buying a girl's information, so I will refrain from doing it."

"Nihihi, you have a good hearT."

The person who said these words that were at the limit of shamelessness and laughed was most likely Aincrad's first informant: the one known as «Argo the Rat».

'—If you chat with «Rat» for five minutes, you'll end up paying for 100 Cor worth of stories without knowing it. Be careful.'

That was a warning by someone. However, the actual Argo had said that she had not once sold information of doubtful authenticity for money. She said that she would only treat it as «merchandise» after she determined that a story had value, made sure to pay an appropriate information fee to the source of the story, and also collected as much of her own evidence as possible. Thinking about it, if a false story was sold even once, then the reliability of the informant would drop, so the business of information gathering possessed a different kind of danger and anxiety compared to gathering material items in dungeons and selling to NPCs in towns.

Although it was a kind of a sexist question, 'Why would a female player choose this kind of job'…is something I inevitably thought whenever I saw Argo's face. But even if I inquired, the most she would say would be another '100,000 Cor' as an answer, so instead I asked another question after giving a cough.

"So? Today once again, you aren't here for normal business talk, but as a proxy negotiator as usual?"

Then, Argo grimaced this time, and after quickly glanced left and right on the street, she pushed my back with her fingertips and made us move toward a nearby alleyway.

The «Boss strategy conference» was still two hours away, so there were not many players here yet, but it seemed like this was a conversation that she didn't want to be heard by others just in case. The reason was—because it had to do with her reputation as an informant, most likely.

Argo stopped when we were deep inside a small alley, and then leaned her back against a house (inhabited only by NPCs, of course) and nodded again.

"Well, yeaH. It's been raised to 29,800 Cor."

"The offer has reached 29.8k Cor now, huh."

I smiled wryly, then shrugged my shoulders.

"…Sorry, but no matter how much Cor is offered, my answer remains the same. I don't want to sell it."

"I also already told the client that the last timE."

Argo's main business is as an informant, but by using her very high AGI (Agility) stats for movement, she also maintains a side business as a «Messenger». Normally it was just delivering oral messages or short messages on a scroll, but the person who had been contacting me through her over the past week seemed to be a slightly complicated…or rather, troublesome client.

He (or she) wanted to buy my one-handed longsword,

«Anneal Blade +6 (3S3D)».

The weapon enhancement system in SAO was simple compared to those of recent MMORPGs. There were five kinds of enhancement parameters: «Sharpness», «Quickness», «Accuracy», «Heaviness», and «Durability». You could try to perform an ability enhancement on a weapon for one of those categories by commissioning a NPC or a player smith to do so. The factors of requiring material items that are exclusively used for raising weapon parameters and also having a fixed probability of failure were similar to other MMORPG titles.

Whenever the enhancement of any of the parameters succeeded, the item's name in the equipment window would have a +1 or +2 appended to it. However, that number's «breakdown» could only be seen when the weapon was directly tapped and its properties window was opened. During player-to-player sales of weapons, saying an item had 'Accuracy +1, Heaviness +2…' and such quickly became tedious, so instead, it had become custom to use a shorter abbreviation: for example, a +4 item with a breakdown of Accuracy +1, Heaviness +2 and Durability +1, would be denoted by the phrase «1A2H1D».

In other words, my «Anneal Blade +6 (3S3D)» was enhanced by Sharpness +3 and Durability +3. Having an item of this quality on the first floor actually required a lot of patience and luck. Because of the situation within Aincrad, not many players have trained smithing skills which have no direct relation to the rate of survival, and although the NPC blacksmiths do have a truly appropriate dwarvish appearance, their level of skill is very unreliable.

Considering that my weapon «Anneal Blade» was also the reward from quest that required a lot of hardship to clear, the current specs of this sword could be said to make it almost the most coveted item on the first floor. —However, that being said, it's still only a «Beginner's equipment», after all. I could only enhance it a few more times at most, so around the 3rd or 4th floor, I would have to upgrade to my next sword and re-forge it from the beginning again.

For the above reasons, I wasn’t able to guess the motives of Argo's client, who wanted this sword so much he would pay the undoubtedly large amount of 29.8k Cor at the present time. If this was a normal face-to-face transaction, I could ask for the reason directly, but that doesn't work when I don't even know the client's name.

"……The hush money the person paid was 1000 Cor, right?"

At my inquiry, Argo calmly nodded and said,

"That's righT. Are you willing to raisE?"

"Hmm…1k huh…hm——m!"

Hush money was the amount of Cor that X-shi[3], who wanted to buy my sword, paid Argo to keep his name hidden from me. If I decided to pay 1100 Cor, Argo would instant message her client to inform them of that, and ask if they would like to counter it raising to 1200 Cor. If YES was the reply, then this time I would be forced to choose whether to pay 1300 Cor or not. If I won this raise and counter battle, then I would learn the opponent's name, but I would end up losing a substantial amount of money in this «sword transaction» at a fearful rate as a result. No matter how you think about it, that would be idiotic to the extreme.

"……Good grief, you can't just sell information, since even when you're not selling something, it's a business, huh…that really is one impressive merchant's spirit……"

While I complained, Argo's whiskered cheeks relaxed into a snicker.

"That's the true joy of this businesS! When I sell someone information, at that instant the story that «Someone bought such and such information» is born."

It was probably an absolute taboo for people like lawyers in the real world to reveal a customer's name, but such a rule didn't exist for the rat whose motto was «Sell all the information that can be sold». The people who became her clients had to be prepared from the beginning for their names to sold, but since her abilities as an informant was first-class, one couldn't complain about it.

"…Please tell me when a female player wants my personal information: I'll buy her information."

[3] -shi is a more formal version of the honorific -san

As I said that while sighing, Argo once again gave a jolly laugh, but then she changed her expression.

"Then, I will tell the client the offer was rejected this time as welL. Also, that this deal is impossible toO. See you theN, Ki-bou."

Waving her hand, she turned around and, with a nimbleness that befitted her «Rat» nickname, left the alley. After watching her curly auburn hair disappear into the crowd in an instant, I idly thought, 'That person surely won't die'.

After being trapped in death game SAO for a month, I have learned a few things.

Just what was it that separated life and death among players? There existed an infinite number of minute factors to this—like the number of potions you have in stock, or when it's time to quit dungeon exploring—but I think that the key factor existed in the center of those details was most likely whether one had their «personal core» that they unconditionally believed in or not. To put it another way, it was their «ultimate weapon» that they depend on in order to survive.

In Argo's case, it was probably «Information». Dangerous monster locations or, conversely, the most efficient hunting locations—this person knew them all. Her belief in knowledge created a sense of peace within her, and increased her chances of surviving.

So then, for me, Kirito's «core» was namely the sword on my back. To be precise, it was that certain mental state that occurred when my body and sword completely became one. I had not fully been in that zone many times, but the single thought *I want to make that world my own someday, and I will not die before then* had kept me alive till now. The reason Anneal Blade's enhancement was Sharpness +3 and Durability +3, while ignoring Quickness and Accuracy, was because the former two were merely simple number spec-ups, while the latter were system-assisted enhancements that changed the feel of a sword swing.

—However, then that means.

That rapier user I met today at the front lines of the Labyrinth. What was her «core»?

I did move her unconscious body outside the Labyrinth (I can't really say how I did it myself), but, on the other hand, even had I not been there, the moment that the next kobold appeared, she would have unconsciously stood up and used that ultra-high speed «Linear» like a shooting star to kill the enemy…I couldn't help but think that.

Just what on earth drove her to fight such a bloodcurdling battle, and how had she managed to survive until now? It was probably a «Strength» I didn't know about.

"……I should have paid Argo the 500 Cor…"

Murmuring with a small shake of my head, I then looked up at the sky.

The windmill towers that were the symbol of the town of Tolbana had their white-painted outer walls slightly tinged orange from the afternoon light. The time should be a bit after 3 PM. To prepare for the approaching lengthy boss strategy conference, I should go fill my stomach somewhere.

The meeting starting at 4pm would be, without a doubt, stormy.

The reason was that today, one type of player that had remained hidden in the world of SAO would show up in front of the numerous normal players for the first time. That's right—«New Players» and «Experienced Beta Testers», a gap that was hard to fill lay between them…

For «Argo the Rat», who sold anything that could be sold, there was only one type of information that she would never make a transaction on. That is, the identities of the original beta testers. No, it wasn't just Argo. Fellow original beta testers, despite having different faces from before, may have had hunches about their respective identities based on each other's names or tones, but they would never come into contact without each other. In fact, it was like that just now as well.

Argo and I were both certain of each other's identity as a beta tester, but that was the only topic we circumvented in our conversations, no matter how many light-years we had to travel to do so.

The reason was simple. When a beta tester's identity was discovered, his life could be at stake.

Not from the danger of being killed by monsters in some dungeon. But while walking around outside safe areas, New Players could «Execute» you. Because they believed that all the responsibility for the deaths of no less than 2000 people in the first month belonged to the original beta testers.

And I could not completely deny this blame.

# *4*

Asuna's selection of food for the past three (or was it four) days consisted of the cheapest black bread from an NPC baker, and a bottle of water that could be filled as many times as you liked from the fountains that were scattered throughout town.

Even in the real world, she hadn't enjoyed eating that much, but the food and drink in this virtual world was so bland that it was beyond description. No matter how much you gorged yourself on luxurious food, not even a single morsel would reach your real body. She thought it would be better if the food system and the sensations of hunger and satiety did not exist at all, but, when your stomach was empty three times a day at mealtimes, the hunger would not dissipate until you had eaten some virtual food.

Even so, she had recently become able to cut off this fake hunger by using willpower only when she went into the Labyrinth, but after returning to town, she had to eat. She bought the cheapest items on the menu as an act of minimal resistance, but she found it strangely annoying that even a dry and coarse piece of black bread seemed delicious in and of itself as she tore it apart and chewed it little by little.

At the center of the town of Tolbana, Asuna sat on a simple wood bench in the corner of an open fountain space and continued to move her mouth to chew while keeping her hood low over her eyes. She had finally finished half of the piece of bread, which was comparatively big for a price of 1 Cor, when—

"That bread looks pretty delicious."

That familiar voice was coming from her right. She stopped her hand that was just about to tear off a piece of the bread, and threw a sharp glance.

The person who stood there was the man she had just left at the town entrance a few minutes ago. The black-haired and grey-coated one-handed swordsman.

A troublesome person that had used some method earlier to move her outside after she had fainted inside the depths of a Labyrinth, and had forcibly reconnected her path which should have been severed then.

The moment she realized that, her cheeks grew hot. Even though she had said her ambition was to die, he was seeing her here, shamelessly eating a meal as soon as she came back alive. A strong embarrassment ran through her entire body, and she did not know what to do at that moment.

As she remained awkwardly stiffened like that while holding the half-moon shaped black bread in both hands, the man coughed slightly, and then said in a low whisper.

"May I sit next to you?"

Normally, she would have left the bench without a word, and moved away without turning back in this kind of situation. However, right now, she was assailed by a stunned confusion she rarely experienced in this world, leaving her unable to react. Perhaps interpreting Asuna's stiffness as a sign of approval, the man sat down at the furthest distance possible away from her on the right side of the bench, and began searching through his coat pocket. What he took out was a round, black-colored object—a black bread worth 1 Cor.

At that instant, Asuna momentarily forgot about her embarrassment and confusion, and instead looked at the man in amazement.

Judging by his ability to be able to go that deep into the Labyrinth and the grade of the equipment all over his body, this swordsman should easily earned enough money to choose from a decent course menu at a restaurant. In that case, he was either a super thrifty person, or—

"…You seriously find it delicious, don't you?"

Without realizing it, she had asked the question aloud in a small voice. Hearing this, the man raised his eyebrow outrageously, and then nodded deeply.

"Of course. Since coming to this town, I eat it every day…Well, I add a bit of a twist."

"A twist…?"

Not understanding his meaning, she shook her head under the hood. Instead of answering, the swordsman put his hand in the pocket opposite from the one earlier, and took out a small unglazed pot. He put it on the center of the bench, and said.

"Try using this on your bread."

The phrase 'use it on the bread' momentarily confused her, but she then realized it was a net game phrase, similar to «Use the key on the door» or «Use the bottle on the fountain». She hesitantly extended her right hand, and tapped the pot lid with her finger. From the pop-up menu which appeared, she selected «Use», and then her fingertip started to glow with a faint purple light. In this state which was called «Target Selection Mode», she then touched the half-eaten black bread in her left hand.

Then, with a small sound effect, one side of the bread was smeared white. The thing that had been fully, or rather, thickly applied to it was, no matter how you looked at it—

"…Cream? Where did you get such a thing…?"

"This is the quest reward from «Cows of the Counterattack» that I accepted one village back. Though, not many people do it, since it takes some time to clear."

After giving this answer with a serious face, the swordsman also «Used the pot on his bread» with a practiced gesture. Then, with its contents presumably used up, the pot shattered with a small sound and light effect. The swordsman opened his mouth incredibly wide and bit into the bread that was now similarly had a heap of cream applied to it.

Hearing the sound of his chewing, Asuna's own stomach felt not the unpleasant pain that she had been experiencing for quite some time, but instead the onslaught of a healthy hunger.

She hesitantly bit into the cream-covered black bread still held in her left hand.

At that moment, the taste of the normally dry and coarse bread spread inside her mouth as if it had transformed into a certain country-style cake with a heavy texture. The cream was sweet and smooth, along with a refreshingly yogurt-like sour taste. As she was struck by a feeling of fulfillment that numbed even the insides of her cheeks, Asuna dreamily stuffed the bread into her mouth with two, three bites.

When she suddenly came back to her senses, the food item that had been in her hands had completely disappeared without literally leaving even a single morsel. When she looked beside her with a start, she seemed to have finished two seconds or so before the swordsman. Again, a strong embarrassment rose intensely within her and she wanted to escape from this place, but having been treated to food, it would have been very bad manners.

After repeatedly taking several breaths and somehow calming herself down, Asuna said in a vanishingly faint voice.

"……Thank you for the food."

"You're welcome."

Having finished his own meal, the swordsman brushed off his leather glove-covered hands, and then continued.

"The cow quest I mentioned earlier. If you want to do it I can give you some tips. If you do it efficiently, you can finish it in two hours."

"……"

To be honest, her heart was moved. With that yogurt cream, even the 1 Cor black bread could become a magnificent feast.

It was a false fulfillment from the taste recreation engine, but she wanted taste it once more…no, to eat it every day if possible, is what Asuna couldn't help but think.

However—

Asuna lowered her eyes, and shook her head gently beneath her hood.

"…It's okay. I did not come this far to this town just to eat delicious things."

"Hmm. Then, for what purpose?"

The swordsman's voice, while it could not be said to be an especially beautiful voice, did not have a single part of it that was unpleasant to the ear, and it had the cadence like that of a boy somehow. Maybe because of that, Asuna spoke without being conscious of it the thing deep inside her heart that she had spoken of to no one since coming to this world.

"It's to…prove that I exist. Instead of locking myself in a room of a town inn like I did at the beginning and slowly rotting away, I want to be myself up to the last moment. Even if I lose to a monster and die, I don't want to lose to this game…to this world. No matter what."

Asuna—Yuuki Asuna's 15 years of life had been a series of battles. Beginning with her kindergarten entrance exam, she had had an endless number of challenges big and small imposed on her one after another, and she had overcome them all. It was set so that even one failure would make her a worthless person, so she continued to brush aside that heavy pressure.

A new challenge with the name of «Sword Art Online» had come upon her at the end of these 15 years of fighting, but she probably could not beat this challenge. With rules and a culture that were far too unknown and far too different, this was a type of battle that a single person's strength could not do anything about.

This was the required winning condition: 'Reach the top of the 100 floor floating castle, and beat the final enemy.' However, one month after the game started, one-fifth of the players had already fallen, and furthermore, most of them were experienced veterans that were confident in their abilities. The remaining fighting force was too small, and the distance that blocked their way was too long…

Asuna said all that in intermittent bits, as if the faucet of her heart had been loosened and drops were slowly dripping down. As she had given her fragmentary monologue that probably didn't have any consistency, the black-haired swordsman had listened in silence, but—eventually Asuna's voice was cut off by the evening breeze, and then he quietly whispered one small word.

"……Sorry."



After a few seconds, Asuna wondered, 'Why would he say that?'

She met this swordsman for the first time today, so there should be no reason for him to apologize. When she glanced at the person beside her from beneath her hood, the grey-coated man that was sitting lightly on the bench rested both elbows on his knees and hung his head down. His lips moved slightly, and she heard his voice again.

"Sorry…—What brought about this current situation…or, to put it another way, what pushed you this far, is in a sense my……"

However, she could not hear the rest of what he said. Because the wind-powered clock bell of the particularly huge windmill that stood tall at the center of the town rang loudly.

It was 4 PM in the afternoon. The time the «Meeting» started. Looking around, Asuna saw that players had gathered at the nearby fountain space for some time now without her being aware of it.

"…Let's go. It's the conference you invited me to."

Asuna remarked that, and stood up. The swordsman also nodded, and slowly stood up. What had he been going to say—? She probably wouldn't talk to him again anyway, so it didn't matter. But in a corner within that thought, there was a feeling like that of a small prickling thorn.

'I want to know.' 'I don't want to know.' Which of those feelings were stronger, even Asuna herself did not understand very well.

# *5*

44 people.

That was the total number of players gathered at Tolbana's fountain plaza.

Compared to my predictions—or rather my expectations, all I could say was that this was far too low. In SAO, the maximum size of a party was 6 people, and by adding together 8 of those you could made a raid party with a total of 48 people. From my experience during the Beta-Test period, if we were going to try beating the Floor Boss with zero deaths, it would be difficult without at least two raid groups to switch between while fighting, but these numbers couldn't even fill up one full raid party.

I sucked in a breath in order to sigh, but I lost my chance to breathe out.

"…This many…"

It was because the rapier user in a hooded cape whispered that from behind me to my left. I involuntarily turned around and asked.

"Many...? This number of people?"

"Yes. Because…they gathered here for the first challenge against this floor's boss monster, right? Even though the chance of complete annihilation exists…"

"……I see."

I nodded, and then looked at the faces of the warriors gathered in groups of threes and fives around the plaza again.

There were five or six players here whose names I knew, and vice versa. Additionally, there were around fifteen of these people who I had seen previously at the towns near the front line and in the Labyrinth. As for the remaining 20-plus people, this was the first time I saw most of their faces.

Of course, the male-to-female ratio was extremely skewed. The only female player that I could see at a quick glance was the rapier user, but that couldn't be discerned just by looking because of the hood she wore low over their eyes, so the other people here besides me should be thinking that everyone here was male. «Argo the Rat» was also here leaning against a high wall on the other side of the plaza, but she would not be participating in the Boss-capture operation.

Just as the rapier user had said, no one had yet seen anyone—not within the current Aincrad, anyway—challenge the First Floor Boss. The risk of one's HP gauge reaching zero, or in other words, the risk of dying would be the greatest here among the large-scale battles that had occurred on this floor until now. In other words, everyone gathered in the plaza was prepared for their own death, and by being here, they accepted they would become the stepping stones for future players…that was what it should have meant, but…

"…No, I wonder about that…"

I unconsciously whispered that. The rapier user sent me a questioning look from under her hood. In response, I answered while carefully chosing my words.

"I cannot say this for everyone, but rather than «Showing a spirit of self-sacrifice», I think that a lot of people came here due to the «Uneasiness about being left behind», too. Since I'm also here for the latter of those two reasons, after all…"

"…Left behind? From what?"

"From the front line. Total annihilation is scary, but having a boss being beaten in a place you don't know is scary, too."

The cloth hood tilted slightly. Since she was a complete beginner to net games, she wouldn't be able to understand what I just said very well—was what I thought, but.

"...That is like, not wanting to fall below the tenth place rank in your school year, or wanting to keep your standard score[4] of 70, that kind of similar motivation?"

"……"

This time, it was my turn to be speechless. Thinking about it a bit, I nodded at a subtle angle.

"Yeah…Well, probably…maybe it's like that…"

Then—

Peeking under her hood, I saw her nicely-shaped lips smile slightly. 'Fu, fu', a faint sound could be heard. Was she…laughing? From the beyond-perfect «Linear» skill user, who had called my actions an "unnecessary effort" when I carried her out of the maze?

I unconsciously tried looking directly into the interior of her hood, but fortunately the situation changed before that. With a *Pan, Pan* hand-clapping sound, a shouting voice that carried well flowed throughout the plaza.

"O—K! Now then, it's five minutes late, but let's start! Everyone, a bit more to the front…there, come three steps closer!"

The owner of the truly majestic voice that spoke was swordsman with shiny metallic armor covering his entire tall figure. He nimbly jumped without a running-start onto the edge of the fountain that stood in the center of the plaza. To have jumped that high with that much armor, he must have possessed very high Strength and Dexterity.

When they saw the back-turned swordsman, several of the forty-odd people present rustled and murmured slightly. I understood what they were feeling. Because I, too, wondered why that man standing on the edge of the fountain was so handsome, to the point that I couldn't help but think it was the product of a VRMMO.

4 Basically the term for how the education system grades students relative to each other's grades.

In addition, his long hair flowing down in waves on either side of his face was dyed a brilliant blue. Since hair-dying items were not sold in shops on the first floor, he must have hunted for or bought a rare monster drop.

If he went to all that trouble to customize his hair style and color for this gathering, with only two female players here (although one of them was in a hooded cape so no one could tell from the outside), I think he must have felt some reluctance, but the man bore a refreshing smile that completely deflected my suspicion and said.

"Today, thank you for heeding my summons! Some people here know me, but I will again introduce myself! I am «Diavel», and my class in my heart[5] is «Knight»!"

With that, the people around the fountain burst out with whistles and applause, mixed with various cries like 'You meant «Hero», right!' flew through the air.

In SAO, «classes» prescribed by the system did not exist. Each player was given a number of «Skill Slots», and could freely select and set up all kinds of skills and train them. For example, people with manufacturing-type or trade-type skills as their main skills could be called a «Blacksmith», «Seamstress», «Cook», or other such official job titles—however, I have limited knowledge about the «Knight» and «Hero» classes, having not heard of them before.

But, of course, ‘calling oneself by whatever title they want’ was every individual’s freedom of choice. Looking at him closely, the man named Diavel was wearing bronze armor on his chest, shoulders, arms and shins, with a large longsword on his left hip, and a kite shield on his back. You could say that was this was the so-called Knight-class armament.

While gazing at his majestic from the back of the crowd, I quickly searched through the index in my brain.

5 The actual word they use here is 気持ち的, which is difficult to translate into English, but the context of Diavel’s words make “in his heart” the best way to express the meaning in English.

His equipment and hair style were different, so it was hard to connect, but I felt like I had seen him many times in the front line villages and towns. And then, what about before that—the «Other Aincrad», did I see him there? At the very least, I don't remember having heard his name before…

"Now then, as for the reason why I gathered you top players who are active at the front lines like this, I don't think I need to say it, but…"

As Diavel's speech continued, I stopped my thoughts and concentrated on him. The blue-haired knight raised his right hand, pointed to the huge tower that rose faintly beyond the town scape—the First Floor Labyrinth, and continued.

"…Today, our party found the stairs leading to the top-most floor of that tower. In other words, tomorrow, or at the latest the day after tomorrow, we will reach it: the first floor's…Boss Room!"

The players rustled and became noisy among each other. I was a little surprised, too. The First Floor Labyrinth had 20 floors; I (and the rapier user beside me) had been close to rising from the 18th to 19th floor when we passed through the Labyrinth today, but I didn't know that the 19th floor was already mapped that far.

"One month. Coming this far took one month…but even so, we have to set an example. We have to beat the boss, reach the second floor, and show everyone still waiting at the Starting City that it is definitely possible to clear this death game. That is the duty of us top players here right now! Isn't that right, everyone!"

Again, cheers. This time, it seemed that there were people clapping who were not Diavel's friends. Certainly, what was being said was splendid and nothing was hidden. No, it would be strange to even wonder about anything hidden in those words in the first place. Right now, should I come out with my high opinion of the mediator of the front lines players that had been scattered until now, give my own applause to the Knight-sama——

"Wait a minute, Knight-han[6]."

At that moment, a low voice flowed out.

The cheering immediately stopped, and the front of the crowd split into two. Standing at the center of the newly opened gap was a short yet solidly built man. From my position, I could only make out a rather large one-handed sword on his back, and some kind of pointed, cactus-styled brown hair.

Taking one step forward, the cactus head growled in a deep, gravelly voice that was the opposite of Diavel's beautiful voice.

"Before that, there is one thing that I have to say, or otherwise I cannot join you."

Despite this rude intrusion, Diavel's expression nearly didn't change. With a smile overflowing with composure, he said while beckoning.

"What is it that you need to say? Well, whatever it is, opinions are very welcome. But, if you are going to speak, you should tell us your name first."

"……Hmph."

Cactus head gave a huge snort, and then took one, two steps forward. When he reached the fountain, he turned around to face us.

"I am «Kibaou»."

The cactus head swordsman who introduced himself with a somewhat daring character name glared at all the players in the plaza with beady but sharp and bright eyes.

His sweeping look stopped for just an instant on my face—or maybe it was just my imagination. I didn't know his name, nor did I have any memory of passing by him somewhere.

6 A different pronunciation of the suffix "-san" that is used in the Kansai dialect of Japanese. Kibaou speaks in this dialect, but unfortunately I don't know how to express it in English

After taking plenty of time to look at everyone once, Kibaou eventually said in an even more threatening voice.

"In this group, there should be about 5 or 10 people that need to apologize."

"Apologize? To whom?"

The «knight» Diavel, who was still standing behind him on the fountain's edge in the back, raised both hands in a questioning manner. Without looking at him, Kibaou spat out in hatred.

"Ha, isn't it obvious. To the 2000 people who died up until now. Those guys had a monopoly on everything, and so 2000 people died in one month! Isn't that right?!"

At that moment, the audience of forty-odd people that had been murmuring in low voices became completely silent. What Kibaou was insinuating, everyone finally understood. Myself included, of course.

In the oppressive silence, only the evening BGM from the NPC orchestra played quietly. No one tried to speak. If anything was said, then at that instant you would be labeled as one of «those guys»—that was the likely fear on everyone's mind. No, more than likely. At the very least, I was certainly caught by that fear…

"—Kibaou-san. «Those guys» who you're referring to are…the original beta testers, right?"

With his arms crossed, Diavel showed the sternest look he had worn up till now as he asked for confirmation.

"Obviously."

With the thick metal pieces of his scale mail clinking over the leather he wore, Kibaou gave a glance towards the knight behind him, and then continued.



"Those beta testers[7], on the day this shitty game started, dashed from the Starting City and disappeared. They left behind over 9000 people who didn't know left from right. They monopolized good hunting grounds and profitable quests, got only themselves stronger reservation, and then always feigned ignorance about it afterwards…There should also be some in this group, some sly people hiding their beta status and thinking of joining the Boss Fight. I say we should make them kneel down and spit out all of the gold and items they stockpiled for the sake of this operation, and that they cannot be entrusted with the lives of our party members!"

Just like his name[8], he cut off his condemnation with a snap of his teeth, but still, no one tried to raise their voice to speak. As a member of the original beta tester group, I also clenched my teeth, held my breath, and continued to keep silent.

It wasn't because of an impulse to shout out a retort to him. Like, 'Do you think that none of the original beta testers died?'.

About one week earlier, I bought a certain piece of information from Argo—to be precise, I requested her to investigate something. To find out the estimated death toll for the original beta testers.

The SAO closed beta test that had been conducted over summer vacation had accepted only 1000 people. Every participant was later given the priority purchase rights for the official-version package, but considering the login status at the end of the test period, my guess was that not all 1000 testers had moved to the official service. Probably 700 to 800 people—that was most likely the total number of original beta testers at the start of the death game.

However, finding out «Who is an original beta tester» was not so simple.

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7 Kibaou refers to the beta testers as ベータ上がりども, which roughly translates as "beta testers".
8 The word "Kiba" means "fang" in Japanese and "Ou" means "king", so his name would translate as "Fang King".

If a player's colored cursor had a [β] mark, then of course it would be easy—having said that, it could be called fortunate that such a mark did not exist, and all of our avatars' appearances had been reset everyone's true appearance in reality due to the GM Kayaba Akihiko's forethought. The only clue we could go by was the name, but many had probably changed their user names from the beta to the official release. Incidentally, the reason that Argo and I are mutually certain that we are both original beta testers was related to how we first met, but that's another story.

Anyway, for these reasons, Argo's research should have been quite difficult. However, it took her only 3 days to give me a number.

Approximately 300 people. That was Argo's estimate for the death toll of original beta testers.

If that number is accurate, that means, within the current death toll of 2000, 1700 were new players. Percentage-wise, the new player death rate was about 18%. On the other hand, the original tester death rate was—close to 40%.

Prior knowledge and experience did not necessarily mean safety. On the contrary, it could also be a pitfall. I myself nearly lost my life in a difficult quest that I accepted right away on the first day of this death game. Also, there were external factors. In this SAO official service, the geography, monsters and items are mostly the same as in the beta test, but once in a while, there is a slight difference, like a small deadly poisoned needle……

"May I speak?"

At that time, a rich and forceful baritone resounded through the evening plaza. When I returned from my thoughts and raised my head, there was a silhouette moving forward and coming out from the around the left end of the crowd.

Huge. His height probably was over 180cm.

An avatar's size was said not to have any effect on one's stats, but the rustic two-handed battle-axe slung over his back certainly appeared lightweight to him.

His appearance, too, was impressive and did not lose to his weapon. A completely bald head, and chocolate-colored skin. However, that radical customization actually suited his chiseled face very well. He was far from looking Japanese…or rather, he might actually be of a different race.

Moving forward near the fountain, the muscular giant lightly bowed to the other forty-odd players, and then turned to Kibaou who had a dramatically different height.

"My name is Agil. Kibaou-san, what you mean to say is that many beginners died because original beta testers did not take care of them, and that they should accept that responsibility and apologize along with giving reparations for it, is that correct?"

"Th…That's right."

Kibaou, momentarily overwhelmed, took a step back, but soon returned forward, and then glared at the axe user called Agil with his blazing, small eyes, and shouted.

"If they had not left us behind, 2000 people would not have had to die! Moreover, they were not just any 2000 people, most of them were top-ranked veterans from other MMOs! If those stupid testers had properly shared information, items and money, then there would have been 10 times as many people here right now…no, by now we would have broken through the 2nd or 3rd floor!!"

—300 of those 2000 are comprised of what you called 'stupid testers'!

I desperately held back the impulse to shout that. Trivial reasons like 'I could not show a basis for the number 300 right now' and 'it would be scary to be hanged and denounced by everyone' were of course part of what stopped me.

However, more than that, it wouldn't be smart to reveal my status as an original tester by objecting here in this situation, no matter how I thought about it.

Right now, about four to five hundred remaining original testers were mixed haphazardly among the new players. Level and equipment-wise, they could no longer be said to stand out. In this situation, I had a fear that, even if I revealed myself as an original tester, let alone progressing towards reconciliation, a dangerous witch hunt might arise instead. At worst, the front line players would divide themselves between beginners and testers, and they would start fighting. That had to be avoided at all costs. Because, in SAO, player attacks were allowed in the fields and dungeons collectively known as the «Outer Area»…

"That's what you say, Kibaou-san. I don't know about the money and items, but I believe that there is in fact information from them."

While I lowered my eyes shamefully, Agil the axe warrior again responded in a rich baritone. From the huge pouch on his muscled and leather armor-covered waist, he took out a simple sheepskin-bound book item. On the cover, there was a «Rat Mark» designed with round ears and three whiskers on each cheek.

"This guidebook, you got it too, right? It's freely distributed from the item shops in Horunka and Medai, after all."

"…F-Freely distributed?"

I involuntarily spluttered quietly. That, just as the mark on the cover indicated, was the «Strategy Guide by Area» sold by the informant Argo the Rat. It comprised subjects from detailed terrain information to monster appearances, drop items and even quest explanations, and the slogan [It's fine. This is Argo's strategy guide.] written on the bottom of the cover in huge letters was no exaggeration. Although embarrassing, I myself obtained the whole set to supplement my memory—but, according to my memory, each book should be 500 Cor, a pretty respectable price…

"…I got it too."

Next to me, the up-until-now silent rapier user whispered. I inquired "For free?", and she nodded.

"There's a commission to the item shop owner, but since the price is 0 Cor, everyone got it. It really came in handy."

"Wh…What's going on…"

That «Rat» —that business demon who would sell even her own status information if it could make her money, had freely distributed information? Impossible! I shifted my gaze, but the stone wall Argo had been quietly sitting on a few minutes earlier was empty. The next time I met her, I wanted to ask for the reason why, but somehow I could already see her saying "That information is 1000 Cor" in response.

"——I got it. What about it?"

Kibaou's sharp voice made me reluctantly interrupt my thought process. Agil put his strategy guide back in his pouch, and said with his arms crossed.

"This guide, whenever I reach a new village or town, is always found in the item shop. You must have noticed that too. The information comes too quickly, don't you think?"

"So what if it's too quick!?"

"It means that the ones who provided the information on monsters and map data that appear in this, cannot be anyone other than the original beta testers."

The players went abuzz all at once. Kibaou closed his mouth sharply, and the knight Diavel behind him nodded in an 'I see' way.

Agil turned his gaze over the assembled group, and spoke in far-carrying baritone.

"You see, there is information. And even still, many players died. I think the reason for that is because they were veteran MMO players. They measured SAO with the same rules as other titles, and missed points that they should have noticed. However, now is not the time to hunt down who is responsible for those casualties. Whether we are or aren't responsible, it will influence this meeting, this is what I think."

The two-handed axe user Agil's attitude was very imposing and his argument was also extremely straightforward, and so Kibaou clenched his teeth as it seemed that he couldn't find any chink in what had been said. If anyone else other than Agil had claimed the same thing, then Kibaou would probably counter with 'Saying that means you are an original beta tester', I think. But, as it was now, all he could do was glare at the giant with hatred.

Still standing on the fountain's edge behind the two confronting each other silently, Diavel nodded once more as his long hair swayed and was dyed purple from the setting sun.

"Kibaou-san, I can also understand your point. I, too, went into fields without knowing left or right, and finally arrived here after many near deaths. But, as this Agil-san said, isn't it now the time to look forward? Even original beta testers…no, especially original testers, we need their fighting strength for this boss fight. If we removed them, and that resulted in the attack failing, what would be the point?"

This was truly a refreshing speech that make me think 'Just as expected from one who calls himself a knight'. Many people in the audience also deeply nodded. I felt the atmosphere change from 'condemning original testers', and I involuntarily breathed a sigh of relief. Though I realized it was shameful of me to do so, I listened to Diavel continue.

"Everyone, I'm sure you each have your own thoughts and feelings, but right now, I would like for you to cooperate to break through the first floor. If there are people who will not fight alongside original testers under any circumstance, then it is unfortunate, but you are free to leave. For a boss fight, teamwork is more important than anything else."

Sweeping his gaze across everyone, the knight finally stared at Kibaou with a serious look. The cactus head swordsman took that gaze for a while, but made a huge snort and then spoke in a stifled voice.

"……Fine, I will obey you here. But I want it to be clear in black and white, that it is only up until the boss fight is finished."

Turning around, Kibaou retreated from the front of the group with his scale mail clinking. The axe user Agil, too, spread his arms to show that he had nothing more to say, and returned to his previous place.

In the end, that scene was the highlight of this meeting. Because, even if we worked out anti-boss strategies, we had only just arrived at the top floor of the maze. In a situation where no one had seen the boss's face, things like strategies could not be made, but……

—No, the truth was slightly different. Because I knew that Aincrad's First Floor Boss was a gigantic Kobold, that its weapon was a huge Talwar, and that once engaged, 12 heavily armored Kobold royal guards would spawn.

If I revealed that I was original tester here and provided information on the boss, our chance of success might increase to some extent. However, if I did that, they could ask 'Why did you remain silent until now', and there was the fear that the 'hang the original testers' atmosphere would reappear with that flow.

Also, my knowledge was acquired from the old Aincrad, so there remained the possibility that, when the official service began, everything or just a small detail about the boss had been changed.

If we based our strategy on information from the beta and rushed in now, then when we actually fight the boss, if the boss' appearance or attack pattern were completely different…or anything else like that, then the raid group could be annihilated in the confusion. Ultimately, until the boss room door was opened and its inhabitant popped up, nothing could start.

I convinced myself with that half as an excuse, and continued to keep my mouth shut.

The meeting finally ended with the knight Diavel giving extremely positive words, and the participants responding to that by giving a collective grand war cry. I also raised my right hand up in the air for show, but the rapier user next to me did not even move her hand from beneath her cape, let alone give a shout. Turning around without a sound even before the word "Dismissed" was spoken, she whispered to me at a volume only I could hear before she left.

"Before the meeting, you said something…if we both live through the boss fight, tell me what you said."

To her back as she disappeared into the dim road, I silently answered.

—Sure, at that time, I will tell you. That for my own survival, I threw away everything else.

# *6*

Although the meeting lacked any real discussion, it still seemed to have boosted the players' morale, and the 20th floor of the First Floor Labyrinth was mapped with unprecedented speed. On the afternoon of the day after the meeting, Saturday December 3rd, the first party (Diavel's party of six again), discovered huge double doors in the innermost depths of the Labyrinth. The sound of their cheers reached me as I fought solo nearby.

I heard that Diavel's group had boldly opened the Boss Room door, and saw the inhabitant's face. On the evening of that day, at another meeting around Tolbana's fountain plaza, the blue-haired knight reported back proudly.

The boss was a huge Kobold, 2 meters in height. Its name was «Illfang the Kobold Lord», and its weapon was of the scimitar category. Around it, there were three metal-armored, halberd-wielding «Ruin Kobold Sentinels»—

The information up until that point was exactly as it was in the beta. If I remember correctly, the «Sentinels» would reappear when the boss lost one of its four HP bars, totaling 12 «Sentinels» that had to be eliminated, but, as usual, I did not have the courage to say this at the meeting. In any case, the actual fight would not occur any time soon, and since several scouting battles will be conducted first, this will soon become known information—that's what I told myself as an excuse, but something that proved my worries were entirely pointless was discovered in the middle of the meeting.

At an NPC stall shop in a corner of the plaza, «the aforementioned item» was put up for sale since who knew when. Composed of three pages bound by sheep skin, it was more a pamphlet than a book. 'Argo's Strategy Guide: First Floor Boss edition'—was its title. The price was 0 Cor from the start.

Of course, the meeting was temporarily paused as all the participants purchased (or more like took) a guide from the NPC, and perused its contents.

As usual, there was an impressive amount of information. From the recently discovered name of the boss to its estimated HP, its main weapon the Talwar, the weapon's speed, how much damage it dealt, and the boss's Sword Skills, this information comprised the first three pages. The fourth page contained information on the surrounding «Sentinels»; there it was clearly written that they would POP four times, to 12 total.

Also, on the cover of the guide, there was a single line of text in a bright red font that had not been on any previous «Argo Strategy Guide» until now. It said—

[This information is from the time of the SAO beta test. It is possible the current version may be different.]

When I read this, I reflexively raised my head, and looked around the plaza for Argo. However, I could not find the «Rat» dressed in simple leather armor today. I lowered my head again, and whispered in a small voice.

"…She went on the offensive…"

This red warning line might have destroyed Argo's current status—her positions of «An informant who simply bought information from original beta testers no one knew». Almost everyone who read this would begin to wonder whether the Rat herself was an original tester or not. Of course there was no proof, but later, if the feud between new players and original testers expanded to more than it was now, there was no doubt that the danger of her being the foremost target of denunciation would increase.

But on the other hand, thanks to this strategy guide, some troublesome and dangerous scouting battles would surely be avoided as well.

Like yesterday, the forty-odd people who read the guide looked to the blue-haired knight standing on the fountain's edge as if to let their leader decide how they should react.

Diavel lowered his head as he seemed to think and consider something for several dozen seconds, but soon enough he quickly stood up straight and shouted in a voice filled with positivity.

"—Everyone, right now, let's be thankful for this information!"

The audience was immersed in a buzz. Because that speech chose reconciliation instead of confrontation with the original testers. I thought Kibaou would again jump out growling, but the brown cactus head that appeared and disappeared at the front of the crowd was standing still for the moment.

"Leaving aside its source, thanks to this guide, we can skip two or three days of scouting battles. Indeed, I think this is incredibly helpful. Because, scouting battles have the possibility of incurring the most deaths."

Here and there in the plaza, different colored heads nodded.

"…If this is true, the boss's numerical stats are not so bad. If SAO was a normal MMO, then even if everyone's average level was level three... no, level five, that would be enough to kill it, I think. So, if we polish our tactics correctly and bring a lot of POTs[6] to the fight, it's possible for us to defeat it without any deaths. No, sorry, not even that. There will be absolutely zero deaths. That, I promise you on my pride as a knight!"

Loud clapping continued as 'Yo, Knight-sama!' and other cheers filled the air. The fact that Diavel was someone with good leadership was something even a rebellious solo player had to accept. Guilds could not be made until the third floor, but at that time an impressive conquest guild would probably be made…

I was feeling various degrees of admiration like this, but as the knight continued speaking, I choked slightly.

"—Then, it's a bit fast, but I am thinking of starting the actual conquest strategy meeting right now! In any case, if we don't make a raid party, we cannot split up our duties, right? Everyone, first make a party with your friends or the people near you!"

……What did he say?

With that single phrase that reminded me of the times during my elementary school gym classes in the past, I hurriedly calculated in my head. In SAO, one party was 6 people, and there are 44 people here, so…if people aimed more towards balance, the best would be 4 parties of 6 members and 4 parties of 5 members? But even if that were so, if the leader didn't specify that……

My high-speed thoughts as I thought it over while standing still were useless in the end. Because, in slightly less than one minute after Diavel's directions, seven 6-member parties were quickly formed. Understanding that the knight wanted to make 6-member parties from the beginning, even Kibaou who was a lone wolf no matter how you looked at him and Agil who gave off the feeling of a gentle giant found five friends in an instant. Maybe the only person who didn't say 'Let's fight together' really was me——

No, that wasn't correct.

When I glanced around with a downcast look, I discovered the hooded cape rapier user standing around by herself, and I quickly approached her.

"……So you got left out too, huh?"

To my quiet inquiry, a hot, angry glare was directed at me from beneath her hood, and at the same time a suppressed voice replied.

"……Not left out. All the people around me seemed to be friends with each other, so I simply refrained."

That's what left out meant—

I wisely prevented myself from retorting like that, and instead just nodded seriously and said.

"Then, how about forming a party with me? A raid is up to eight parties; if we don't do that then we cannot join."

It seemed attacking in a systematic way like that was correct, as the rapier user showed hesitation only for a moment, before she scoffed and said.

"Since you invited me, I will have to accept."

The competitive childlike expression that said 'you asked first so you make the request' that she gave here was something that I had graduated from the previous month, so I nodded and touched her color cursor in my view to send the party invitation request. The rapier user pushed OK with a curt gesture, and then in the left side of my view, a second small HP gauge appeared.

I gazed at the short alphabetic letters displayed beneath it.

【Asuna】. That, was the name of the mysterious fencer who possessed the godly fast «Linear».

The knight Diavel's leadership was pretty good not just with speeches, but also with the finer practical details, as well.

He checked over the seven completed 6-member parties, and with only the smallest number of switches, formed seven specialized parties out of them. Two heavy-armor Tank parties. Three high-mobility and high-firepower Attacker parties. And finally, two long-weapons Support parties.

The two Tank parties take turns being the targets by the boss Kobold Lord. Two of the firepower Attacker parties would concentrate on the boss, while the third one would kill the sentinels first. The Support parties would mainly use the Delay skill with mostly long-reach weapons, and interrupt either the boss' or guards' attacks when possible.

Although simple, this plan didn't have many holes, and I thought it was a good strategy.

While I was lost in admiration, the knight came at last to the good-for-nothing two-person party (of course, that's me and the rapier user), and after appearing to be lost in thought for a while, he said pleasantly.

"You two, please support Group E in order to make sure none of the Kobold Guards remain, okay?"

In other words, 'Don't interfere with the boss fight and stay quietly at the back' was what I felt his words meant. Sensing that the rapier user, who was apparently called «Asuna», beside me was about to give an unfriendly response to that, I stopped her with one hand and replied with a smile.

"Understood. That's an important role, leave it to us."

"Yes, I am counting on you."

Flashing his white teeth, the knight returned to the fountain. At that moment, close to my left ear, I heard a voice tinged with a dangerous tone.

"…What important duty. It will finish without us being able to land a single attack on the boss."

"W-We can't do anything about it, we only have two people. There's not nearly enough time for Switch and POT rotation."

"…Switch? POT…?"[9]

Hearing that questioning whisper, I once again thought. This rapier user really did leave the Starting City as a complete beginner without any knowledge, and struggled all the way here by herself. Most likely with only five non-enhanced store-bought rapiers, and by relying on just the single sword skill «Linear»—

"…I'll explain in detail later. If we talk here it will never end."

9 POTs: Game term, short for healing and various other potions.

I estimated that her response would be 'Unnecessary' with more than a 50% probability, but the rapier user remained silent for a few seconds, then nodded with a minute motion.

The second boss strategy meeting ended after a short greeting by the leaders of each group that were designated from A to G and the plan for how the Cor and item dropped in the Boss Battle would be divided was established. The giant axe user Agil was Tank Group B's leader, and Kibaou, who had a burning enmity for original beta testers, was Attacker Group E's leader. Since Group E's goal was to kill the Kobold Guards, it meant that the rapier user and I, the remaining pair, would be assisting Kibaou. To tell the truth, he was one opponent I wouldn't want to be too close to, but he didn't know that I was an original tester—he shouldn’t know, that is. On a side note, the face of the «Rat» was not among the raid party. Of course, I didn't mean to criticize her at all. With that «Strategy Guide», her duty was well fulfilled.

For distribution of drops, we adopted the simple rule of 'Cor will be automatically divided evenly among the 44 raid party members while each item will belong to the person who receives it'. In the MMOs in recent years, drop items would typically have a system where a dice roll was performed between the people who wanted a drop and competed for it, but for some reason, SAO used the previous era's method, where the item was suddenly dropped into a random player's storage, and moreover, without anyone else knowing either. In other words, if a «Boss-dropped items must be dice rolled anew» kind of rule were set, then the person with the actual item would have to turn in the item by notifying everyone of it themselves. I also experienced this many times in the beta test, but it is a big test of willpower. Rather, in reality, after a boss fight, no one will come forth and say anything (in other words, someone kept the drop), so there were many rather awkward raid disbands.

Diavel, probably to prevent this kind of development, used the «Drop to person» rule. What a truly perceptive Knight-sama.

At 5:30 PM in the afternoon, the meeting was ended and dissolved with similar messages as yesterday like 'Let's work hard!' and 'Yea—!', and then the group split into threes and fives, disappearing inside bars and restaurants. While moving my awfully stiff-feeling shoulders, I wondered if this stiffness was an illusion, or if my real body were actually tense, though it would not matter either way—

"……So, the explanation, where shall we do it?"

…'What did you say', I was confused for a moment, then I hurriedly faced the rapier user.

"Ah, yeah…Anywhere is fine with me. How about that bar?"

"……No. I don't want to be seen by anyone."

That speech almost pierced me for a moment, but then I rallied my spirits by arbitrarily supplementing the part she omitted as «seen together with any male player» instead of «seen together with me», and I somehow managed to calmly nod.

"Then, how about an NPC house…but, someone might enter. An inn room can be locked, but that's no good either, right?"

"Of course."

This time I sustained a light piercing damage from those words that were like the point of a rapier. Since this is a virtual world, I could somehow manage to talk to female players, but until one month ago, I was a 2nd year middle school student whose interpersonal skill was so low that I even had difficulty talking with my younger sister. In the first place, how did only I, who followed the straight path of a solo player, end up in this kind of situation? I understood that I couldn’t help but enter groups when it came to boss battles, but when I thought about it carefully, all other seven parties are male-only groups, so if I had joined those then it would be over without so much bother…

While I was timidly thinking about these things, the rapier user sighed and continued.

"…Anyway, most of the private rooms at inns in this world cannot even be called a room. A space less than six tatami mats with only a bed and table, just that costs 50[10] Cor a night. Eating doesn't really matter, but since only sleep is genuine here, I want to sleep in a slightly better room."

"Eh…R-Really?"

I unconsciously tilted my head.

"If you search for it, you can find better housing conditions somewhere, right? Though it will cost a bit more…"

"You say 'search,' but there are only three inns in this town. The rooms are all similar."

Hearing that reply, I finally understood.

"Ah…I see. You only checked places with [INN] signboards, right?"

"Yes, since…INN means inn."[11]

"True, but on lower floors like this one in this world, it just means shops where you can sleep at the cheapest price for the time being. There are plenty of other rooms besides those at inns that you can rent with Cor."

The instant I said that, the rapier user's lips became open-mouthed.

"Wha……Y-You should have said that earlier……"

Feeling like I had finally found a clue to counterattacking, I grinned and promptly started bragging about the room I was currently renting.

"The place I rented in this town is on the second floor of a farmhouse at the cost of 80 Cor[12] a night, but it has two rooms that come with the bonus of getting all the milk you can drink, it has a

10 100 Cor in the web, 50 in the published version.
11 The all-capitals 'INN' is said in English as a common game term, while the lower case 'inn' is said in Japanese
12 120 Cor in the web, changed to 80 in the published version.

bed with a scenic view, and on top of that there is also a bathroom attached…"

I had gotten carried away talking, but at that moment.

Extending forward at a godly speed like the «Linear» I had seen in the depths of the Labyrinth, the rapier user's right hand grabbed my grey coat's collar with force just shy of triggering the Crime Prevention Code. Then a low husky voice barked out forcefully.

"……WHAT DID YOU SAY?"

# *7*

Although she had said it herself already, Asuna thought that, among all the acts within this world, the only act that could be called real was «sleep».

Everything else was a virtual imitation. Walking, running, talking, eating, and fighting. It would not be a lie to say that all these actions were nothing but data-code calculated by the server that ran Sword Art Online. Since, no matter what one's avatar did, the body in the real world that was lying down somewhere would not move a single finger. The only exception was when the avatar slept on a bed, and one's real brain also went to sleep. Therefore, she wanted to at the very least sleep soundly which was done when she slept at town inns—however, this was actually rather difficult.

She got caught up in the heat of battle when she fought in fields or dungeons, so she had no time then to look back and reflect, but when she returned to town and laid down on the bed of her single room, she would inevitably replay her actions from a month ago in her mind. Why, on that day, did she have such an unusual whim? Why had she not been satisfied with just touching the Nerve Gear? Why had she put the grim headgear on her head, and say the single phrase "Link Start"? —That was what she thought about.

She would fall into a shallow sleep while thinking of such regrets, and naturally saw bad dreams. Her classmates, ridiculing Asuna at having hugely stumbled at the important time of their third year of junior high, all because of a mere game. Her relatives, pitying Asuna for have dropped out from the race that would continue on during the many years ahead. And—her parents, staring at Asuna's comatose body on the bed of some some hospital, with expressions that she could not see—…

With a trembling body, she would suddenly jump up in bed and see at the time displayed in the lower left corner of her vision, indicating that, even though a long time had passed since she went to sleep, the actual amount of time she had slept was less than three hours. After that, no matter how many times she closed her eyes, she simply could not fall back asleep. Then again, if she had slept properly every night, she might not have been able to drive herself to fiercely fight for three or four days continuously in the dungeon.

Therefore, Asuna had always wanted to at least spend the money she saved up on a high-class bedroom and bed. The rooms in this world's inns were all narrow and gloomy, with beds made out of unknown materials that were rustling and hard. If it was made of Italian high-elastic and high-tech urethane foam…or at the very least normal cotton, she might have been able to turn her three hours of sleep every night into four hours. And speaking of things she wanted, she wished that there was a bathroom or at the very least a shower attached to the rooms. Even though bathing here was nothing more than a virtual experience and her body in the real world would probably be regularly washed by the hospital staff, this was just problem of feeling. She was already prepared to die alone in the depths of the Labyrinth, but before that she wanted to just once, even if it would only be virtual, dip her hands and feet as much as she liked into some warm water……

——And that ardent wish of hers had been directly hit by the black-haired swordsman's words.

"……What did you say?"

Asuna asked with a hoarse voice, while unconsciously grabbing the other party's collar. If she wasn't having a hallucination in her brain's hearing, the swordsman had really said just now that…

"A-All the milk you can drink…?"

"After that."

"I-It has a bed with a nice view…?"

"After that."

"T-There's a bathroom…?"

—It seemed that she hadn't heard wrong after all. After letting go of his collar, Asuna continued as if becoming impatient.

"You said that your room costs 80 Cor to stay one night?"

"Y…Yes, I did say that."

"How many of those are still available at those lodgings? What's the location? I want to rent one, too, so please show me the way to it."

At that point, the swordsman seemed to finally realize the situation. After coughing once, he put on a strangely solemn face and spoke.

"Ah, didn't I just say that I rented the second floor of a farmhouse?"

"…You did say that."

"I meant that I rented out the entire second floor. Therefore, there are no vacant rooms. Incidentally, there are no rooms for rent on the first floor."

"Wha……"

In that moment, she became weak from the knees and she was just barely able to brace herself.

"……t-that room……"

Though she only said that, he seemed to be aware of what was omitted. His black eyes flitted about, and with an apologetic expression he said,

"About that, actually, I am already very satisfied after staying there for about a week, and I would be more than willing to give it to you, but…the truth is, I have already paid in advance for the rented room system's maximum number of days…ten days' worth of rent. And, there's no way to cancel it."

"Wha……."

Her body staggered again, but this time Asuna somehow withstood, as she was hit by a huge conflict.

What the swordsman before her had just told her was 'there are rentable rooms besides those within inns, and in addition, there are also deluxe versions among them'. In that case, if she searched hard enough, there might still be available rooms with bathrooms in Tolbana village that she could find. But, dozens of players aiming to reach the next floor had already gathered within this village in throngs. Naturally all the good rooms were already taken, and that was precisely why this black-haired swordsman had paid rent for the maximum number of days.

Then, what if she went back to one of the previous villages? But, after sunset there would be strong monsters that shouldn't be underestimated roaming about the surrounding fields, and tomorrow morning she had to meet with the clearing group at 10 AM at the fountain plaza. Even though she originally had little interest in this boss clearing group, it was simply not in her character to disregard her duty and be late or absent without notice—for such a trivial reason, no less.

So then, there was only one option left.

For a few seconds, Asuna was conflicted in body and soul. If this were the real world, she would not do such an action even if the sky and earth turned upside down. But, this was merely a virtual world where everything was made of digital data, and her own avatar was also no different. Besides, the person in front of her eyes could not be considered a passing stranger anymore.

They had eaten cream-covered bread together, been pushed into the same party for the boss fight, and, that's right, this man had said earlier that he would explain something or other to her somewhere anyway. If she used this opportunity to receive that explanation, that should serve as a proper excuse somehow…right? Definitely. Probably.

Turning to the swordsman whose gaze was wandering aimlessly as usual, Asuna suddenly lowered her head—and spoke at a volume that could somehow only be heard by him.

"……Let me borrow the bath at your place."

The farmhouse that the black-haired swordsman had rented was situated along a small pasture in the eastern part of Tolbana. It was much larger than she had expected. If the barn and main building were included together, the place would be about as large as Asuna's house in the real world.

A beautiful stream flowed through the side of the farm grounds, and the installed small waterwheel made peaceful *pitter-patter* sounds as the water passed through it. At the two-storey main building, there lived a NPC farm family on the first floor, and the cheerful missus of the house directed a wide smile at Asuna when they arrived at the entrance. There was old woman who was sleeping on a rocking chair near the fireplace and had a golden [!] mark—the indication for a quest starting point—floating above her head that was worrisome, but she ignored it for now.

Asuna followed the swordsman up to the massive staircase to the second floor, where there was but one door at the end of a short corridor. When the swordsman touched the doorknob, there was a sound of a lock opening automatically. Had it been Asuna who touched it, this door would definitely not have opened. It was completely impossible to unlock rooms rented out to players even with the «Picking»[13] skill.

[13] Kanji = 鍵開け(lock opening), furigana = ピッキング (picking)

"…W-Well, please come in."

The swordsman pushed open the door, and made an awkward welcoming gesture.

"…Thanks."

Expressing her gratitude in a low voice, Asuna then entered the room—and at that moment, she cried out unintentionally.

"W-What is this? So large……T-There's only a thirty Cor difference between this and my room!? I-Isn't it too cheap……?"

"Being able to find a room like this quickly is a fairly important Outside System Skill…Well, in my case…"

At that point, the swordsman cut off his words unnaturally so she turned to look at him, but he only shook his head slightly. Asuna then looked around the interior of the room again and let out a big sigh.

The room the two of them were in right now was at least twenty-tatami[14]. If the door that could be seen on the east wall was the bedroom, then that room was certainly about the same size as well. And on the western wall, there was a door with a [Bathroom] plate hanging on it. Those alphabet letters, inscribed in a strange typeface, seemed to release a magical attractive power to Asuna. The swordsman quickly unequipped his one-handed sword from his back and the defensive equipment on his hands and feet, and comfortably sank his body into the soft-looking sofa among the set of furniture that was simple yet possessed an excellent ambience.

After giving a long stretch of the body, the swordsman looked at Asuna, who had been lost in thought for a while, and then he cleared this throat and spoke.

"Erm, well, you probably can tell just by looking, but the bathroom is over there, so…F-Feel free to use it."

14 A tatami is Japanese floor mat made from straw, in this case it was used to describe the size of the room big enough to fit 20 of them (approximately 330 square feet).

"Ah…o-okay."

Asuna couldn't believe that she would visit someone else's room and then suddenly rush into the bathroom, but it was too late to show restraint now. As she muttered "Well, then" and headed to the door, the swordsman's voice called after her.

"Oh yes, I'll tell you just in case, but even if it's called bath, it's not the same as in the real world. The Nerve Gear seems to be inadequate at recreating a liquid environment…So, don't set your expectations too high."

"…As long as there is a lot of hot water, I don't desire anything more than that."

Responding with complete sincerity, Asuna opened the bathroom door. She slipped inside and then immediately drew back the doorknob firmly.

…In addition to the hot water, another feature of the bathroom was that it could be locked.

She stared at door that was merely closed and considered adding that precaution, but regrettably, it was unlikely that she could do so. She couldn't find any kind of notch or button in the vicinity of the doorknob, and even after tapping with her fingertips just to make sure, it seemed that the operation menu couldn't not be called up by Asuna, who was not the tenant of this room.

Nonetheless, the presence or absence of a lock was already a trifle in this situation. After all, she had intruded into a room belonging to a man she just met yesterday and was borrowing his bath. She couldn't grasp neither the age nor character of the black-haired swordsman—come to think of it, she still didn't know his name either—but at the very least he shouldn't be the type to suddenly break into the bathroom, probably. Well, even if by any change he did rush in, he shouldn't be able to do anything here «within the city boundary» where the «Crime Prevention Code» or something would activate, but…

Thinking up to there, Asuna finally removed her gaze away from the door, and turned around to face the south.

"……Amazing……"

And then she involuntarily spoke out in a small voice.

This room was also fairly spacious. The northern half was a dressing room, with a thick carpet laid on the floor and solid wood shelves built into the wall. And the floor of the southern half had a spread of tiles made of polished stone, while the majority of that section was occupied by a white bathtub in the shape of a ship.

High on the western brick wall was a hot water faucet in the shape of a monster's face, and from its mouth cascaded large quantities of clear liquid. It filled the bathtub filled to the brim while raising pure white steam, and water overflowed from the edge and flowed into a drain in a corner of the tiled floor.

—Based on common sense, such large-scale hot water supply facilities should not exist in a Medieval European manor house that this building was modelled after. However, Asuna didn't have the heart to complain about the errors of historical research in the virtual world. She brought up the Main Menu window with an aimless hand motion, and pressed the button to unequip all her armor and weapons in the «Equipment Figure» that was displayed in the right half of the window.

Her hooded cape that she had always covered herself with up until now, the copper armor covering her chest, both her gauntlets and long boots, and the long and slender sword hanging at her waist; all of these disappeared, and her long, straight chestnut hair flowed out behind her. The only clothes that remained were a wool tunic with three-quarter-length sleeves and some tight leather long trousers. The button she just pressed changed to «Unequip all clothing», so she pressed it again. The tunic and pants then disappeared, leaving only two simple pieces of cotton underwear.

Asuna glanced at the door one more time, and then pressed the button that had changed once again into «Unequip all underwear». With just these three operations, her avatar became unequipped of everything, and a virtual sense of cold brushed across her bare skin. In the oddly named castle known as Aincrad, the four seasons were tentatively synchronized with reality, and because the real world was currently in early December, the room temperature was fairly low.

She hurriedly rushed across the bathroom, and the instant she straddled over the edge of the ceramic-looking bathtub and submerged her left leg into the hot water, the complicated sensory signals that were generated from it directly hit the top of her head. Withstanding the urge to plunge her whole body into the water, she first put her head under the shower of water from the mouth of the water faucet. As the feeling of warmth enveloped the surface of her entire body, the difference in temperature from the surrounding air faded away—

*Splash*.

She lowered herself down into the hot water from behind.

"……Uaaa……"



Asuna couldn't help but let out another low moan.

Indeed, just as the black-haired swordsman had said, the sensation of bathing in the real world could not be reproduced. The feeling of hot water on the skin, the pressure of the water against the body, and the light reflecting off the water's wavering surface; they all left a subtle sense of incongruity.

But, the «sensation of taking a bath», which was pre-set to a certain extent like eating, seemed to be sent to her brain, and when she closed eyes and stretched her arms and legs out, the difference was so trivial that she didn't care anymore. This was a bath. Moreover, it was a deluxe version two meter-long bathtub with the luxurious hot water freely flowing within it.

While sinking into the hot water up to her mouth with her eyes closed and completely relaxing her whole body, she started to think.

——Right now, it's fine even if I die. I have nothing more to regret.

Since she had left the Starting City two weeks ago, there was a thought she had constantly dwelled on. Clearing this death game was an impossible task; thus, all of the ten thousand people imprisoned would eventually die. It was just a matter of sooner or later, so everything in this false virtual world was meaningless. In that case, it would be better to just continue forward and forward recklessly, until one collapses after no longer being able to move, and then die.

Looking back on the «strategy meeting» that was held yesterday and today, Asuna was fairly indifferent in her heart. She didn't care who the beta testers (which she still didn't know the exact meaning of) were or how the items were to be distributed. What they were going to try challenging tomorrow on Sunday was the greatest and final barrier on Aincrad's First Floor which had so far swallowed two thousand people. It wasn't possible to clear something like that with a mere forty-odd people, and moreover on only the first battle.

There was a high chance of total annihilation, and even if it did not go that far, a routing defeat was inevitable.

Wanting to take a bath to the point that Asuna greatly deviated from daily behavioral had, in other words, a wish that she wanted to accomplish «at least once before dying». Now that it had come true, she felt no more regrets about disappearing from this world in the boss battle tomorrow……

————That cream-covered black bread.

————Before I die, I want to eat it once again……

This desire that suddenly welled up from within her chest confused Asuna. She opened her eyes, and raised her body slightly in the hot water.

The taste was indeed not bad. But, it was completely an imitation. Her eyes saw only polygons, and the taste signals were pre-set. For that matter, even this bath was the same. What looked like hot water was no more than a mathematical boundary surface that created its seeming permeability and reflectance. The warmth enveloping her entire body was also in reality merely the enumeration of electronic signals emitted from the Nerve Gear.

But……But.

In the real world that she had lived in until one month ago, had she ever wished to eat something as much as this? Had she ever wished to take a bath as strongly as this?

The course menu of organic ingredients that she had mechanically moved to her mouth while talking to her parents even though she didn't want to eat, and the virtual cream-covered bread that her body had wished for so much that her mouth salivated. Which one should be considered more «Real»……?

Asuna was struck with wonder by the feeling that she now somehow considered this a very, very important matter, and she quietly held her breath.

# *8*

To think I would be forced to use such a high Will Saving Throw[15] just in order to withstand the urge to look at the bathroom door.

As my body sank deep into the sofa in the living room, I exerted all my mental energy and tried to stay focused on «Argo's Strategy Guide: First Floor Boss Edition» which I had obtained today. However, despite following several times the lines of simple Japanese font that was my priority to read, the content still failed to reach my brain.

—But well, at least this proves this place isn't in the real world.

For example, suppose that this was in my home in Kawagoe, Saitama Prefecture, that my mother and younger were absent, and there was a female classmate taking a bath in my bathroom for some reason. In those circumstances, what would I do? It's obvious. I would go out from the front door with silent footsteps, get on my beloved MTB[16], and then ride at full speed towards the prefectural road No. 51 in the Arakawa district.

But fortunately, this was the second floor of a large farmhouse built on the outskirts of Tolbana on the first floor of the floating castle Aincrad, and I was not a net game maniac male high school student, but instead the swordsman Kirito. Since my body was just an avatar in a virtual world, nothing would happen even after the female fencer called Asuna walks out of the bathroom. No, well, the possibility wasn't zero that this might be an elaborate trap and that when I took my turn to take a bath she would disappear along with the contents of my chest in the living room, but the box held only several low level raw material items that I got from small fry monsters.

15 A Dungeons and Dragons Tabletop RPG term, for example if someone cast a death spell on you, and your dice roll is sufficient, you won't die.
16 Mountain bike

Or rather, I have no reason to go to the bathroom anyway. When she comes out, I'll say "Well then, let's work hard tomorrow", show her out of the room, and end it there. That's all.

Shaking my head, I returned my attention to the guidebook on the low table, but at that moment.

From the door—not the bathroom one, but the one leading to the hallway outside—came a tap, tap-tap-tap noise.

The sound of knocking. But the one who knocked would not be this house's landlady. This rhythm was a signal that had been agreed upon between me and a certain someone.

Surprised, my whole body trembled, and I timidly turned around to face the thick oak door—to look at Argo the Rat, who should be standing on the other side of the door.

—I could escape out of the south window to the front yard, jump astride the donkey tied to the stable, and gallop full speed straight down the path through the forest in order to reach the dungeon area.

I couldn't deny that I didn't momentarily consider this option. However, riding any of the various mounts in SAO was unusually difficult. I've heard that the horse-riding skill can be trained and leveled up gradually, but I don't have the space on my skill slots to add such a hobby-like skill right now.

Therefore, while getting up off the sofa, I first took a glance at the bathroom to check the situation. Currently, on the other side of that door, the rapier user Asuna-san was in the highly praised bath. If Argo learned of that, she would definitely write words like «Kirito is the type of man who would bring a woman he met for the first time into his room» in her notebook. If this information were distributed around, my reputation as a solo player and the like would be completely ruined. But fortunately—it could be said, all doors in this world have perfect soundproofing performance under certain conditions.

As far as I know, the only three sounds that could be transmitted through the door were ① a shout, ② knocking, and ③ the sound of combat. The sounds of normal speech or the splashing of the bath couldn't be heard even if you pressed your ear against the door.

Therefore, even if I let her in, she shouldn't notice that a player was here using the bathroom in the next room. If, by any chance, the rapier user comes out while Argo is here—I will definitely jump out of the window, and leave on a donkey.

Deciding on that with the speed I normally used in battle, I stepped up to the hallway door and, with my mind made up, opened it. On seeing the face of the person on the other side, I exclaimed,

"How rare, for you to come all the way to visit my room."

The phrase I had earlier prepared in my mind came out from my mouth. The face of the informant «Argo the Rat» with her trademark whiskers twitched in a suspicious manner for a moment, but she immediately shrugged and replied,

"Yes. The client wants to hear your reply today no matter what."

Just like that, Argo walked into the room nonchalantly and sat down with a thump on the sofa I had just left. I shut the door, walked to the wagon in a corner of the room while seriously resisting the urge to look at the bathroom, and poured out two cups of fresh milk from a large-sized pitcher. I brought them over to the sofa set, placing them on the low table. The «Rat» raised an eyebrow and laughed.

"For Ki-bou, that sure is considerate. By any chance, did you put some sleeping drugs in it?"

"…That kind of thing would have fundamentally no effect on players. Besides, I couldn't do anything while you are asleep within the town boundary anyway."

At this, Argo clapped her hands and said "Well, that's true" while nodding. Lifting the glass, she drained its contents in one gulp.

"Thanks for the drink. This unlimited drink sure has a very good taste. How about bottling it up and selling it to other players?"

"Unfortunately, when you remove it from the farmhouse, its endurance level will completely drop after five minutes. Moreover, the remaining liquid becomes a gunky mess instead of disappearing…"

"Ho, I didn't know that. Looks like there's nothing scarier than free things."

…As she spoke, my heart was filled with the single thought of 'Hurry up and get to the point!', but if she discovers that I was thinking this, who knows what she would do. With an innocent expression, I picked up the «Argo's Strategy Guide: First Floor Boss Edition» I had left on the table, and lightly tapped it.

"Speaking of free things, what's this about? Although I'm indebted to you for it every time I buy it, I've always bought this book for five hundred cor…yet at yesterday's meeting, that axe user Agil said that these books are distributed for free, didn't he?"

Hearing my slightly resentful tone, the Rat laughed with a "nishishi".

"That's because, with the sales from the first edition that Ki-bou and all the other front runners bought, I released a second free edition. But don't worry, only the first edition has Argo-sama's autograph printed on it."

"……I see, then in the future I won't buy it anymore."

—In other words, the free edition is Argo's way of taking responsibility as an original beta tester. Although I wanted to plunge in and ask about it more deeply, there was an atmosphere of taboo between me and the Rat about voicing the word beta.

No, since I didn't do anything to contribute earlier as an original tester, I might have no right to ask about it.

The atmosphere became momentarily heavy. Argo swung her golden brown curly hair and changed the subject.

"Well then, I guess it's time to get to the main topic."

While silently shouting 'Go ahead, go ahead, go ahead!', I nodded gently.

"Well, I think the client is at the point where he's feeling considerate. The subject is about his wish to buy Ki-bou's sword…if you sell it to him today, the client will buy it for thirty-nine thousand and eight hundred cor."

"……Th……"

'Three nine eight!?' I barely avoided yelling that out. After taking a deep breath, I thought hard a few seconds, and then opened my mouth.

"……I don't mean to insult you, but…isn't that some kind of scam? No matter how you think about it, the sword is not worth forty thousand cor. After all, the market price of an original «Anneal Blade» should be around fifteen thousand cor, right? Add another twenty thousand cor to that, and you can basically buy the materials to enhance it to +6 almost safely. Although it might take some time, I reckon that thirty five thousand can be used to make a sword comparable to mine."

"I, too, have told the client that three times already!"

Spreading out her arms, Argo had a rare "I don't get it!" expression on her face as well.

As I crossed my arms and leaned back against the sofa, the whole ordeal with the bathroom and all that momentarily left my mind and I became troubled. In this matter, I'm absolutely against diminishing my assets.

But, to let this mystery go felt more distasteful. Having made up my mind, I spoke to Aincrad's best informant.

"…Argo, I want to know the name of your client for one thousand five hundred cor. Please check with your client about whether they'll increase the price."

"…I understand."

The Rat nodded, opened her window, and typed rapidly before sending the instant message.

After a minute, a side of her eyebrows twitched as she read the reply, and then she gave a big shrug.

"He doesn't mind you learning his name."

"……."

While in an 'I don't care anymore' state of mind, I opened my own window as well and materialized one thousand five hundred cor. I piled up the six coins that represented it in front of Argo.

Pinching them casually with her fingertips, the rat playfully deposited the coins one by one into her own inventory. After nodding with an "Indeed"—she spoke.

"…Ki-bou, you already know his face and name. From when he went on a wild rampage at yesterday's meeting."

"……Could it be……Kibaou?"

Hearing my whisper, the Rat nodded clearly.

—Kibaou. The man who burned with intense hostility against original beta testers. That guy, wants to buy my sword for the large sum of forty thousand cor?

Certainly, the weapon he carried on his back was the same kind of «One-Handed Longsword» as mine.

However, yesterday should have been the first time we met. Yet Argo first offered this deal one week ago…

This information that I had obtained for 1500 cor merely made me more confused. Argo, sitting cross-legged on the sofa while facing the brooding me, spoke as if to remind me.

"…So I guess this means that you reject the sword purchase this time as well?"

"Yeah……"

Of course, regardless of the price, I had no intention of selling my beloved sword. I nodded half-automatically, and the Rat stood up without a sound.

"Well then, excuse me for bothering you with thiss. I hope that strategy guide will be of use to you."

"Yeah……"

"So, sorry for asking, but before I leave, I'd like to borrow the next room. I want to equip my night equipment."

"Yeah……"

—If I think back hard, I did have the feeling during yesterday's meeting that, while Kibaou was out in front of everyone, his gaze had lingered on my face for a moment. Then that gaze wasn't because he suspected I was an original beta tester, but to look at my sword…was that it? No, maybe it was because of both…

——Wait a minute. What did Argo just say?

While eighty percent of my thoughts were preoccupied about Kibaou, I looked up blankly.

In the corner of my eyes, I saw Argo just about to turn the doorknob. The door was neither the one leading to the corridor outside, nor my bedroom door on the east wall—it was the door with a plate saying Bathroom hanging from it.

Before my eyes as I watched dumbfounded, the Rat's petite figure slipped into the bathroom and disappeared.

Three seconds later—

"Waaah!?"

A surprised voice, and,

"……Kyaaaaaaaaaaa!!"

A terrible scream shook the entire house. Subsequently, a player who was not Argo flew out from the door.

I have no memory of what happened after that.

# *9*

December 4th, Sunday, 10 AM.

This death game had started at one o'clock in the afternoon on a Sunday, on November 6th. In three hours, it will have been exactly four weeks since it began.

When I first noticed that the Log-Out button was missing, I believed it was a system glitch, and thought that even if it took a while, I would be able to log out in a few dozen minutes. Then, the release condition of clearing all hundred floors of Aincrad were thrust upon me by the Kayaba Akihiko who was clad as a faceless Game Master, and I had vaguely expected that we would be imprisoned for a period of a hundred days. That was the calculation based on the assumption that we could clear an average of a floor per day.

But—even after four weeks had passed, we hadn't even reached the second floor.

I could only laugh at that far too naïve estimate of mine, but depending on the results of today's Boss Battle, we would be knocked down to a situation where we couldn't even speak of the time until our release. The forty-four players that were now gathered at the fountain plaza in Tolbana could be considered to be the strongest fighting force we could have hoped for at this point. If by some chance this raid party is wiped out, no, if it was even partially destroyed, rumors of it would spread to the Starting City in an instant, and the resignation that «SAO is impossible to clear» would surely spread throughout the first floor. Reorganizing a second force would take who knows how long—or, a second challenge against the boss many never even happen. Even if we tried increasing our level in order to fight the boss again, we had already reached the de-facto limit of efficiency to gain experience from the monsters on the first floor.

Everything depended on whether the Boss Monster «Illfang the Kobold Lord»'s strength had changed from the time of the beta test. If it was the Kobold King I remembered, it shouldn't be impossible to keep it down to zero deaths with our current level and equipment even if we were only one raid party. With that, if everyone could calmly keep cooperating until the end in this battle where we risk our actual lives…

While I was thinking over these overheating thoughts in my mind, I suddenly glanced at the player standing next to me, and after taking a short breath, I gave a bitter smile as I breathed out.

The profile of the rapier user «Asuna», half hidden by her hood, looked exactly like the first time I saw her in the labyrinth area the morning of the day before yesterday. Her appearance combined the fragility of a shooting star with the sharpness of live steel. Compared to her, I looked extremely agitated and restless.

As I continued to look at her, Asuna suddenly turned and glared at me.

"……What are you looking at?"

This faint, but forceful whisper caused me to shake my head. The reason for her bad mood since early this morning was, according to her, due to drinking from a pail of spoiled milk which I had offered to her, but I couldn't recall this myself.

"I-It's nothing."

When I said those un-ingenious words, Asuna once again gave me a look as sharp as the tip of her rapier, before turning her back to me. Will today's strategy meeting turn out okay like this? Well, she and I are just an extra party because the numbering didn't work out. While I was thinking on such things—

"Hey."

Hearing a voice that could hardly be called friendly from behind, I turned around.

Standing there was a male player with pointy brown styled hair. My body reflexively flinched back. Because today, even if other people spoke out to me, his was the one face I had least expected to see. Just this man—Kibaou.

Glaring with extremely dangerous eyes from a slightly low position at me as I stood there stunned, Kibaou said in an even lower voice,

"Listen here, today you should stay in the back. You guys are only here as support for my party."

"……"

I've never been a smooth-speaking person, but I had no response to this. Because, yesterday, I had directly rejected his large offer of forty thousand Cor offer, and in addition, I had learned his name that he had specifically hidden through the representative he sent, so this situation was quite awkward to anyone with common sense. If the situation were reversed, I wouldn't want to approach him at all within a twenty meter radius.

Yet, Kibaou's attitude was so unpleasant that it withered my intention to say "Of course". His hatefully distorted face protruded forward even more, and he spat out,

"Listen up, you guys should only take on the small fry Kobolds that slip past my party."

Spitting some virtual spit onto the ground for emphasis, Kibaou then finally turned aside and left. I watched his back as he returned to the other members of the Group E party. Still stunned, I continued watching his back as he lumbered back over to his E-party members, but I came back to my senses when I heard a voice beside me.

"…What was that?"

Of course, the «you guys» mentioned also included Asuna-san. Her gaze was about 30% more terrifying than the leer she gave me just now.

"W-Who knows…Maybe he doesn't want solo players to get cocky…"

I spoke without thinking too deeply, but suddenly a thought came, and added inside my mind.

—Or, maybe, he doesn't want original beta testers to get carried away.

If that was true, then based on his attitude, there was no doubt that Kibaou had already determined that I was a beta tester. But—what was his basis for believing that? Even Argo the Rat would never sell any information on whether another player was an original tester. And up until now, I had never ever mentioned the word beta to anyone.

While once again feeling tormented by an unpleasant feeling like yesterday, I kept my eyes on Kibaou's back as he walked away.

"……Eh…?"

Then, I suddenly realized something, and let out a sound.

Yesterday, that man offered me the large sum of forty thousand Cor to buy my Anneal Blade +6. This is the only certain fact. And his purpose in doing that was, of course, to use it in the boss battle today. Regardless of the matter of how he would suddenly be able to wave around such a heavy sword due to having been enhanced by three extra points in Durability, I could understand his motive to get a powerful weapon and play an active role on the battlefield in order to improve his influence and leadership abilities.

However, if that was the case, then by now, he should have upgraded his other equipment with his forty thousand Cor.

Yet, the scale mail Kibaou was wearing now and the one-handed sword on his back were the same ones that he had equipped at yesterday's meeting. They weren't poor quality equipment, but with forty thousand Cor, it should have been possible to upgrade to much stronger equipment, since there was enough time.

In fact, the thin sword hanging from the waist of Asuna beside me had been upgraded from her store-bought «Iron rapier» to a «Wind Fleuret +4» which had been obtained as a drop last night after following my advice. After all, depending on the flow of today's battle, we could die, so what's the point of keeping forty thousand Cor in storage…

—However, at this point, my train of thoughts was brought to a halt.

Before I had realized it, the blue haired knight Diavel stood on the edge of the fountain and raising his familiar beautiful voice.

"Everyone, although it may be sudden—thank you! Just now, all forty-four party members have gathered here, without a single person missing!!"

After he said that, a loud cheer of 'Uooh' shook up the entire plaza. It was followed by a cascade of applause. I ceased my conjecture reluctantly and also clapped my hands.

After look at everyone with a smile, the knight pumped his right fist, and shouted out again.

"I'll say this now, but I was actually thinking of aborting the mission today if even a single person didn't show up! But…that kind of worry is an insult to everyone! I'm very happy…that we weren't able to make the best raid party like this…Well, though our numbers are slightly short!"

Some people laughed, some people whistled, and some people pumped their right hands mimicking him.

I didn't want to find fault with Diavel's leadership right now. However, I couldn't help but think inside that he was raising the excitement a little too much. Just as nervousness could become the poison known as fear if taken too far, too much excitement could also become negligence.

During the beta testing period, being defeated for being over-enthusiastic was just a funny story, but right now we were in a single situation where failure could lead to the death of a player. Rather, it would probably be good if everyone were too tightened up and strained.

While I thought about these things, I looked at the other groups from behind, and I saw that Group B's leader Agil, the two-handed axe wielder, and several other people all had stern expressions with their arms folded in front of them. At critical moments, they would probably be reliable. Kibaou of group E had his back to me, so I couldn't see his expression.

As everyone shouted and yelled for a while, Diavel raised both hands to suppress the cheering.

"Everyone…I have only one thing left to say!"

His right hand moved to his left hip, and he drew his silvery long sword with a ringing peal—

"……Let's win!!"

The huge war cries that rang out in response was, I thought, slightly similar to four weeks ago, in the packed central square of the Starting City, when ten thousand players screamed.

# *10*

The distance taken by the large group of people from the town of Tolbana to the Labyrinth tower prickled a part of Asuna's memories. After a few minutes of thinking, she finally recalled it.

It was the school trip that she had went on in January of this year. The destination had been Queensland, Australia. Her classmates' excitement from suddenly being in the Gold Coast in the middle of summer from mid-winter Tokyo had been through the roof, and their revelry had continued wherever they went.

Even if the situation was entirely different—to that point, it was the only common feature, the atmosphere among the forty-odd people walking down the path beneath the trees bore a strong resemblance to that time with her classmates. The endless chatting, the frequent explosions of laughter; the only difference was that monsters would occasionally attack them from the forest on either side. However, all the monsters that came close were instantly slain by the skills that everyone was bragging about.

While walking at the rear of the group, Asuna spoke to the swordsman next to her, letting herself forget about the tragedy last night for a moment.

"…Hey, you, before coming here, you also played other m…MMO games? Is that how they're called? Anyway, did you?"

"Emm…Yeah, pretty much."

Despite still giving off a withered feeling, his black hair swayed up and down as he nodded.

"In other games, is there also this kind of feeling when people move around together? How should I put it…like going on a field trip…"

"…Haha, a field trip would be nice"

After giving a short laugh, the swordsman then shrugged slightly.

"Unfortunately, the other games that I played had nothing like this. After all, those are games that don't use the FullDive technology, so even if you move around, you have to use the mouse and keyboard. Therefore, there's not much time to dedicate to speaking in the chat window."

"…Ah, I see…"

"Well, there are other games that include voice chat, but I haven't played those kinds before."

"Hmm."

After imagining for a little while the scene of a group of game characters continuing to dash silently inside a flat monitor screen, Asuna murmured once again.

"…I wonder what the real thing feels like"

"Eh? R-Real thing?"

The swordsman gave her a questioning look, so Asuna tried to describe the image that had appeared in her mind.

"What I mean is…in a real fantasy world like this…while a group of swordsmen or magicians venture forth to go beat a terrible boss monster. During the journey, what do they speak about? …Or would they walk along silently? That kind of subject."

"……."

The swordsman remained oddly silent, and when she glanced at his expression, Asuna finally became aware that she had asked a very childish question. She reflexively turned away, and just as she was about to say "I guess it doesn't matter",

"Walking on the road leading either to death or glory, huh."

Those quiet words reached her right ear.

"For people that live doing that kind of thing normally and every day…I think it would probably be like going together to a restaurant for dinner. If you want to talk, you talk, and if not you stay silent. I think these boss battle raids will become like that eventually. If we challenge the floor bosses every day."

"…Fufu, fu."

Finding the swordsman's straightforward words funny, Asuna gave off a small laugh. She explained immediately, half as an excuse.

"I'm sorry for laughing. But…this is really strange. This world is the ultimate form of unusualness and non-daily life, yet there are ordinary aspects in it."

"Ha ha…I guess that's true."

After laughing in the same way, the swordsman spoke quietly.

"However, it took four weeks to reach this point today. Even if we beat the boss today, we still have another ninety-nine floors to go. I'm..... prepared to go for two, no, three years like this. If it goes on like this, even the unusual will become ordinary and everyday."

Those words would have caused great shock and despair to the old Asuna. But now, acceptance and understanding simply blew through her chest like a dry wind.

"……How strong. If it were me, I couldn't think like that at all. Since the thought of living in this world for years…seems much more terrifying than dying in today's battle to me."

The swordsman glanced at her for a moment, and then thrusted his hands into his grey jacket pocket, and said in a subdued voice,

"If we can reach the higher floors, maybe there is an even better bath there."

"……R-Really?"

She involuntarily responded, before realizing what she had just said. Forcing down her returning shame, she lowered her voice and said,

"…You better remember that. Or I'll make you really drink a barrel of spoiled milk."

"Then, the least we can do is to come back alive today."

After making that remark, the swordsman grinned and laughed.

# *11*

11 AM, we reached the Labyrinth.

12:30 PM, we finished travelling by foot to the top floor.

For now, I secretly felt relieved that there had been no deaths reported so far. After all, the majority of our near full 48-member raid party marching through here must be coming to this place for the first time. In this world, any action that was done for the «first time» held the danger of mishaps, without exception.

In fact, there was also a situation that was three times as frightening. That is, if Group F and G, which consisted of only people wielding long weapons such as «Spears» and «Halberds», were ambushed by the melee-type Kobolds along the road. In SAO, melee weapons wouldn't cause damage to other players even if they accidentally hit each other in a confused battle (this didn't equal them becoming a criminal player either), but normal attacks and sword skills would be halted when this happened due to contact with an obstacle. Since ranged weapons were already at high risk from this, an ambush by melee monsters made the situation even worse.

In that kind of small pinch, however, the knight Diavel showed his ability to command precisely. He boldly made all the surrounding party members fall back save for the individual leaders of each group, made them use heavier sword skills to knock back monsters, and then switched over to melee weapon-equipped members without delay. These decisions would not have been possible at all if he hadn't been familiar with being a leader in everyday life.

In light of this, it could be said that for a solo player like me to have feared something like "Everyone's getting too excited" before we departed was very presumptuous of me. Diavel had his own philosophy about leadership, and trusting in him fully now that we had already come this far was the duty of every raid member.

—As I recognized these things, two huge doors finally appeared in front of us, and I stood on my tiptoes at the back of the group in order to look up at them.

On the surface of the grey stone was a relief of a terrifying monster with a beast head and human body. Speaking of Kobolds, in other MMO games these monsters were the weakest of the weak, but in SAO alone these «Demi-Human»-class monsters were formidable foes that couldn't be made light of. This was because they had the ability to wield weapons such as swords and axes, and therefore could even use sword skills. Possessing speed, power and hit correction abilities that exceeded those of normal attacks, these «sword skills» could critically hit an enemy in a defenceless position and reduce their HP gauge drastically even with just an elementary skill. The fact that the rapier user Asuna beside me had reached the deepest part of the Labyrinth using only «Linear» proved the strength and terror of sword skills…

"…Can you listen for a while?"

I leaned in close to Asuna, and whispered in a lowered voice.

"Today, our opponents are the «Ruin Kobold Sentinels», and even though they're small-fry that act as the boss' followers, they're still strong enemies. Like they roughly explained yesterday, a large portion of their head and body is tightly covered and protected by metal armor, so your «Linear» won't be enough to attack them with."

After listening, the fencer gave me a sharp look from under her hood and nodded.

"I understand. The only point that can be pierced is the throat, right?"

"Exactly. After I throw up their poleaxe with a sword skill, please switch with me and jump in at once."

After Asuna nodded in reply and then turned around to face the huge door, I continued to gaze at her for a few more seconds.

Where and how you die, and whether it's sooner or later, is the only difference.

When we first met, she had told me that. I couldn't let those words be proven true. Asuna's «Linear» clearly demonstrated a natural talent that she herself was probably unaware of. All shooting stars did not necessarily burn up and disappear in the atmosphere. There were stars that withstood the flames that burned them and managed to reach the ground.

If she could survive today's battle, Asuna's name would surely one day resound throughout Aincrad as a swordswoman that was faster and more beautiful than anyone else. The many players gripped by fear and despair would surely be illuminated and guided by the brightness of that shooting star. I firmly believed that. And this responsibility was a role that someone marked by the stigma of being an original beta tester like myself could never take on.

Once I confirmed my determination, I also faced the large door. In front of us, Diavel had finished finely arranging the lineup of the seven parties.

Not even the knight-sama dared to shout "Let's win!" in this place. This was because humanoid monsters would react to loud noises here.

Instead, Diavel lifted his silver long-sword up high, and gave a large nod. The forty-three raid members also raised their weapons and nodded in reply.

His long blue hair fluttering as he turned around, the knight placed his left hand in the center of the large doors and—

"——Let's go!"

With a short cry, he pushed the doors open with all his might.

Was it this wide?

Looking at the First Floor Boss Room for the first time in around four months, this was the first impression that I had.

It was a rectangular space that extended out far towards the back of the room. Its width from the left to the right wall was about twenty meters, and the distance from the entrance to the back was about one hundred meters. Since the 20th floor had already been mostly mapped except for the boss room, its area could be estimated by looking at the blank area on the map, but even so, actually seeing it with our own eyes made it feel a lot larger than the numerical digits.

This room was spacious in order to contain the gigantic monsters here.

In Aincrad's boss rooms, the doors would not close even after the battle against the boss began. Thus, even if the events took a turn for the worse, we could retreat without having to wait for total annihilation. However, if we merely turned and dashed way, the enemy's long ranged sword skills would hit us and cause a delay effect, or in the worst case stun us. Therefore, we would have to retreat while facing the boss, but in that situation, the hundred meters needed to escape would feel infinitely long. Rather, if it was a boss battle on the upper floors, where it was possible to obtain «Teleport Crystals» that allowed instantaneous teleportation, retreat might actually be easier then. Well, since crystals were absurdly expensive, our money deficits would undoubtedly rapidly increase after retreating, though.

While I was contemplating such thoughts, a series of igniting sounds rang through the boss room that was almost completely sunk in darkness, and crude torches blazed to life along the walls on either side. As the sound of flames popping into existence continued, the lit torches increased in number one after another further towards the back of the room.

As the sources of light were generated, the internal Gamma[17] brightness also rose.

17 Computer display brightness: Gamma correction

The stone floor and walls were filled with cracks. Skulls of all sizes decorated the room everywhere. In the deepest part of the room stood a huge and crude throne, and upon it sat a rough silhouette of something large—

The knight, Diavel, raised his long-sword high, and then swiftly swung it down in front of him.

With that as the signal, the forty-four members of the Boss Monster Capture Forces raised a battle cry as they all rushed into the large room like an avalanche at once.

The ones to rush in first in the front row were Group A, led by a hammer-user brandishing an iron heater shield[18]. They were followed by Group B diagonally to their left, led by the axe-warrior Agil. To their right was Group C composed of Diavel and his five friends, and Group D with a tall man wielding a two-handed sword as their leader. Behind these three groups were the search-and-kill Group E led by Kibaou, the polearm-equipped Group F and Group G running alongside each other.

And still further behind them, there were two extra people—

When the distance between the advancing Group A and the throne was about 20 meters, the gigantic silhouette that had been still until now suddenly jumped fiercely into the air. It somersaulted once before landing on the ground, causing the earth to rumble. After that, it opened its wolf-like jaws wide, and howled.

"Gururuaaaaaaaaaaa!!"

The Demi-Human King, «Illfang the Kobold Lord», looked exactly as I remembered. Its muscular body was easily over two meters tall and was covered in blue-gray fur. Its eyes blazed a bloodthirsty copper red.

18 A Heater Shield is a form of European medieval shield, developed from the early medieval Kite Shield.

Its right hand wielded an axe made of bone, while its left carried a leather buckler. Behind its waist, a meter and a half long Talwar[19] protruded.

The Kobold Lord raised the Bone Axe in its right hand up high, and struck with all its strength at Group A's leader. The thick heater shield received the blow, causing a dazzling light effect and a loud impact sound to reverberate throughout the hall.

As if that sound were a cue, three heavily armed monsters jumped down from various alcoves high up on the walls on either side. These were the guards, the «Ruin Kobold Sentinels». Group E led by Kibaou and the support Group G quickly moved towards the three monsters, locking onto their target. Asuna and I glanced at each other, and then dashed to the nearest Sentinels.

Thus, on the 4th of December at 2:40 PM, the first Boss Monster Battle finally began.

«Illfang»'s HP gauge had four bars. During the first three bars, it would fight with its Bone Axe in its right hand and its leather buckler in its left, but when it reached the fourth, it would discard them and remove the Talwar from its waist. The fact that its attack pattern would drastically change at that point was the biggest hurdle for us, but Argo’s strategy guide had also included details on that without sparing anything. Of course, the kinds of sword skills it used after changing its weapons from the Bone Axe to the Talwar and the ways to deal with that had been completely confirmed amongst us during yesterday’s meeting.

While I fought against the «Sentinel» that had slipped past Group E and Group G, I continued watching the situation on the front lines from the edge of my vision, but there was no sign of our tactics collapsing.

19 A «Talwar» is a sword or saber with a curved blade. The word talwar literally means sword or dagger in the majority of the languages of the South Asian Subcontinent, where the «Talwar» is from.

The switch replacements between «Tank» forces and the «Attacker» forces and the POT rotations were done with sufficient margin for error, and the average remaining HP of each raid party member that was displayed in a small window at the left corner of my vision was also stable at 80%.

Please, like this—just let it keep going like this.

It wasn't something I did at all when fighting solo, but now I prayed like this with all my body and soul for someone else.

# *12*

Since the time he had (through some unknown means) rescued her unconscious self from within the almost deepest part of the Labyrinth tower, Asuna had thought that the black-haired swordsman was probably a considerably strong person.

However, after seeing his way of fighting for the first time, Asuna could tell that her assessment fell far short.

—Strong.

No, there was something in his fighting that could not accurately be described by the word “strong”. Something that transcended measuring scales like power or speed, and left like it went into a «further dimension».

As a beginner who had never played a net game or been in a FullDive environment before, Asuna couldn’t put that something into words. But if she had to express them, it would probably be as a feeling that everything was optimized. Excessiveness was eliminated from all his movements, hence his techniques were quick and his sword was heavy. With an instant slash, he would repel the dreadful-looking halberd wielded by a heavily armed Kobold guard into the sky above, and then casually retreat while calling out "Switch!". In his place, Asuna would quickly jump in front of the Kobold, but it was very easy for her to fire a «Linear» into the weak point at its unprotected throat while the Kobold was bent over from the recoil.

Asuna now recalled the words that he had spoken the first time they met. In response to how he had pointed out "Overkill has no demerit or penalty from the system, but it's bad for efficiency", Asuna had answered with "Is there any problem with it?". Now, she had no choice but to admit that it was a huge problem. If you could remove useless movement, it would produce a margin of time and space to spare, and that margin would widen one’s view.

These «Sentinels» were much stronger in comparison with the «Trooper» she had fought back then, yet Asuna could see each move it made quite clearly—

The Kobold guard's HP gauge that she had just attacked with a «Linear» to its throat's vital point had a little left in its bar. If it were the old Asuna, she would have waited for the enemy's counterattack, dodged it at the last minute, and then fired off another «Linear». But that was pointless «Overkill». As soon as the delay from the sword skill ended, Asuna once again jabbed at the throat with minimal movement. With that, the enemy's HP gauge reached zero, and disintegrated into blue fragments.

"GJ.[20] "

Behind her, the black haired swordsman whispered that softly. Although she didn't know what the abbreviation stood for, she still replied with "You too".

At that time, the first bar of the Boss Kobold's HP gauge had disappeared. In the front row, Diavel shouted "We're on the second bar!", as additional «Sentinels» jumped down from the holes in the wall.

Forgetting that they were the extra forces, Asuna and her partner dashed towards the nearby monsters. The sword in her right hand, despite only having been bought just yesterday, had already perfectly adapted to her palm, and the response from the sword was clear when she fired off her techniques as well. It was as if the sword was a part of her arm, from the leather wrapped hilt to the tip of its sharp, glittering blade.

—If this is what a «battle» is like in this world, then everything I did up until yesterday was like a false imitation.

—I'm sure there will still be many more battles «ahead» of us. The swordsman running next to me had always been heading forward down that path.

20 GJ means Good Job

This world is a virtual illusion, and all our actions are imitations…but…but I'm sure, this feeling is real. This feeling of wanting to see what he sees as well.

A Sentinel's axe swung down, and the swordsman countered it with a high blow. The next instant, Asuna herself shouted "Switch!", and jumped towards the enemy with her beloved sword.

# *13*

The battle between the Kobold King with its guards and the 44 players proceeded far better than I expected.

Diavel and the rest of Group C had taken out the first HP gauge layer, Group D had gotten rid of the second layer, and now Group F and G had reduced the third layer by half. Until this point, the members of Group A and B, the «Tank» teams, had their HP reduced to the yellow «Half» region several times, but none of them ever entered the dangerous red region. Since the heavy-armored guards could be taken care of with ease by Group E and the two of us, Group G changed roles to supporting the main battlefield midway through.

What was truly remarkable was the intense fighting from the rapier user Asuna. The «Linear» sword skill that had amazed me when we first met, with the stronger and sharper rapier she had obtained, accurately pierced the Kobold guards' throats, their weak point. The time from the first motion of the skill until the damage occurred was close to half of when the attack was launched while relying the System Assist on its own. Looking at that pure speed, I doubted that even I, who had been practicing deliberately boosting the sword skill since the beta testing period, could achieve that much acceleration.

She was just a beginner that knew only one skill. Just imagining how far she could go if she increased her knowledge and honed her senses made my spine tingle.

If this truly occurs, I'd like to see the progression by her side— was the thought that came to my mind, but I forced it back into my chest. On that day one month ago, I had decided to survive in this world as a selfish solo player, so I had no right to want to be together with other players. Because Klein, my first friend in this world, should still be around the Starting City, carefully and safely levelling up in order to make sure he and all his friends survive…

As I looked on while recalling those unpleasant memories, Asuna had already struck down her second prey. The «Ruin Kobold Sentinel» was a rare monster on account of the fact that it only spawned here, so although it did not give as much experience and Cor as the boss, it still dropped an item. Only money was automatically distributed evenly among members in a raid party, while the experience was split between those who defeated it, which were Asuna and me. The item drop had a higher probability of going to Asuna because she made the final blow.

That was probably the real reason why Group E's leader Kibaou, whose party was also fighting similar Sentinels, wanted only his group members to take the monsters down. However, the extra pair of Asuna and I defeated our targets much faster than the full six-member party of Group E. This way, even he couldn't complain—

Just as I thought that, Kibaou's voice resounded loudly from right behind me.

"I know what you're up to. Feels good, doesn't it?"

"……What did you say?"

Not knowing what he meant, I turned around to ask that. Since the last two of the three Sentinels that had spawned in the third wave were just about taken care of now, there was spare time to talk until the next wave spawned. The cactus-headed swordsman glared at me as I frowned, and then raised his voice and spat out,

"Don't pretend. I already know your motive for slipping into this boss raid."

"My…motive? Aside from beating the boss, is there anything else?"

"What, playing innocent, are we? I know exactly what you're aiming for!"

The premise behind this conversation didn't seem to be connecting for me. As I unconsciously grinded my teeth out of a strange frustration, Kibaou finally told me the heart of the matter.

"I know about it. I heard a little about you…in the past, you did the dishonourable act of LA on the boss!"

"Wha……."

——LA. Last Attack.

It was true that, in past battles against bosses, I had prided myself on having a good grasp of the boss's remaining HP gauge to determine the best time to use my strongest sword skill on the boss and get the LA bonus. However, that was not in this world, but in another floating castle that existed for merely a single month—in the «Sword Art Online Closed Beta Test».

Kibaou not only knew I was a former beta tester, but he even knew my play-style from back then. But, wait a minute. This man had just said "I heard it", if I recall right. In other words, it was hearsay information. But, who did he hear it from……

At that moment, a second insight ran electrifyingly through my body.

Last week, Kibaou used the informant Argo the Rat to attempt to buy my «Anneal Blade +6» with a large sum of money. Yesterday, he had even raised his offer beyond the market price to forty thousand Cor, but even though I gave a final refusal, he did not spend that money.

No. It was not that he did not spend it. In fact, he didn't have that kind of money in the first place.

It was not just Argo, Kibaou himself was also a mediator. Because even the day after I refused his offer, he still talked to me calmly.

The real buyer was someone else. The source of the forty thousand Cor was that person. If another person was put between that person and Argo, no matter how much I paid for information, I could not have found out who the original buyer was.

That mastermind gave Kibaou information about the beta period and manipulated him to stir up trouble.

If it is like this, that person's aim was not to get the «Anneal Blade +6» to increase their own battle power. No, that may also be a part of it, but his main aim was different. It was to decrease my—Kirito's battle power. To make me weak and prevent me from doing my old signature move, obtaining the LA bonus—

"……Kibaou. That guy who told you that, how did he manage to gain information on me from the beta test period?"

"It's obvious. He used ridiculously large amounts of money and bought the information about the beta period from the «Rat». In order to deduce the identity of the hyena that snuck into the raid party."

——Liar. Argo, even if she would sell information on herself, would never sell information on other beta testers.

As I clenched my teeth, the front row gave a loud cheer. The boss's long HP gauge had finally reached the fourth and final layer.

My attention was drawn to the front lines. It looked like Groups F and G were retreating after taking out the third HP gauge, and in their place the fully recovered Group C was rushing towards the boss. The party leader was the commander of the raid itself, the blue haired knight Diavel. Even in the dim light of the Labyrinth, his blue hair glittered brilliantly.

"Uguruooooooooooooo——!!"

«Illfang the Kobold Lord» gave out a particularly ferocious roar. At the same time, the final wave of three «Ruin Kobold Sentinels» jumped out of their holes in the walls.

"…More small fry Kob, this time I won't let even one go. I won't let you LA them."

His voice dripping with hatred, Kibaou returned to his comrades in Group E.

While still feeling lingering shock and confusion, I reluctantly turned away and went to regroup with Asuna who was not far away.

"……What did you talk about?"

As she asked quietly, I just shook my head.

"No…—First, let's defeat our opponents."

"……Yes."

After our brief exchange, I plunged forward and aimed my sword at a Sentinel.

At that moment—

Suddenly, I felt «something», so I glanced over at the main battlefield for just an instant.

The Kobold king threw away both the bone axe in its right hand and the leather shield in its left down onto the ground simultaneously. It gave another roar and brought its hand to the back of its waist. It grasped a handle bound roughly in tattered cloth, and pulled out its brutally long «Talwar».

During the early days of the beta, I'd seen this attack pattern change motion many times. From here on, it would only use the sword skills from the curved blade category until it died. Although its savage appearance in a berserk state was terrifying, it was actually easier to deal with than its earlier state. Since the techniques it used were only straight long-ranged vertical cuts, if the trajectory of the skill was firmly grasped when it was launched, one could avoid it even when sticking close to the boss.

Under Diavel's command, the six people that formed Group C surrounded the boss. This was a formation that couldn't be used while the boss still wielded the bone axe that performed horizontal attacks. Really, I hadn't expected at all that reading the book beforehand allowed them to come up with such precise directions. As long as the six could avoid the wild swings of the Talwar until the final blow……

"……Huh…?"

From the back of my throat, that noise was subconsciously leaked out.

The object of player X, who had entrusted to Kibaou the large sum of forty thousand Cor in order to try to buy my sword, was to interfere with me performing the LA on the Kobold king. I had already guessed that much. Even though my sword had not been taken, the goal of X had been mostly achieved. As part of the raid's extra force, I could only deal with the Sentinels, so I couldn't even approach within ten meters of the boss.

However, if it is like this.

The identity of X, at this moment, is a player who is attempting to LA the boss—that should be correct, right? After all, paying forty thousand gold is far too large a sum of money just to hinder me. Being able to LA the boss themselves should be more than enough to cover that expense.

In other words…the player X manipulating Kibaou, the man knew about my past in the beta test, his name is……

"—It's coming!"

Asuna's sharp words instantly roused me out of my momentary thoughts. The Sentinel swung its halberd, and I subconsciously used the diagonally cutting sword skill «Slant», repelling his weapon with all my strength.

"Switch!"

I shouted, then jumped backward, as Asuna exchanged with me and went in front of the guard. I once again glanced at the battlefield twenty meters away to my left.

After the motion during which the boss couldn't be attack was finished, the battle resumed. The first locked target was the blue haired knight, who had calmly avoided the first strike.

With his back facing me, I wondered to myself.

—Is it you?

—Diavel the knight, are you…Is everything part of your plan……?

Of course he didn't answer. Instead, Illfang roared and howled, then it slowly raised the blade in its right hand up high in a slow curve……

Once again, the sensation of «something» picked the center of my head.

A sense of discomfort. Something was different. This boss monster and the Kobold king that I knew were just slightly different. It was not its color. Nor its size. Nor its face and voice. The source of the discomfort wasn't from its body…it was the weapon in its right hand.

From where I was, only the silhouette of the sword was visible, but…wasn't that blade too thin? The gently curved blade was certainly similar to the one I was familiar with during the beta test period, but its width...as well as its gleam, was different. It wasn't the rough texture of cast iron. It was the tint of forged, polished steel. I have seen a weapon similar to that before…on the tenth floor of the old floating castle. A curved sword wielded by a very formidable foe dressed in red armor at the end of the beta period. Unusable by players, it was in the monster-use category, called……

"Ah…Aah……!"

A strangled sound came out from my throat. I forcefully sucked air into my narrowing air ducts, and bellowed out as loud as I could.

"D…Don't do it, fall back!! Retreat quickly——!!"

But, my voice was drowned out by the sound effects of Illfang's sword skill.

The Kobold king's huge body shook the floor, as it jumped up high. It turned its body in mid-air, while accumulating power to its weapon. As it fell down, it used the accumulated power, releasing a crimson beam of light.

Trajectory—horizontal. Angle of attack—three hundred and sixty degrees.

Katana-use sword skill, the heavy ranged attack «Tsumujiguruma»[21].

Six vivid red light effects appeared, looking like pillars of blood.

The HP gauge that was displayed on the left side of our field of vision, showing Group C's average HP, immediately dropped below fifty percent and became dyed yellow. I could see the six individual HP gauges of the six player if one touched the gauge with their finger, but there was no point in doing it now. Everyone in Group C had obviously received nearly equal amounts of damage.

Though a ranged attack, it also had a tremendous power that was enough to take out more than half of one's HP, but the technique's affect didn't stop there. Yellow lights rotated around the heads of the six people that had collapsed on the floor. This was temporary state of being unable to move for a period time—the stun effect.

Of the dozens of bad statuses in SAO, being stunned wasn't as scary as paralysis or blindness, as the effect lasted at most ten seconds. However, once the effect started, there was no way to recover from it. Therefore, if the front members were stunned, their friends must save them by diving in front without waiting for the switch, and must become the target to draw enemy fire—however.

Not a single person moved to help. Having a detailed strategy meeting in advance. Filling themselves with a mood of an easy victory that had continued thus far. And having the person everyone relied on, their leader Diavel, be struck down in a single blow. These reasons, combined together, tied down the bodies of everyone aside from Group C. Within the strained silence, the Kobold Lord recovered from the long delay caused by using its super skill.

Coming to my senses at last, I tried to shout out.

"Charge…"

21 Tsumujiguruma: Kanji is 旋車, which basically means "whirling wheel"

At the same time, in the front lines, the two handed axe user Agil and several other players tried to move in to support the others.

But, it was too late.

"Uguruo!!"

The demi human roared, and the katana—no, the nodachi[22] in both its hands was moved away from its trajectory close to the floor and raised up high. Sword skill «Ukifune»[23]. It was aimed for the Knight Diavel, who had fallen right in front of it. As if pulled by a pale red arc of light, the knight in silver armor was sent flying high up into the air. The damage wasn't much. However, the Kobold Lord's movements didn't stop there.

Its large wolf-like mouth grinned ferociously.

The nodachi was once again wrapped in a red light effect. «Ukifune» was the start of a skill combo. If you were hit by it while in the air, it was useless to struggle, so you could only defend by curling up. However, it was impossible for a person who was dealing with this situation for the first time.

While in the sky, Diavel brandished his sword, trying to pull off a sword skill to counterattack. However, because he was unstable, the system could not determine the starting motion for the skill. The huge nodachi directly hit the front of the knight as he waved his sword uselessly.

At a speed which could not be seen by the eye, the combination attack continued with a further strike followed by a thrust. A three hit strike, this skill's name was «Hiōgi»[24].

The bright colors and crashing sounds of the three consecutive damage effects that engulfed the knight’s body showed that all the attacks were critical hits.

22 Nodachi: A curved blade like the katana, but much longer.
23 Ukifune: Kanji is 浮舟, which basically means “floating boat”
24 Hiōgi: Kanji is 緋扇, which basically means “scarlet fan”

His avatar was blasted twenty meters away, over the heads of the raid members, and fell as if piercing into the ground near me, as I faced the last of the Sentinels. He fell almost as if piercing the ground. His HP gauge, which was already crimson, began to reduce further from the right end.

"……!!"

I gasped out a strange sound from the back of my throat, and I attacked the Sentinel's halberd that was approaching in front of me with a «Slant» that contained all my strength. The halberd's handle was cut apart in the middle, and as it stood stunned for a short duration Asuna's rapier pierced through its throat.

With ascertaining for the monster's shattering effect with my own eyes, I turned towards the body of the fallen Diavel. Seeing the knight's eyes from the short distance of one meter for the first time, I felt sparks race through my mind.

—I recognize this player.

His name and appearance were completely different from what I remembered, but we had definitely previously met face to face in the other Aincrad, and maybe I had even talked to him. As expected, Diavel was an original beta tester like me. And like me, he had fought while hiding his past until today. No, since he had made close friends while hiding his past, the pressure on him was probably several times more than mine.

However, precisely because he had an original tester's knowledge, he was harmed by it when it came to final stage of breaking through the first floor.

Although I do not remember him, he had had probably been convinced that I, Kirito, was the player with the same name, although with a different face, who was good at placing the LA on the boss during the beta testing period. And, he believed that I would probably try to do the same thing here. A Floor Boss's rare drop items were unique and high power items, and by getting it one's fighting power could sharply rise.

In the current death that SAO has become, combat ability is synonymous with survivability. Diavel, in order to survive in this world—not as an isolated solo player, but as a Knight at the head of a group—had tried to get the rare drop from Illfang by any means.

It seemed like Diavel has also guessed that I had realized all that in that moment. His eyes, as blue as his hair, twitched for an instant, but immediately after emitted a kind of pure light. From his trembling lips, he spoke in a voice soft enough for only me to hear.

"…I leave the rest to you, Kirito-san. The boss, defea—"

Before his sentence ended—

The commander of the Aincrad Boss Raid Forces, the Knight Diavel, turned into blue shards of glass, and then scattered in all directions.

# *14*

*Uwaaaaa*, this kind of cry—or rather, scream filled the Boss room.

Nearly all the raid members clutched their weapons as if clinging to them, with their wide eyes open. But no one moved. The leader being first to fall, no, to die was a situation beyond any of our expectations, so no one could decide what to do next.

Of course, this was also true for me.

In my mind, two options alternately blinked. To flee, or to fight.

In normal circumstances, when suffering from such large disasters as «a boss using weapons and skills different from information previously obtained» and the «loss of the leader», everyone should immediately retreat out of the boss room. However, if we turned our backs to Illfang with his long-range Katana skills while we retreated, the ten people furthest to the back, or in the worst case more than that, would end up stunned and deprived of all their HP by consecutive attacks like Diabel. Though I say that, even if we retreated while facing forward to protect ourselves, it would be difficult against an opponent with unknown skills. It would be expected that an equal number of people would gradually lose their HP and die during the time required to dash out of the room.

And most of all, with that many deaths—including the leader—and with the boss battle having failed, there was the risk of never again being able to assemble another force raid party of the same scale. In other words, the attempt to clear the death game called SAO would fail. The eight thousand survivors would not be warriors of the virtual world, but prisoners trapped in the first floor until there is some kind of «end»…

Then, two sounds echoed out at the same time, stirring me from my hesitation.

One of them was, right at the front lines, the sound of Illfang, who had come out of its delay, starting to rampage again. With a metallic sound and a shriek, the mass damage effects violently shook the dim lighting.

The other sound was the voice of Kibaou, who was kneeling next to me.

"……Why…Why…Diabel-han, why were you, the leader, the first to…"

—Because he tried to perform the LA on the boss.

Telling him like this would be easy. However, I didn't say anything.

Now that I think about it, in the first meeting, Kibaou's actions had been a flared up act by Diabel. Diabel had perfectly attempted to lead the conversation towards radical remarks like not becoming comrades with beta testers if they didn't apologize and give an unfair contribution of their assets without obstructing the topic.

That scene was probably a reward—no, not a term of bargaining from Diabel to Kibaou. In exchange for making Kibaou do the troublesome job of negotiating to buy my sword, Diabel gave him the opportunity to clear again the anger towards original testers that was smoldering inside Kibaou at the raid meeting. Agil's logical argument ended it halfway through, but if the boss battle ended as planned today, they probably planned to bring up the same topic again somehow at the review meeting afterwards. In other words, Kibaou did not suspect that Diabel was an original tester. He believed and was convinced that Diabel was a representative of the regular players taking a stand against the dirty testers. Was there any meaning in me giving him a further shock to him by telling him my deductions?

Instead—I grabbed Kibaou's left shoulder as he hanged his hand downwards, and forced him up.

"Is this the time to be discouraged!?"

When I gave that low shout, Kibaou's small eyes were instantly filled with a familiar hostility.

"…What…What did you say?"

"If you, the Group E leader, become a coward, your companions will die! Listen here, additional Sentinels may still spawn…no, they will definitely spawn. Handling them is your responsibility!"

"…Then, what will you do? Are you planning on escaping alone!?"

"As if I would. Of course I…"

Ringing the Anneal Blade in my right hand, I said,

"—Will get the LA on the boss!"

In the one month since I had become trapped in this world, I had taken many actions to keep only myself alive. I hadn't dispensed the knowledge I had obtained during the beta test period to anyone, in order to take advantage of the hunting grounds and quests that were more efficient while single-mindedly strengthening myself.

If I were to stick to a solo player's normal code of conduct, then in this situation, I should run towards the exit while many raid members are still standing between the Boss monster and myself. Without turning back even as the raging Kobold king kills my comrades, instead I should actively using them as shields, in order to ensure my own safety.

However, at this instant, no such thoughts came to my mind. Something fiery ran through my veins, and both my legs head towards the brink of life and death. This may have been because of the words the knight Diabel had left me.

The boss—defeat it. Those were the words he had tried to say. Not ‘escape with everyone’.

He had persisted in trying to get the Last Attack in order to significantly boost his probability of acquiring rare items, and as a result he had lost his life, but his command ability was definitely outstanding. That Diabel, in his last moments, had decided not to ask us to «withdraw» but instead to do «bloody battle». Therefore, as a member of the raid party, I will comply with his wish…no, his dying wish.

However, there was still one doubt that remained in me.

Before the battle began, I had secretly decided. Instead of protecting myself, I would protect the rapier user «Asuna»'s life with everything I had. She had a radiant talent which I did not possess. For this bud to perish before it blooms was an absolutely unacceptable situation for anyone fascinated by VRMMO games.[25]

Just before I started to run forward, I looked at Asuna who stood to my left, and was about to tell her "Stay in the back and if the front collapses, you should withdraw immediately". However, as if she could read my mind, before I opened my mouth, she declared decisively,

"I'm going too. We're partners, after all."

I did not have a good reason to deny her, and there was no time for debate. After hesitating for an instant, I nodded.

"…Understood. I'll be relying on you."

The two of us turned in the same direction at the same time, and started running towards the back of the hall.

Along the way, we heard constant roars and screams.

25 By Pryun: In this sentence Kirito is saying that, "for the bud (which refers to Asuna) to perish (ie: be killed) before it blooms (before Asuna grows to reach her full potential), would be an extremely unacceptable situation for any person (Kirito included) who is fascinated by VRMMOs (ie: takes VRMMOs seriously)."

Although it seemed that there were no more deaths following Diabel's, the average HP of the vanguard was less than half altogether, and for Group C who had lost their leader, they were down below twenty percent. Some players were in complete despair and were just trying to escape, and at this rate the formation would fall apart within a few dozen seconds.

The first thing I had to do was to calm everyone down from their panicked state. However, in this situation, the noise would drown out any half-hearted instructions given. I needed some short yet strong words, but being inexperienced in leading, I couldn't just suddenly figure out what words I should shout to them—…

At that moment. Asuna, running by my side, forcefully grasped her hooded cape that was likely to get in her way, and suddenly flung it from her body.



It was as if the lights from the countless torches along both walls were condensed into a single point of radiance. Her glossy chestnut long hair now radiated a deep golden shine, scattering the gloomy ambience of the boss's room.

With her long hair fluttering as she dashed, Asuna was like a shooting star that had suddenly appeared at the bottoms of darkness. Even the panicking players were taken aback by her fierce beauty and became silent. Not letting this miraculous moment of silence go to waste, I shouted so loudly that my throat was tearing,

"Everyone, take ten steps back towards the exit! As long as the boss is not surrounded, it won't use its ranged attacks!!"

At the same time as the echo of my voice disappeared, time started to flow again. *Za!!* With this sound, the front line players moved backwards all at once on either side of me and Asuna. Chasing them, the Kobold king turned around and faced us as we ran side by side.

"Asuna, we'll use the same tactics that we used against the Sentinels! …Here we go!!"

The moment her name was called, the rapier user glanced at me, but then faced the front again almost immediately and responded back.

"Understood!"

In front of us, the Kobold king took away his left hand from the nodachi that both hands previously held, and lowered it next to his left hip. If I remember right, that motion is for—

"……!!"

I held my breath, and started to activate my own sword skill. I similarly positioned to my left hip in preparation, and leaned forward just on the verge of falling over. At this angle, it wasn't enough for the system to recognize the motion.

From this low position so close to the floor, I then used my right leg to take off at full power. As my body became wrapped in a pale blue light, I ran through the ten meters separating the boss from me in an instant. Basic one-handed sword rush technique, «Rage Spike».

At the same time, the boss was poised with his Nodachi shining with a green glow, and slashed at a speed which could not be seen. Straight long ranged move, «Tsujikaze»[26]. Because it was an Iai[27] type move, it would be impossible to keep up with it after seeing it launched.

"U…oooh!!"

With a roar, the trajectory of my sword moving upwards from the left intersected with the trajectory of Illfang's Nodachi. As a flash of sparks burst out along with a shrill metallic sound, the boss and I were knocked apart more than two meters from the recoil of our respective sword skills.

With the opportunity that was produced—Asuna seized it splendidly, driving forward at a speed equal to my charging technique.

"Yaaaaa!!"

Released with a short and sharp vigor, her «Linear» stabbed deep into the Kobold king's right flank. The fourth HP gauge, marginally, but definitely was reduced in width as a result.

While conscious of the intense feedback that still remained in my right hand, I reflected upon our prospects of success and my misgivings in equal measure.

The Illfang from the beta period had been equipped with the «Talwar» sword skills, which I hadn't been able to fully parry using my own sword skills back then.

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26 Tsujikaze: The original kanji for this is 辻風, which means "whirlwind"

27 Iaido is Japanese martial art associated with the smooth, controlled movements of drawing the sword from its scabbard, striking or cutting an opponent, removing blood from the blade, and then replacing the sword in the scabbard.

However, perhaps because the Katana was lighter than the Talwar, my HP gauge did not decrease from the previous clash. But in exchange, the speed of the techniques was outrageous. Was it really possible to keep dodging them with no mistakes?

Another one. The Troopers had been taken out by three strikes of Asuna's «Linear» while the Sentinels had required four strikes, but as expected of a boss monster, its HP was at an amount that couldn't be compared with that of those small fry. I had no clue how many strikes it would take if she were to try depleting the fourth gauge by herself. A big advantage for the player side was that the boss could be attacked simultaneously by several people due to its massive bulk, so if it were possible I'd want at least one player on either side of her as attackers, but all the other groups from A to G had drawn back as their HP had been greatly reduced. I couldn't ask them for help until they had recovered with their potions.

—Asuna and I could only do what we could do with the two of us. In the first place, hadn't I been thinking of doing it just by myself somehow earlier? Now that it became two people, what else could I ask for?

"…The next one is coming!"

I cried that out after recovering from my post-motion[28], and then concentrated all my will on the long and large blade brandished by the boss.

In August of this year, within the «Sword Art Online Closed Beta Test» that one thousand testers had been recruited to play, I reached the tenth floor last, but I didn't managed to meet that floor's boss.

[28] "Post-motion" is the English term the author uses in furigana, while the kanji beneath would best describe it as "after technique stiffness". Basically, it means the temporary delay in movement after using a sword skill.

I had been unable to break through the spawning zone there filled with the samurai-type monsters «Orochi Elite Guards» that guarded that floor's dungeon, which was called «Thousand Snake Castle». Since the katana skills they used were unavailable to players and were mercurial, I had had to desperately memorize the skill names and their trajectories by using each time I was hit by them as a reference. And then finally, I managed to grasp the «pre-motions» of all the skills they used…but by then it was already the thirty-first of August.

Orochi and Illfang, although their shapes and sizes were very different, were both humanoid-type monsters, and had used the same techniques so far. Therefore, I used my memories of four months ago to somehow continue to counter its various attacks, including the Iai-type.

Of course, I was walking on a tightrope. The boss's slashes had very high base damage value, and the basic skills «Slant» and «Horizontal» left only to the Assist would be repelled back by them. If I didn't fully use these skills by intentionally moving my body[29] in order to boost the speed and power of the skill, it wouldn't work at all. However, this amplified outside the system skill was also very risky because of its power if I relied on it too much. Even a small mistake in movement would hinder the system assist, and in the worst case the sword skill would abort in the middle of it.

I, with a total of two months playing SAO if you included the beta period, had trained this technique which requires maximum concentration over the longest period of time.

And, every fifteenth or sixteenth time, it was disrupted.[30]

"Cra…!!"

29 By intentionally moving my body, it means that the user he has to move his body without the use of the system assist.

30 Meaning that the chance of failure was 1 in 15 or 16.

Cursing, I tried to cancel the «Vertical» slash I had initiated. I had read the opening moves of Illfang's blade, as it drew half a circle while Illfang turned beneath it. It was the motion for the technique that launched strikes up and down in random order, «Gengetsu»[31]. I desperately pulled back the Anneal Blade in my right hand, but an unpleasant shock hit my whole body with a jerk, and my movements stop.

"Ah…!!"

By the time Asuna gave out a small shout next to me, the nodachi had already jumped up from below and caught the front of my body.

I felt a sharp shock that was as cold as ice. My body was paralyzed, and my HP gauge was reduced by thirty percent.

As I was thrown across the room and barely managed to stay on my knees, Asuna rushed towards the Kobold king in my place. I tried to scream "Don't!". «Gengetsu» had a very short post-motion delay. While raised up high from the previous slash, the blade glowed the color of blood. Not good, this was the three hit skill that killed Diabel, Scarlet Fan «Hiōgi»……

"Nu…oooo!!"

A deep war cry was let out just as its blade was on the verge of hitting Asuna.

As the blade grazed just the top her head, a huge weapon launched a skill while releasing a green light. The two-handed axe sword skill «Whirlwind»—

The nodachi had discharged first, but the two handed axe that spun like a whirlwind intercepted it. It created an impact so great that the entire boss room trembled, and Illfang was knocked back quite a distance. However, the attacker had braced both his feet wrapped in leather sandals, so he only slid back a meter or so.

31 Gengetsu: The original kanji for this is 幻月, which means “phantom moon”

The one who had entered the fray was Group B's brown skinned and gigantic leader, Agil.

As I knelt on the floor exploring my coat pockets, he looked over his shoulders at me, grinning.

"We'll support you until you finish drinking your POT. There has to be Tanks along with damage dealers, that will not change."

"……Sorry, I leave it to you."

I gave that short answer, and I forcibly swallowed down something that tried to well up inside my chest with a recovery potion.

Agil was not the only person who had come to the front. Many people composed mainly of his B Group comrades and those with light wounds had finished recovering and were rejoining the battle.

With a look at Asuna I conveyed "I'm fine" to her, and then I shouted in my loudest voice at the swordsmen.

"If the boss is surrounded, it will attack back with an omni-directional attack! I will be calling out the trajectory of the attacks, so the guys in front, deal with them! Even if you can't repel it by force with a sword skill, you can avoid a large amount of damage just by blocking it properly with a shield or a weapon!"

"Ou!!"

A savage bellow from the men reverberated, and it may have been my imagination, but it blended with the roar that the Kobold king gave in irritation.

I retreated to stand beside the wall, and while waiting for the recovery potions to slowly take effect, I checked the situation on the rear lines.

The boss's weapon had changed, and sure enough, along with it, it seemed that the number of «Ruin Kobold Sentinels» that were spawned had also increased.

Kibaou's Group E and the lightly injured pole-arm equipped Group G were taking on all four of the heavily armored guards at the same time.

Although they had not taken much damage so far, as long as Illfang remained alive, four Sentinels would probably keep jumping out of the wall alcoves on a regular basis. They would eventually reach their limits with just two parties.

Also, between the front and rear lines, the injured raid members, including the survivors of Group C, were trying to recover their HP like me. However, recovery potions in this game were really frustrating items, having only a «Heal Over Time» effect…in other words, drinking the bottle would not instantly recover the gauge, but instead make it gradually increase in small increments, and moreover, after drinking the potion there was a cool-down period indicated by a «Cooling» icon displayed at the bottom of the vision, which rendered drinking the next bottle useless until it disappeared. On top of that, the inferior-quality potions sold at the first floor NPC shops had a sorrowfully terrible flavor.

Putting the taste aside, because of the set cool-down period, healing from heavy injuries took up a lot of time. Therefore, the normal theory was that, when someone received damage worthy of a potion, they would switch with their partner and fall back to the rear (that was, in other words, POT rotation), but as the number of those who received unexpectedly heavy wounds multiplied, it became easy for the rotation to break down. On higher floors, the dreamlike item which could instantly recover the gauge, «Healing Crystal», could be obtained, so such recovery is possible if one is not bothered with the cost, but it would be asking too much to have one on hand now.

Therefore, how long Agil and the six people under him who were currently replacing me were able to maintain their HP gauges against the boss's fierce attacks would decide the flow of the battle. For that reason, I would have to predict Illfang's skills the moment its preparatory motions started.

In my kneeling posture, I of course kept my eyes carefully peeled while focusing my senses to capture every movement the Kobold Boss made, and after determining the sword skill that was being activated, I shouted things like "Horizontal slash, right!" and "Downward slash, left!".

Agil's team of six was not pressured into desperately countering from following my instructions, but instead they used their shields and large weapons to guard themselves. Since they were players with «tank builds», they had high defense and HP, but even so receiving zero damage from the sword skills the boss launched was impossible. A loud sound effect would occur, and each time, their gauges would gradually reduce.

Among that group was a single fencer who lightly danced. Asuna. Without turning her back in front of the boss, she never wasted any chance to pierce its body with «Linear» whenever Illfang was in a delay period, even for a moment. Of course, after repeated strikes the «Hate» value would become focused on Asuna, but the six tanks used appropriate skills such as «Howl» to redirect the target's Hate to themselves.

This dangerous battle, which could collapse in an instant if even one of the elements here failed, actually managed to continue for close to five minutes.

Soon enough, the boss's HP finally went below thirty percent, and the final gauge became suffused red.

At that instant, perhaps letting down his guard for a moment, one of the players acting as a tank tripped over. Stumbling, the player came to a halt directly behind Illfang.

"…Get out of there quickly!"

I called out reflexively, but it was a moment too late. As the boss felt that it was «In a surrounded state», it gave out an exceptionally ferocious roar.

With a jerk, its large body sank into a crouch. Then its entire bulk was flung high up into a vertical jump.

While on its course, its body along with the Nodachi, contorted and revolved during the jump. It was the omnidirectional attack «Tsumujiguruma»—…

"U…ooaah!!"

Giving off a short howl and forgetting that my own HP had not fully recovered, I jumped forward from along the wall.

Positioning my sword on my right shoulder, my left foot kicked off from the floor at full force. The acceleration that shouldn't have been possible with my actual Agility assaulted my spine, while my body flew up diagonally into the sky like a shot from a gun. The one-handed sword rush technique «Sonic Leap». Its range was shorter than «Rage Spike», but its trajectory could be aimed towards the sky.

The sword in my right hand was engulfed in a bright yellow-green light. In its path was Illfang's katana, which had reached the apex of its jump, while producing a deep crimson glow.

"Reach…it——!!"

Shouting that, I stretched my right arm to its limit, and swung my sword.

The point of my beloved Anneal Blade +6 drew a long crescent as it raced through the air, and hit the left side of Illfang's waist, as it was on the verge of using «Tsumujiguruma».

*Zashuu!* A sharp and heavy slashing sound rang out. The intense light effects showing that it was a critical hit flashed before my eyes.

In the next moment, the Kobold king's huge body was sent angling sideways in the sky, and then it crashed into the ground before the tornado of its special attack could even form.

"Guruu!"

Yelling, it tried to stand up, but both its feet and arms quivered.

It was a bad status that affected humanoid type monsters, the «Tumble» state—.

Barely managed to land successfully with falling, I turned to face Illfang, and then I forced out the air in my lungs to shout.

"Everyone—do a Full Attack!! Surround it!!"

"O…oooooh!!"

Agil's six men cried out as if releasing the anger that had accumulated, while they had only been able to concentrate on guarding until now. Surrounding the fallen Kobold king, they activated all their vertical slashing sword skills simultaneously. Axes, maces and hammers wrapped in lights of various colors, and rained down incessantly on its huge body. Bright lights and loud sound effects exploded, and Illfang's HP gauge which was shown at the top of our field of vision was shaved down bit by bit.

This was a gamble. If all Kobold king's HP was reduced to nothing before it got up, it would be our victory. If it got out of the «Tumble» status first, in that instant we would be met with «Tsumujiguruma» again, and this time everyone would be cut down. My «Sonic Leap» was in the middle of the «Cooling» period, so I was unable to deal attacks while in the air.

Agil's group, who had recovered from the post-motion delay of their techniques, began the pre-motions for their next skills. The Kobold king stopped struggling at the same time, and its body started to rise.

"……We're not going to make it!!"

I shouted that in a stifled voice, then raised my voice to Asuna who had moved beside me while I was not paying attention.

"Asuna, one final «Linear», let's go for it!!"

"Understood!!"

As her answer was so upbeat, I unconsciously raised one side of my cheeks in a smile.

The weapons of the six people thrummed once again simultaneously, swallowing the boss's giant body in a swirl of light effects.

However, before the lights had even faded, the boss roared as it stood up. Its HP gauge was left with merely three percent, shining a bright red.

Agil and the others were still stuck in delay, unable to move. In contrast, Illfang who was attacked while in the «Tumble» state was neither stunned nor knocked back, and so smoothly entered its vertical jump motion.

"Let's…go!!"

As soon as I screamed, I kicked off from the ground at the same time as Asuna.

Through the gaps in Agil's party, Asuna first sent a «Linear» at the boss's left flank.

Slightly behind her, my sword, coated in a blue light, made a cut from the Kobold king's right shoulder to its stomach.

Its HP gauge…was left with one dot.

It felt like the demi-human gave a smirk. In return, I gave a fierce smile as well, as I rapidly readjusted my wrist.

"O…oooooh!!"

With my whole body and soul, I swung my sword. The blade, which was nicked in several places after the fierce battle, drew a "V" shaped trajectory along with the earlier slash, exiting from Illfang's left shoulder. One-handed sword double-consecutive-strike skill «Vertical Arc»—

The Kobold king's gigantic frame, suddenly losing its strength, staggered backwards.

Its wolf-like face looked towards the ceiling, as it gave a thin and high howl. Over its body, numerous cracks noisily appeared, resounding with a snap and crackle.

Both its hands went slack, and its nodachi fell to the floor. After that, the body of Aincrad's first floor's boss, «Illfang the Kobold Lord» shattered into millions of fragments, and scattered grandly in all directions.

As I bent backwards under the intangible pressure, the purple system message [You got the Last Attack!!] flashed soundlessly in my vision.

# *15*

As the boss dispersed, the remaining Sentinels at the back also seemed to have scattered into nothingness.

The hue of the shining torches on the walls changed from a gloomy orange into a bright yellow. The dimness in the boss's room was immediately lifted, and a cool wind from somewhere swept across the room, taking away the heat of the hard-fought battle.

There was barely anyone who tried to break the silence. While Groups G and E remained standing at the back formation, Groups A, C, D and F within the middle formation were on their knees awaiting recovery, and Agil's Group B, the «Final Tanks», sat on the floor, looking around dazedly. It was almost as if they were worried that the terrifying demi-human king would revive.

I too, with my right hand still holding my sword ready in a slashing position, remained stationary.

Was it really over? Would any more «Minor differences from Beta» occur here as well…?

Then, at that time. A small white hand gently touched my right shoulder, causing me to slowly lower my sword. Standing before me, was the rapier user Asuna. As her long chestnut hair waved in the breeze, she stared at me.

With the removal of her hooded cape revealing her face, I realized for the first time that she was so beautiful that I wanted to doubt whether it was really a player's appearance. I continued to stare into the eyes of her pretty face blankly. Asuna—probably just for now—silently accepted my absentminded stare at her beautiful face without a trace of annoyance, and then she eventually whispered.

"Thanks for your hard work."

At those words, I was finally convinced. It was over…The biggest obstacle which had kept eight thousand players confined to the first floor had finally been removed.

And, as if the system had been awaiting that recognition of mine, now a new message appeared in my view. The experience gained. The distribution of cor. And finally—the items obtained.

As everyone around me also saw the same message I did, their expressions finally brightened again. A moment after that, a cheer of *Waa!!* erupted.

Some people threw their hands up into the air. Some embraced their comrades. Some danced nonsensically. In this storm of uproar, a large figure slowly got off the floor and strode over. It was the two-handed-axe user, Agil.

"……Those were wonderful commands. And more than that, those sword skills were spectacular. Congratulations[32], this victory is rightfully yours."

Even with the English word in the middle, the giant pronounced the sentence perfectly, and as his mouth closed, he had a large grin. He stretched out his large right hand clenched into a fist.

I wondered how to respond, but sadly no clever response came to my mind, and I could only say "No…", as I also formed my right hand into a fist, raising it.

At that moment.

"——Why!!"

Suddenly, that loud shout howled out behind me. I half-turned, and in response to that almost-scream-like shout, the cheering from the entire room calmed in an instant.

Looking away from Asuna and Agil, I turned to see a man in light armor, a scimitar user, whose name I could not recall.

32 Note that this is said in English by Agil.

However, as soon as his mouth parted and further disjointed words flowed from his lips, I understood.

"——Why did you leave Diabel-san to die!!"

This man was a member of Group C…in other words he had been one of the deceased knight Diabel's comrades from the start. As I looked past him, to the remaining four members behind him, they stood looking disheveled. Some of them were crying.

Looking at the scimitar user again, I muttered. I truly didn't understand the meaning behind those words.

"Let him die…?"

"That's right!! Because…Because you knew the skills the boss used, didn't you!! If you had given us that information from the start, Diabel wouldn't have died!!"

As he shouted as if vomiting blood, the remaining raid members began to rumble. Things like "Now that you mention it…" and "Why…? It wasn't even written in the strategy guide…" were brought up and gradually spread.

I would had expected Kibaou to be the one to give answers to those questions—

But he didn’t. He was standing motionlessly further away, with his mouth closed shut as if he was resisting something. However, another team member of Group E under his leadership walked closer towards me, pointing with the index finger on his right hand at me, and shouted.

"I…I know!! This guy is a beta tester!! That’s why, the boss's attack patterns, good hunting spots and quests, he knows all of them!! He hid them despite knowing about them!!"

Even upon hearing those words, the scimitar user and the other members from Group C did not show any surprise.

I thought they might have heard it from Diabel, but—as a beta tester himself, and hiding that fact from his comrades, it was unlikely that Diabel would have brought up the topic of beta testers on his own—when I discerned those katana skills that should never have been seen by anyone before, they must have figured it out then.

Instead, the scimitar user's eyes seemed to seethe in hatred, as he again tried to shout out something.

It was interrupted by the mace user who had served as a tank with Agil until the end. He raised his right hand dutifully, and said in a calm tone.

"Even so, the guide that was handed out yesterday, it was written that it was information on the boss's attack pattern only from the beta period, right? If he was really a beta tester, wouldn't his knowledge be the same as in the guide?"

"T-That's……"

Replacing the Group E member who became silent, the scimitar user spoke in a voice full of hatred.

"That strategy guide was a lie. Argo's information shop was selling lies. That person was a beta tester after all, there's no way she would have given us the truth for free."

——This is bad. This flow is very bad.

I quietly held my breath. I could endure any amount of condemnation on myself. However, a situation where hostility flares up towards the other testers, starting with Argo, was one that I wanted to avoid by all means. But—But, what should I do……

At that instant as I hung my head and stared at the black floor, the still visible system message was being vividly displayed in my vision. The acquired experience, cor, and items……

Instantly.

In my mind, an idea occurred to me. Subsequently, a large conflict racked my body. If I followed this option, I don't know what kind of future I will behold. As I had once feared, there was even the risk of being killed in an ambush. But—at the very least, the animosity currently directed against Argo and the other beta testers might just be averted…

Behind me, in silence, Agil and Asuna who had endured patiently up to this moment opened their mouths at the same time.

"Hey, you guys…" "You…"

However, I quieted the two of them with a delicate motion of my hand.

Taking a step forward, while deliberately putting on an impudent expression, I coolly looked into the face of the scimitar user. Shrugging my shoulders, I told him in a voice as emotionless as I could muster.

"An original beta tester, right? …Don't lump me together with those amateurs."

"Wha…What was that…?"

"Listen here and remember well. SAO's CBT[33] had an outrageously low acceptance in the lottery draw. Out of the one thousand people chosen, how many real MMO gamers do you think got selected? Most of them were just newbies who didn't even know to level up properly. You guys here are much better than that lot."

At the end of my contemptuous words, the forty-two players simultaneously fell silent. A chill, as if the atmosphere before fighting the boss had returned, brushed against my skin like an invisible blade.

"—But, I'm not like those guys."

Deliberately sneering, I spoke the following words.

33 CBT: Closed Beta Test

"During the beta testing, I reached floors no one else could reach. I knew of the Katana Skills the boss used because I fought and killed mobs that used katanas on much higher floors. I know a lot more too, far more than someone like Argo."

"……What the, that's…"

The person who had first pointed me out as a beta tester, the guy from Group E, then said in a hoarse voice.

"That's…no longer on the level of a beta tester…that's totally cheating, you're just a cheater!"

From all around us, multiple voices sprang up saying things like "yeah, a cheater, a cheating beta tester". The words were soon muddled together, and in the end a strange sounding word, «Beater», reached my ears.

"…«Beater», that has a good ring to it."

Laughing and grinning, I looked around at everybody here, and told them in a clear voice.



"Exactly, I am a «Beater». From now on, please do not lump me together with those former testers."

——This should be fine.

With this, of the four or five hundred current players that seem to be beta testers, they will now be divided into two further categories. The majority «testers who are merely amateurs» and, the remaining few «information-controlling dirty Beaters».

In the future, the hostilities from the newer players should all be directed towards the Beaters. So even if a beta tester were to be discovered, players probably would not immediately hate them.

In return, I alone have lost the possibility to fight on the front lines in any guilds or parties…However, it's not like much has changed. I am currently a «Solo», and I will remain a solo. Forever alone. That much is certain.

The scimitar user became pale-faced and fell silent, along with the Group C members, then the Group E member turned his gaze away from me. I opened my menu window and ran my finger along the equipment figure.

I replaced the dark gray leather coat that I had worn until now with the unique object dropped by the boss just a moment ago, the «Coat of Midnight». My body was enveloped with a pale aura, and the tired gray fabric changed to a shiny jet black leather. The length increased by quite a bit, as the hem dropped to the level of my knees.

With a flourish of the long black coat, I turned around—and faced the small door at the back of the boss's room.

"I'm going on to activate the second floor's transfer gate. From the exit here it will be a short walk to the district town, so if you want to come along, you should be prepared to be killed by any mob that comes across us."

Agil and Asuna kept staring at me, as I started to walk away.

Both of them had eyes that showed they understood everything. That was a relief. I faced the two of them and gave a small smile, then stepped forward with large strides, and pushed open the door to the second floor situated behind the kingless main throne.

After climbing the narrow spiral staircase for a while, a door once again appeared.

As I gently opened it, a spectacularly scenic view suddenly sprung into view. The door exited into the middle of some steep cliffs. A narrow staircase in the shape of a terrace extended downwards to the left along the rockface, but first I swept my eyes over the panoramic view of the second floor.

Unlike the complex and varying terrain of the first floor, the second floor was lined from one end to the other with flat-topped mountains. The mountain tops were covered in lush green grass, where gigantic ox-type monsters sauntered around.

The second floor's main town, «Urbus», was a city entirely excavated from one of the flat-topped mountain below. From here I will descend the flight of stairs, and as I had earlier described, it would only require walking a short kilometer across the field to reach the «Teleport Gate» in the central square of Urbus, which would be activated upon touch, linking it to the gate in «Starting City» on the first floor.

Even if, by any chance, I died along the way—or perhaps, if I sat here idly, two hours after the boss was defeated, the teleport gate would open automatically by itself. But today, the fact that the first raid party was going to challenge the boss must have already been conveyed to the Starting City, so many players were probably waiting at the teleport gate right now, awaiting the moment the blue warp gate would appear. I really should hurry to Urbus for their sake, but…for just a little while more, I should have the right to immerse myself in this breathtaking view.

I took a few steps forward, and then I sat down on the edge of the terrace extending from the rocks.

Extending from beyond the rocky mountains, from the expanse of Aincrad's periphery, a small sliver of the blue sky could be seen.

I wonder just how many minutes I passed that way. Before long, I heard the quiet fall of footsteps climbing up the spiral staircase behind me. Without turning around, I heard the footsteps stop after the individual causing them came out of the main door, then with a faint sigh, the person walked closer, and sat down beside me.

"……And I told you not to follow too."

After I muttered that, the intruder replied in a slightly displeased voice.

"You didn't say so. All that you said was you must be prepared to die if you wish to come."

"…Is that so, sorry."

Shortening my neck, I saw the rapier user Asuna sitting next to me, and from this angle I got a glimpse of the beautiful face of hers. For a moment, her light brown eyes caught mine, but I returned my gaze to the view immediately below us, mumbling “beautiful” along with a sigh.

The silence continued like that for a minute, before she suddenly spoke up.

"Agil-san and Kibaou have something to say to you."

"Heh…What is it?"

"Agil-san's words were 'Let's go for the second floor's boss raid together'. As for Kibaou…"

Asuna gave a small cough, and with a serious face, attempted to reproduce the Kansai-dialect with a poor imitation.

"…'You may have helped me today, but I still don't recognize you. I will aim to clear this game my own way.' was what he said."

"…I see."

As I mulled over those words in my mind a few times—Asuna gave a small cough, and continued speaking while looking the other way.

"Also…this is my own message to you."

"Wha…What?"

"During the battle, you called out my name, didn't you?"

'Did I?', and then I recalled after thinking for a moment. Certainly, somewhere in the heat of battle, I might have called out her name without honorifics.

"S-Sorry, I forgot the honorifics…or was it that I pronounced it wrong?"

This time, Asuna gave a puzzled look.

"Pronounced…? —What I meant was, I never gave my name to you, and you never told me yours, right? So how did you know my name?"

"Haa!?"

I involuntarily cried out. How did I find out—because we were still in a party, so in the upper left corner of my field of vision, two HP gauges were displayed, and underneath the smaller one, the five letters [ASUNA] was clearly written……

"Ah…c-could it be…this is the first time you've formed a party with someone…?"

"Yes."

"……I see."

As my mouth involuntarily gaped open, I lifted my right hand, pointing to the left edge of Asuna's field of vision.

"Around here, you can see an additional HP gauge other than your own, right? Underneath it, isn't something written there?"

"Eh…"

Murmuring, Asuna tried to turn her face, looking to the left, so reflexively I placed my fingertips against her cheek.

"When your face moves the gauge would also move. With your head held steady, use your eyes to look to the left."

"Like…Like this?"

Asuna's hazel eyes moved about uncertainly, and then saw a string of letters that I could not see. Out of her glossy lips came three quiet syllables.

"Ki…ri…to. Kirito? Is that your name?"

"Yup."

"Really…This whole time, it was written there…"

Asuna whispered, and then unexpectedly her whole body quivered. Subsequently, I finally realized my palm was still held against her cheek. This was---just like some kind of pre-motion.

I removed my hand in a hurry, and likely from the momentum a **Gyun** sound was released as I turned away. A few seconds later, I heard a giggle—or at least, I feel like I did. Eh, could she be laughing? That transcendent «Linear» user, Kobold Overkiller Asuna-san? As I inwardly thought that, I was tormented with a strong desire to see her face, but I desperately resisted that urge.

Regrettably, the laughter soon stopped, and was replaced by a quiet voice.

"…To tell you the truth, Kirito, I followed you here to thank you."

"…For the cream on the bread, or the bath?"

I asked without thinking, then she replied "That's not it", as her daunting voice returned, but instantly added "…Although, that may be a part of it, too" before continuing.

"Yeah…there were various things. Thanks for many things you did. I…in this world, for the first time, I found something to aim for, something that I want to chase after."

"Heh……What is it?"

As I glanced at her, Asuna flashed a brief smile,

"It's a secret."

That was all she said. Then with that, she stood up, and stepped back.

"…I will do my best. Do my best to survive, and become stronger. In order to reach the place I'm aiming for."

With my back turned to her, I nodded gently.

"Yeah…You will be strong. Not only in your sword techniques, but you will gain a larger and more valuable fortitude. So…if one day someone you trust invites you to a guild, don't refuse. After all, there's an absolute limit for solo players…"

"……."

For the next few moments, I could only hear Asuna's breathing.

Eventually, the following words that came were a little unexpected.

"…The next time we meet, tell me just how you carried me out of that labyrinth region."

"Ah…"

'That was a piece of cake', I thought of following up with, but I swallowed those words. Instead, I answered with a simple "I understand", and then remembered something before speaking again.

"That's right…There's one more thing I have to tell you. Before the meeting the day before yesterday started, I was going to say something…"

Yes—I have to tell her now. That some of the responsibility for creating the tragedy of two thousand deaths and driving her to the edge of despair belonged to the selfish former tester…no, the «Beater», me.

But, just before I could say it, Asuna shook her head gently.

“It’s fine. I already understand. About the path you’ve walked…and that you’re about to move forward alone from now on…but…but one day, I……”

Her quiet whisper halted there. As remaining silent for a while, she then gave a calm farewell.

"…Then, see you again, Kirito."

*Squeak* The door opened. Then footsteps. And with a *Bam*, the door closed.

I remained sitting on the terrace jutting out from the cliff until the information describing the scent of Asuna dispersed from the virtual air. I tried thinking about the meaning of her last words, but I felt that, for now, it was fine if I didn’t get it.

After sucking in a single huge breath, I stood up. After glancing at the door Asuna had left through, I turned around and began to descend the wide staircase down the cliff step by step.

When I tried counting the number of stone steps on the constantly winding staircase, it turned out there were forty eight steps.

Upon giving a little thought to whether there was any meaning to that number, I realized. It was eight by six—in other words, the number of people in a Full Raid. Assuming a situation where the first floor's boss was challenged with that force, and none of them died, then upon these stairs, from landing to landing, would be just enough space for each player.

But surely even the designers of this area would not have imagined that there would be only a single player going down these steps.

Descending this path seemed to imply what my future would be like. There was no one before or after me. No matter where or how far I went, I would go down by myself……

However.

When I reached the several landings at the bottom of the stairs, there was an icon consisting of small letters in the right corner of my vision.

It was a Friend Message, which could be sent and received even when not on the same floor. And I have only registered two players as friends. My first friend Klein and—the informant, Argo the Rat.

‘Who is it’, I wondered as I opened the message, and found it was the latter.

[Looks like I gave you a really hard time, Ki-bou.]

Looking at these first few words, I ended up blurting out "Info sure travels fast!". I continued reading and scrolled through, but there was only one following sentence.

[To apologize, I will sell you one piece of information on anything at all for free.]

——Ho.

I couldn't help but grin, as I activated my holographic keyboard and resumed walking once again, quickly typing out a reply.

[Then tell me the reason for your whiskers in person.]

Pressing the send button, I laughed once more, and over the ground of the second floor that I had arrived at, I started walking towards the main city «Urbus».

# SWORD ART ONLINE PROGRESSIVE

## INTERLUDE



THE REASON FOR THE WHISKERS

# Intermission
## Reason for the Whiskers
*Aincrad 2nd Floor, November 2022*

Aincrad's second floor's main town «Urbus» is a town located inside a table mountain that measures three hundred meters in diameter, which had been dug up with only the outer circumference remaining.

Once I had gone through the southern gate, the words [INNER AREA] floated up into my vision, and the slow tempo of the town's BGM started playing. Unlike the music led by string instruments in each town on the first floor, the main melody here was played with a sorrowful oboe tone. The NPCs passing by also had subtle changes in the design of their garments, giving it a 'new floor' feel.

After walking about ten meters from the gate, I started looking at my surroundings. I couldn't see any green cursors which indicated players at all, but that was only natural. Of course, that was because the guardian of the continuous spiral stairs to this second floor, the boss monster of the first floor, «Illfang the Kobold Lord» was just defeated forty minutes ago, and every member of the boss-capturing party aside from me had returned to base.

In other words, at this moment, on the vast second floor, the only existing player was me alone —— the «Former beta tester» and now «Beater», Kirito.

Although that was the case, obviously, this situation wouldn't continue on for much longer. That was because exactly two hours after the floor boss' annihilation, the «Transfer Gate» at the center of the main town of the next floor (which was Urbus) would be automatically activated, connecting it to the main town on the lower floors. At that time, the large crowd of players, who were watching on the lower floor, would rush out from the gate.

Conversely, if I wished to, I could spend the remaining hour and twenty minutes monopolizing this town —— or this floor.

With that much time, I could clear a few slaughter quests two or three times, which I normally had to compete with other players for the pop. It was a very attractive idea to a solo player who ultimately advocated self-interest, however, I didn't have enough courage to seriously anger the several hundreds…… or possibly more than a thousand people who were eagerly awaiting the activation of the gate.

Therefore, I started jogging along Urbus' main street which went straight towards the north, ascended the wide stairs before arriving at the town square, and finally started walking toward the large gate set up in the center.

It was called a gate, but it was actually just an arch made of neatly stacked stones. Without a door or any bars, there was nothing to block its other side. However, upon getting closer, I noticed a faint distortion from the empty space in the middle of the arch, as if seeing through a thin film of water.

As I looked around at the surroundings to confirm an escape route, my right hand stretched slowly toward the swaying transparent veil. The fingertip, which was wrapped in a black leather glove, touched the surface of the water, which spread vertically —— and at that moment,

My field of vision was dyed in an overflowing bright blue light.

The pulsing light spread in circles within the five-meter-wide arch. Once it had filled the entire space, it would be the opening of the Transfer Gate, the so-called «Town Opening». The very same phenomenon would also happen at the gate in each town on the first floor as well, where the crowd of players before that gate would prepare to dash in when they realize that the gate started to activate and they wouldn't have to wait two hours for the automatic opening.

However, after pushing the switch, I turned around without watching this phenomenon to its very end.

As I ascertained beforehand, I started a fierce dash to a building, which looked like a church, at the east of the square. After jumping into the entrance and climbing the stairs inside, I put my back against the wall to the side of the window in a small room on the third floor, and looked down upon the square.

Just then, the insides of the gate shone brightly, and the NPC orchestra stationed at the corner of the square started playing a loud «Opening Fanfare».

After a moment, a rapid stream of numerous multi colored players spilled out from the blue light-filled gate.

Some people stood inside the square while looking around. Others ran off with a leather map from the information dealer in one hand. And —— there were people who raised their fists and shouting "I'm on the second floor————!!"

During the beta test, there was a total of nine «Town Openings», the scene, during those times, were the lines of the raid party members who had defeated the previous floor's boss, being bathed in the generous applause and admiration from the players from the lower floors. However, this time the only person who was the «Opener» had already escaped, so that event didn't occur. There was a group of people who were looking restlessly around, it could be that they were looking for me, but unfortunately, they wouldn't be able to find my name there.

Over half an hour earlier, soon after defeating the boss, I had made an announcement in front of more than forty raid members. It was that I, «Kirito», wasn't just a mere Beta Tester, but a «Beater», who had reached the highest floor among the thousand testers, and had accumulated the most knowledge of the game.

I didn't want to act so nasty, but it was partly a reaction to avert the hostility from the new players to the former testers; and as a result, currently, my infamy had spread among the highest leveled players at an ultra-high-speed. If I went out of my hiding place, far from receiving congratulatory remarks, it wouldn't be strange to hear boos and jeers.

In that situation, I certainly didn't have enough emotional strength to remain calm like a willow in the wind.

Therefore, I would have to continue hiding on the third floor of the church until the commotion in the transfer square died down. ——However,

"……Huh?"

I muttered quietly after seeing an unusual event at the square down below.

A female player who had just warped out of the Transfer Gate did not stop, but continued ferociously dashing towards the western side of the town. If it was just that, it could be seen as hurrying to the weapon shop or the quest NPC, but the problem was the two men who came out of the gate right after her. They took a moment to look around, and once they had spotted the player who was running away, they started running in the same direction. From the looks of it, it was «Two guys chasing a girl».

Normally I wouldn't poke my head out and get involved, as this place was within the effective area of the Anti-Criminal Code, but since the one being chased was my acquaintance, the story had changed. With golden-brown curly hair and that plain leather equipment, she was none other than the information dealer, «Argo the Rat».

'Selling every information that could be sold', there certainly were people who hated this motto of The Rat, but I couldn't be calmly chasing after them in middle of town in this appearance. After hesitating for a minute, I placed my feet on the frame of the church's window and jumped down onto the roof just below.

I quickly dashed with my AGI-focused parameter before the players at the square could notice me, and jumped to the roof of the nearby building. I kept going without dropping down to the ground, aiming to the direction Argo and the two guys went. It was possible to do so due to the consistent height of the buildings in Urbus.

I waved my right hand's finger while I was running and called out the main window. After clicking «Searching» from the skill tab, I selected «Tracking» on the floated up sub-menu. When I entered the name 【Argo】 into the input window, pale green illuminated footprints appeared on the road on my lower right field of vision.

«Tracking» was a modification that could be learned after the proficiency of the «Searching» skill had increased. It was normally used to raise effectiveness while hunting monsters, but it could also be used to pursue a player who was registered as friend. However, as my proficiency was still low, the footprints that could be seen were from a minute ago. I hastily chased after the disappearing lines of the small shoe soles.

Argo's focus was on AGI, so for her to be unable to shake off the chasing two guys, they must not be ordinary players. Although I didn't see them among the boss raid, their levels should be top-class. In addition, the footprints that went straight along the road toward the west, had exit to the outside through the city gate which was dug out of the outer rim of the crater.

The western plains of Urbus was a dangerous area with large buffalo type monsters roaming about. The situation was getting worse. I bit my lips and rushed into the virtual savanna without even stopping.

The wasteland area beyond this savanna was still quite risky for my current level to enter alone. But fortunately, the footprints engraved on the thicket were getting more vivid (in other words, Argo had already stopped running), from inside the valley between two small rocky mountains, a familiar voice could be heard.

"……imes I'll still be saying the same thinG! This information, no matter how much you offer, is not for salE!"

That coquettish nasal covering the end of the sentence was obviously Argo's voice, but it was thirty percent more intimidating than usual. It was then followed by a loud voice of a man.

“You don’t want to monopolize it, but also don’t want to make it public. Doesn’t that mean you want to jack up the price-gozaru?”

——Gozaru?' I frowned as I stopped my feet before climbing up the nearby cliff. In SAO, by using brain and stubbornness, there were many ways to get through the terrain which looked impossible to trespass at first glance. My ambition was, one day, to try climbing the outer wall of this floating castle to reach the next floor. But at the moment, the reason I was climbing this mountain was to get into their blind spot. It wasn’t for the challenge, but for my own safety.

After climbing up for about five meters and reaching a flat, narrow surface, I continued to crawl forward. The general source of the quarrel was right below at that moment.

“It’s not a problem about pricE! I told you that I don’t want to be blamed after I sold the informatioN!!”

The voice of the second man then retorted Argo’s words,

“Why would we blame you!? No matter what price you ask, we’d still be expressing our gratitude-gozaru!! So just sell us the information about the quest hidden on this floor —— the acquisition quest for the «Extra Skill» already!!”

……Huh?

I couldn’t hold onto my breathe upon hearing that sentence. The extra skills were those that wouldn’t appear as choices unless some special conditions were met, the so-called «Hidden Skills». The only one I discovered during the beta period was «Meditation», a mental concentration skill (the pose looked like so) that increased the rate of HP recovery and increased the probability to recover from the negative statuses. However, due to its low efficiency and lame pose, not many players took it.

The other was the «Katana» extra skill, which was used by the Kobold Lord and samurai type monsters on the tenth floor, but I still didn’t know its prerequisites.

In any case, I'm certain that the topic between Argo and the two mysterious gozaru guys isn't the «Meditation» skill, as the NPC giving this skill is on the sixth floor. That means, there is a flag quest to unlock an extra skill that I still don't know of (also equals to all former beta testers not knowing about it) hidden on this second floor, and these gozaru guys are trying to make Argo sell the information —— something like that?

Once I had reached that conclusion, the volume of the guys' voice increased.

"Today, we'll pull it off for sure-gozaru!"

"We'll certainly do anything necessary to get that extra skill-gozaru!"

"You guys just won't understanD—! No matter what you say, I won't sell that information-goza…… oops, I won't sell iT!!"

*Piri*— the voltage of the tension in the air seemed to have increased a step higher —— at that moment, I stood up on the stone ledge and jumped to the ground five meters below. I landed in the middle between Argo and the two guys. In order to receive no damage for jumping from that height while still lacking in AGI, I bent my knees and took a defensive posture to absorb the impact damage before quickly standing up.

"——Who are you-gozaru!?"

"Spy from another clan!?"

Just when I saw the shape of the gozaru guys, who were shouting at the same time, a corner of my memories was intensely stimulated. Their entire bodies were clothed in dark grey cloth armor.

It seemed they wore light chain mails on their upper bodies, and the weapons on their back were small sized scimitars. On their heads were bandana caps and pirate masks of the same grey color.

Overall looking, it was the so-called «Ninja» appearance, which was originally and ingeniously reproduced.

Seeing these guys like that, I also had a hunch that I may have met them during the beta period once or twice.

“Hmm, eeh…… you guys are probably, Fu, Fuu……Food, no, Fooga, but that also doesn’t sound right……”

“It’s Fūma-gozaru!!”

“We are Kotarou and Isuke from the guild «Fūmaningun»-gozaru!!”

“Oh, that’s it!”

I snapped my fingers in satisfaction as they helped me remember who they were. These two were the members of the ridiculously fastest ninja guild which was feared during the beta test period. I should make a note about what was feared first. Every member were just like Argo and focused their parameter on AGI, they would open the battle as the front row and used their AGI wall to confuse the enemy. When it became dangerous, they would use their dashing power to flee, forcing the monster to target nearby parties instead. No matter how I thought about them, they were clearly a group of evil shinobi.

But I didn’t know these guys were still going along the ninja path even after SAO official service turned into a death game, which by itself (so far), I had no complaints. However, two vs one, chasing Argo, a female player, and forcefully getting information from her, was a different story.

I made a gesture for Argo, who was behind me, to step back, and moved my finger to the grip of my beloved sword «Anneal Blade +6» hung on my back, as I said,

“As a secret agent of the government, I certainly can’t overlook this misdeed of the Fūma ninja…”

At that moment——

Under the fake ninja cowls, eyes of Kotarou-shi and Isuke-shi shone brightly.

“”You bastard, are you from Iga!?””

“Hah!?”

Apparently, the speech which I thought was appropriate to the mood seemed to have pressed their important switch. Their right hands started to reach, in perfect synchronization, for the ninja katanas on their back (which were actually the small sized scimitars).

No way —— are they really unsheathing? But here is the «Outside» with no Anti-Criminal Code, where Players can attack other players and HP would decrease for real. At the same time, the color cursor of the attacking side would turn orange, indicating a «Criminal» status, preventing them from entering towns. Even if they were ninja, they wouldn’t be able to deceive the God of the system controlling this world.

Should I say I’m not Iga but Koga? But would that help avoiding the problem? As I was seriously pondering these ridiculous thoughts——

The solution to the situation came from an unexpected source.

A while ago, in order to listen to the conversation between Argo and these ninja, I didn’t stop at the entrance of this small valley but instead struggled to climb up the cliff. The reason was, this place wasn’t in the middle of the town but a field. If one were to stand still in one place, sooner or later, one thing would surely happen.

As I slowly moved a step backward, I said in a low voice,

“Behind you.”

“”Do you think we will fall for that trick-gozaru!?””

“There’s no trick, just look behind you.”

Something within my voice seemed to have moved the deep skepticism of the ninja. Kotarou and Isuke, who turned their faces around, made a slight jump at the same time.

That was because in front of their eyes and noses, a new intruder —— no, an intruding-cow stood tall.

Its formal name was «Trembling Ox». The height to its shoulders would be about two and a half meters, it was a huge cow type monster, specialty of the second floor. While its toughness and attack power were just as expected from its appearance, what was troublesome was actually its terribly long targeting range and duration, which made it very hard to switch targets mid-fight. Since I had already retreated to the ledge, there was no doubt that its target would be none other than those guys.

“Bumoooo————!!”

The cow howled,

““Go-gozaruuuuu!!””

After the screams of the ninja, the two players in ninja outfits started running at an amazing speed in the direction of the town. The cow also chased after them with an agility that did not match its huge body. It was only five seconds before the earth shook and the screams disappeared into the horizon. From the look of it, the chase would continue until Kotarou and Isuke entered Urbus.

I, who had somehow avoided the outburst of a big battle against those super ninja, let out my breath while looking over my appearance. Up until an hour ago, I have been dressed in a very plain dark grey leather coat over a cotton shirt and black leather pants. But the unique equipment I obtained as a drop from the Kobold Lord, the boss of the first floor, the «Coat of Midnight» which I equipped on the spot, along with my eyes and hair color, had made my whole body look pitch black.

I thought it was suitable for a character labeled as a «Dirty Beater», but at the same time, I somehow looked ninja-like as well. *From now on, it would be unbearable if the "Kirito is from Iga." rumour is spread out, should I at least change the inner color?* —— was what I thought.

Again, an unexpected event occurred.

Two small arms stretching from behind embraced me tightly. I could feel a soft and warm sense of touch on my back, along with a faint whisper,



"……You're too cooL, Kiri-bou."

That voice was, of course, from Argo who was staying silent until this moment. However, the tone of her voice was subtly different from the «Rat»'s usual slightly hateful tone——

"But doesn't this mean Onee-san is breaking the first rule of being information dealeR?"

……O-Onee-san? ……The rules of the information dealer?

Those words provoked my curiosity, but the situation wasn't something to which I, a second-year middle school gamer until a month ago, who had zero intercommunication skill could make a correct reaction. I desperately thought while I was freezing, and somehow managed to push the words out of my mouth,

"……You owe me one anyway. I'll be troubled until you tell me the reason behind your whiskers."

On the face of the information dealer, Argo the «Rat», there were three lines of whiskers on each cheeks clearly drawn in black face paint. While those were the source of her Rat nickname, no one knew the reason behind why she drew them. And a terrible price tag of hundred thousands of Cor was attached to that information.

However, in the boss battle earlier, I took a «Beater» label to isolate myself from most of the former beta testers, single-handedly taking the hostility from the new players off the former testers including Argo. In order to express her gratitude, Argo sent a message saying that I could «Get any single information for free», to which I replied «Tell me the reason for your whiskers».

To my words that I used as a joke to divert the situation, Argo pressed her face harder on my back as she whispered,

"……OkaY, I'll tell you-ru. But you need to wait a bit while I take off the painT……"

Eh?

Paint…… she means taking those whiskers off? Does she intend to show me the unpainted face which no one had seen before? Does it have some deep implication?

My social anxiety rose to a dangerous peak, before she could let go, I exclaimed,

"……Never mind, I want you to tell me something else instead! Tell me about the hidden skill on this floor that those guys were talking about!!"

When Argo let go of my back and turned in front of me, fortunately —— if I should say so, the whiskers still clearly remained on her cheeks. Just before she let go of my back, I felt like I heard 'Kii-bou, you coward', or was it my imagination?

The «Rat», who had completely returned to her usual cheeky expression, said while folding her arms,

"I said I'll tell you any information, so I'll keep my promisE. But, Kii-bou also have to promise me one thinG. Regardless of the outcome, don't blame mE!"

"……Just now, you also said that to those ninja. But, what does that mean? For you to sell the information about an extra skill no one knows, wouldn't they feel grateful instead of a grudge……?"

To my question, the Rat showed a broad grin.

"For that information, I'll need to collect the feE, Kii-bou."

I leaked out a sigh as I nodded.

"Alright, I promise. I swear to the god…… no, to the System-sama, that no matter what happens, I won't hold a grudge against you."

Whether the quest to acquire the extra skill could pose a risk to my life, I would have to judge it by myself. After hearing my oath, Argo gave a deep nod, Then "follow mE," before turning around.

For the path we took from there, I felt it would be impossible to travel along without having bought a map beforehand, or having unlimited amounts of curiosity and endurance.

We climbed the cliff of the table mountains standing close together on the vast —— the diameter shouldn't be different from the first floor —— second floor, got into a small cave, and glided along the underground stream like it was a waterslide. We also went through three battles, but the enemies weren't difficult to me, who was leveling to the limit in order to defeat the first floor's boss. The total time of our traveling was about thirty minutes.

Judging by our position on the whole map, we had arrived at a place near the summit of an exceptionally high towering mountain on the southern edge of the second floor. That place was a small clearing surrounded by cliffs, with a spring and a lone tree, also —— a small hut was built there.

"……Is it here?"

Argo nodded at my unnecessary question before walking to the hut without hesitation. It seemed there was still no danger at this stage. She then forcefully opened the door.

There was an NPC inside, along with some furniture. It was a big middle-aged man with a well built body, his head was a slick skinhead, and around his mouth was a thick beard. Over his head was a gold-colored [**!**] mark, indicating a quest starting point.

To my questioning gaze, Argo gave a nod again.

"This guy is the NPC giving the «Martial Arts» extra skilL. The information I can give is up until this point, accepting the quest or not, is Kii-bou's decisioN."

"……M-Martial arts?"

It was a name that I had never heard during the beta period. Argo said 'This is on the housE,' before adding supplementary information.

“«Martial Arts» is a skill that allows attacking with bare hands…… that is my speculation. It would be effective when the weapon is dropped, or its durability is at the limiT.”

“O-Oh…… then it would be useful, unlike «Meditation». In that case…… I see, so that’s why you got stuck with those ninja there……”

To Argo, who made a puzzled face, I also gave a ‘On the house,’ preface before giving an explanation.

“When speaking about ninja, normally you would imagine their weapons to be ninja katana and shuriken, but it was a bit different in game industry. Removing the head with a single bare hand attack. That has been the highest peak of ninja gaming style for a long time. So Kotarou and Isuke would want that martial arts skill in order to make their ninja being «Complete». ——Hmm… wait a sec. They didn’t know this place, then how did they know about the content of the martial arts skill and Argo knowing that information?”

“……This is double on the housE. Just before the end of the beta test, this information was revealed from an NPC on the seventh floor, regarding «The martial arts master on the second flooR». But I found it out myself long before thaT. Those ninja should have heard about it from the NPC on the seventh floor during the beta tesT. Then, ever since this official server launched, they have kept asking me to sell the information about the extra skill on the second flooR.”

“T……Then, why don’t you just say ‘I don’t know’ at that time? So they wouldn’t keep pestering you about the information like that……”

To my expected question, Argo made an awkward face as she said,

“……That single ‘I don’t know’ would destroy my pride as an information dealer.”

“……So you chose to say ‘I know but won’t sell it’, huh. Well…… it’s not like I can’t understand your feelings……”

As I let out a sigh, I looked at the NPC set up in seated Zen meditation over a tatami-mat in the middle of the hut again.

"……And, the reason you won't sell is that the one who bought it would hold a grudge against you. But even saying so, don't you already have a lot of enemies due to your business……?"

"People usually forget the grudge from having bought information just after three dayS! But this is differenT! Even if it turns out to be lame, you still have to keep it for your whole lifE……"

Watching small body of Argo trembling, I was lost for several seconds before giving a nod.

"I already knew I'd need to experience it by myself anyway. So it's fine, I promise. No matter what the outcome, I won't blame Argo."

I then walked into the hut and stood in front of the old man who was sitting in Zen meditation. The old man in a rugged dōgi looked at me before saying,

"Thou wishes to be a disciple?"

"……Yes."

"Even though there be a long and steep road of training?"

"I'm expecting no less."

After a short conversation, the [**!**] above the head of the old man changed into [**?**], the log in my vision indicated that the quest was accepted.

The old man, who became my master, moved outside the hut, toward a huge rock at the edge of the garden, which was surrounded by cliffs. Its height was about two meters, with a diameter of about one and a half meters, the master lightly knocked it and spoke while he was stroking his beard with his left hand,

"Thine training is just one. Splitting this rock using only thy palms. Once thou have succeeded, I shall teach thee all my knowledge."

"……W-Wait a minute."

I tapped lightly on the huge rock, feeling a little nervous about this unexpected development. Since I was accustomed to the game, my sense of touch could tell the degree of the target's durability. The hardness sensation that was transmitted to my hand was «One step short of Immortal Object».

Yeah, it's impossible.

I made that judgement and turned to the master to cancel the quest. However, before I could do so——

"Until this rock is split, leaving this mountain is forbidden. And thou hast to bear the mark for that reason."

The master who spitted out that line took strange objects from the bosom of his dōgi. On his left hand was a small pot. Then in his right hand was… a thick and elegant —— writing brush.

Bad feeling, a word made up in a three-dimensional font floated over my head as the bad feeling pierced through my entire body.

E-Err, I want to quit!

Faster than I could say that, the right hand of the master flashed at an amazing speed. The tip of the brush plunged into the pot, a lot of ink then —— *Zubazubazuba—!* exploded on my face.

At that moment, this made me realize the secret behind Argo's whiskers.

That girl had discovered the old man on her own from the early stage of the beta test and had accepted the quest. Upon accepting it, she was told to split the same rock, along with the graffiti written on her face. Those —— three whiskers on each cheek.

"O-Owaaaa!?"

I raised a pathetic scream as I leaned back, and met with the gaze from Argo who was standing slightly further away.

The girl showed deep sorrow and sympathy —— but at the same time, the expression on the Rat's face looked as if she was trying to suppress the urge to burst into laughter.

I hurriedly used both of my hands to wipe my face after the release of the brush attack. However, the ink seemed to be a super-fast drying type, as I couldn't get anything on my hands. The master looked at me like that before nodding, and spitting out the devastating words that I was anticipating,

"That «Mark» cannot be removed until thou hath split this rock and finished the training. I believe in thee, my disciple."

Then, he returned to the hut and disappeared behind the door.

I stood still like that for about ten seconds, before gazing at Argo, who was still wearing a complicated expression, and asked,

"I see…… Argo, you accepted this quest during the beta period…… and gave up on clearing it, right? That's why you had to continue playing with that drawing on your face until the final day of the test. And as the result, it was the beginning of the «Rat» character, the information dealer, and for your business in the game's official version, you chose to continue using it with paint…… is that correct?"

"Excellent! That's some excellent reasoninG!"

As she clapped her hands, the Rat continued,

"Isn't it greaT, Kii-bou! As a result, you gained the information of both «The reason behind the whiskers» and «The extra skilL»! For celebration, I'll tell you one more thinG. This rock…… it's demoN!"

"……I thought as much…"

While I was bearing the urge to collapse to the ground, I bet on a single small ray of hope as I asked Argo,

"……Hey. Is the paint on my face similar to your whiskers?"

"Hmm, it's quite differenT—"

“Oh…… h-how does it look!?”

Maybe it isn’t too noticeable? Or if it’s noticeable but is somewhat cool then I still have a choice of returning to my daily life while carrying this mark. Argo spent three seconds looking at my face, who didn’t have enough courage to look at my own reflection from the spring —— before saying,

“Oh righT. I can express it in one word…… it’s «KiriemoN»[34].”

At that point, seeming as she had reached her limit, Argo fell to the ground, both feet wriggled while she rolled her body about, “Nyahahaha! Nya—hahahahaha!!” she continued laughing uncontrollably. Eternally, eternally…

I secluded myself on the mountain for three days, by then, I managed to split the rock after a tremendous amount of struggle. It was fortunate that I had promised not to hold a lifelong grudge against Argo.

[34] Kiriemon = Kirito + Doraemon

# SWORD ART ONLINE PROGRESSIVE

## RONDO FOR A FRAGILE BLADE



SECOND FLOOR OF AINCRAD, DECEMBER 2022

# Chapter 2
# Rondo of a Fragile Blade
*Aincrad 2nd Floor, December 2022*

## *1*

"S...s-screw you!"

My feet stopped when the high-pitched shriek hit my ears.

I took a few quick steps to the side and pressed my back against the wall of the NPC shop. Up ahead, the path opened into a wider plaza, from which the disturbance was coming.

"P-put it back! Back to the way it was!! That was a plus-four...P-put it back to what it was!"

Another shriek. It sounded like an argument between two players. Given that we were in the protected zone of Urbus, the main city on the second floor of Aincrad, the disagreement was unlikely to lead to physical harm to either player. I certainly had no reason to hide, given that it had nothing to do with me.

But even though I understood that well enough, I couldn't help but be more cautious than usual these days. After all, Kirito the level-13 swordsman was the most hated solo player in Aincrad–the first man to be known as a beater.

Thursday, December 8, 2022, was the thirty-second day of *Sword Art Online*, the game of death.

Illfang the Kobold Lord, master of the first floor, was dead. Four days had passed since the teleport gate of Urbus went active. In those four days, the story of what happened in the boss chamber had spread among the game's top players, albeit with wings of its own. A boss monster with the Katana skill, a piece of information that wasn't previously known.

The death of Diavel the Knight, leader of the raid. And one beater, a beta tester who got further than anyone and used his knowledge to steal the last hit on the boss and reap the rewards.

Fortunately for me, while the name Kirito had spread like wildfire, only forty or so players had actual knowledge of my physical appearance within the game. And in *SAO*, the names of strangers did not appear on their in-game cursors. That was the only reason I could walk through town without fear of being pelted by stones. Then again, even if that happened, a purple system wall would deflect the projectiles.

Even still, I felt ashamed that I was removing my signature Coat of Midnight–my prize for defeating the boss–and wearing a wide bandanna to escape notice. It wasn't that I was so desperate for human contact that I would sneak into the city in disguise; I just needed to refill on potions and rations as well as perform maintenance on my equipment. There was a small shop at the village of Marome about two miles southeast of Urbus, but its selection was poor, and there were no NPC blacksmiths I could pay to repair my weapon.

Due to these factors, I was busy in the market on the south side of Urbus, filling my item storage with sundry goods and supplies, then making my way along the side of the street toward my next errand when I heard the shouts.

Out of reflex, I had to check to make sure the angry screams weren't directed at me first, then sighed in disappointment at my own timidity. Satisfied that it wasn't me, I resumed my trip to the eastern plaza, which was both my destination and the source of the argument.

In less than a minute, I arrived at a circular, bowl-like open space. It was relatively crowded for three o'clock in the afternoon, which was normally prime adventuring time. Most likely, the foot traffic was due to the recent opening of the town–there were plenty of players coming up from the Town of Beginnings on the first floor to visit the new city.

The flow of pedestrians slowed down in a corner of the plaza, and I could hear the same shouts coming from that area. I slipped through the crowd and craned my neck, trying to detect the source of the argument.

“Wh-wh-what did you do?! The properties are all way down!!”

I vaguely recognized the red-faced man. He was a proper frontier player, not a tourist. He hadn’t taken part in the first-floor boss raid, but his full suit of metal armor and large three-horned helmet spoke to his level.

What truly drew my eye, however, was the naked longsword clutched in the three-horned man’s right hand. The edge couldn’t hurt anyone inside of town, but the idea that he would wave it around in the midst of a crowd was distasteful. He was too furious to think straight, however, so he stuck the tip into the pavement stone and continued bellowing.

“How could you possibly fail four times in a row? You can’t have reduced my sword to plus zero! I should have left it with a damn NPC! You owe me for this, you third-rate blacksmith!” Standing quietly in a plain brown leather apron and looking guilty through the minutes of raging insults was a short male player. He’d set up a gray carpet at the edge of the plaza with a chair, anvil, and shelf crowded together. The rug was a Vendor’s Carpet, an expensive item that allowed a player to set up a simple shop in the middle of the town–a necessity for any enterprising merchant or crafter.

You could display your wares without a carpet, of course, but when left abandoned in the open like that, the items would lose durability bit by bit as time wore on, and there was no defense against thievery. In the beta test, I’d seen lively player markets along the main streets of all the major cities with carpets of every color, but this was the very first I’d noticed since *SAO*’s retail version had turned deadly. In fact, it was very first non-NPC blacksmith I’d seen.

Now that I recognized the circumstances, the reason for the uproar was clear.

The man repeatedly slamming his sword against the ground had paid the silent, drooping blacksmith to fortify the blade. In general terms, a player of the same level would be better at augmenting weapons than an NPC. The requisite production skills had to be at a certain level, of course, but that could generally be recognized at a glance. The crafting tools used–in this case, the blacksmith's hammer–were all grouped into tiers that could only be equipped with the right level of skill proficiency. The Iron Hammer resting on the silent blacksmith's anvil required a higher level than the Bronze Hammers this towns NPCs used.

So this blacksmith should have better odds at strengthening weapons than the NPCs of Urbus–in fact, he couldn't run a business without them–which was why the three-horned man had entrusted him with his beloved sword.

Unfortunately, however, weapon augmenting in *SAO* was not a surefire success unless one's skill proficiency was quite high. With a failure rate of 30 percent, there was a 9 percent chance of failing twice in a row and a 3 percent chance of three failures, Even the tragic outcome of four consecutive failed attempts had a 0.8 chance of occurring.

The terrifying thing was that in a vast online RPG world, these odds were just high enough to happen every now and then. I played games before this that featured rare items with drop rates like 0.01 percent that made you want to scream, "You're joking!" And yet plenty of lucky players wound up with them. I prayed that such cruelly rare items did not exist in *SAO*, but a part of me knew they must and that I would spend days and days in the dungeons looking for them...

"What's all the ruckus about?" someone muttered in my ear, startling me out of my thoughts.

It was a slender fencer. She wore a white leather tunic, pale green leather tights, and a silver breastplate. Her facial features were so pristine and graceful that you might wonder how an elf wandered into the world of Aincrad, but the crude gray wool cape from her head to her waist ruined that effect.

But she didn't have much of a choice. If she'd taken off the cape and let her luscious brown hair and elven beauty catch the sun, *she'd* never escape the attention of the crowds again.

I took a deep breath to calm my head and responded to this person I might actually call a "friend"...one of the very few I had in this world.

"Well, the guy with the horned helmet wanted the other one to power up his..."

At this point I realized that I, like her, was in disguise. I didn't want to believe that my nondescript costume of plain leather armor and a yellow-and-blue striped bandanna was that easy to see through. Perhaps I ought to pretend that I did not know her.

"Er, well...have we met before?"

The look I got in response was like twin rapier thrusts burning holes through the center of my face.

"Met? Why, I believe we've shared meals and been in a party together."

"...Oh...Now I remember, of course, I believe I lent you the use of my bath–"

*Thunk*. The sharp heel of her long boots——officially named Boots of Hornet, slammed down on the top of my right foot. A piece of my memory disintegrated. I cleared my throat, pinched the edge of her hood, and walked her a few yards away from the crowd so we could have a proper conversation.

"H-hi, Asuna. Long time no see...if two days counts."

"Good afternoon, Kirito-kun."

Two days ago, when I'd met her on the front line, I claimed that there was no need for formality between avatars. But as this was her first VR game, she seemed to have difficulty getting over that.

And when I'd offered to call her "Asuna-san" in return, she said it was a pain in the neck and totally unnecessary. I didn't understand women.

At any rate, once the pleasantries had been peacefully exchanged, I turned back to the unpleasantness with the blacksmith and gave her a brief explanation.

"It seems the guy in the three-horned helmet asked the blacksmith to strengthen his weapon, but the process failed four times in a row, returning it back to a plus-zero state. So he's furious about it–which I can understand, I mean, four in a row..."

Asuna the fencer, the fastest and most coolheaded player I knew in Aincrad (I'd add "most beautiful," but I didn't want to cross the line of my personal harassment code) shrugged her shoulders and said, "The one who asked the other had to be aware of the possibility of failure. And doesn't the blacksmith have the rates of success for different weapons posted? Plus, it says that if he fails, he'll only charge the cost of the upgrade materials, and not the labor."

"Uh, really? That's quite considerate," I muttered, recalling the image of the short blacksmith bowing and scraping repeatedly. Forty percent of my sympathy had been for the three-horned man whose weapon had been ruined but now it dropped to closer to twenty.

"I'm guessing that after the first failure, the blood rushed to his head, so he kept demanding another attempt to make it up. Losing your self-control and paying a terrible price for it is a constant feature of any form of gambling..."

"That almost sounded like it had personal experience behind it"

"N-no, just a common-sense observation."

I avoided looking at her, sensing that telling her I'd lost all of my money at the seventh-floor monster coliseum during the beta test was not going to win me any points.

Asuna gave me a piercing look for several seconds before mercifully returning to the topic at hand.

"Well...I can't say I don't feel a little sorry for him, but that kind of rage doesn't seem necessary. He can just save up the money for another attempt."

"Um...well, it's not that simple."

"What do you mean?" she asked. I jabbed a thumb at the Anneal Blade +6 strapped over my back.

"The three-horned guy's sword is an Anneal Blade, just like mine. He must have gone through that terrible quest on the first floor to get it, too. On top of that, he'd gone to the trouble of having an NPC bump it up to plus four. That's not too hard to reach. But once you get to plus five the odds really start to drop–that's why he had a player blacksmith try it. But the first attempt failed, so now it's back to plus three. He asks for another attempt, hoping to get it back to where he started, but it fails again, down to plus two. Then the process repeats. The third and fourth attempts fail, so now he ends back at zero."

"But...there's no way to fall further from zero. Can't he just try to get it up to plus five again...?"

At this point, Asuna seemed to understand where I was going with this. Her hazel eyes widened in the shade of her hood. "Oh...there's maximum limit to attempts. And what's the limit for an Anneal Blade?"

"Eight times. He got four successes and four failures, which put him at even and used up all his attempts. That sword can't be smithed anymore."

It was the trickiest part of *SAO*'s weapon upgrading system. Every piece of equipment that could be powered up had a preset number of possible attempts. It wasn't the maximum level you could reach with the weapon, but the number of *attempts*. For example, a Small Sword, the starting weapon at the beginning of the game, only had a single potential attempt.

If the process failed, that sword could never be a Small Sword Even worse, the success rate could actually be affected by the effort of the owner. Obviously, finding the best blacksmith possible was a major part of that–and ultimately, one could master the Blacksmithing skill themselves, though at this point in the game, it was an unrealistic option. One could also increase the chances of success through better materials, either in quality or quantity.

Most player blacksmiths set their upgrading fees based on a success rate of around 70 percent. If the client wanted a better chance, they could pay extra to have more crafting materials added, or simply provide them directly to the blacksmith.

Which meant the biggest fault of the three-horned man was that he'd gotten worked up and gambled on more attempts. He should have taken a deep breath after the first failure, then paid (or provided) extra to improve his chances the next time. That would likely have prevented his tragedy of an Anneal Blade +0 with no remaining attempts.

"I see...Well, I can understand why he'd be upset. Just a little."

I nodded in agreement and offered a moment of silence to the fateful blade. Suddenly, the screaming man ceased his rage. Two of his friends had raced over and put their hands on his shoulders, offering support.

"C'mon, Rufiol, it's gonna be okay. We'll help you try the Anneal Blade quest again."

"It'll only take a week to get it back, then we can push it all the way up to plus eight."

Wow, now it takes three players a week to get it? Glad I got mine early, I thought. And you guys...take care of your pal. Don't let him gamble it away again.

Rufiol seemed to have recovered his cool. He trudged off out of the plaza, shoulders slumped.

The blacksmith, who'd withstood the insults in silence the entire time, finally spoke up.

"Um...I'm truly sorry about this. I'll try much harder next time, I swear...I mean, not that you'd want to bring me again."

Rufiol stopped and looked back at the blacksmith. When he spoke again, it was in an entirely different voice,

"...It's not your fault. I'm...I'm sorry for ripping you apart."

"No. I failed at my job..."

I looked closer at the blacksmith, who was still bowing, hands clasped in front of his leather apron. He was quite young, still in his teens. His slightly drooping eyes and plain parted bangs made him look, I hated to admit, like a perfectly typical crafter.

A little shorter and thicker, and he'd be the perfect dwarf. Or perhaps a gnome–he didn't have the beard.

The blacksmith stepped forward and bowed deeply yet again. "Um, I know it's nothing in return...but do you think I could buy back your spent plus zero Anneal Blade for 8,000 cor?"

The onlookers murmured in surprise, and even I grunted at the offer.

The current market price for a fresh new Anneal Blade +0 was about sixteen thousand cor. So the offer was only half that, but Rufiol's weapon was "spent," fresh out of upgrade attempts. The market price for a weapon like *that* was probably halved again, down to four thousand cor. It was an extremely generous offer.

Rufiol and his two mends were stunned, but after a moment's conferral, they all nodded.

The incident was over. The three partners and the crowd of onlookers were gone, and the rhythmic clanging of the black-smith's hammer echoed through the plaza.

The blacksmith–not dwarf–was producing a weapon on his anvil,

Asuna and I took a seat on the bench across the circular plaza, listening to the hammering.

Normally, I wouldn't spend this much time here–I'd get my business done and zip back outside of the Urbus town limits. There were two reasons my plans had changed. For one, the presence of Asuna, one, of the few people in Aincrad who wouldn't call me a dirty beater, meant that I could actually have a conversation and practice my increasingly rusty Japanese. The other reason was on my back: I'd come to power up my Anneal Blade +6.

I'd overheard someone talking about a talented player blacksmith setting up shop in the east plaza of Urbus over in the small town of Marome just yesterday. I'd been thinking it was about time to give that +7 a shot, so I got the crafting materials in order and changed into my disguise for a trip into Urbus. The previous scene had given me pause, however.

In truth, it would be as easy as standing up and walking over to the dwa–er, blacksmith, and asking him for an upgrade. We'd never met before, and I doubted he would say, "My hammer isn't meant to work on the swords of a dirty beater!"

But the prior squabble had put some pressure onto my decision. Another Anneal Blade had gone from +4 to +0 despite a 70 percent success rate. It was mathematically possible, but a tragedy of the highest order for such a fine weapon. If the same fate befell my attempt, I might not lose my cool the same way, but I'd definitely be sulking in my inn room for a good three days.

Something told me that embarking upon my attempt with this pessimistic view would ensure that I wound up with an Anneal Blade +5. Then I'd panic, try again without providing more materials, and finish with a +4. There was no logical reason for my suspicion, but the gamble of attempted upgrades in MMOs was a topic that often defied logic...

"...Well?"

I looked over at the questioning voice, still lost in thought.

"Huh? What?"

"Don't play dumb with me. Why did you force me to sit here?" Asuna glared at me.

"Er, um, oh, right. Sorry, just thinking..."

"Thinking? Weren't you coming here to have that blacksmith work on your weapon, Kirito?"

"Um, h-how can you tell?" I asked, startled. She shot me an exasperated look.

"When we were in Marome two nights ago, you said you were hunting Red Spotted Beetles in the rocky mountains to the east. That must have been for one-handed sword upgrading materials."

"Oh ...yeah," I sighed.

"What was that reaction for?"

"Um...I just can't believe I'm hearing this from the girl who didn't know how to read her party companions, names just four days ago...in a good way! I'm not being sarcastic."

Apparently Asuna believed my sincerity, as her expression softened and she murmured, "I *have* been studying a lot."

For some reason, this admission made me happy. I nodded excitedly. "That's great, really. In an MMO, knowledge makes all the difference when it comes to getting results. Anything you want to know, just ask. I was a former tester, after all, so I know everything from the items sold in towns up to the tenth floor to the different sounds of all the mobs..."

At this point, I realized the terrible mistake I was making.

Just as I said, I was a former beta tester. But at the same time, I'd taken on the persona of a dirty beater who hoarded information and used it solely for his own benefit.

Many other high-level players despised me for this, not least of whom were the party members of the fallen knight Diavel. Even with the leather armor and bandanna, someone who knew me would recognize my face close up, and they would assume that Asuna, sitting on the bench next to me must be my partner. It was incredibly reckless of me to be talking about this in a crowded public place.

"Umm...s-sorry, just remembered something I need to do," I excused myself clumsily, preparing to stand and rush off.

The fencer stopped my shoulder with the lightest tap of her index finger and spoke in a low but firm voice.

"It's crazy and arrogant of you to think you can bear the burden of all the hatred and jealousy toward the former testers...but that was your choice, so I won't say anything more on the subject. But I also wish you'd respect my decision as well. I don't care what other people think. If I didn't want people to think that I was your friend...your companion, I wouldn't have spoken to you."

"……..Aw, geez. You can see right through me," I muttered and sat back down on the bench.

She had identified all my motives, from calling myself a beater at the boss chamber to my attempt to get up and flee just seconds ago. No use trying to hide now. I raised my hands in brief surrender and she grinned slightly beneath her deep hood.

"If you're a pro at Aincrad, then my all-girls' academy upbringing makes me a pro at mental battles. As if I couldn't read your avatar's face like a page in a book."

"W-well...I'm sorry to have doubted you..."

"So be honest. Why are you hesitating on upgrading your weapon? I was coming here to do the very same thing, in fact."

"Wha...?"

I looked down at Asuna's fragile blade in surprise.

Her green-hilted rapier in its ivory scabbard was called the Wind Fleuret. I'd looted that sword from a monster and given it to her as an upgrade when we first formed our party, preparing for the first-floor boss fight. It was a fairly rare item, with the potential to serve admirably until midway through the third floor if it was upgraded properly.

"Is that plus four right now?" I asked. She nodded.

"Did you bring your own upgrade mats? How many?"

"Umm ...I have four Steel Planks and twelve Windwasp Needles."

"Wow, nice work. But..." I did some mental calculation and groaned, "Hmm, but that means the chance of going to plus five is only a bit over eighty percent."

"Aren't those good odds to risk?"

"Normally, sure. But after what we just saw..."

I looked back across the plaza at the dwarfish blacksmith, rhythmically pounding away. Asuna looked at him as well and shrugged.

"The odds of a coin turning up heads is always fifty percent, no matter what happened the last time. What effect does the last person's consecutive failure have on you or me trying our hand?"

"Well...nothing...but..."

I couldn't come up with a good answer, but my mind was racing. Clearly, Asuna was a person of logic and reason, and she wouldn't accept my assertion that there were streaks and mojo when it came to gambling. Even my left brain knew that there was no proof behind the "bad feeling" I was getting.

But on the other hand, my right brain was screaming danger. It claimed that whether Anneal Blade or Wind Fleuret, the next weapon to be given to that blacksmith, regardless of extra boosts and bonuses, would end in failure.

“Listen, Asuna.” I turned my body to face her directly and put the gravest possible tone in my voice.

“Wh-what?”

“You like ninety percent better than eighty percent, right?”

“...Well, sure, but–”

“You like ninety-five percent better than ninety percent, right?”

“...Well, sure, but–”

“Then don’t compromise. If you already put in the work to get these materials, why not give it one more round and get those odds up to ninety-five?”

She gave me a very skeptical gaze for several long seconds, then beat her long eyelashes slowly, as though realizing something.

“Yes, it’s true that I hate compromising. But I hate people who are all talk and no walk just as much.”

“...Huh?”

“Since you’re so dead-set on me pursuing perfection, I assume you’re going to lend me a hand, Kirito. The drop rate on Windwasp Needles is only eight percent, after all.”

“.....Huh?”

“Now that that’s settled, let’s go hunting. I think the two of us together can take down about a hundred before nightfall.”

Asuna patted my shoulder and stood up, then squinted slightly, her shapely eyebrows knitting together, and delivered the finishing blow.

“Oh, and if we’ve going to hunt together, you must take off that ugly bandanna. It looks absolutely hideous on you.”

## *2*

Because of the “sword arts” that were the greatest selling point of *SAO*, the game had far more humanoid monster types than any other MMORPG. This tendency didn’t come into focus until the next floor, however, so there was still a wide variety of nonhuman monsters on the first and second floors. The animal and plant mobs that couldn’t use sword skills were much easier for newbies to deal with, but there were exceptions, of course.

Most notable of those were monsters with dangerous side effects like paralyzing toxins and corrosive acid, but aside from that, flying mobs were surprisingly tricky. After all, there was no magic in *SAO*. The only means of attacking targets at a distance was throwing knives, and they were more like a complementary weapon, not a primary source of damage.

I had to admit there was something cool about the idea of sinking all my time into the Throwing Knife skill and terrorizing all the flying mobs, but I didn’t have the willpower to dedicate to such an extreme build now that the game was deadly. On top of that, SAO、’s throwing weapons all had a finite amount, so if you ran out of knives in the midst of battle, tragedy awaited.

Therefore, when Asuna the fencer called upon–more like forced–me to help her hunt the flying Windwasps in the western zone of the second floor, with our very limited weapon range, there was only one thought on my mind.

Ugh, this is gonna be such a pain in the ass.

Once we left the west gate of Urbus, I called up my equipment mannequin and unequipped the yellow-and-blue-striped bandanna. I looked up at the long black bangs hanging below my eyebrows and sighed in relief. My original *SAO* avatar had parted hair in an attempt to escape those loose bangs, but now that I’d been living with this for a month, it was the most comfortable and familiar look for me.

Asuna watched me removing my costume and snorted. “I can’t believe you thought putting on one stupid bandanna made for a disguise. It won’t work unless you hide your entire face or use face paint.”

“Urgh...”

The latter term sent a painful shock through my memory.

My face had been covered in thick black paint until two nights before. And it wasn’t a cool tribal pattern on the cheeks or a reverse cross on my forehead. No, it was something much, much more embarrassing–I thought. I didn’t have the nerve to look for myself. The only human player who saw me described me as Kiriemon,” after the famous robotic cat character.

My face was marked against my will the moment I accepted a certain quest, and the marks would not come off until I completed that quest. I worked myself to the bone, tears in my eyes, to finish it up after three nights, when the whiskered old martial arts master finally erased the markings. There were no words to describe the joy and satisfaction of that moment. I was so happy, I even forgave him for the fact that cleaning them off was as simple as a wipe of the light brown rag from his robe pocket.

For that reason, I’d lost a good fifty hours of forward advancement since the opening of the second floor. I rushed to the village of Marome, the current front line of player progress, where I met Asuna for the first time since the boss fight.

She, of course, had no idea why I would give that odd reaction to her innocent suggestion, and stared at me suspiciously. I cleared my throat in a hurry.

“Ah, um, g-good point. Maybe I should get one of those hooded capes for myself the next time I go to Urbus. Where did you buy yours?”

“From an NPC in the western market of the Town of Begi...” She trailed off, and I felt flames pouring from her eyes. “You’d better not buy the same thing! Then people will think we’re a coup...a fixed party! Wear a burlap sack if you want to hide your face!”

Asuna turned her head away in a blinding huff, opened her menu and tapped the equipment figure. The plain gray wool cape sparkled briefly and vanished, and her long, straight hair glimmered in the afternoon sun.

It was the first time I’d seen her full face in four days, not since the battle against Illfang the Kobold Lord, and it was indescribably beautiful. It almost made me wonder if Akihiko Kayaba, the ruler of our new world, had made one careless mistake and left her face in its original avatar torn–but if I ever said that aloud, she’d pound me.

Marome was to the southeast of Urbus, so the southwest road was empty of adventurers. If it weren’t for the whole game-of-death thing, being able to stroll with a beautiful girl in the midst of a video game would be the greatest gift God could give any teenage boy. Even if we were only going to farm wasps for a royal-pain-in-the-ass mission.

“People might confuse me for a PKer if I wear a burlap sack. Can I at least get the same cape in a different color?”

“Negative!”

“...Yes, ma’am.”

I brought up my equipment mannequin again, removed the leather armor disguise and put on the pitch-black Coat of Midnight I’d looted from the boss.

Asuna seemed about to say something as she watched the long hem of the coat flap in the wind, but when our eyes met, she turned away in a huff. I started to wonder why I was even helping her gather upgrading materials, then remembered that it had been my own suggestion.

On the other hand, Windwasps were worth the trouble thanks to their experience value. It would be a good source of points before dinner. Plus, no doubt Asuna would be generous enough to pay for dinner in place of her lodging fee. Sure, she would.

The path ahead took us through a narrow ravine that split the fields of grazing oxen into north and south. Through that canyon was where we'd find the wasps.

"As I'm sure you already know, given that you've hunted a fair number of them, the wasps' stingers have a two or three-second stun effect. Let's keep in mind that if the other gets stunned, we should immediately go in and take over for them."

"Got it," she said, then added, "If you go too far south, you'll run into Jagged Worms, so watch out for that."

"G...got it."

Belatedly, I recalled that bit of info from the beta test.

We crossed the natural stone bridge that spanned the thirty-foot gorge, nervous despite its reasonable width, and sighed in relief once we were across.

"I wonder what would happen if we fell off," Asuna asked. I shrugged my shoulders.

"I doubt you'd die if you're over level five. But the path out the ravine is way to the south, and there's plenty of slimy monsters down there, so it'd take a while to get out."

"Oh."

I thought I detected something other than relief in her face. As though sensing my suspicion, she turned away toward the valley and said, "I was just thinking, if we go up against a boss monster, scouting it out and leveling up, creating a strategy and all that, and still lose, that's one thing. But dying because you were careless and fell from a tall height would really suck."

“Yeah. In a normal MMO, dying from a fall would be a funny story...but not here,” I murmured. “But do you even think there’s a way of dying in the real world that might make you say, “Well, I did my best so I have no regrets’? Whether it’s a disease or an accident, I think all you’d be left with is sadness and frustration...I mean, if there’s any way to die in Aincrad and feel satisfied that you did what you needed to, it would have to be...”

Sadly, my fourteen-year-old-nerd’s vocabulary failed me; my fingers wriggled and my mouth opened and closed without a sound. Asuna mercilessly watched the entire sorry display, then gave a brief answer.

“Perhaps that wouldn’t be so bad. Not that I’m eager to find out what that’s like any time soon.”

“Y-yeah.”

“In which case, we ought to put our best effort into defeating the second-floor boss. And helping me power up my weapon is part of that process.”

“Y...yeah.”

“Since were both in agreement, let’s get started. A hundred in two hours!”

Asuna drew her rapier and headed in the opposite direction of the stone bridge–a small basin lined with low trees.

One hundred wasps in two hours. One every seventy-two seconds? For real?

All I could summon in response was a halfhearted grunt of agreement.

The Windwasps were black with green stripes and a foot and a half long, easily making them larger than any insects on earth, but among the smallest monsters found on Aincrad. Their HP and attack values were fairly low for second-floor mobs.

However, it was very difficult to suppress the brain's primitive signal to flee when a bee larger than your head approached, brandishing a stinger the size of an ice pick. Hunting the wasps therefore became an exercise in mastering one's instincts.

It was for this reason that I'd been concerned about Asuna, who did not seem to take kindly to bugs. However–

"Haah!"

Her rapier skill Linear burned a silver line through space, unerringly piercing the weak abdomen band of a wasp. screeched metallically and burst into polygonal shards. A list of experience and rewards appeared before my eyes automatically for being in her party.

"Twenty-four," she shouted, looking over with what I suspected to be confident glee in her eyes. My juices of rivalry energized, I turned toward a fresh new wasp to my right.

It had spawned with me inside of its aggro range, so as soon as the curved compound eyes spotted me, it reared up high. The wasp stopped about five yards off the ground, then buzzed down with a heavy, stomach-churning vibration. If the wasps body stayed straight, it would lunge for a bite attack, and if it curved like a hinge, it would use its poison stinger. That was the first step to dealing with the creatures, but even after my considerable beta experience with these and the more powerful Storm Hornets, I couldn't help but recoil in fear when they lunged.

This time, I withstood the terror and noticed the bee had its abdomen exposed, signaling a stinger attack. I stood my ground The wasp charged right before me, then briefly stopped to hover again. The massive poisoned barb was glowing with a faint yellow light. I waited until that moment, then jumped backward. The stinger shot forward with a mechanical clank but found no purchase.

Once the wasp missed, it would fall under a delay effect for a second and a half

Without missing a beat, I unleashed Vertical Arc, a two-part sword skill. The blade carved out a V shape and hammered the wasp with satisfying sound effects. The monsters HP gauge fell nearly 60 percent.

Fresh out of its delay, the wasp flew up high again. It spun around and began another dive. This time, it hurtled body first, the sign of a bite attack. I sidestepped rather than waiting for the attack, then raced after the bee when it passed by. It stopped and briefly hovered before its next turn, more than enough for me to catch it with a clean diagonal Slant.

One more Vertical Arc would finish off the monster, but its cooldown icon was still lit at the bottom of my view. A follow-up Slant could do the job if I hit its weak point, but from behind, the wasp's large wings were in the way. If I didn't strike a critical hit, its HP bar would still have a bit left. I clicked my tongue in disappointment and launched a regular swing attack before the wasp's delay wore off. Fortunately, I hit it before its bite started, reducing the wasp to pieces or blue glass.

"Twenty-two!" I yelled, looking around for a fresh opponent. The fact that I was losing despite the edge in level and equipment was thanks to Asuna's high rate of critical hits–in other words, she was so accurate that she could hit the wasps in their weak point every single time.

My Vertical Arc did 60 percent of a wasp's life bar with a normal hit, whereas Asuna's Linear did just over fifty for a critical blow. But because that move was a basic skill, it had a very brief cooldown time, meaning she could use it every single time the wasp was vulnerable.

I could try to follow her lead and aim for crits with my basic attacks like Slant and Horizontal, but I just didn't have the confidence in my own accuracy. If I had an excuse, it was that my Anneal Blade +6 was specced "3S3D," meaning three points to sharpness, three to durability.

On the other hand, Asuna's Wind Fleuret +4 was 3A1D, meaning three points to accuracy, one to durability. That gave her an excellent bonus to critical hits, no doubt.

But even taking that into account, an extremely high level of player skill and calm concentration was necessary to land every single hit as a critical attack–to say nothing of experience.

I suspected that Asuna had spent a considerable amount of time fighting these giant wasps since reaching the second floor.

Much of that had to do with farming the materials to upgrade her Wind Fleuret, but I thought there was something bigger behind that. It was about strengthening herself as a player, not just her stats. If she learned to jab the weak points of the nimble flying enemies, landbound monsters would seem slow as molasses in comparison.

I recalled what Asuna said to me on our first encounter deep within the first-floor labyrinth.

We're all going to die anyway. The only difference is when and where, sooner...or later.

Her eyes had shone with a dim light that saw not hope but despair at the end of her battle. That she was able to strive in search of true strength now filled me with joy. I could only hope that someday she'd stand atop the entire population, a shining example and beacon of light to all.

But having said that...I was not about to lose our competition to see who could kill fifty wasps first.

Before we began battle, Asuna had proposed a chilling bet. She would provide the dinner for tonight, but whoever could hunt fifty wasps first would also get a free dessert, courtesy of the loser.

I'd accepted the challenge without thinking, and it wasn't until after we started that I realized what she was after. One of the NPC restaurants in Urbus sold a shortcake with an astonishing amount of sweet cream made from giant cow's milk, the local delicacy.

And it was delicious–enough to make one forget about my favorite black bread with cream from the first floor. It was also expensive–enough to use the majority of the cor I'd earn in the hunt.

That's what Asuna was after. If she bought the meal and I bought the dessert, I'd come out way, way behind. I had no choice but to emerge victorious!

"Raaahh!!"

I raced after the freshest new wasp, a bellow ripping through my lungs.

But the next moment, all the wind went out of my sails when I heard her call out, "Twenty-five!"

A three-point margin. That was bad news at the halfway mark.

If we both continued at this pace, she'd pull away and leave me in the dust. If I couldn't find a way to kill them in two moves like Asuna, I would never make up the difference.

I didn't have any other choice.

After turning back to ensure that Asuna was looking the other way, I gave my target an appraising stare.

The black-and-green wasp hovered high, then plunged down at me. Its body was bent, the gleaming stinger extended.

I followed the proper pattern, stopping in my tracks and inviting the enemy to strike and miss before employing a Vertical Arc. Two pleasing slashes rang out, but as usual, they only did 60 percent of its health. If the wasp pulled away, I couldn't finish it off in two moves, short of a lucky critical hit.

I clenched my left fist with a silent scream.

Normally, I'd suffer a brief delaying effect at the end of my sword skill, but my left fist began glowing with a red visual effect when I held it to my side. Largely automatically, my body jutted forward and pounded the wasp, which was already in a knockback state from the sword attack.

The meaty thud that resulted was unlike the sound of any blade. My fist shot forward and caught the wasp in its round, bulging abdomen: Flash Blow, a basic Martial Arts skill. The wasp lost another 20 percent of its HP.

Poised again, the wasp zipped upward and out of reach. Its second dive was another stinger lunge. I had already recovered from delay, and I easily evaded the wasp and dispatched it with a simple Slant. The time it took to defeat this wasp was nearly the same as two hits.

At this point, depending on how quickly I could find the next monster, I had a chance. I had a chance.

Eyes wide, I scanned for the formation of a polygonal blob that signaled a new monster being generated into the environment, and raced after it.

* * *

One hour later, I sat on the grass, fifty wasps killed, burnt to a crisp by sheer exhaustion. Asuna walked over and patted me on the shoulder.

“Nice work, Kirito.”

There wasn’t a hint of fatigue in her voice. She circled around the front and smiled.

“Well, let’s go back to Urbus for our dinner. And when you buy me dessert, I’d like to hear all about that bizarre punching skill you were using.”

I had no response. The beautiful fencer leaned in for the critical finish.

“I can’t wait to finally try that cake. A win’s a win, even if it was only by one point. A boy must keep his promises, after all.”

## *3*

Just as we arrived back at Urbus, bells rang crisp and clear from all over the town, signaling the arrival of night. It was a calm, slow melody with a hint of longing. Seven o'clock was about the time for the players out adventuring in the wilderness to make their way back home.

In the MMORPGs I'd played before *SAO*, seven o'clock was just when the game was getting going. People would begin to log in to the server around then, hitting peak traffic at about ten, with the hardiest of souls lasting all through the night until morning.

As a student of mandatory schooling age, I always logged out by two in the morning at the latest. I remembered looking on in jealousy at those who were preparing to race out for yet another round of hunting.

Ironically, now that all I wanted was to be able to go *back* to school, I could stay out well past two, until five or eight o'clock in the morning if I chose. And yet once it got dark outside, I always found my way back to town.

Many times, it was just to eat dinner and fill up on supplies before trudging out for another round of adventures until sunrise–the night I met Asuna in the labyrinth was just such an occasion. But every time I saw that red, sinking sun through the outer perimeter of Aincrad, the sky changing from purple to navy blue, I couldn't sit still. I had to walk back to civilization.

As proof that this urge was not solely in my own mind, there were a number of players walking the main street of Urbus, all wearing smiles of relief. Lively cheers erupted from the restaurants and bars on the sides of the street, with the occasional toast or song dedicated to another day of survival.

This same scene occurred at the towns and villages of the first floor.

But it had been quite a while since I'd heard such unreserved laughter–perhaps never–since we'd been trapped in Aincrad.

"This is the first time I've come back to Urbus at this time of day. Is it always like this? Or is today a special day?" I asked Asuna.

December 8 wasn't a holiday. She shot me a quizzical look, her beauty hidden beneath the wool cape once again.

"Both Urbus and Marome have been like this for several days. Have you been in hiding both day and night?"

"Um...well..."

She was probably asking if I really cared that much about being seen. As a matter of fact, I couldn't visit Urbus even if I wanted to. If I was going to tell her about my Martial Arts skill over dinner, I'd eventually get to this topic, but it was not something that could be summed up briefly.

"You could say I was hiding. Or maybe I wasn't," I stammered.

Asuna's stare grew even more incredulous.

"Didn't I tell you you're being paranoid? We've passed by dozens of people so far, you're not in disguise, and not a single one has bothered you in the least."

She was correct: My awesome striped bandanna was not on display. My face and hair were just like normal, though the black coat was stashed away, too. But I had a feeling that it was not a case of players recognizing me as "Kirito the Beater" and choosing to leave me alone, but that they were simply too full of relief and anticipation of dinner to bother spending any time examining one gloomy-looking swordsman out of many.

I coughed lightly, subtly maneuvering myself to use Asuna as cover.

"Ahem...w-well, perhaps. Anyway, back to the topic–is this place always this lively at night? For no particular reason?"

"Oh, I'm sure there's a reason."

I shut my mouth. She shot me another look.

"...In fact, you're responsible for about three-quarters of that reason."

"Huh? M-me?!" I sputtered. She sighed in total exasperation. "Look...Isn't it obvious why everyone is smiling and laughing? It's because we're on the second floor."

"Which means?"

"It wasn't a riddle. Everyone was much more nervous for the entire month we were trapped on the first floor. They were terrified that they might never see the real world again. I was one of them. But then the boss raid came together, we won on the first try, and opened up the second floor. Everyone realized that maybe we can beat this thing. That's why they're smiling. I'm just saying...we wouldn't be seeing this phenomenon if a certain someone hadn't stood strong during that battle."

"....."

Finally, I understood the point Asuna was making, but I was no closer to knowing how to react to that. I coughed again and grasped tor something to say.

"Uh, I g-guess. Well, if you ask me, that certain someone did a good enough job to deserve a free shortcake," I finished hopefully.

"That was that; this is this!"

It was worth a shot.

We turned onto a narrow path leading north from the east-west main street, then made another right and a left to reach the restaurant.

I knew about this establishment (and its infamous shortcake) from my tireless exploration of Urbus during the beta test, so was a bit surprised that Asuna knew about it after just a few days on the second floor. We took a table near the back and ordered our food, at which point I decide to ask her how she knew.

"So let me guess, Asuna: the smell of the sweet cream–" Those brown eyes went sharp beneath her hood. I instantly changed course.

"–did *not* guide you here. So was it coincidence? It's got a small storefront with a tiny sign. I think it would be difficult to pick this place out at random."

There wasn't anything to be lost by wandering into a business at random in Aincrad, as there were no rip-off bars that bullied you into paying up just for entering (as far as I knew), but there were some that automatically initiated an event-type quest when you walked in the door. There was no danger to one's HP within town (again, as far as I knew), but such events might come off as a nasty surprise to someone not familiar with MMOs. I figured Asuna was not the type of person to appreciate or desire unexpected thrills, but her answers surprised me. "I asked Argo if there were any low-traffic NPC restaurants in Urbus and bought the answer from her."

Sure enough, there was no one else in the restaurant. Asuna opened her menu and unequipped the cape, letting her hair swing free with a sigh.

"Oh...I see. That makes sense..."

On the inside, I broke out into a cold sweat. I was the one who brought Asuna and Argo together. Technically, it was when Asuna borrowed the use of my bath at the farmhouse near Tolbana, and Argo had visited with perfect timing. Despite my best efforts, they ran into each other in the bathroom, much to Asuna's shock. She screamed and ran out into the main room, where I was sitting–

"You're not remembering something you shouldn't, are you? If so, I might need two cakes instead of one."

"No, not remembering a thing," I replied instantly, vigorously shaking my head clear. "Anyway, Argo might be quick and accurate with your information, but be careful around her. There's no entry for 'client confidentiality' in her dictionary."

“Meaning...I could ask her to sell me all the information she has about you?”

It was too late to regret my slip of the tongue now.

“W-well, yeah...maybe...but it’ll cost you a lot. I’m sure the whole bundle would cost you at least three thousand cor.”

“That’s actually not as much as I expected. I bet I could raise that amount without much trouble...”

“N-n-no! I’d buy all of yours in return! After all, she saw your–” I shut my mouth so hard my teeth clicked. She grinned at me. “My what?”

“Umm, er...what I meant to say is...”

At that moment, a miracle occurred and the NPC waiter returned with dishes of food, saving me from certain catastrophe.

The menu was simple salad, stew, and bread, but this was the finest to be found on the second floor. Asuna’s eyebrows emitted a threatening aura as we ate, but it disappeared by the time the long-awaited dessert arrived.

As we agreed, Asuna paid for the dinner, while the cost of the dessert came from my own wallet. The terrifying thing was the cost of that one dish easily exceeded the three-piece dinner for two. But given that I’d busted out my secret Martial Arts skill and still lost the bet, I wasn’t in any position to complain. My only option was to rue the lack of my own skill.

The triumphant winner, seemingly oblivious to my inner turmoil, looked at the green plate piled high with a mountain of cream, her eyes sparkling.

“Oh my gosh! Argo’s info said you just *have* to try the Tremble Shortcake once. I can’t believe the moment has finally come!”

The “tremble” in the name was clearly derived from the Trembling Cows, the female versions of the terrifyingly huge oxen that roamed the second floor.

The cows were nearly twice the size of the oxen, practically bosses in their own right. The cream piled atop the shortcake came from their milk (supposedly), but now was not the time to mention that.

There was another angle to the "trembling" moniker, however: the cream was piled so high atop the dish that it shook on its own. The piece was a triangular slice from a full-size round cake seven inches to a side, three inches tall, about sixty degrees of the whole.

That meant the total volume of the cake was (7x7x3.14x3)/6...totaling seventy-seven cubic inches of pure heaven. There had to be almost an entire quart of cream on that thing.

"So...what about this cake qualifies as 'short'?" I whined.

Asuna picked up the large fork that came with the cake and said, "You don't know? It's not called shortcake because it's short in stature."

"Why, then? Was it invented by a legendary big-league shortstop?"

She effortlessly ignored my killer joke. "It's because the crispy texture of the cake is achieved through shortening. In America, they use a tough, crispy biscuit-like cake as the base, but we have soft sponge cake in Japan, so it's not really accurate to the original meaning. Let's see which kind this is..."

She put her fork to the top of the triangular wedge and carved out a good five cubic inches, exposing golden sponge cake. It was a four-layer cake, going sponge, strawberries and cream, sponge, strawberries and cream. The top of the cake, of course, was covered in a stunning amount of strawberries–or more accurately, some kind of in-game fruit that resembled strawberries. "So it's sponge cake. I like this style more, anyway," Asuna said.

Her smile was so radiant that it was almost worth losing the bet and being forced to pay a massive dessert bill just to see it. In truth, it didn't matter whether I came out ahead or behind.

The fact that she'd gone from pale-faced despair in the depths of the labyrinth to a full-faced smile under these warm oil lamps was a very good thing, indeed.

If there was one very bad thing here, it was that there was only a single slice of cake on the table. I'd been planning to live dangerously and order two servings outright, but the price on the menu was like a bucket of ice water dumped over my enthusiasm.

I summoned up every last point of my Gentleman statistic and waved a magnanimous hand, smiling as naturally as I could. "Please, dig in. Don't mind me."

She smiled back. "Oh, I won't. Here goes."

Two seconds later, she cracked with laughter, then reached into the cutlery basket at the side of the table and handed me a fork. "I'm just kidding–I'm not that mean. You can have up to a third of it."

"...Um, thanks," I replied, a relieved smile on my face. On the inside, my brain was doing rapid calculations.

One-third means I can eat...twenty-seven and a half cubic inches of cake!

When we left the restaurant, the town was wreathed in the dark of night. Asuna sucked in a deep breath and let out a deep sigh of contentment.

"...That was good..."

I knew how she felt. That cake was probably the first honest dessert she'd tasted since we'd been trapped in this place. It was the same for me. I sighed happily as well and murmured, "It feels like that tasted even better than in the beta test...The way the cream melted in your mouth, the perfect level of sweetness that wasn't too heavy, but still satisfying..."

"Don't you think that's just your imagination? Would they really bother with such fine-tuning between the beta and the retail release?" she asked. I answered her skepticism with all seriousness.

"It wouldn't be that hard to update the data in the taste engine. Besides, even ignoring the difference in flavor, we didn't have this in the beta."

I pointed just below my HP bar, in the upper left portion of view. There was a buff icon displayed that hadn't been there before, a four-leaf clover that signified an increased luck bonus.

That effect could only be gained by making an expensive offering at a church, equipping an accessory with that particular bonus, or consuming a special food item.

*SAO* kept its main stats exceedingly minimal, showing only values for strength and agility. However, there were a number of hidden stats affected by equipment properties, buffs and debuffs, even terrain effects. Luck was one of those stats, and a pretty important one–it affected resistance to poison and paralysis, the probability of weapon fumbling or tripping, even potentially the drop rate of rare items.

No doubt someone on the Argus development team had taken a look at the exorbitant price of the shortcake and decided that it was enough to warrant a bonus effect when the retail game launched. The effect would last for fifteen minutes. That would be a handy amount if eaten as a snack in the middle of a dungeon, but...

"Unfortunately, it's not enough time for us to make good use of it out in the fields," Asuna said, clearly following my line of thought. Even if we ran out searching for monsters, we'd barely find a handful before the buff wore off. Plus, the monsters around the outskirts of the town didn't drop any decent loot.

"Too bad...What a waste of a good buff."

I stared at the icon timer ticking away precious seconds, wracking my brain for a way to make good use of the bonus while it lasted.

We could get down on hands and knees in the street–coins and fragments of gems could be found on very rare occasions–but I didn't think Asuna would like that. We could gamble big at a casino, except that they didn't start showing up until the seventh floor. The more I pondered, the less of the effect remained.

Wasn't there anything we could do to test our luck? I supposed I could turn to the fencer and ask if she'd go out with me, but I had a feeling the system's luck bonus had no bearing on my chances there...

Just as the steam was about to pour from my ears in frustration, I heard a sound.

It was the distant, rhythmic clanging of metal. *Clank, clank*, went the hammer.

"Ah..."

I snapped my fingers, finally having spotted a use for the twelve remaining minutes of good luck.

## *4*

Five hours after our last visit to the eastern plaza of Urbus, there were virtually no people wandering around. The only souls left were a few players standing around the NPC shop stalls that opened only at night, and two or three couples seated on benches. Of course, I hadn't brought Asuna here to sit on a bench and stare up at the bottom of the floor above in lieu of stargazing.

The short player was still there in the northeast corner, his small anvil and display case sitting atop the vendor's carpet. This was who I came to see: the blacksmith, likely the very first committed crafter since the start of *SAO*.

"Asuna, you met your quota of upgrading materials for your Wind Fleuret during our hunt, right?" I asked. She gave me a brief nod, her hooded cape back on.

"Yes. I'm a bit over, in fact, so I was planning to sell the rest and split the money with you."

"We can do that tomorrow. Why don't you try getting it to plus five right now?"

She looked upward, thinking it over. "I see. But does the good luck bonus affect weapon augmentation attempts? Isn't it the blacksmith who does the attempt, not me?"

"True. But we can't give the blacksmith some of that cake, for obvious reasons..."

*Obvious* meaning financial reasons. I shrugged and continued,

"So I can't claim that the effect will work, but you are the weapons owner, so maybe there's a boost to the chance of success. I'm certain it won't have a *negative* effect, so you might as well give it a shot."

The explanation had wound the buff timer down to seven minutes. Asuna nodded again and said, “All right. I was going to do it today, anyway.”

She pulled the rapier from her waist and strode directly over to the blacksmith’s display. I followed her without comment.

Up close, the diminutive blacksmith reminded me even more of a dwarf. He was short and squat, with a young, honest face. It really was a shame that he didn’t have any whiskers. Hairstyles and facial hair were easily customizable with cosmetic items from shops, so it seemed like he could draw in more customers by going with the classic look.

Asuna’s voice broke me out of my pointless reverie.

“Good evening.”

The blacksmith looked up from his anvil and gave a hasty bow. “G-good evening. Welcome.”

His voice was young and boyish, a far cry from that dwarven baritone. Every avatar’s voice was sampled from the player’s real-life voice, so while it seemed slightly different from his face, it didn’t change his overall impression. As I suspected the first time I saw him, he might be a teenager close to my age.

Atop the signboard with his list of prices, it said Nezha’s Smith Shop. Under Japanese rules, I supposed that to be pronounced “Nezuha”–it must have been his name. Sometimes it was difficult to tell with the alphabetized display of *Sword Art Online* player names. In our first-floor raid party, there was a trident user with the handle Hokkaiikura. After much deliberation, I concluded that it must be “Hokka Iikura,” only to find out later that he called himself “Hokkai Ikura.” *Nezha* itself could have some different pronunciation, but it seemed rude to ask him that on our first meeting.

At any rate, Nezha. the blacksmith got to his feet and bowed again nervously.

“A-are you looking for a new weapon or here for maintenance?”

Asuna held up the rapier in both hands and answered, “I’d like you to power up my weapon. I want this Wind Fleuret plus four boosted to plus five, bonus to accuracy. I’ve got my own materials.”

Nezha took one glance at the fleuret and his already-drooping brows looked even more troubled.

“A-all right...How many materials do you have...?”

“The upper limit. Four Steel Plates and twenty Windwasp Needles,” she answered promptly. I recalculated everything in my head.

Equipment upgrade materials came in two categories: base materials and additional materials. Every attempt had a fixed, mandatory cost of base materials, but the additional materials were optional. The type and number of additional mats would have a wide effect on the chance of success.

Windwasp Needles were an accuracy-boosting additional material, which meant that they would increase her critical hit chance even more. If my memory was correct a full twenty needles would max out the success rate of the upgrade attempt at 95 percent.

In other words, this should have been a very good thing for the player actually performing the upgrade attempt. The best customers of all would pay the blacksmith for the materials themselves, but it still had to be much better than failing with no additional mats.

And yet, Nezha looked terrified after hearing her answer. He was clearly unsettled by the request, but he couldn’t find a reason to turn her down.

“All right. I’ll take your weapon and materials.” He bowed again.

Asuna thanked him and handed over the Wind Fleuret first.

She then opened her window and materialized a sack in which she had placed all of the goods. She handed them over to the blacksmith through a trade window. Finally, she paid him the cost of the upgrading attempt.

At this point, the luck bonus effect had only four minutes left. That would not be much help in battle, but it was more than enough for a single weapon upgrade. Whether or not it actually worked in the way we hoped was another question, but that was one expensive piece of cake. Surely they could afford to bump us from 95 percent to 97.

I said a silent prayer to the god of the game system. Asuna took two steps back and sidled right next to me. She muttered, “Finger.”

“Huh?”

“Stick out your finger.”

Baffled, I lifted my left hand and extended the index finger. Asuna reached out with her brown leather gloves and gripped my finger in two of hers.

“Um...what is this...?”

“If I do this, maybe your buff effect will be added to mine.” That seemed stupid. “W-well, in that case...shouldn’t you hold my entire hand...?”

I felt an icy stare emanating from her hood.

“Since when were things like that between us?” Since when were they like this?! I wanted to yell, but the blacksmith signaled that he had counted all of the materials and found them satisfactory, so I had to stay quiet and let her squeeze my fingertip, draining away all of my valuable good luck.

Asuna and I watched over the sign as Nezha the blacksmith turned and reached for a portable furnace set next to his work anvil. The number of ingots it could melt at once was very low, meaning he couldn’t create large polearms or suits of metal armor, but it did the job for a simple street side business.

On the furnace's pop-up menu, he switched it from creation mode to strengthening mode, then set the type of augmentation. Nezha then tossed Asuna's materials into the furnace.

Four thin sheets of steel and twenty sharp stingers turned red and burst into flame in seconds, and soon after, the furnace began burning with a blue flame that signified the accuracy stat. All preparations complete, he removed the Wind Fleuret from its sheath and set it down within the brazier-shaped furnace.

The blue flames enveloped the slender blade, and the entire weapon was soon glowing azure.

Nezha quickly pulled the rapier out and laid it on top of the anvil, then gripped his hammer and held it high.

At that exact moment, something prickled the hairs on the back of my neck. It was the same sensation that I'd felt earlier that afternoon, when I decided to hold off on upgrading my Anneal Blade +6.

I opened my mouth, preparing to yell, "Stop!" But the blacksmith's hammer had already made its first strike.

*Clang! Clang!* The rhythmic pounding echoed throughout the square, orange sparks flying from the anvil. Once the upgrade attempt had begun, there was no stopping it. Well, I could grab his hand and force him to stop, but that only guaranteed that it would end in failure. All I could do now was watch and pray for success.

There was no foundation for my panic; it was a manifestation of my inner worrywart, nothing more. All the materials had been invested, the blacksmith represented better odds than an NPC, and we had two players' worth of luck bonus. We couldn't possibly fail.

I held my breath and watched the hammer go up and down.

Unlike with weapon creation, only ten strikes were necessary to upgrade a weapon. Six, seven–the hammer smacked the blue rapier at a steady pace. Eight, nine...ten.

The process complete, the rapier flashed brightly atop the anvil. There's no way it can fail I repeated to myself, gritting my teeth. The result was far, far worse than my bad premonition could possibly have signaled.

With a fragile, even beautiful tinkling, the Wind Fleuret +4 crumbled into dust from tip to hilt.

* * *

No one reacted for several seconds, from Asuna, the sword's owner; to me, the emotional and luck bonus support; to Nezha the blacksmith, the one who had caused it to happen.

Perhaps if a single passerby had been watching, they might have broken the ice. But for now, all the three of us could do was stare emptily at the anvil. As the third party in this transaction, perhaps I was best suited to smooth over the situation, but my mind was occupied by one massive question, not to mention the sheer shock of what had transpired. *This is ridiculous!*

The phrase echoed through my head over and over. All I could do was stare.

It was impossible. As far as I knew, there were only three negative outcomes of a weapon upgrade attempt in *SAO*: the materials disappeared and left the already-upgraded values where they were, the properties of the bonus got switched around, or the upgraded value decreased by one.

In the worst case scenario, Asuna's Wind Fleuret +4 should have decreased to +3, and that was, at most, a 5-percent chance. Of course, 5 percent put it well within the bounds of possibility for an MMO...but it should never result in the weapon just completely disintegrating.

But there was no getting around the brutal truth that the glittering shards of silver scattered about the anvil had been, until a few seconds ago, Asuna's precious sword.

I watched the entire series of events. Asuna removed the rapier from her waist and handed it to Nezha. He picked it up in his left hand and manipulated the portable furnace with his right, then pulled the sword from its scabbard and put it in the fire. Nothing in that sequence of events was out of the ordinary.

As we watched in silence, the scattered pieces around the furnace melted into the air. The weapon-damaging skills that some monsters used might melt, warp, or chip a blade but leave it in a repairable state. A weapon that had shattered into pieces represented the loss of all durability and was irretrievably gone. Asuna's sword wasn't just visibly destroyed–it had been deleted from the *SAO* server's database entirely.

As the final fragment disappeared, it was Nezha the blacksmith who moved first.

He threw aside his hammer and bolted to his feet, bowing to the both of us over and over, his parted bowl cut waving in the air. He squeaked and wailed, trying to trap the screams in his throat.

"I...I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'll return all of your money...I'm so, so sorry!"

Asuna couldn't react to the repeated apologies. She just stood there, her eyes wide. I eventually stepped forward to speak.

"Look, um...before we talk about money, I want an explanation. I thought that weapon destruction wasn't a possible failure state of upgrading in *SAO*. How did this happen?"

Nezha stopped bobbing his head and finally looked up. The angle of his hanging eyebrows was extreme, his round, honest face screwed up in agony. It was as though his face had been designed as an expression pure apology. I felt extremely uncomfortable, but there was no way I could tell him that it was "all right." Instead, I tried to keep my voice as calm as humanly possible.

“Listen...I played in the beta test, and I remember the player manual they put on the official website. It said there were three possible penalties for failure: lost materials, property alteration, and property downgrade. That’s a fact.”

As a publically outed “beater,” I had no desire to bring up the beta. But this was not the time for self-preservation. I stopped there and waited for his answer.

Nezha was no longer bowing and scraping, but his eyesight was fixed firmly downward as he spoke, his voice trembling.

“Um...I think that maybe...they added a fourth penalty type for the launch. This happened to me...once before. I’m sure the probability is very low, though...”

“.....”

I had no argument left. If Nezha’s claim was false, then he’d somehow just accomplished a destruction penalty that did not exist in the game. That was far more unlikely.

“I see,” I murmured lifelessly. Nezha looked up and mumbled again.

“Um...I’m truly sorry. I don’t know how to repay you. I’d give you a replacement Wind Fleuret, but I don’t have any in stock. I’d hate to leave you without an option, so I can give you an Iron Rapier, if you don’t mind the downgrade...”

That wasn’t my choice to make. I looked to my left at the still silent Asuna.

Her face was almost entirely hidden by the gray hood, but I could still make out delicate chill moving side to side. I answered Nezha for her.

“No, thanks...We’ll make do on our own.”

With all due credit to Nezha’s offer, the Iron Rapier was sold as far back as the Town of Beginnings on the first floor, and wasn’t going to be very helpful up here.

If he couldn't give us a Wind Fleuret, the Guard's Rapier that was one rank below it was the only thing that came close to a replacement.

Besides, the risks of failing in an augmentation attempt should fall upon the shoulders of the client, not the blacksmith carrying the job out. Nezha's shop sign had a list of the success rates for various jobs at his current skill level. Being unlucky enough to hit the 5-percent chance–probably less than 1 percent for this worst of all outcomes–of failure was our problem, not his. Even Rufiol, he of the Anneal Blade +0 disaster this afternoon, had eventually given in and accepted his fate.

Nezha's shoulders slumped even lower at my answer. He murmured, "I see. Well...at least let me return your fee..."

He moved his hand to start the transfer, but I cut him off. "It's all right, you did your best. You don't need to do this. There are some crafters who say it doesn't matter how you do it as long as you hit the weapon enough times, so they just whack away..."

I didn't mean anything by that, but for some reason, he shrunk his head even farther. His arms were held as close to his body as possible, trembling fiercely. Another apology shuddered out.

"...I'm sorry...!!"

After that painful, heart-rending apology, there was nothing more to say.

I took a step back, nodded to Asuna, and started to move her away.

It was only at this moment that I noticed that her hand, which had been pinching my index finger originally, was now fully gripping my palm.

I pulled the silent Asuna away from the blacksmith and out the northern entrance of the plaza.

There were few NPC shops or restaurants along this stretch, only a number of buildings of unknown utility–perhaps they would be available as player homes after some later point in the game. At any rate, the street was nearly empty.

We walked on and on, the only points of interest the occasional signboard of an inn. There was no destination, not even a general direction. The cold grip of her hand on mine told me of how heavily the loss of her favorite sword was weighing on her, and the shock of its abrupt disappearance after a single upgrade attempt. But I had no idea how to react or console her. My meager life experience as a middle-school gamer left me unprepared for this. All I knew was that pulling my hand free and running away was the worst possible choice. I wanted to pray for the advent of some sudden salvation, but the good luck bonus icon below my HP bar was long gone.

First, let's stop walking.

I noticed a wider space ahead with a bench and started off for it.

After a few dozen steps, I stopped and awkwardly said, "L-look, here's a bench."

The voice inside my head screamed at me for being an idiot, but Asuna sensed my intentions and turned to sit down without a word. She was still holding my hand, so I automatically took a spot beside her.

After a few seconds, her fingers eased up and left my own to land on the wooden slats of the bench.

I had to say something, but the more I thought, the tighter my throat shrank. How could I be the same person who had stood before dozens of powerful warriors and proclaimed myself a beater? And not that just that. I was the one who had spoken first when I originally found Asuna deep within the first-floor labyrinth, wearing a much harder expression than she was now.

Sure, it had been an emotionless admonishment about overkill, but there was no reason I could say something then and couldn't now. None at all.

".....Um, so," I finally began. Fortunately, the words seemed to form themselves after that point. "It's a real shame about the Wind Fleuret. But once we reach the next town after Marome, they sell a weapon that's even a bit better. It's not cheap, of course...but we manage it together. I'll help you save up..."

If mana points existed in this world, it would have cost me every last one of mine to get those words out of my mouth. Asuna responded so quietly that I could barely hear her, even at this close range.

"...But..." The word melted into the night air as quickly as it had appeared. "But that sword...that sword was my only..."

Something in her voice, some emotional resonance, pulled my gaze directly to her face. Two clear drops ran down her cheeks, glowing with a pale light under her hood.

It wasn't as though I'd never seen a girl crying up close. But the source of those tears was always my little sister Suguha, and almost all of the instances had occurred years ago, in my kindergarten and early grade-school years.

The last time I'd seen her cry was three months before I fell prisoner to *SAO*. She'd lost at the prefectural kendo tournament and cried in the corner of our backyard. I had no words to console her, only a bag from the convenience store with ice pops, the kind you sucked from a plastic wrapper. I broke one in two and stuck one of the halves in her hand.

In gaming terms, my proficiency in the Reacting to Crying Girls skill was barely above zero, if I'd even unlocked that skill in the first place. I had to compliment myself on even having the guts to stay there rather than run off.

On the other hand, an objective look showed me in a very pathetic light: frozen still and dumbfounded, watching the tears streak down Asuna's cheeks one after the other. I ought to speak or move, but I had no ice pops in my inventory, and I wasn't ready to speak to her when I wasn't entirely sure what she was crying about.

I understood the shock of seeing her favorite weapon crumble to pieces before her eyes, of course. If my Anneal Blade suddenly vanished, I'd probably get tears in my eyes as well.

But in all honesty, I didn't peg Asuna as the type to form a deep attachment to her weapon, to see it as an extension of herself and talk to it soothingly as she oiled it...That was my category, if anything.

Asuna seemed like the opposite case. She would see a sword as simply one element of battle power out or several. If she looted a slightly stronger sword from a dead monster, she'd toss aside the one she'd been using without a second thought. The first time I met her, she had a bundle of starting rapiers that she'd bought in town, throwing each one away when it was no longer of any use.

It had only been a week since then. What had changed Asuna's way of thinking 180 degrees in just seven days?

...No.

No matter the reason, there was no use wondering about it now. She was shedding tears over her partner, the blade she'd used for seven whole days. I could understand her sorrow. What else was there to think about?

"...It's a real shame," I murmured. Asuna's back shivered. She seemed even more doll-like than ever.

"But listen," I continued. "I know this might sound cold, but if you want to keep fighting on the front lines to help beat this damn game, you're going to have to keep getting new equipment. Even if that had worked, your Wind Fleuret would be useless by the end of the third floor. I'll have to replace my own Anneal Blade at the first town on the fourth floor. That's just what MMOs–what RPGs are like."

I had no idea if this was actually comforting her, but it was the best I could do.

Asuna did not react for several moments after I finished speaking. Finally, a few weak words trickled out from her hood.

"I...I can't take that." Her right hand clenched lightly atop her leather skirt. "I always thought my sword was just a tool...a bunch of polygonal data. I thought that only my skill and determination mattered here. But the first time I tried out that Wind Fleuret you chose for me...I'm ashamed to admit I was blown away. It was as light as a feather and seemed to home in right on the spot I wanted to hit...as if the sword was helping me, out of its own will..."

Her cheeks trembled, and a fleeting smile crossed her lips. For some reason, this seemed like the most beautiful expression I had seen Asuna make yet.

"I thought, *I'll be fine as long as I have her. I'd have her by my side forever*. I told myself, even if the upgrading fails, I'll never get rid of her. I'd take great care of her, for all the swords I wasted before this...I promised..."

Fresh tears dripped onto her skirt and vanished. When things disappeared in this world, they left no trace behind. Swords, monsters...even players.

Asuna quietly shook her head and whispered, her voice barely audible.

“If what you say is true, and I have to keep switching to weapons...then I don’t want to go upward. I feel so bad. We fight together, survive together...I can’t bear just throwing it away...”

Something in Asuna’s words brought back a memory of entirely different scene.

A child’s bicycle with a black frame. Twenty-inch tires, a six-gear shifter. I picked it out myself on the day I entered elementary school. I treasured that junior mountain bike than any child would. I put air in the tires once a week. If it rained, I wiped it off and oiled the moving parts. Perhaps borrowing Dad’s bike care chemicals to waterproof the frame was going a bit overboard.

Thanks to all of that, the bike was still sparkling like new after three years, but that was the root of my predicament. Once I outgrew the bike, my parents said they would buy me a new one with twenty-four inch wheels. But rather than allowing me to keep my precious first bike in storage, they said I had to give it away to a younger boy in the neighborhood.

I was in third grade at the time, and I fought back like I’d never fought before. I claimed that I’d rather not have a new bike at all. I even asked the fellow at the neighborhood bike shop to store it away in secret for me.

Instead, he told me that he’d transfer the soul of my machine to the new bike. Before my stunned eyes, he took out a hexagonal wrench and removed the bolt from the right crank. This bolt was the most important out of all of them, he claimed. So as long as he stuck that on the new bike, its soul would come over with it.

Today, it was obviously a bunch of baloney meant to quiet a child, but that first bolt and another one from my second bike were currently sitting in the saddlebag of my twenty-six-incher.

With this past experience in mind, I told Asuna, “There’s a way to keep a sword’s soul with you when the time comes to say goodbye.”

“...Huh...?”

She raised her just a bit. I help up two fingers.

“Two ways, in fact. For one, you can melt down your inferior sword into ingots, then use them as the base for a new sword. The other way is to just keep your old sword in storage. There are downsides to both cases, but I think there’s merit to them.”

“Downsides, how?”

“Well, when it comes to turning them into ingots, you have to have strong willpower when you loot good weapons from monsters. If you switch over to a looted sword, that ends the bloodline there. You could always melt down the loot and mix them together for your new sword, but it’ll cost a lot. On the other hand, if you keep it in your inventory, that’s using up valuable space. Again, your willpower will be tested when you’re deep in a dungeon and you run out of space for items. In either case, the more practical players will probably laugh and wonder why you’d bother...”

Asuna was looking down, deep in thought, then raised her head and brushed a tear away with her fingertip.

“And do you plan to do either of those...”

“I’m on the ingot side, but I should explain...I do it for my armor and accessories too, not just my sword.”

“...Oh.”

She nodded and smiled again. This one was a bit clearer than the last, but the air of sadness still had not vanished from her face.

“If only I could have kept the shattered pieces so they could be melted down,” she murmured. I could only nod in agreement. The first sword that Asuna had felt a connection to was gone forever without a trace. There was no way to bring that soul back…

I was lost in silence. Eventually, she spoke again.

“...Thanks.”

“Huh...?”

She didn't repeat herself. Asuna stretched her legs forward and stood up from the bench.

"It's getting really late. Let's head back to the inn. Will you help me buy a new sword tomorrow?"

"Um...yeah, of course," I nodded, hastily getting to my feet.

"I'll, uh, see you to your inn."

She shook her head at my offer. "I don't feel like walking back to Marome. I'll stay in Urbus tonight. There's a place just over there." I turned and saw that indeed, there was a gently glowing sign that said Inn. Upon further reflection, it would be too dangerous to walk through the wilderness between towns without a decent weapon. Leaving her here for tonight and coming back tomorrow to help her buy a weapon seemed like a much better idea.

I walked her to the door or the inn about twenty yards away and watched her check in, waving as she walked up the stairs. I didn't have the guts to stay at the same inn with her.

Besides, there was one other thing for me to do tonight.

I headed south back down the street toward the eastern plaza of Urbus.

# *5*

When the bell rang out eight o'clock, the tireless clanging of the hammer finally stopped.

I rushed through the gate of the east plaza of Urbus and made my way across the open space, avoiding the lighting radius of the streetlamps. I reached the line of leafy trees planted at the eastern border and put my back against a thick trunk.

In my player menu, there was a shortcut icon at the bottom of the main screen that corresponded to my Hiding skill, which was set in my third skill slot A small indicator appeared in the bottom of the view reading 70 percent–my avatar was now 70 percent blended into the tree at my back. A number of variables affected that number: my armor type and color, surrounding terrain and brightness, and of course, my own movement.

I was risking the exposure of my "evil beater" persona by wearing the Coat of Midnight, but the black leather coat's bonus to hiding would be of more use than my usual disguise. The area was dark and there was no one else nearby, maximizing my stealth efficiency. The number seventy wasn't great because my Hiding proficiency was still low. Increasing that skill was a long and boring process, so I wouldn't max it out for quite a long time.

Even at starter status, the skill was powerful enough to work easily against the mobs on the first two floors (as long as they were sight-dependent), but that number felt awfully low against a human being. A perceptive player like Asuna would probably see through 70-percent camouflage without any trouble. On top of that, hiding in town was considered poor manners, so getting revealed by other players could lead to trouble, especially if it was one of the recent "game police" type who took it upon themselves to uphold proper etiquette.

It wasn't my style to sneak around and spy on people, but this was a special circumstance. I was about to embark on my very first attempted trail of another player.

As I waited behind the tree, a player-crafter closed up his shop at the eight o'clock bell. It was Nezha, of course, the first blacksmith in Aincrad to sell his wares in the street.

He extinguished the fire in his portable forge and put away the ingots in his leather sack. His hammer and other smithing tools went into a special box. He folded up the sign and set it down on an empty spot on the carpet, then straightened out his display of weapons for sale.

Once every object related to his business had been neatly packed on top of the six-by-six-foot carpet, Nezha tapped the corner to bring up a menu screen and hit the "store" button. The carpet rolled up by itself, absorbing the countless items on top of it. In just a few seconds, the only thing left was a thin, round tube.

The short blacksmith picked it up easily and hoisted it over his shoulder. The magic Vendor's Carpet was always the same weight, no matter what items were locked within its internal storage. When I first learned about that, visions of unlimited space for potions, food, and loot in the dungeon floated through my head, but reality was not so generous. The carpet only worked in towns and villages. On top of that, it couldn't be fit into a player's inventory, meaning that the four-foot-long, four-inch-thick rolled carpet had to be carried everywhere by hand.

Normally, this item bore little use for non-merchants or crafters, but some enterprising people found unexpected avenues for fun. Back in the beta, there was a brief period where pranksters used the "items on carpet cannot be moved by anyone but the owner" rule to block off major streets with large furniture, sowing chaos left and right. This was addressed very quickly in a patch that limited use of the carpets to the corners of public spaces over a certain size.

Magic carpet on his shoulder, Nezha heaved a sigh of exhaustion and started plodding off, head down, toward the south gate of the square.

I waited for him to be at least twenty yards away, then pulled away from the tree. My hide rate indicator dropped rapidly until it hit zero, at which point the hiding icon disappeared entirely. I still stayed in the shadows, trying to cut down on any unnatural footsteps as I trailed him.

Of course, I was not following Nezha home in order to confront him about his failure to improve Asuna's weapon, or to threaten him away from prying eyes.

If anything, it was that feeling of wrongness.

As far as I knew, he had failed twice–no, five times–to upgrade a weapon over the course of the day. The destruction of Asuna's Wind Fleuret and the four consecutive tries on Rufiol's Anneal Blade, rendering it a "spent" +0. Of course, this outcome was possible from a statistical standpoint, but it struck me as a little to easy. Or a little to *hard*, depending on how you looked at it.

The only reason I'd visited the eastern plaza of Urbus in disguise in the first place was because I heard rumors in Marome that an excellent blacksmith had set up shop there. I packed up enough materials to boost my chances to 80 percent and was pondering whether to bump up sharpness or durability when I happened across the scene with Rufiol. I would have gone up to him directly afterward to have my weapon upgraded if I hadn't happened to run into Asuna at that precise moment.

Would my weapon have failed just like theirs? I couldn't help but feel that way, although I had no proof backing my suspicion.

If rumors of his skill had reached Marome, then Nezha's chances of success must be noteworthy. There was no way to test for myself, but his numbers must surely be better than the standard NPC blacksmith.

However, if he was somehow able to *fulfill a condition that guaranteed failure*, there must be some hidden reason behind it. It was possible that some malicious trick lurked behind this series of events.

This was all personal conjecture–perhaps even paranoid suspicion. Even if there was some kind of knack to what he was doing, I couldn't possibly guess how it worked. He had put Asuna's materials into the forge, heated her sword in it, then moved it to the anvil and hammered it–all before my eyes. It was all according to the book, nothing out of place. Besides, what could he possibly stand to gain by downgrading or destroying other players' weapons...?

Even as the possibilities swirled through my mind, I kept a bead on his back as he walked. Fortunately, he seemed to have no idea he was being followed and didn't spin around or force me to come to an awkward halt. On the other hand, I had no experience trailing another player, so a cold sweat ran down my back the entire time. If I got my Hiding skill higher, I could follow at a much greater distance without trouble, but at this point, the only experience I could rely on was spy movies.

I darted stylishly from shadow to shadow for seven or eight minutes, a certain impossible theme song ringing in my ears. Nezha plodded his way almost to the town walls at the southeast edge of Urbus before stopping at a faintly glowing sign. I stuck close to a tree lining the street to watch. Anyone witnessing this scene would find it extremely suspicious, but I didn't realize that until later.

The sign clearly said BAR in the light of the oil lamps. Again, I felt a strange suspicion. Nothing was out of place for a hard-working player to settle down with a drink after a long day of work...but something was wrong with Nezha's demeanor. He wasn't racing up the steps in anticipation of a nice cold mug of ale. In fact, he stood still outside the swinging door for over ten seconds, as though hesitating to even go inside.

*He's not going to turn around, is he*? I thought in a panic. Nezha adjusted the roll of carpet on his shoulder, then set a heavy foot forward. He put out his hand and slowly pushed the door open. His small form disappeared into the bar, the door swinging shut behind him. It only took two seconds–but even at my distance, I could faintly hear what came from inside.

There were a great cheer and applause, and a man's voice shouting, "Welcome back, Nezuo!"

"...?!" I sucked in a deep breath.

This was not what I expected. My spur-of-the-moment decision to trail Nezha was only meant to find where he was spending the night. Instead, he went to a bar at the edge of town where at least four or five people knew him personally. What could it mean?

After a brief hesitation, I left the shadows and raced up to the swinging door of the inn. Unfortunately, even with my back to the wall next to the door, I could hear nothing from inside. By nature, all closed doors in the game were soundproof; the only way to hear through them was the Eavesdropping skill. Even the swinging door, with its wide-open gaps above and below, was no exception.

I swore under my breath. There were only two options here, and entering the store disguised as a customer was not one of them. I could either give up and leave, or...

I steeled my nerves and reached out to gently push open the door a crack. Five degrees, ten–there was no sound from within. Once I got it to fifteen degrees, the man's voice from earlier floated up to my ears.

"Might as well chug it, Nezuo! None of the beer in this place actually gets you drunk, anyway!"

In contrast to his statement, he seemed to be plenty drunk already.

It was true that you could drink gallons of beer in Aincrad and never take in a single molecule of alcohol, but it was fairly common for players to get "drunk" on the atmosphere of the situation. The excited cheers and yelling that floated through the doorway were no different from what could be heard from groups of college students walking through a nightlife district after a few rounds of drinks in the real world.

I strained my ears and heard a hesitant "okay" in a quiet voice, chattering died down for a moment, only to be followed by an excited cheer and applause.

Based on the evidence, I assumed that the five or so people waiting for Nezha in the bar were close friends of his. This came as a surprise to me, as in my experience, crafters tended to be lone wolves–or in Nezha's case, sheep. I was curious as to the player builds of his friends, but there was no way to identify their play-styles based on voices alone.

I decided to take another risk and peer over the top of the swinging door for just an instant. I blinked quickly, like the shutter of a camera, then pulled my head back.

As I suspected, there was only the one group in the cramped interior. It I'd tried to waltz in pretending to be a customer, I would have drawn all of their notice. There were six of them sitting at the table in the far right corner. Nezha had his back to the door. The other five all appeared to be fighters clad in leather and metal armor.

This wasn't anything out of the ordinary. It was completely normal for MMORPG guilds to have fighters and crafters mingling naturally. The official guild feature of *SAO* wasn't unlocked until a particular quest on the third floor was beaten, but many players had gathered into organized groups already. In fact, solo players like Asuna and me were already in the minority.

Having a crafter or merchant in the group made equipment maintenance and selling loot much easier for the adventurers, and the crafters could get the materials they needed for cheap, if not free altogether. So there was nothing wrong with Nezha having friends who happened to be fighters...but the lump of suspicion in my chest did not show any signs of disappearing.

Just as I was trying to figure out the exact nature of what troubled me, one of the friends who was just entertained by Nezha's downing of an entire mug of beer said something that caught my ear.

"...So, Nezuo, how was business today?"

"Oh...um, I sold twelve new weapons...and got a few visitors for repairs and upgrades."

"Hey, that's a new record!"

"We'll have to scrape together some more ingots!" two other men shouted, and there was another round of applause. It was the very picture of a close-knit band of friends with a network of support. I didn't recognize any of the other five, which meant they probably weren't front-line players, but they might rise to that rank soon with a talented blacksmith on their side.

Maybe I really am being paranoid...

I felt ashamed. If Nezha really was using some kind of bug or trick to intentionally downgrade or destroy other players' weapons, it would have to be planned and supported by his entire group, and I just couldn't see a logical motive for them doing that.

With considerable pain, I recalled that Diavel the Knight, leader of the first-floor boss raid party, had gone through a secondary negotiator in an attempt to buy my Anneal Blade +6. Only in his final moment of life did I learn that he'd done it to deny me the Last Attack bonus on the boss.

In hindsight, I did score that very last hit on the kobold lord and earned his unique Coat of Midnight for the feat, so there was a kind of logic behind Diavel's attempt to lower my attack output.

But on the other hand, Nezha and his friends were not even on the front line. They weren't in any position to be concerned with the boss's LA bonus. There was no benefit to ruining Rufiol and Asuna's weapons.

I guess it really was just a series of coincidences...

I sighed silently to myself and was preparing to let go of the swinging door and allow it to close, when something stopped my hand.

"...I don't think we can keep doing it," came the sound of Nezha's frail voice.

The men carousing inside the bar suddenly went quiet. After a short silence, the first man responded, but in a whisper too quiet for me to make out. I pushed the door in again, moving the angle to twenty degrees.

"–ust fine, you're doing great."

"That's right, Nezuo. Nobody's talkin' about it in the least."

I held my breath. I had a feeling they were talking about the failed upgrade attempts, and focused all of my attention on the words. Nezha protested against their apparent encouragement.

"It's too dangerous to keep up. Besides, we've already made back our cost..."

"Are you kidding? We're just getting started. We've got to rake it in so we can catch up with the top players while we're still on the second floor!"

Made back the cost? Rake it in...? I leaned forward, unsure of what they were discussing.

Was it really unrelated to the upgrade failures?

After all, Nezha should have lost money buying back Rufiol's spent sword, and he only made the standard fee in Asuna's case, nothing more. How could that make him any money...?

No...No, there was a way. Perhaps I was looking at this from the wrong viewpoint...

Just then, a suspicious voice arose from the bar.

"...Huh? Hey, look at the door."

I closed the door as smoothly as I could and immediately jumped off to the right, flattening myself against a nearby tree and employing my Hiding skill. Almost immediately, the swinging door burst outward.

The face that emerged was of the leader-like man who'd been sitting next to Nezha and egging him on. He wore banded armor that made his already hefty form look even more rotund, and a bascinet helm with a pointed top. While the overall effect was humorous, the sharp look in his eyes was anything but. His thick eyebrows squinted, scanning the surroundings of the bar.

The moment his eyes passed over the spot where I was hiding, the indicator dropped to 60 percent. I wasn't in any physical danger within the safe zone of town, but I didn't want to alarm them–I was just starting to peel back the curtain on Nezha and his five friends' plot. The tools at my disposal were poor, but all I needed were answers.

My hide rate dropped continuously while his eyesight was fixed on the tree. If it got down below 40 percent, he would certainly detect something wrong with the tree's outline. I kept an eye on the number and slowly, slowly tried to rotate around to the back of the trunk. Inch by inch I crawled, trying to keep the fluctuating value from creeping below 50.

Once I was around the backside of the tree, he must have looked away, because the hide rate jumped back up to 70. A few seconds later, I heard the creaking of the door swinging shut, and dashed through an alley until I was a block away from the pub.

"Whew..."

I leaned against the wall and wiped away a cold virtual sweat with the sleeve of my coat. If this was what Argo the Rat did every day in her profession, then I was in no mood to follow that line of work.

I might have made a poor spy, but at least I'd succeeded at my mission. I found Nezha's base of operations–probably the second floor of that bar–discovered the existence of his partners, and even gained a little fragment of information about the mysterious trick behind the failed weapon upgrades.

That was assuming that the snippets of conversation I overheard were in fact related to such a trick. If it was true, they were somehow profiting from forcing other players' upgrade attempts to fail. Profiting enough that they were even staying in the black by buying a spent +0 weapon at twice the going rate.

If that was possible...was someone else paying them money to intentionally sabotage the orders of specific players? That was hard to imagine. It was such a roundabout way to get back at someone, and there was no guarantee that the target would ever come to Nezha for his services. If this mystery client was going to spend money, they'd be much better served following Diavel's plan and contacting the target directly.

But if that wasn't the case, what other explanation could there be?

The thoughts raced through my head so fast, I could practically feel the steam shooting from my ears. The scene from less than an hour ago replayed in my head.

Nezha taking the Wind Fleuret from Asuna. Accepting the materials and putting them into the forge with his right hand, sword in the left. When the forge was full of blue light, he pulled the sword from the scabbard and laid the blade into the fire. Once infused with that blue light, he moved it to the anvil and struck it with his hammer. A few seconds after that, the sword shone like a death scream, then shattered and disappeared.

I watched the entire string of events. I couldn't believe that there had been some sleight of hand there. If I had to assume that deception had occurred, perhaps it was in the materials. But there was no way to mimic the bright blue light that flashed out of the forge–

"Ah..."

Wait. Wait...I thought I had seen the entire thing, but there was one moment. One spot, invisible to both me and Asuna...

That meant it wasn't the materials that he'd falsified.

"Gah...!!"

My mind jumped over several logical steps and landed at a conclusion. I grunted and slapped my main menu open, checking the time readout in the corner.

The digital clock said 8:23.

There's still time!

My right hand flashed to the instant message tab, but I reconsidered and brought it down, closing the window. It was impossible to describe what I was about to do in text. I had to state it directly in person.

"There's still enough time to pull this off!" I said aloud this time, bursting out of the alley way and racing north down the street.

The route that took eight minutes to cross during my attempt at spywork was less than three in a blazing sprint. I reached the familiar eastern plaza of Urbus but shot straight through it to the north without stopping and back into the streets of the town. Past the bench where Asuna had cried, then a hard turn shortly after. I burst through the door of her inn and raced upstairs, taking three steps at a time.

Thanking my lucky stars that I'd asked for her room number, I charged over to room 207 and slammed on the door as if to break it down.

It followed the same physical rules as any other closed door, but several seconds after knocking, it would allow voices to pass through.

“Asuna, it’s me! I’m coming in!”

I turned the knob without waiting for an answer and practically pushed the door down. Instantly, my eyes met those of a figure who leapt from the bed inside like a shot. Her hazel eyes were wide, and she was sucking air through her lips when I slammed the door shut.

“Eeyaaaa!!”

The scream was completely smothered by the closed door. I felt almost like a criminal–what I did was practically a crime–but this was all for Asuna’s sake.

She clenched her fists over her chest and continued to scream. She wearing a white sleeveless shirt on top, and some kind of poofy, rounded shorts below. This didn’t seem to be underwear, so I gauged that it was safe to walk over and grab her shoulder.

“Asuna, this is an ultra-emergency! There’s no time, just do as I say!”

She finally stopped screaming, but I could see in her face that she was simply *deciding* whether to resume screaming even louder, or to start attacking me directly. But there was truly no time for anything else–I had to get to the point immediately. “First, call up your window and set it to visible mode! Now!”

“Wha...wha...?”

“Just do it!”

I grabbed her hand, still clutched in front of her chest, and moved it in the appropriate motion, pushing out two of her fingers and sliding them through the air. A purple window materialized with a soothing sound effect, but only looked like a blank, flat board to me. I guided her finger over to the general location of the button that would display the contents of the window to other players.

“But, um, I...I thought I locked the door...” she murmured. I answered without thinking.

“You’re still partnered up with me, remember? The default setting on inn room doors is to allow guild and party members in.”

“Wh...what? Why didn’t you tell me that–”

I swiveled around next to the fencer, peering at the now-visible contents of her main menu. It was arranged just like mine but with a floral pattern skin selected. For a moment, I was surprised, remembering that my own window was still in the default setting, then scolded myself for getting distracted.

The right side of the window featured a familiar equipment mannequin. It was mostly empty, as she was not wearing any armor. I scrolled past the something-or-other camisole and whoopty-doo petticoat to look at the right-hand cell: no item selected. Meaning that Asuna had not equipped a new weapon since giving her Wind Fleuret to Nezha. “Okay, first condition complete! Now the time...” The clock in the bottom right corner read 20:28, despite how fast I’d run,

Asuna and I had returned to Urbus after our Windwasp hunt at 19:00. We had finished eating dinner around 19:30. Immediately afterward, we had moved to the plaza and asked Nezha to her weapon...meaning there was only a minute or two to spare!

“Crap, we gotta make this quick. Just hit the buttons as I tell you. Move to the storage tab!”

“Uh...um, okay...”

Asuna faithfully followed my order, perhaps so confused by the sudden turn of events that she had no time to resist.

“Next, the settings button...search button...now there should be one that says Manipulate Storage...”

Her slender finger flashed over the buttons, diving deeper and deeper into the menu. After three or four selections, we finally reached the button I wanted.

"There, that's it! MATERIALIZE ALL ITEMS! Hit it!!" I screamed. She hit the tiny button, bringing up a YES/NO prompt. At maximum volume,

"Yesssss!!"

Click.

Asuna muttered to herself as she hit the button. "Hmm...mm? Materialize all items...? When it says all items...does it mean...?"

With the satisfied smile of a man who did his job, I replied, "All, everything, the entire shebang, the whole nine yards."

The next moment, all of the rows of text in Asuna's inventory vanished.

And then–

*Clunkclankthudwhamwhudclinkflopflipfwapswishfwuf* came a cavalcade of sound from hard and heavy to light and airy. Every single item contained in Asuna's player inventory had been materialized into the game world to fall onto the floor in a great messy pile.

"Wha...what...wha-wha-wha?!"

The mess' owner couldn't contain her shock at what had just happened, but I knew it was coming–this was what I'd run all way from the other side of Urbus to do. The only hitch was my slight underestimation of the volume of her inventory–just a mere two or three times what I'd expected.

The amount of space for storage varied depending on the player's strength, Expansion skill, and the presence of certain magical items. For a moment, I marveled at how Asuna, a low-level player with no Expansion skill and an agility-heavy fencer build, could have packed so many items in. The answer soon became apparent.

Capacity was determined not by volume, but weight. Metal armor and weapons, liquids such as potions, and stacks of coins put a major dent in item storage.

On the other hand, lighter items such as leather armor and accessories, rolls of bread, and parchment scrolls could be packed in there with ease. The majority of Asuna's inventory was taken up with those loose effects, big and small...meaning clothes and undergarments.

I stared at the four-foot-tall pile of stuff, feeling slightly self-conscious. The heavier items had fallen out first, so the metal equipment was on the bottom, followed by leather goods, then various clothes and finally, resting on top, a small mound of frilly white and pink underwear. What was the point of keeping so many of them? Avatars in Aincrad had no bodily waste functions, and the only thing that took durability damage in battle was the outer armor. You only truly needed one set of underwear. I had three, for battle, everyday use, and sleeping, but that was probably on the high side for a male player.

And yet.

I couldn't stop here. If my suspicion was correct, and we'd hit the command in time, it would be here...piled at the bottom of this mountain.

"Pardon me!" I said, ever the gentleman, and started shoving the piles of cloth out of the way. I heard a trembling voice over my shoulder.



Um, excuse me...Do you have a death wish? Are you one of those people who dream of dying in battle...?"

"No way," I said in all honesty, still scrabbling through the pile.

I got through the clothes to the leather armor, gloves, and small boxes, and finally reached the metal layer at the bottom.

With great effort, I pushed them aside and got to the very last section of the little mountain. The heaviest item Asuna owned–though light as a feather compared to what I had slung over my back–a single rapier.

Wind Fleuret +4.

I grabbed the green scabbard and lifted it out of the pile, then turned around to face Asuna. Her eyes had the look of one deciding a suitable means of execution, but they grew wide when she saw the sword she'd thought was gone forever. Her lips trembling, a tiny little squeak escaped her throat.

".....No way..."

# *6*

Later–much, much later–Asuna smiled angelically and told me that if I hadn't found her sword at that moment, she would have thrown me through the window of the inn.

In truth, I hadn't spared a single thought for what might have happened if my suspicion had been false. It wasn't confidence in my logic as much as it was panic, knowing that there were only seconds to spare before the time limit hit. So when I barged into Asuna's room without asking, forced her to open her window, and yelled at her to press those buttons and eject all of her stuff, I wasn't acting in my right mind. At least, I hoped I wasn't.

Order finally returned out of chaos three minutes after I held out the Wind Fleuret +4 to Asuna.

All of the many items spilled over the inn room floor were back in item storage. Asuna sat on the side of her bed, dressed in her normal tunic and leather skirt. She silently cradled her precious, miraculous weapon in her hands, her face a mixture of emotion–probably caught between the polar extremes of joy and rage.

As for me, I sat in a guest chair in the corner of the room, breaking into a cold sweat as I reflected on what I'd actually just done. There was no time to explain anything until I got her to press that MATERIALIZE ALL ITEMS button several layers deep in the menu. But once that step was complete, there was no more time limit, which meant I had no reason to search for the sword myself.

Perhaps I had gone a step too far by ransacking the crown of delicate snow that was Asuna's undergarments on top of the pile. On the other hand, I still couldn't fathom why she would need so many of them. If my hazy memory served, there were enough of them that she could change every day for two weeks without reusing any. Yes, they were light enough that you could store a nearly infinite supply, but those weren't cheap.

The silky smooth ones cost quite a pretty penny at the NPC shops, and surely that kind of scratch was better spent raising one of the properties of her armor–

"So, I've done some self-examination," came a voice from the other side of the room. I hurriedly sat up straight.

"Y-yes?"

"If the anger I'm feeling represents ninety-nine g, then my joy is a hundred g. Therefore, the one leftover g represents my gratitude to you," she said, light flashing in her eyes.

"So, um...why is it represented in g?" I asked.

"Isn't it obvious? If my anger had been the greater force, I would have pummeled you to make up the difference."

"Oh...so you're talking about g as in gravity, not gold? I...guess that makes sense."

"I'm glad you understand. Now, will you please explain? Why was my supposedly shattered sword left in my inventory...and why did you barge into my room like this?"

"O-o-of course. But it's a very long story. And I'm not even sure exactly how it works, myself..."

"I don't mind. We've got all night."

And the fencer, her beloved sword back in hand, finally cracked a menacing smile.

I went down to the check-in counter and bought a small bottle of herb wine and a mysterious bag of assorted nuts. When I got back to the door to room 207, I politely knocked and waited for an answer before opening.

Once the wine was poured, we shared a toast to the recovery of her fleuret, though there was still a dangerous air to her attitude.

I moistened my tongue with a sip of the sweetly sour nonalcoholic wine and decided that getting right to the point was in my best interest.

“A minute ago, you asked why your shattered sword was in your item storage.”

“Yes...and?”

“That was the hitch...the trick...the centerpiece of an upgrading scam.”

Her eyes narrowed at the clear direction of the conversation after that last word. She nodded silently, pressing me onward.

“It might be faster to show you than to explain,” I said, swinging my hand to call up my own menu and hitting the visibility button. I touched the top and bottom of the screen and flipped it around until I got it to an angle that was easily visible to the both of us, then pointed out a spot.

“Right here. See how the right-hand cell in my equipment mannequin has an icon for my Anneal Blade plus six?” Her hazel eyes glanced at the sword grip poking out over my back, and she nodded. I reached backward and removed the entire scabbard, which was affixed to my coat, and dropped it to the floor with a heavy thud. A few seconds later, the icon on my menu was grayed out.

“This indicates that the equipped weapon has been dropped. It happens if you fumble the weapon in battle, or an enemy uses a disarm attack on you.”

“Yes, I’m familiar. It can be quite alarming if you’re not used to it.”

“You can always stay calm and pick it up once you evade the next attack, but it’s tricky at first. The Swamp Kobold Trappers in the middle of the first floor were the first to use disarms. I hear there were quite a few casualties around then...”

“In Argo’s strategy guide, she warns not to attempt to pick it up right away...When I had to fight them, I dropped a spare rapier first, almost like a good luck charm.”

“Ahh...that’s a good idea. You can do that if you’ve got plenty of the same weapon.”

I was impressed. It wasn’t the kind of idea you expected a new player to implement...although maybe her lack of experience gave her greater creativity in tackling the game’s challenges.

“But I digress. If you don’t pick up the dropped weapon, it eventually goes into an Abandoned state, which gradually decreases its durability rating. Asuna, go ahead and pick up that sword.” She raised an eyebrow but dutifully stuck the Wind Fleuret onto her waist attachment point and bent down to my scabbard. Asuna lifted the simple one-handed longsword with both hands, grunting, “This is heavy. Am I doing it right?”

“That’s good. Now take a look.” I poked at my window, still floating above the table. The cell with my Anneal Blade grayed out had gone empty the moment Asuna picked it up.

“In combat, this is called weapon-snatching. Unlike a disarm attack, snatching enemies don’t show up until much later in the game. For a solo player, that can be deadly. There’s a weapon skill modification called Quick Change that you’ll have to get before you fight them...but that’s not the point.”

I cleared my throat and attempted to get back on topic again. “You can give your equipped weapon to your friends, even when you’re not in battle. Instead of a ‘snatch’ that’s called a ‘handover.’ So anyway...if someone picks up your weapon or you hand it to them, the weapon cell in your menu goes blank. Including situations like the one where you gave the blacksmith your Wind Fleuret.”

“...!”

She must have seen where I was taking this at last. Her eyes went wide, then filled with a sharp light.

“But here’s the thing. The equipment cell might be empty, as though you’re not equipping anything...but that Anneal Blade’s equipper info hasn’t been deleted. And the equipment rights are protected much more tightly than simple ownership rights. For example, if I take an unequipped weapon out of storage and give it to you, my ownership of that item disappears in just three hundred seconds–that’s five minutes. As soon as it goes into someone else’s inventory, it is owned by that player. But the length of ownership for an equipped item is far longer. It won’t be overwritten until either three thousand six hundred seconds have passed, or the original owner equips a different weapon in that slot.”

Asuna’s eyelashes dropped as she mulled over this information. Her response caught me by surprise.

“Meaning that if your main weapon gets snatched and you do a

Quick Change to a backup weapon, you should put it in your left hand rather than your right?”

“Eh...?”

I was momentarily taken aback, but I eventually understood her point. It was indeed true that if a monster stole the players weapon and they put a backup in the same hand, the equipment right of the stolen weapon would vanish. If the player had to retreat for survival and couldn’t immediately kill the monster to retrieve the weapon, the results could be disastrous. Once the player was back in the safe haven of town, there would be virtually no way to get it back.

“Ah, I see...Yes, that’s a good point. But it’s a lot harder to swing a sword with your non-dominant hand.” Even as I said it, though, I made a mental note to practice sword skills with my left hand.

“And one other thing. When you barged into my room and forced yourself a peek at my equipment mannequin, that’s what you were checking, yes? That I hadn’t equipped another weapon in its place. So if that was the very first condition...”

I nodded slowly as she stared directly into my eyes. “Yes, that’s right. The second condition was that it had to be within three thousand six hundred seconds of letting go: one hour. As long as those two conditions were fulfilled, we had a shot–one ultimate method of pulling back your equipment, no matter where it happened to be. Remember that you asked me how your supposedly shattered sword was in your item storage?”

“In reality, my sword wasn’t shattered, and it wasn’t in my inventory, either. So that’s why...” She took a deep breath and resumed glaring up at me. “And your last-ditch method of bringing back my sword was the MATERIALIZE ALL ITEMS command. And because there was not a second to spare, you had no choice but to invade my room and force me to flip through my menu. Is that what you’re claiming?”

“Umm, I think that sums it up...I guess?” I trailed upward at the end in an attempt to sound innocent, but Asuna only snorted, unconvinced. Fortunately, she seemed more interested in getting to the bottom of the situation than holding me responsible. She handed back the Anneal Blade and changed topics.

“So anyway...why was that materialize button buried so deep in the menus? It’s almost like they don’t want you to use it...And why does it have to be *all* of the items? If you could just select the items that aren’t on hand already, there would be no need for that pile of my und...my other equipment.”

“You just said the answer yourself. They want to make it harder to use.”

“Huh...? Why would they do that?” she asked, shapely eyebrows squinting in suspicion. I shrugged.

“It’s basically a last-resort option. If you drop your weapon, leave it behind, or lose it to a monster and have to run away, those are all the player’s fault. In a sense, you should probably just accept your loss and move on. But they probably decided that it would make the game a bit too hard, so they added this option in case of an emergency. They just made it less convenient so you can’t use it like a crutch. Hence, it’s stuck under a pile of menus and you can’t just pick and choose what to materialize. Boy, you should hear this story from the beta test...”

I grabbed a star-shaped nut from the dish on the table, flipped it into the air, and caught it in my mouth. Even this trifling action was affected by agility, the brightness of the surroundings, and the hidden influence of luck.

“So, the first snatching mob appears in the fifth-floor labyrinth. A guy loses his main weapon and doesn’t have a backup for a quick change. So he turns tail and manages to escape the monster. However, he doesn’t feel like trekking all the way back to a safe room. Instead, he finds a spot he thinks is safe, then does the MATERIALIZE ALL ITEMS trick. Sure enough, in the pile is his stolen sword. The problem is, the snatch mobs aren’t the only guys to watch out for there...there are also, looting mobs! All these little gremlins come pouring out of the woodwork and grab everything off the floor, stuff it into their sacks, and scamper off.”

“That does sound awful...But couldn’t he just find an actual safe haven and do that same trick again to get it all back?”

“That’s the thing. Most looter mobs have the Robbing skill, which immediately rewrites the items ownership. Fortunately for him, nobody else had been to that area yet, so he crawled the entire dungeon to hunt down all the gremlins and managed to get his stuff back by hand. I tell you, it brought tears to my eyes...”

I flipped another nut into the air, sighing in exasperation.

“That story sounded like there was some personal experience behind it,” Asuna noted wryly. My internal panic system must have kicked in, because the nut landed in my hair rather than my mouth. I shook my head and tried to look aggrieved. “It’s...just a story I heard, nothing more. Anyways, where was I...”

“You were explaining how the MATERIALIZE ALL command is useful but has its limitations, she sighed,” and reached out to pluck the star-shaped nut off my head. Before I could ask what she planned to do with it, she flicked it with a finger directly into the open crack of my mouth. I crunched it with my teeth, marveling at her accuracy.

“At any rate, now I understand the logic of how my sword came back,” she said, taking a sip of her wine. When the glass left her lips, that dangerous light was back in her eyes. “But that’s only half of the story, isn’t it? After all, I saw the sword I gave the blacksmith shatter on top of that anvil. If the Wind Fleuret that came back was my original sword...what sword was it that broke into pieces?”

A very good question. I nodded slowly, trying to piece together the fragments of information and suspicion into an easily explainable form.

“To be honest, I don’t have a full explanation of that train of logic. What I can say for certain is this: At some point from the time you handed your Wind Fleuret to Nezha, to the time it shattered into pieces, he switched it out for another item of the same type. At first, I suspected that he’d found a way to intentionally destroy other players’ weapons, but that wasn’t it. He’s the first blacksmith in Aincrad, and the first upgrade scammer...”

Upgrade scams, enchantment scams, forging scams, refinement scams.

The name varied depending on the title of the game, but it was a classic, traditional means of deception that had been around since the early days of MMORPGs,

The method was simple. The blacksmith (or other type of crafter) put out a sign advertising his weapon upgrade service, charged his clients expensive fees, then embezzled the funds by pretending the upgrade attempt destroyed the item. In games where weapon destruction wasn't one of the failure states, they had a variety of other options to fool clients, such as replacing the item with the same one a single level lower, or just keeping the crafting materials for themselves without attempting to upgrade.

In the original pre-full-dive games played on a monitor, the player's weapon was completely lost from view as soon as they handed it over to the blacksmith. The entire process happened on the other player's screen, so there was no means of telling whether any fraud had taken place.

Leaning too heavily on such deception would quickly lead to the kind of bad reputation that kept any more players from using their services, but rare gear in MMOs could be incredibly valuable. Even the occasional bit of trickery might reap huge benefits. There were almost no bad rumors about Nezha, so the rate of his fraud must still be quite low. However...

"The problem is, this is the world's first VRMMO. Even after handing over the weapon, we can see it. It can't be easy to switch it out–in fact, it must be incredibly hard."

My long explanation finally concluded, Asuna frowned and murmured, "I see...I thought I kept the sword in my sights the entire time after giving it to him. The blacksmith held my sword in his left hand and did all of the controls and hammering with his right. He couldn't possibly have opened a window, put my sword into storage, and brought out a fake."

"I absolutely agree. He had a number of pre-forged weapons on his store display, but the best ones were Iron Rapiers, and none were Wind Fleurets. So be couldn't have just switched them like that. However..."

"However?"

“However, there was a brief point where my eyes left the sword.

“The time when Nezha tossed your materials into the forge and it started glowing blue. It was three seconds at the most. I wanted to make sure that he used all of the materials we spent so much time collecting...”

I trailed off. Asuna’s hazel eyes went wide.

“Oh! I...I think I was watching the furnace the entire time... but only because I thought the blue flames were pretty.”

“Um, okay. Anyway, we weren’t watching the sword in his hand while it happened. I think anyone would be staring at the flames. The materials burn and melt and change into the color of the property, so it’s a big show to those watching. I think he might be using that as misdirection, the way a magician would...”

“So he switched out the sword in the three seconds we were watching the forge? Without opening his menu?” She started to shake her head in disbelief but stopped just as quickly. “On the other hand, that’s the only moment it could have happened. He must have pulled off some kind of trick in those three seconds. I can’t imagine what it is, but if we can just witness him doing the same thing again...”

“Agreed. Then we can watch his left hand the entire time. But that’ll be difficult ...”

“Why?”

“Nezha must have noticed by now that the Wind Fleuret plus four he supposedly stole is gone. Meaning that the player he tricked–in this case, you–utilized the MATERIALIZE ALL command, because you probably saw through his deception. He’ll be spooked, and either not set up his shop for a while, or if he does, he won’t attempt that scam again.”

“...I see. He didn’t seem to be that excited about it to begin with...In fact...”

Asuna paused, but I knew exactly what she was about to say. In fact, he didn't seem like the kind of person to commit fraud.

"Yeah...I agree," I said. She glanced over at me and smiled shyly. I went on, my voice quiet. "We'll lay low and gather information. Both on the switch-out trick and on Nezha himself. Either way, we've got to get back to the front line tomorrow."

"Yes, you're right. From what I heard in Marome today, they're going to challenge the last field boss tomorrow morning, then enter the labyrinth in the afternoon."

"Wow, that's quick...Who's leading the battle force?"

"Kibaou and someone else...named Lind."

I recognized the first name she said, of course, but the second was unfamiliar.

"Lind was in Diavel's party during the first-floor boss fight. He used a scimitar." Her words seemed to be coming from miles away.

The instant the words hit my brain, I heard his tearful scream in my ears. *Why did you abandon Diavel to die?!*

"Oh...him."

"Yes. It seems like he took over in Diavel's place. He even dyed his hair blue and his armor silver, just like Diavel's."

I shut my eyes, envisioning the dead knight in his blue-and-silver finery.

"Between Kibaou and the other guy as leader, I'm guessing they won't save a space for me in the boss fight. Will you participate, Asuna?" I asked her. She was a solo player, just like me. Her long brown hair shook left and right.

“I took part in the scouting of the boss, but it was just a big bull. Didn’t seem like it needed too many, as long as they were well coordinated. Plus they started getting really bossy about who would get the last attack bonus, so I told them straight out that I wouldn’t be in the battle.”

I grimaced to myself; I could practically see the scene floating before my eyes.

“I see. You’re right; that boss isn’t anything to worry about. The real problem is the floor boss...”

“It’s a problem?” she asked, to the point. I grimaced again. “Of course. I mean, it stands to reason that the second-floor boss would be tougher than the first.”

“Oh...right. Of course.”

“His attack isn’t all that high, but he uses special skills on you. It’s possible to practice a defensive strategy on the auto-generating mobs in the labyrinth, but...”

If Diavel–secretly a beta tester–was still alive, he’d make sure that information made it to all the other front-line players. But without him, the only reliable source of beta info was Argo’s strategy guides, and that was a problem. As we learned in that terrible battle four days ago, the boss’s attack patterns could have been altered since the beta.

“Let’s ignore the blacksmith for now and spend tomorrow on practice,” she suggested.

I nodded automatically, lost in thought. “Yeah, good idea...”

“South gate of Urbus, seven o’clock tomorrow morning?”

“Sounds good...”

“And make sure you get a full night’s sleep tonight. If you’re late, you go back to a full hundred g.”

“Yeah, I know–wait, what?”

I tuned back in to the conversation and raised my head. Across the table from me, her normal spirits recovered with the return of her sword, Asuna set her morning alarm.

# *7*

Scattered in the wilderness of each floor of Aincrad were unique named monsters called “field bosses” that acted as gatekeepers of sorts along the route to the labyrinth.

Field bosses were always found in tight areas adjacent to sheer cliffs or river rapids, natural chokepoints that couldn’t be passed without defeating the guardian. What this meant, in practice, was that while each floor might be circular in shape, it was broadly divided into multiple discrete zones.

The second floor was split into a wide northern area and a cramped southern area, which meant there was only one field boss on the entire floor. It was named the Bullbous Bow, a combination of “bull” and “bulbous bow,” the protruding bulb at the front of many large ships. As the name suggested, it was a massive bull with a bulging, rounded forehead that it used for powerful and deadly charging attacks.

I watched the distant, twelve-foot-tall monster, paw at the ground with powerful legs and lower its four-horned head. “Since his fur is black and brown, does that make him a Black Wagyu?”

I wondered.

“You’ll have to ask them to share any meat it drops in order to find out,” Asuna responded, disinterested.

“Hmm...”

I actually gave that option serious thought. Many of the animal-type monsters in Aincrad dropped food items like “so-and-so meat” or “so-and-so eggs” that could actually be cooked up into meals. The flavors varied far more widely than the offerings available from the NPC restaurants in town–meaning that some of them tasted much better than what you could buy, while some were much worse.

The Trembling Oxen that roamed the second floor had such unfortunately tough meat that you could chew it forever without softening it up. On the other hand, the Trembling Cows weren't bad at all. Therefore, you'd expect the boss of all the cattle on the level would taste better than any of them. I rued my lack of foresight in not testing that theory during the beta.

"Forget about that. They're starting."

Her elbow snapped me out of my reverie, and I concentrated on the sight below. I, Kirito the swordsman, and my companion for the last two days, Asuna the fencer, were in a position atop one of the mesas that looked down on the field boss's lair. Some low trees growing right at the lip of the mountaintop made for excellent camouflage that kept us hidden from those below.

The basin was about two hundred yards long and fifty yards wide. The Bullbous Bow stood its ground, ready to turn aggro at any moment, as a neatly organized attack party inched toward it. The group was made of two full parties and three reserves–fifteen players in total.

It didn't seem that impressive in comparison to the forty-some warriors that tackled the kobold lord on the first floor, but field bosses were, generally designed so that even a single party of a decent level could emerge triumphant. Fifteen was more than enough to do the job, but that depended on their knowledge of the boss's patterns and their ability to work seamlessly as a team.

"Hmm?" I muttered to myself, watching the raid closely.

Asuna whispered, "Which ones are the tanks, and which ones are the attackers?"

"I was just noticing that...Both parties look awfully similar from up here."

The Bullbous Bow was the size of a small mountain, but its attack pattern was quite simple: charge, turn, charge, turn.

With two parties, the orthodox strategy said that the tanks should hold its attention and absorb its charges, while the attackers did all the damage at its flanks.

But from what I could tell, there was no real difference in the equipment of the two parties of six. Both had roughly the same number of heavily armored tanks and lightly armored attackers.

I continued to squint down at them from our height of three hundred yards and eventually noticed a subtle detail.

“Wait...look at the cloth they’re wearing under their armor.”

“Huh? Oh, you’re right. Each party has its own color.”

It was hard to tell beneath all the metal and leather armor, but Asuna was correct. The right-hand part wore royal blue doublets, and the six on the left were clad in mass green.

If the colors were meant for easy visual identification of either party, it made more sense to wear brightly colored sashes on top of the armor. Also, blue and green weren’t the most distinct opposing colors. No, those were not temporary colors arranged for this fight–they were probably the original uniform designs of their parties.

“They didn’t reform into new parties based on battle roles,” Asuna noted, her voice hard. “The blue party on the right is Lind’s–they’re all Diavel’s friends. And the green party on the left is Kibaou’s. I suppose they weren’t the type to get along...”

“Maybe they just figure that they’ll perform better if each team is made up of familiar faces.”

“But that will make coordination across the parties worse. It seems obvious that against that boss, you want one team to pull aggro from him, and another to deal all the damage.”

“You’re absolutely right,” I agreed. The slowly advancing twelve below had finally breached the boss’s reaction zone.

"*Bullmrooooh!!*" it roared. Even the ground up here seemed to shake. White steam puffed out of the Bullbous Bow's nostrils, and it lowered its four horns and began to charge.

There were still nearly five hundred feet between the boss and the raid party, which left plenty of time to react before it reached them, but that was easy to say from my safe vantage point. Those fighters down on the ground no doubt felt like the bull would reach them in no time at all.

After a pause long enough to make me feel nervous, the two leaders finally issued commands to their companions. I couldn't make out their voices from here, but the orders were obvious. On either side, heavily armored fighters stepped forward, raised their shields, and roared.

That was not bluster but a skill called Howl that increased the target's aggression and made it focus attacks on the user. At least, it was supposed to.

"Wait a second...why are they *both* trying to pull aggro?" I wondered. The Bullbous Bow looked back and forth between the two in indecision, then ultimately settled on the blue party. The fighter who had howled and one other shield user inched forward and stood their ground, crouching.

Two seconds later, *thwam!* The giant bull collided with the two fighters. If their defense was not up to the task, they'd be thrown into the air and take massive damage, but fortunately they managed to stay on their feet, despite being knocked ten yards backward. The other four members of Lind's party descended on the beast, unleashing sword skills on its open flanks.

"I feel nervous watching them...but it seems like they might manage to win," Asuna murmured, unimpressed. I hesitantly agreed.

"Yeah, I guess. It's supposed to be beatable by a single party. But..."

Kibaou's green party was standing off to the side rather than joining the fray. In fact, the tank was still up front, tensing himself for another Howl once the cooldown timer expired.

"Seems to me like there was no point to forming a raid party in the first place. They're more like parties competing for the same mob. Maybe it's working for now, but who can say if that will last?" I sighed.

At this point, I began to wonder about the three reserve members who weren't in the equal camps of Lind and Kibaou's men. Were they aligned with either side? I took my eyes off the fight and examined the backup adventurers standing far to the rear.

"Hng–?!" I grunted. Asuna gave me a questioning look, but I didn't have the presence of mind to answer her. I leaned forward. Standing at the center of the three was a burly swordsman. He wore dark banded armor and a pointed bascinet helm that look like an onion sprout–the leader of the five men I saw last night after trailing Nezha to the bar.

His outfit was humorous, but I would never forget the sharpness in his eyes when he noticed me listening in on them. It seemed likely that the other two reserve members with him were also in Nezha's party.

"What are they doing here?!" I muttered. Asuna shot me another suspicious look. I pointed down at the rear of the battleground. "Do you know the names of those three guys on standby? Particularly the middle one in the bascinet."

"Bassinet...? Aren't those baby cribs?"

"Huh? N-no, I mean the guy in the pointy helmet with the visor that looks like a duckbill. That's called a bascinet helm..."

"Oh. Maybe they're spelled differently. You know, it's really irritating that being stuck in this world means I can't open a dictionary. Maybe someone will make one."

“I think it would be nearly impossible to craft an E-J dictionary, writing by hand. On the other hand, Argo did say that some folks were looking to create a simple game encyclopedia of sorts. Wait, why are we talking about this?”

I pulled us back to the topic at hand by pointing down at the rear of the basin. “That round guy in the middle of the reserve members. Ever seen him before?”

“I have,” she said easily. I froze for a moment, then turned on the fencer, the questions flowing out of me.

“W-when did you see him? Where? Who is he?”

“Yesterday morning, exactly where he’s standing now. He was at the Bullbous Bow scouting session. Remember how I told you about that? His name is...Orlando, I think...”

“Orlando...? First a knight, now a paladin,” I muttered to myself. Asuna raised a questioning eyebrow. I added a quick explanation as the three men continued to survey the battle before them. “Orlando was the name of a knight who served King Charlemagne of France and bore the legendary blade Durendal. He was an invincible hero.”

“A knight...I see.”

Something in her voice made me curious, and it was my turn to cast her a quizzical look. She extended a slender finger to point to the short warrior with the two-handed sword to the right of the onion-headed paladin.

“When we did introductions, he called himself Beowulf. That’s another legendary hero, right? From England. And the skinny spearman on the other side was Cuchulainn. That name sounded familiar, too...”

“Ohh...Yes, that’s another legendary hero. I think he’s Celtic,” I added. Asuna shrugged her shoulders.

“Apparently they already decided on their guild name. I think it was Legend Braves.”

"...I see...Hmm...Hmmmmmmm!" I couldn't think of anything better to say.

A player was free to choose any name they wanted to attach to their MMO avatar–as long as it didn't violate the game's terms of service, that is. If they wanted to name their guild Legend Braves and pretend they were all legendary heroes, that was their right. In fact, it was probably fairly rare for names like those to go unclaimed in an MMO.

But I couldn't shake the feeling that it was a much harder sell in a VRMMO, where you literally became your avatar. That took guts. But...what if their choice of names was a statement of intent?

Perhaps they meant to grow into the heroes their names suggested. You couldn't just write that off as youthful exuberance. Orlando, Beowulf, and Cuchulainn were currently standing just behind the front line of player progress in *SAO*. In terms of pure distance, they were two hundred yards closer than I was.

Before I could ask the question, Asuna said, "They just showed up in Marome yesterday morning, where all the frontier players were gathering, and asked to take part. Lind checked out their stats and said their levels and skill proficiency were a bit below average for the group, but their equipment was good and powered up. So instead of putting them in the main force, he let them join as reserve fighters. Part of the reason I didn't join in is because they showed up to round out the group."

"I see...That makes sense." I nodded slowly and gazed down at the three heroes, feeling conflicted.

I hadn't explained to Asuna yet that they were Nezha's friends. Based on this new information, he must be another member of the Legend Braves. Perhaps the reason he had the name Nezha and not another knight or hero was because he was a crafter, not a fighter.

This also led me to a new conjecture.

One that explained how three men that neither of us had seen until a day ago, who hadn't taken part in the first-floor boss raid, could be right here with the other front-line warriors...

"Bullmrrrroooh!!"

Another ferocious roar redirected my attention to the far end of the basin. For the second time, I was stunned.

Now both Lind and Kibaou's parties, a confusing mishmash of blue and green, were tangled together in one unorganized mass. They'd been squabbling over who was drawing the Bullbous Bow's aggro and collided in an attempt to get into the proper position to defend his charge. The shield-carrying tanks had lost their balance–it took quite a long time for heavy warriors to recover from a Tumble status–and no one was able to defend.

"Watch out!" Asuna hissed.

"Attackers, dash outta the way!" I shouted. They couldn't hear me, of course, but Kibaou and Lind finally raised their hands and the eight light warriors darted left and right.

But they weren't quite fast enough. The raging ox passed right through the line of shield-bearing warriors, who were only just now getting back to their feet, and caught two swordsmen with his four horns. With a vicious toss of his head, they flew high into the air.

Asuna and I both gasped. I had a momentary premonition of both men shattering into glass, either in midair or when they crashed to earth. Fortunately, perhaps because of the soft grass, they recovered and got their feet after only a few bounces. They had trouble keeping their footing, however; they'd suffered quite a mental shock.

Lind swung his arm again–probably the signal for retreat and potion recovery–and at the same moment, Kibaou looked back to the rear of the battleground and waved his sword.

As the bull dashed back to the far end of the basin, the two wounded members retreated, and two of the reserves stepped forward to take their place: Orlando the bascinet-wearing paladin and Beowulf with his two-handed sword. They ran forward a few yards, then stopped in apparent hesitation. The pair unleashed roars so loud that even Asuna and I could hear them, and resumed dashing toward the battle.

Orlando reached behind his round shield and pulled out a longsword of black iron that was unmistakable to me–the very same rare Anneal Blade that was only available as a reward for a quest on the first floor. The paladin brandished his sword high, glowing with the light of a highly upgraded weapon, and valiantly charged at the massive boss.

* * *

The Bullbous Bow, the only field boss on the second floor of Aincrad, exploded into a small mountains worth of polygonal shards about twenty-five minutes after the start of the battle.

Based on the scale, level, and gear of the raid party, that was quite a long time, but it was easy to say that from my vantage point, safely removed from danger. And above all, there was one new, ironclad rule that never existed in the beta: Even a single fatality was an unacceptable result.

In that sense, the three from the guild (technically, still just a team) Legend Braves performed admirably. Compared to the first-string members who had fallen into the yellow danger zone, their movements were a bit awkward, but they upheld their duty well.

“Well, that was nerve-wracking...but at least it all ended safely,” Asuna said. She took two steps back from the lip of the flat mountaintop, sat down on a rock, and looked up at me, crossing her legs.

“Well? What is it about those heroes?”

I nervously looked back down at the far end of the basin, where the fifteen combatants were gathered together and raising a victorious cheer. However, there seemed to be differing degrees of celebration–Lind's royal-blue team and the colorless Braves were truly rejoicing, while Kibaou's moss-green team was a bit muted. Probably because it was Lind's scimitar, Pale Edge, that had scored the last attack on the boss. I couldn't tell how much it was powered up at this distance, but the strength of its glow suggested that a considerable amount of work had gone into it.

I fixed Orlando the paladin with another gaze before I turned back to Asuna. He was standing boldly right next to Lind, sword raised in the air.

Asuna's cape hood was off, and the morning light shone dazzingly in her light brown eyes. It was as though they stared right through my avatar and into my soul. There was no use hiding anything at this point. I summoned my courage and began to explain.

"...Nezha the blacksmith is one of the Legend Braves."

"Wha...? So...you mean..."

I nodded. "Nezha's upgrading fraud was done at the order of their leader, Orlando. I think. Do you know exactly when Nezha's Smith Shop first set up in Urbus?"

"Umm...I think it was the very day that the second floor was opened."

"So it's only been a week. But even bilking one or two high-powered Wind Fleurets or Anneal Blades a day would make them a ton of money. At least ten–no, twenty times what you'd make in a day from farming monsters. Remember what you said earlier? Orlando's group was weak, but they made up for it with good gear. Weapon skills have to be raised through experience in battle, but weapon upgrades..."

"...are easy if you've got the money. So that's what's going on," she said, her voice hard. Asuna bolted to her feet and glared down at the battlefield, then turned to the path that wound down the mountainside. I rushed to stop her.

"W-wait, hang on! I know how you feel, but we have no proof yet."

"So you're just going to let them get away with it?"

"If we don't at least figure out how exactly they're performing the trick, people will accuse us of defamation. There are no GMs in this world, but you don't want the majority of people treating you like an enemy. It's too late for me, but I'd hate to see you slapped with the beater tag and–"

A finger jabbed right at my face stopped me mid-sentence.

"We're about to go adventuring in the dungeon together, and that's what you're trying to protect me from? Anyway, your point is taken. If we don't have any proof or explanation, the only thing we're producing is empty accusations..."

She pulled her finger back to her chin and looked down, her voice softening. "I'll try to come up with some ideas of my own.

Something that won't just expose how their weapon-switching trick works but also give us solid proof."

There was a different kind of fire blazing in the fencer's eyes now, and I had no choice but to agree with her.

Once the victorious battle party turned and headed back to Marome to restock supplies, we descended the mountain and stealthily raced across the narrow basin. The right to set the first footprint on the southern side of the second floor belonged to Lind or Kibaou, but we didn't have the patience to sit around and wait for them. Plus, they seemed competitive enough that they'd waste time arguing about who got there first.

The far end of the basin turned into a narrow, winding canyon. The walls were nearly vertical and so sheer that not a single handhold could be seen. There was no climbing them.

We took a breather in the empty gorge after our sprint, then headed through the exit to a brand-new sight–well, for Asuna, at least.

The flattop mountains with two or three levels were the same, but the gentle grasslands of the northern area were replaced by thick jungle. Vines and ivy crawled up the sides of the mountains, and clumps of fog here and there made visibility poor.

There was one thing clearly visible through all of the fog, however, looming over everything on the far side of the jungle. The labyrinth tower of the second floor stretched all three hundred feet to the bottom of the floor above. It seemed thinner than the first-floor labyrinth, but it was still a good eight hundred feet across. It was really more like a coliseum than a tower.

We stared at the shape in the distance until Asuna finally broke the silence.

"...What's that?"

I suspected that she was referring to the two protuberances extending from the upper half of the tower.

"Bull horns."

"B-bull?"

"When we get closer, you'll see a huge relief of a bull on the side of the tower. It's kind of the theme of the second floor."

"I just figured that giant one they killed was the last of the ox things..."

"Not even close. The Moo-Moo Kingdom is only getting started. The ones ahead are certainly beefy, but they don't look very tasty." I coughed to hide my embarrassment at that terrible pun and clapped my hands to switch gears. "Well, let's get going. The last village is about half a mile to the southeast, and beyond that is the labyrinth. We could do all the quests in the village and still reach the tower before noon. It's actually safer and quicker to take the detour to the left, rather than going straight through the forest."

Just as I was getting ready to start hiking, I noticed that Asuna was watching me with a strange expression.

"...What is it?"

"Nothing..." She coughed as well, then looked serious again. "This isn't meant to be sarcastic, it's an honest opinion."

"...Y-yes?"

"With all that knowledge, you're very handy to have around. Everyone should have one of you."

I had no idea how to respond to that comment. Asuna strode past me and turned her head.

"Come on, let's go. I want to get into that tower before Lind's group catches up."

# *8*

“Eek...no! Stay away!”

The beautiful girl’s eyes were wide with fear as a menacing silhouette plodded closer.

It sounded like a scene from a suspenseful horror film, but it would not be following the Hollywood template for much longer.

“I told you...to stay the hell away!” she roared, and dashed forward rather than backward. The large attacker reacted by waving its crude two-handed hammer, but her right hand shot forward like lightning before it could hit the target.

The rippling thrust caught the attacker directly on its exposed chest. Brilliant beams of light exploded outward, and the hammers progress slowed. Normally at this point, the player should dart backward and evade, but the girl plunged farther onward, pulling her rapier back and unleashing another attack. Two strikes hit the thick chest high and low, and the half-naked body writhed in pain.

“Brmooooh!!”

It leaned back and emitted a death cry, short horns and ring-pierced snout in clear profile. The massive body tipped backward, then stopped in mid-fall. The rippling muscles turned to hard glass and cracks trickled down the surface, emitting blue light until it finally exploded.

The combo was Linear and the two-strike Parallel Sting, and the creature was a Lesser Taurus Striker, a humanoid with the head of a bull. The fencer bent over, panting heavily, and turned to fix me with an angry look.

“That...was a bull!”

Two hours had passed since Asuna and I reached the second-floor labyrinth, the first players in Aincrad to set foot inside of it.

Kibaou and Lind's parties were probably down on the first level of the tower, gnashing their teeth over the ransacked chests they found, but if I had to be stuck with the "evil beater" role, I might as well reap the benefits. The initial locations of the treasure chests were about 80 percent unchanged from the beta, so I steered us from one to the other, with the occasional battle in between. Once we reached the second floors, we finally met one of the true masters of the labyrinth–a Taurus.

"Well, I guess they're closer to human than bull," I admitted. I had no idea why Asuna was so upset about this. "But this is pretty much what minotaurs are like in every MMO. So people call them 'bulls' or 'cows' as a nickname"

"...Minotaurs? Like from Greek mythology?"

The anger in her eyes subsided slightly. It seemed that she had a fondness for topics related to studying and learning. I wasn't particularly well versed in mythology, but my little sister had always liked the stories, and I had read them to her when she was young. I nodded and tried to recall some nuggets of information.

"Y-yeah, that's the kind. The legendary minotaur lived in a, dungeon on the island of Crete–they called it the *labyrinthos* in Greek. Anyway, the hero Theseus delves into the dungeon and kills the minotaur. It's a very game-like scenario, so the minotaur has been a classic RPG enemy type for years and years. In this game, they take out the "mino" part and just call them tauruses."

"Well, that makes sense. Isn't the mino in minotaur from King Minos of Crete?"

"Huh? So you're saying that calling it 'mino', for short would be incorrect?"

"Of course. After Minos died, he became the judge of the dead in Hades. So it's probably best that you don't call them that."

This discussion seemed to have taken the edge off of Asuna's anger, so I tried to take advantage of the opportunity.

"So, erm...Asuna-san, what was it about that mino–I mean, taurus, that didn't meet your approval...?"

She glared at me side-eyed. "It wasn't wearing, well...hardly anything at all! Just a tiny little scrap of cloth around the waist. It was practically sexual harassment! I wish the harassment code would kick in and send it to the prison of Blackiron Palace."

"Ah...I see."

The lower tauruses did indeed feature minimal clothing compared to the kobolds and goblins of the first floor. If you removed the bull head, they were basically nearly naked muscle men–quite a shock to (I assumed) a pampered rich girl from an all girls' school.

But that left one big problem. One of the chests I'd just opened had a set of armor called Mighty Straps of Leather. Not only did it have excellent defense, it also granted a strength boost. However, when equipped, it turned the wearer's torso naked except for a few strategically placed leather straps. No other clothes or armor could be worn over or under it. I figured the dungeon was a discreet enough place for it, and was planning to change the next time we found a safe room, but Asuna's reaction to the taurus causing me to reconsider. Still, it was a shame to waste such a great piece of loot. Should I offer it to her, or banish it for having no value to the party?

"Hey, Asuna...I got a strap-style armor with magical effects from a chest back there."

Suddenly, her eyes were three times as frosty as when she had dispatched the taurus.

"Yes, and?"

".....Um...Just thinking, not many people will look good in that. Maybe *he* would. You know, the tank leader from the first boss raid..."

"Agil? Yes, I suppose he would look the part. I met him at the reconnaissance mission for the Bullbous Bow yesterday."

I hid my surprise with an expert poker face, secretly relieved that I had avoided stepping on a landmine.

“O-oh really? But he wasn’t in the actual battle today, was he?”

“I don’t think he really gets along with Lind or Kibaou. But he did say he’ll be there for the floor boss, so you’ll see him there. Why don’t you give it to him then?”

“G-good idea. So anyway, do you think you can handle the mino...I mean, taurus’s Numbing Impact?”

“Oh, just call them minos already. I think I’ll be fine after another two or three encounters.”

“Okay. The boss’s numbing effect is way wider than the normal ones, but the timing works the exact same way. Anyway, shall we go to the next block?”

She nodded without a hint of fatigue, got to her feet, and started marching off toward the exit.

We defeated four more tauruses after that, but they were timed to pop at set intervals, so you couldn’t hunt tons of them even if you wanted. Our inventories were bulging with loot from the monsters and chests we’d run across, and luckily for us, we were able to leave the labyrinth without running into any other players.

At a safe zone near the entrance, I flipped open my map tab and found that we’d almost entirely filled in the blank space for the first two levels. If I turned that data into a scroll and sold it, I could make some pretty good cash, but the evil beater wasn’t enough of a merchant to make a business out of map data. I decided to offer it to Argo the Rat free of charge.

In a way, it didn’t seem fair. By tomorrow, Argo would be selling the latest strategy guide out of the nearest town, based on intel provided by me and the other former beta testers, and I’d have to spend five hundred cor for it. But I couldn’t complain too much.

She claimed that the funds she earned selling the guide to the top players went into producing a free version for middle-zone folks who were still catching up.

I switched tabs and shot her an instant message with the map data, then yawned widely and looked up at the sky. Looming over the overgrown jungle was not actual sky, but the bottom of the third floor. Yet the sunset rays coming from the outer perimeter of Aincrad cast that lid overhead in a brilliant, beautiful orange.

"Today is December ninth...a Friday. It's got to be winter on the other side by now," Asuna murmured. I gave that some thought.

"I read in some article that, depending on the floor, some places in Aincrad are actually modeled after the current weather conditions. Maybe if we climb a little bit higher, it'll really be winter."

"I don't know whether I want that or not. Oh, but..." She trailed off. I turned to look at her. Her lips were pursed, but I couldn't tell if she was feeling angry or shy. "It was just an idea. What if we reach a floor with proper seasons by Christmas, and it snows that day?"

"Oh...good point. It's already December. By Christmas would mean...fifteen days left. I sure hope we finish this floor by then..."

"Well, that's not very ambitious of you. I want to be through here within a week–no, five days. I'm exhausted from all these cows."

"Oxhausted?"

I couldn't help it. She stared at me blank-faced for several seconds, then her cheeks went bright red, and she stomped on my foot just softly enough not to cause damage. The fencer promptly turned and stormed off toward the town, forcing me to run after her.

We walked for twenty minutes down the stone path through the jungle, evading battles whenever we could, and only stopped for breath once we reached the limits of Taran, the village that would serve as base for the boss raid.

As I suspected, the main street was already packed with players. Once the Bullbous Bow that blocked the path was defeated, many who'd been staying in Marome made their way here, I carefully removed my black leather coat and covered half my face with the bandanna that Asuna loved to hate.

She couldn't complain, though; she was wearing her own hooded cape low over her face. Unfortunately, her reason and mine were almost polar opposites.

"So, um...I'm going to go meet Argo in a little bit," I muttered as we walked along the side of the street. Asuna's nod was barely visible beneath her hood.

"That's perfect. I have my own reason...my own business to do with her. I'll join you."

"A-ahh."

I had no reason whatsoever to be afraid of Asuna and Argo in the same place, which made it very strange that I felt a sudden panic. I tried to hide the shiver that ran down my back by showing her to the bar where we'd meet up.

But before I could, a sound hit my ears. I nearly missed it at first, so I focused and caught it directly.

The regular clanging of metal on metal. Not as melodious as a musical instrument–tough and hardy, like a tool.

"–!!"

Asuna and I shared a look and turned together in the direction of the sound: the eastern plaza of Taran. We proceeded quickly toward the plaza, stifling the urge to sprint. When we got there, our expectations were not betrayed.

A carpet was laid out with an array of metal weapons and a simple wooden sign. A portable forge and anvil. Seated on a folding chair, swinging away with his hammer, was a short blacksmith. It was Nezha. A member of the Legend Braves, and Aincrad's first upgrade scammer.

“The nerve he’s got. You saw through his deception yesterday, and instead of laying low, he’s setup in the latest town,” Asuna whispered with distaste from the shadow of a pillar. I was going to agree but changed my tack at the last second.

“Actually...Maybe the fact that he’s here in Taran is a sign of caution. I mean, he has no way of knowing that we’d be here at the same time. Maybe he’s just avoiding Urbus for now, since that’s where his fraud was discovered.”

“It doesn’t change the fact that he’s got nerve. I mean, if he’s going to change towns just to set up shop again...it means he’s still going to do his weapon-switching trick, right?”

She silently mouthed the words “weapon-switching,” then bit her lip. There was anger in her face, of course, but also a number of other emotions. My skill at reading expressions was near zero, so I had no way of knowing exactly what was on her mind. But it seemed to me that there was something like sadness shining in those eyes, within the darkness of her hood.

I turned to look back at Nezha, who was a good sixty feet away, and said, “He probably will. He’ll just be more careful about choosing his victims...”

“What do you mean?”

“If the Legend Braves are trying to leapfrog their way up to the ranks of the front-line players, they’re not going to target those players for their scam. There’s no point trying to reach that rank if no one else trusts you.”

But then I gave voice to a suspicion that had just popped into my head.

Unless Orlando and his friends intend to cut Nezha loose.

After all, they might be friends in the same party, but the guild feature hadn’t been unlocked in the game yet. There was no guild emblem showing up on his player cursor to identify him, no proof that he was connected to Orlando and Beowulf.

They might be forcing him to use his sleight of hand to bilk other players out of money and equipment, and if the word got out that he cheating customers, they could cut him out of the team and avoid any blowback.

“But...no...”

I dispelled that depressing thought with a sigh.

The camaraderie I had witnessed after trailing Nezha back to that bar did not signify a group that met in an online game for the first time. They seemed to have been friends since long before SAO came along.

So that theory was impossible...I didn’t want to believe it could happen.

I felt a gaze on my cheek and turned to see Asuna staring at me. If she was annoyed by my solitary muttering, she did not dig deeper for clarification.

“So I suppose that means they didn’t classify me as one of the top players, since they weren’t afraid of stealing my sword,” she said bitterly. I hastily tried to do some damage control.

“N-no, I didn’t mean it like that. When I say front-line players, I mean organized parties like the guys in green and blue earlier. You can’t tell someone’s like that unless they have some visual identifier–I bet Nezha didn’t think I was a top player, either. And who’s to say he wouldn’t be right?”

“Are you kidding? Aren’t you getting ready to fight the next floor boss?” Asuna shot back. I nodded out of habit but needed to clarify a bit.

“W-well, I’d like to...but if Lind or Kibaou say they don’t want me, that’s that. In fact, I feel like there’s a high probability of that happening...”

Her eyebrows shot up at an extremely dangerous angle; fortunately, they soon returned to normal. Her voice was troubled, but fairly calm.

“I don’t know about Lind, but Kibaou has to understand how crucial your strength and knowledge are in defeating the boss.”

“Huh? Really?”

“He sent me a message after we beat the kobold lord. It said, ‘ya really saved my ass today.’”

I tried not to smile at her faithful recreation of his Kansai accent, and decided I should join in. “Yeah, but he also said, ‘I still can’t get along with ya. I’m gonna do things my own way...’”

“‘...to beat this game.’ If that’s his ultimate goal, then he won’t let his petty pride get in the way of beating a floor boss.”

“Let’s hope not,” I muttered, unable to shake the image of the chaotic, frantic scene at the battle against the Bullbous Bow.

I had only talked once to the scimitar-wielding Lind, leader of the blue squad, at the end of the kobold lord battle–and it wasn’t a conversation as much as an excoriation. But I could easily imagine what he wanted. He sought to lead his fellow companions of Diavel and raise them into the greatest force in the game. His strength of will was apparent from his fixation on scoring the LA bonus, even against mid-bosses. I had no doubt that when we reached the third floor, he’d be the first to complete the guild establishment quest and start his own guild, decked out in Diavel’s silver and blue.

The more complicated matter was Kibaou, who I’d spoken to on several occasions.

There was no doubt that the engine driving him was a hatred of all former beta testers. He’d singled me out as an enemy immediately and supported Diavel for taking charge as a non-tester. He might have even hoped to join Diavel’s party ranks after that boss battle.

But even if Diavel had survived, that wish would not have come true. Diavel was secretly a former tester himself. It was possible that Kibaou realized it when he saw Diavel’s drive to seize the boss’s LA bonus.

And when the battle seemed on the verge of breaking down, it was I, with my "dirty" beta knowledge, who set things right again.

So Kibaou followed his determination not to rely on the help of testers, and started his own group, rather than seeking to join Lind and the other companions of Diavel. That team was the one wearing moss green. He must have put a lot of work into it, because they seemed to be about equal strength during the fight against the bull. But they would never see eye-to-eye.

The top two teams–let's just call them guilds–would clash and compete, thereby raising the pace and power of all the frontier players, but that competition would also wreak havoc during the raid battles, when teamwork was paramount. It was just a question of whether the good would outweigh the bad. And the next question was how Orlando and the Legend Braves would affect the makeup of the front line...

"Oh, speaking of which," I said to Asuna, who was watching the blacksmith work, "did Lind and Kibaou's parties have names yet?"

"Um...I'm not sure about Lind's. But I did hear a name for Kibaou's group." She grinned. "It's kind of crazy. The Aincrad Liberation Squad."

"W-wow..."

"In fact, they've got some grand plans."

"Is that so?"

"He said they were going to set up base in the Town of Beginnings on the first floor and aggressively canvass for more members out of the thousands still down there. He'll provide them with equipment, give them organized battle training, and hopefully increase the number of frontline players as a result."

"...I see. So that's what he means by his own way." I nodded, and pondered this idea.

It was a valid choice. The more players there were advancing the front line, the quicker we'd progress through the game.

But that also created a massive dilemma. An increased number of people also unavoidably increased the chance of fatalities...

“There’s something else that bothers me,” Asuna said suddenly. I blinked.

“Huh? What is it?”

“The term. Everyone has their own version: front-line players, frontier players, clearers. I get what they mean, but it’s all so arbitrary. Lind’s group were calling themselves ‘top players.’”

“Oh...yeah, it’s true. Argo likes to call them ‘front-runners’...Oh, crap!”

I hurriedly opened my window and checked the time. I was supposed to meet Argo the Rat in just two and a half minutes.

“Um, so...you’re coming too, Asuna?”

“Yes, I am. Why?” she responded coolly. I took one last look at the small blacksmith, swinging his hammer.

“Let’s make the visit with Argo as short as possible so we can watch Nezha a bit longer. Maybe we’ll figure out how his trick works.”

# *9*

"Hmmm" said Argo.

"It's not like that," I replied.

If the unspoken parts of those statements were to be filled in, they would look like this:

Hmmm. Kirito the former tester and Asuna the solo player are working as a team. How much can I sell that nugget for?

It's not like that. We're only temporarily traveling together, and not as a team or whatever.

Of course, denying the intent or definition did not change the fact that we were indeed working together. And that activity had begun when we met at the east plaza of Urbus the previous afternoon–twenty-seven continuous hours of companionship.

I couldn't blame her for assuming there was something deeper going on, but in my personal dictionary, a "party of two" and a "team" were very different things.

A party could come together spontaneously for the sake of a battle or two, then be disbanded and never return, but a proper team was designed to work together, each player fine-tuning their skills based on the presence of the other. This translated to choosing a particular equipment loadout and skillset that made up for the weaknesses of the other player so as to create attack combos that could take down difficult mobs–not so we could each attack our own targets (as Asuna and I did against the wasps).

It was only once you reached that step that I considered it to be a team, and by that definition, Asuna and I would probably never be a team. Even ignoring all of the beater baggage, Asuna put an incredible amount of craft and pride into her fencing skills, and I couldn't see her abandoning that fine-honed technique to prioritize her teamwork with me.

I had no idea how much of that explanation–more like excuse–got through, so I sat down across from Argo with an innocent look on my face, waited for my temporary party companion to sit down, then ordered a black ale. Asuna ordered a fruit cocktail cut with soda water, and the NPC waiter left for ten seconds before returning with the drinks. With that kind of speed, it felt as though they should dispense with the employee altogether and have the glasses just appear on the table, but I supposed the game's creator felt it was a necessary touch. NPC employees didn't cost real money, anyway.

We lifted our drinks, as did Argo, who shot me an encouraging look. I cleared my throat and announced, "Erm...to reaching the second-floor labyrinth!"

"Cheers!"

"...Cheers."

The enthusiasm was not quite shared by all, but at least we were on the same page. I drained half of my mug of beer–they called it ale in the game, but I didn't understand the difference. It was the same sour, bitter carbonated drink I remember tasting at my mother's permission in real life, but it was strangely satisfying after a long day of racing around the wilderness and dungeons. Though from what I understood, the adult players of *SAO* thought there was no reason for alcohol that didn't get you drunk.

In that sense, it seemed obvious that Argo, who gulped down her entire mug of foamy yellow liquid and exhaled with satisfaction, was probably another teenager who wasn't fixated on the alcohol part of the drink. But there was no way to be sure. In fact, it was nearly impossible to guess her age, even if there were no familiar whisker stripes painted on those cheeks.

Argo slammed her empty cup onto the table and immediately ordered another.

"Five days from the opening of the gate to reaching the labyrinth. That was quick."

“Compared to the first floor, sure. Plus, we had lots of players over level 10 because it took so long the first time. The original level required to beat the second floor was more like 7 or 8, right?”

“Well...maybe from a numerical standpoint. But that’s just the point at which it becomes beatable.” She lifted the second mug of ale to her lips, and Asuna filled the silence.

“How many attempts did it take to defeat the second-floor boss in the beta?”

“Hmm. We got wiped out at least ten times, and that was only the attempts that I participated in...But the first time was pure recklessness. I was only level 5.”

I didn’t mention that I did it hoping to score the LA bonus.

“I think when we actually did succeed, the raid’s average level was over 7.”

“Ahh...But this time, it’ll be at least level 10.”

I checked the party HP gauge. I’d earned a level up thanks to our hunting of the minos–er, tauruses–in the labyrinth, so I was up to fourteen. Asuna claimed to be twelve. Most likely Lind and Kibaou’s teams, the main muscle of the raid party, would be about the same.

“Yeah...I bet it’ll be over 10. Statistically, that’s a high enough level...but floor-boss battles don’t follow the same rules as wimpy mobs.”

The battle against Illfang the Kobold Lord seemed like it had happened ages ago by now. Our average level was far higher than it had been during the beta test. Our leader, Diavel the knight, was level 12, just like me.

That did not stop the kobold king’s katana skills from draining all of Diavel’s HP. The sheer firepower of a boss’s attacks rendered the “safe range” of levels meaningless.

Asuna and I thought in silence as Argo emptied three quarters of her second mug and said, “Plus, this boss is more about having good equipment than a high level.”

“Yeah, that’s the thing,” I agreed with a sigh. The second-floor boss had a special sword skill called Numbing Detonation that wasn’t primarily about dealing damage. But because of that, increasing the player’s HP wasn’t an adequate defense. Careful raising of debuff prevention via equipment upgrades was crucial.

That would all be covered in the next edition of the info dealer’s strategy guide series, no doubt. All the front-line players would eagerly delve into the upgrading system, and Nezha would do a booming business here in this town.

“...Ugh...” I grunted without realizing it.

What if Nezha hadn’t moved from Urbus to Taran in order to wait out the storm...but because he foresaw that there would be high demand for his services here? He might bilk players out of their hard-earned rare gear without a care for his reputation, making the Legend Braves the top guild in the game, surpassing even Lind and Kibaou’s teams. And what would happen to Nezha the blacksmith?

“...Argo.” I brushed off the crawling sensation going up my arms and opened my window over the table. “Here’s the map data for the first and second level of the labyrinth.”

I turned it into a scroll and plopped it down before her. She picked it up and made it disappear faster than a parlor magician.

“Thanks again, Kii-bou. Like I always say, if you want the proper value of this information...”

“No...I’m not trying to make a business out of map data. I couldn’t sleep at night if I knew players were dying because they couldn’t afford maps. However, I do have a job with a condition I want you to do for me in return.”

“Ohh? Why don’t you tell Big Sister what you want?”

She casted a sidelong glance at me. I could feel some kind of waves radiating off of Asuna, but I was too afraid to look, so I focused my eyes on Argo.

"I'm sure you're aware of them already..." I lowered my voice and looked around the bar. The entrance was at the end of a narrow alleyway, and no other players had come in. "I want info on a team called Legend Braves that took part in this morning's fight against the Bullbous Bow. All their names and how they got together."

"Ahh. And...your condition?"

"I don't want anyone to know that I'm looking for information about them. Especially the people in question."

The scariest thing about Argo the Rat is that not only did she not practice client confidentiality, she actually made it her motto that every buyer's name was another product to sell. So normally, there was no way I could buy information on the Legend Braves in total secrecy. Argo would follow her own rules and go straight to the Braves, asking if they wanted to buy the name of the person snooping into their business. Of course, I could pay her more than what they offered in order to keep my name out of it, but it would still let them know that *someone* was asking about them. That was what I wanted to avoid.

My condition was that I wanted her to collect information on the Braves without making any kind of contact. It was in direct conflict with Argo's motto and principles.

She twisted her curly hair with a finger as she mulled it over, then shrugged and said okay with surprising ease. But my relief only lasted a split second.

"Just remember this: Big Sister prioritized her feelings for Kii-bou over her rules of business."

Again, I felt a burning sensation emanating from the right, and froze solid. Argo never let the smile leave her face.

"Now, what did you want with me, A-chan?"

Ten minutes later, Asuna and I were back at the eastern plaza of Taran.

As a village, the scale of Taran was much smaller than the main town of Urbus. However, it shared the same basic construction in being carved down out of a flat mountaintop, with only the outer walls left standing. Therefore, it had at least twice the vertical space of any village built on flat plains.

The circular plaza was no exception, surrounded by tall buildings in every direction. But most of them were not NPC shops like inns or item stores, and there were no player-owned homes yet, so anyone could walk in or out.

More than a few players used these empty houses as squats instead of paying for an inn. The biggest difference was that an NPC-run inn offered full system protection on its rooms.

Of course, while it was impossible to hurt anyone in one of these places, there was always that uncertainty about sleeping without a lock, and the beds were painfully hard. I'd tried them out a few times when trying to skimp on expenses, and barely got a wink of sleep–I bolted to my feet every time I heard a noise inside the room or outside in the street. It was truly unfair; my real body was probably in some safe, sanitized hospital, with all of my senses disconnected from their external organs, but I was still terrorized by awful beds and outside noise in this virtual world.

After I'd suffered enough, I finally swore off of such frugality, and had been staying in proper inns or NPC homes ever since.

But there were other uses for an empty home than just sleeping. You could have a meeting in private, divvy up loot–or spy on someone.

"This is a good angle," Asuna said from the chair in front of the window, looking down at the plaza below, but careful not to get too close.

“It’s probably the best spot you can get. Straight behind him, the angle would be too extreme to have a good idea of what’s happening. I’m gonna set the dinner down here.”

I placed four steamed buns of uncertain filling I’d bought from a street vendor on top of the round table. Their skin was the usual milky white, and nothing seemed out of order with the scent of the rising steam. In fact, they looked good. The official item name was “Taran Steamed Bun.”

Asuna turned away from the source of the clanging outside and casted a doubtful look at the steamed buns.

“What’s...inside of those?”

“Dunno. But it’s a cow-themed floor, so I’d guess it’s probably beef? By the by, in western Japan, when they talk about streamed meat buns, they mean beef. It’s in eastern Japan that the generic term means pork.”

“And is this town western or eastern?” she asked exasperatedly.

I apologized for my pointless trivia and pushed the pile toward Asuna.

“Go on while they’re hot.”

“...Very well.”

She removed the leather glove from her hand and took the bun from the top of the pile. I hurriedly grabbed one of my own.

We’d been in the dungeon since this morning, and hadn’t had time to stop for a snack, so I was nearly starving. If our avatars exhibited biological processes other than emotion, my stomach would have gurgled all through our meeting with Argo. I opened my mouth wide and was about to stuff the steaming treat into mouth, when–

“Nyaak!”

A strangled shriek hit my ears and I looked over in surprise. Asuna was sitting frozen in her chair, the steam bun held in both hands.

The large, five-inch bun was missing one small bite–and the opening had squirted a thick cream-colored liquid across her face and neck.

She stayed dead still, properly chewing the bite she already took while resisting the impulse to cry, then finally spoke in a soft voice.

"...So the filling is warm custard cream...and some kind of sweet-sour fruit..."

"..."

I slowly lowered the Taran steamed bun from its position an inch away from my face, down to the table. The moment I let go, her voice struck again, sharp as a rapier.

"If...if it turns out you ate this during the beta test and knew what was inside, and intentionally didn't tell me what it was...then I may not be able to stop myself from what comes next..."

"I swear to you that I did not know. Absolutely, positively, categorically."

I took a small handkerchief out of my belt pouch and handed it to her. Fortunately, "mess" effects here would disappear in only a few moments, even if left alone, and wiping them with any item categorized as cloth made them disappear entirely. With each mess, the durability of the cloth would fall, but I'd heard rumors of a magic handkerchief that could be used forever. Mess effects caused by mobs or special terrain often contained their own debuff effects, so an unlimited handkerchief would be really handy to have. If only it weren't such a rare piece of loot...

"Mm."

I was shaken from my reverie by the return of my handkerchief. After a few seconds of wiping, Asuna's face was free of cream.

She gave me one last glare, turned back to the window, and announced, “I’ll cook my own food the next time we have a stakeout. I’d rather not have to eat something terrible like this again.”

I felt tempted to point out that with a Cooking skill of zero, she couldn’t make anything that *wasn’t* terrible. But even as a fourteen-year-old, I was smart enough to know I shouldn’t. Instead I gave her a forced smile and opined, “Th-that sounds great.”

Two arrows shot forward and wiped the smile off my face.

“When did I say, ‘I’ll cook my own food...for both of us?’”

“You didn’t,” I admitted sheepishly. When I actually tried the cooled-off Taran steamed bun, it wasn’t bad...It was pretty good, actually. But only as a dessert.

The outer skin was soft and chewy, and the cream inside was smooth and firm and not too sweet, the perfect match for the sour, strawberry-like fruit inside. I suspected that the preset flavor values for the bun were meant to resemble a strawberry cream pastry, but through developer error or some whim of the system, it was sold heated. Asuna’s mood improved eventually–she even ate two of the buns.

That was all well and good, but unlike the buns, the actual purpose of our stakeout was turning out to be fruitless. The entire point of doing this, of course, was to monitor Nezha the blacksmith and attempt to discover the means of his weapon-switching trick.

His business was thriving, but nearly all of the requests were maintenance repairs, and only two players in the hour that we watched asked him to upgrade their weapons. Both of those attempts were successful. I suspected that it was because they were only mid-rank weapons, but it was starting to make me doubt the possibility that there was any deception at all.

What if Asuna's sword breaking and then reappearing thanks to the MATERIALIZE ALL ITEMS button were just freakish errors, bugs in the system...?

"No, that can't be it," I muttered to myself, trying to shake aside my self-doubt.

The means of the weapon-switching trick were still a mystery, but we knew how it was that the Wind Fleuret was destroyed on the first attempt–it was the very piece of information that Asuna bought from Argo.

When Argo had asked Asuna what her business was, the answer surprised me. She said, "I want you to find out if destruction is one of the possible penalties for an unsuccessful attempt at upgrading a weapon."

Argo's answer was just as unexpected as the question. "I don't need to look it up. I already know the answer."

We were stunned. Argo said up-front that she'd give it to us for the cost of her drinks, and explained.

"Strictly as a failure penalty, weapon-breaking will never happen. However, there is one way to ensure that a weapon will break with absolute certainty: when you *attempt to upgrade a weapon that is out of upgrade attempts.*"

Meaning this. Last night, the Wind Fleuret that crumbled to pieces before our eyes was in fact switched in at some point...and it had already used all of its allotted upgrade attempts. It was a "spent" weapon. But the Wind Fleuret +4 hanging from Asuna's waist still had two chances left. So even if the attempt had failed, it could not have caused the sword to crack.

Now that the spent-weapon concept had entered the picture, I thought back to Rufiol, the fellow who tried out Nezha before Asuna did.

I couldn't determine if Nezha had indeed switched out his Anneal Blade with a different one.

But the result was three straight failures, not destruction. Perhaps he couldn't do his normal trick because there were so many people around, or perhaps he just didn't have a spent Anneal Blade to switch it with.

If that was the case, it explained why Nezha offered the crestfallen Rufiol a sum of money much higher than the going rate for that spent +0 Anneal Blade. He wasn't compensating the man for his loss, but stocking up for the next attempt...

"Kirito."

I blinked, snapped out of my speculation. My eyes focused and saw that the plaza below was shrouded in night, and few players were still going to and from.

One player walked directly across the circular plaza. He wore metal armor that reflected the light of the lampposts, and a dark blue shirt–clearly the uniform of Lind's group, the top team among the front-line players.

Asuna and I watched with bated breath as he approached Nezha's smith shop and removed his sword from his waist attachment. Its length and shape identified it as a one-handed longsword.

But it was slightly shorter and wider than my Anneal Blade.

I couldn't be sure because of the distance and darkness, but the large knuckle guard appeared to be that of a Stout Brand. That was a broadsword, a sub-category of one-handed swords that prioritized attack strength over speed. It was about as rare as a Wind Fleuret, if not slightly higher.

"Certainly good enough to be a target for his switcheroo," Asuna whispered. I was surprised that she'd identified it at a glance, but I didn't let it show.

"Yeah. Now, whether he asks for maintenance or an upgrade..."

There was at least fifty feet in between us at the southwestern side of the plaza, and the outdoor blacksmith shop at the northwest edge.

The Search skill's parameter adjustment brought several details into focus, but it was much too far to hear a conversation at normal volume.

"Do you know that guy's name from the Lind team?" I asked. Asuna thought it over. "I think his name is Shivata."

"With a V? Not Shibata?"

"It was spelled 'S-h-i-v-a-t-a.' Seems pretty clear to me."

"...All right, then."

We both practiced the foreign sound of the letter V by biting our lower lips. Meanwhile, Nezha and Shivata had finished their negotiation, and the Stout Brand changed hands, sheath and all.

This was the important point. We craned as close as possible to the window without being visible from the plaza and focused on the blacksmith's hands. Inevitably, our shoulders and even hair brushed up against each other, but the proud fencer would certainly understand, given the circumstances.

If it was a maintenance request, Nezha would remove the sword and place it against the small grindstone affixed to the side of his anvil. But he turned away from his client and reached out with his right hand to one of the many leather sacks on the carpet. Those sacks presumably contained different types of crafting materials. Meaning...

"An upgrade!" I hissed.

Asuna nodded vigorously and whispered, "The left hand! Keep your eyes on his left hand!"

She didn't have to tell me. I kept my eyes fixed on that left hand, fighting the natural urge to follow the movement of his right.

Shivata's broadsword hung from Nezha's hand, still in the sheath. There was nothing unnatural about the position or angle of his arm.

Very close to the sword was a display of premade weapons for sale, but there was no way he could switch them. All of the display weapons were common iron weapons; there was not a single rare weapon among them, and certainly not another Stout Brand. Besides, dropping the sword onto the carpet and lifting a nearby weapon would draw too much attention. I couldn't imagine that we'd have missed such an action when the Wind Fleuret was nearly stolen...

Nezha's left hand was completely still, holding the broadsword, while the right hand did all the work. He picked out all of his materials from the leather sacks and tossed them into the forge next to the anvil The dozen or so items burst into flame and eventually melted into one big lump–I assumed. I wasn't actually watching. At any rate, it was the highlight of the upgrading process. For an instant, the deep red light that signified a Heaviness upgrade shone from the forge, then subsided into the waiting state.

"...!"

Every muscle in my body twitched.

At the same moment the red light flared, Nezha's left hand did something. Asuna must have sensed it as well, because our shoulders jumped.

"Did he...?"

"The sword..."

We kept staring but couldn't finish our sentences. That brief flash of light, barely half a second, was enough to blind us from the exact sight we needed to witness.

As I watched, teeth grinding, the blacksmith gingerly raised the Stout Brand. If he had indeed done something to it, the sword looked absolutely identical to the one Shivata gave him.

He grabbed the hilt with his right hand and slowly pulled the sword out, then placed the thick blade into the red flames of the forge. After a few seconds, all of the light transferred to the weapon. He placed it on the anvil, picked up his smithing hammer with his right hand, and began striking the sword. Five. Eight...Ten.

Just as we feared, the dark gray blade of the Stout Brand shattered into pieces. This time, neither of us missed it.

"...What now?" Asuna asked, watching the quiet plaza from the windowsill.

It was clear what she was referring to. Shivata showed remarkable restraint in bottling up his anger and disappointment, and left with minimal complaint to Nezha. Asuna was wondering if we should track him down and reveal the existence of the deception.

From a sympathy standpoint, I wanted to tell him, because within an hour, he could use the MATERIALIZE ALL ITEMS button to retrieve his sword. But from a more practical standpoint, Shivata would not be happy just to get his sword back. He would surely return to the plaza and confront Nezha with this evidence, and I could not predict what would happen after that.

Nezha's actions were evil–of that there was no doubt. He ought to suffer proper punishment for his misdeeds. But without a GM holding court in this virtual world, who would determine what was "proper"?

Even a crafter could not just hang out in town all the time. What if, when he left the safety of the village limits, some player attempted to punish him through means within their control? What if they took it to the ultimate conclusion?

If we told Shivata now, it could ultimately lead to the very first in Aincrad. That concern was the driving force behind Asuna's question, and I did not have an easy answer in mind.

As I sat wracked by indecision and unease, I heard the calming ringing of bells. It was eight o'clock. At the same moment, the hammering outside stopped.

I moved next to Asuna and looked to see that Nezha was closing up his shop. He extinguished the forge, put away the tools and materials, folded the sign, and began laying them all on top of the carpet. His back looked so very small and unassuming.

"Why did Nezha and the Legend Braves decide to start doing this fraud, anyway...? And how?" I murmured to myself. Asuna shrugged. "I mean, even if they came up with the idea to switch the weapons, there's a huge hurdle between something that is theoretically possible within the system, and actually doing it. *SAO*'s not just a normal VRMMO. Our lives are on the line now. Surely they have to realize what might happen if they steal other people's weapons..."

"Maybe they do realize...and decided to kick over the hurdles anyway."

"Huh?"

"Ignoring the ethical side of it, the actual hurdle is just knowing that you could risk your life if you get exposed, right? So they can eliminate that issue if they just get far stronger than anyone else before anyone finds out what they're doing. That way they can fight off any attempts to take their lives in the wilderness. The six–er, five members of the Legend Braves probably aren't that far off from their goal."

When Asuna's words sank in, I felt my virtual skin crawl

"C-come on, don't tell me that. A team of guys that doesn't shy away from wicked acts, strong enough to destroy any front-line players? I mean..."

My throat became so constricted that even I could barely make out the next words I said.

"...They'd rule the world."

While I wasn't inclined to think that this weapon scam wasn't my problem in any way, I also assumed that I wouldn't have to suffer from it. I just had to make sure I didn't ever give Nezha my sword.

But that was a terribly shortsighted view of the situation.

Thirty-three days before, the moment we were trapped in this game permanently, I left behind my first and only friend in the game, Klein, and abandoned him back in the Town of Beginnings. I avoided the wilderness zones, which I expected to be bled dry in no time, and headed straight for Horunka, the next town. In other words, I prioritized the quickest and most efficient way to upgrade my equipment and stats so that I could maximize my chance of survival.

Using all the knowledge from my beta experience, I tore through countless quests and mobs, racing onward and onward. From the moment I chose to sprint out of the gates, I'd never slowed in my progress.

But the speed of my advancement was always based purely on the rules of the game (if not personal morals). If I were to ignore those rules, there were far more efficient ways to advance than what I did now–for example, monopolizing the best hunting grounds, or stealing rare loot from other players.

Of course, swindling weapons only earned them cor and the item itself, not experience or skill points. But as Asuna had said, with enough money, there was no limit on how much you could power up your gear.

I had bumped my main weapon up to +6, but my armor was currently averaging around +3. Against a player with fully upgraded armor, even at a lower level, there was no way I could win.

In other words, allowing the Legend Braves to continue in their weapon fraud would be tantamount to allowing the creation of a group of players stronger than me and unbound by rules or morals.

"...I'm sorry. It took me until just now to realize how serious this is," I murmured. The fencer looked at me suspiciously.

"Why would you say sorry?"

“Well, you almost had your sword stolen, right? And this whole time, I’ve only been half-concerned, as if it was someone else’s problem...”

The words emerged naturally, without thinking, but for some reason, Asuna scowled even harder, blinked a few times, then yanked her head in the other direction, angrily.

“There’s no need to apologize. It’s not as though you and I are total strangers...I mean, um, we know each other and we’re party members, but there’s nothing more than...arrgh! Look what you did! You’re acting so weird, I’m all confused!”

I thought I was more confused than she was, but before I could respond, she looked out the window and her eyes narrowed. “That carpet...”

“Huh...?”

“So keeping your items from wasting away isn’t its only function.”

I turned to look at the east plaza of Taran. In the northwest corner, Nezha had finished packing away all his tools and was now fiddling with the pop-up menu on his Vendors Carpet. It started rolling itself up, and the assortment of objects on top of it was automatically sucked into storage.

“Hey...Do you suppose he’s using that function to switch the weapons?”

I shook my head instantly. “No, that’s not possible. The carpet’s absorption ability has to be activated via the menu, like he’s doing now, plus it swallows up everything on top of the carpet. You couldn’t have it take just one sword and spit another one out...in...exchange...”

I trailed to a stop.

The Vendor’s Carpet’s ability to store items could not be used to exchange them.

However, what if he used his own storage...meaning, the inventory tab of his main menu? I rolled away from the window and slumped to my knees.

“Wh-what are you doing?” Asuna asked. I didn’t reply. I brought up the menu with my right hand and switched to the item list. As I had done the last night when I showed Asuna the equipment mannequin, I tapped the top and bottom edges of the window to make it adjustable, then lowered it down until it was almost stuck to the floor–right below where my left hand would dangle if I let it hang.

Lastly, I pulled the Anneal Blade, sheath and all, off my back and held it in my dangling left hand. I didn’t have a folding chair, but I was about the same distance off the ground as Nezha was when he accepted the weapon from his customer.

Asuna held a deep breath, understanding what I was about to try. I looked up at her face and said, “Watch close and count the time.”

“Okay.”

“Here goes...Three, two, one, zero!”

I dropped the sword directly onto the window. Just as it touched the surface, the sword vanished in a puff of light and turned into text in the menu. I promptly touched the item name. When the sub-menu appeared, I selected materialize.” With another splash of light, the sword reappeared and I picked it up again.

“...How was that?”

I looked up and met the fencer’s wide-eyed gaze. Her hazel eyes blinked slowly, moved to my left hand...and she shook her head.

“It was a similar sight. But much too slow to be the same thing. It took well over a second for the sword to disappear and reappear.”

“Maybe if I practice, I can do it faster...”

“There were other differences. There are big fancy effects when you put it in and take it out of the menu. Even timed to happen at the same time the upgrading materials flash in the forge, you can’t hide that kind of effect. Plus, it shines twice.”

“...I see...” I sighed, and tapped the window on the floor to make it disappear. I stood up and slung the sword back into position.

“I thought I was onto something. I figured all the stuff stacked on the carpet could hide his menu...”

“Wouldn’t that be impossible, too? I mean, if you put something on top of a window set to the inventory tab, wouldn’t it all sink into it?”

“...Urgh.” She was right. I nodded and looked out the window again. Nezha was just leaving the plaza, rolled-up carpet balanced on his shoulder. His head was down, as though feeling the weight on his shoulder, and plodded heavily away. It was not the image of a man who had just scored himself a rare and valuable Stout Brand.

“If we can’t expose the trick he’s using, I suppose we’ll just have to go reveal the truth to Shivata,” she said.

“If the sword returns to him, that will prove that there was a deceptive attempt to steal it. But if that happens, all the blame will fall on Nezha’s shoulders, and the other five Braves could get away scot-free. Obviously, what he’s doing is wrong. But...I just get this feeling...”

I trailed off. Asuna fixed me with a direct stare. For a moment, it seemed as if the powerful light in her eyes softened just a bit.

“You can’t imagine that Nezha is doing all of this entirely of his own volition...Am I right?”

“Huh...?”

My eyes widened. She’d hit the nail on the head. Asuna turned away and leaned against the wall, looked up at the dark ceiling and spoke in a slow cadence.

“Do you remember what he said yesterday, when I went to ask him to upgrade my Wind Fleuret? He asked if I wanted a new weapon or to repair my old one. It was as though he left out the option of upgrading, hoping he didn’t have to do it...”

“I see...Good point. That would explain why he made such a sour face when you asked him to upgrade.”

“Honestly, if Shivata was able to expose his fraud and all the Legend Braves stood up for Nezha and said they were false charges, I wouldn’t mind that much. But...if they abandoned him and tried to pin all of the responsibility on his shoulders...”

In a worst-case scenario, all the rage of the player population would be focused on Nezha, and he might be executed. In fact, the probability was fairly high. After all...

“The five warriors all took the names of legendary soldiers and heroes, and they didn’t include Nezha the crafter in that pattern...”

“Oh, about that.” Asuna held up a finger as though just remembering something.

“What?”

“Something’s been bugging me ever since you told me he was a member of the Legend Braves. His name...Nezha. So I asked Argo...”

At that precise moment, a purple icon started blinking on the right side of my vision, and I held up a hand to cut her off. I clicked the icon and it opened a long private message. Speak of the devil–it was from Argo.

FIRST REPORT

Beneath that header was all the information I’d requested about the Legend Braves: names, levels, rough character builds. It was an impressive amount of info to compile in such a short time.

I set my window to visible mode and beckoned Asuna over to look at the message. At the top was Orlando, their leader. Level 11, used a longsword and shield, heavy armor.

Along with these data was a simple sentence explaining the source of his name. That part was requested by Asuna. As my uncertain memory recalled, he was indeed based on one of the Twelve Peers of Charlemagne, his paladin knights. But Orlando was the Italian styling of his name, while in the original French, he was Roland.

“Where do you suppose Argo got this information?” I noted wryly. Asuna giggled.

“She must know someone who’s a major history buff...So Beowulf was Danish, not English. Cuchulainn was from Celtic Mythology, like we guessed.”

We went down the list, ignoring the character info and reading the sources of their names. When we reached Nezha’s name at the bottom, I let out a long breath.

His level was 10, a fairly high number thanks to the fact that crafting gave experience points on its own. But it didn’t help his combat skill proficiency, which would make fighting on the front line difficult for him. Naturally, his player build was tuned to be a blacksmith. And at the end, the source of his name...

“Huh?!”

“What...?”

We yelped together. The answer was totally unexpected.

“Does this mean...we were pronouncing it wrong?”

“B-but I remember the other Braves were calling him Nezuo...”

We looked at each other, then back to the message. If what was written in his lengthy name background was true, I had terribly misunderstood him.

A moment later, several pieces of information stored in my brain as separate clumps suddenly began to rearrange themselves, linking together and shining bright.

“Oh...!”

I lifted my left hand and squeezed it, watching closely. Opened again, and closed.

In that instant, I knew that I had finally grasped the secret of Nezha’s weapon-switching trick for good.

“Of course...That’s what it was!!”

# *10*

"Upgrade, please."

I roughly thrust my sword and scabbard forward. Nezha the blacksmith looked up at me doubtfully.

He was suspicious because he wasn't looking at my face, but the great helm that completely covered it. The only thing it featured were narrow slits at the eyes. Such helmets were excellent in terms of defense but terribly limited the player's vision. It was one thing for a tank in the midst of a group battle to use it, but hardly any player would bother to wear such a thing in town.

As I was a vowed disciple of light, versatile armor, the only reason I'd ever wear this great helm was for disguise. And because I'd been present for the destruction of Asuna's Wind Fleuret three days earlier, I couldn't use my favorite bandanna instead, or Nezha would recognize me.

Perhaps this disguise was not that much better, but Asuna insisted that if I didn't want to stand out because of the funny helm, I should commit to the full outfit and simply play one of *those* people.

So the great helm was only part of the costume, I was covered in thick plate mail all over and held a tower shield the size of an entire door. All the items were the cheapest of that type available at NPC shops, and the equipment weight was just light enough not to send me into the red, but the cramped, closed-in sensation threatened to make me go claustrophobic within half a day.

Feeling a newfound sense of appreciation for those tanks who'd taken part in the boss raid, I handed over my sword–the Anneal Blade, my only truly rare piece of equipment right now.

"I'll take a look at its properties," he said quietly, tapping the hilt. When he saw the contents of the window, his downcast eye-brows shot upward.

“Anneal plus six...two attempts left. And its upgrades are S3, D3. A challenging sword, but a very good one...”

I watched his lips creep into a tiny smile, and I confirmed that my initial suspicions about him were correct. This blacksmith wasn’t an irredeemably evil person.

But just a second later, Nezha’s smile of admiration disappeared, replaced by a grimace of pain. Through gritted teeth, he murmured, “...Which value did you want to upgrade?”

Sunday, December 11, just before eight o’clock in the evening.

A chill wind blew through the eastern plaza of Taran. There were no other players or NPCs in sight. There were only Nezha the blacksmith, just before he closed up his street side shop, and me, his mystery customer. Somewhere in the empty houses lining the plaza, Asuna was watching our encounter, but I couldn’t feel her gaze for all the thick metal armor.

It was the preceding Sunday that we defeated the first-floor boss and opened the teleport gate to the main city of the second floor, so today marked a full week since then. I had run into Asuna in the eastern plaza of Urbus three days ago, and it was two days before that I had discovered the truth behind Nezha’s upgrade fraud.

Technically, I hadn’t identified the trick, only been “certain” that I had, but there was a reason that I’d waited a full two days to attempt to ascertain the truth of the matter. I needed to master the technique Nezha was using to switch out weapons.

Of course, this all depended on Nezha accepting my work request. Telling myself that the hassle of all this full plate armor had succeeded in convincing him, I murmured an answer to the blacksmith.

“Speed[35], please. I’ll pay for the materials. Enough for a ninety percent chance.”

35 The "S" in weapon parameters is supposed to mean Sharpness, but it is referred to as Speed here, although it had been written correctly as Sharpness in other instances in the book.

Nezha had heard my voice three days ago, but the distorting effect of the great helm helped disguise it enough to keep him from realizing that I'd been the companion of the woman with the Wind Fleuret.

"Very well. For enough to boost the chances to ninety, that will be...two thousand seven hundred cor, including the cost of labor," he explained, his voice tense. I agreed in as flat a tone as I could muster.

Beneath the thick breastplate, my heart was already racing, and my gauntlets were clammy with sweat. If my suspicions were all entirely wrong, and Nezha wasn't in fact a fraudster, and weapon destruction had indeed been added as a possible failure state, then my beloved Anneal Blade +6 might be gone forever in a manner of minutes.

No.

That was not all. After all, we had retrieved Asuna's Wind Fleuret through the use of the MATERIALIZE ALL ITEMS command. Even my theory about the trick was wrong, I could still get the sword back within an hour by using that button.

So all I had to do was stay calm, watch everything that happened, and hit one icon at the proper moment. Nothing more.

I waved my left hand to bring up the menu, flipped to the trade tab, and paid Nezha his price. Normally I might have closed it after that, but this time I left it open on the top screen. Fortunately, Nezha did not seem to find this suspicious.

"Two thousand seven hundred cor, paid in full," he muttered, and turned to the forge. Very naturally, he let the end of the sword in his left hand dangle just inches above the many products crammed on top of his carpet.

It all started here.

My concentration had been sucked toward the portable forge the last time, so I kept my gaze directly fixed on his left hand.

My field of view was greatly limited by the helms eye-slits, but that helped me ignore any misdirection he attempted through the flashy forge display.

Nezha must have tossed the upgrade materials straight from his stock into the forge, because everything flashed bright green for a second. If I'd had a view of the forge, my eyes would have been dazzled by the light for just a second.

But the next moment, Nezha's left index finger stretched and lightly tapped between two swords on the carpet. For just the briefest of instants, the Anneal Blade blinked.

That was it. The switch was complete. Such a brilliant, perfect trick. He could do this in front of a crowd of a hundred in broad daylight, and not a single one would notice.

Like Nezha when he saw the detailed properties of my sword, I let out a sigh of admiration. But I said nothing–I let the blacksmith finish his upgrading process.

Once the green light filled the forge like a liquid, Nezha lifted the sword in his left hand and pulled it from the scabbard with his right. The blade was the darkened steel color unique to the Anneal Blade. But to my eye, its shine was just a bit duller than usual.

The sword Nezha was holding right now was not my +6 sword, but the spent +0 blade he had bought from Rufiol three days before. It was only a guess, but I was sure of it.

The blacksmith laid the weapon in the portable forge, suffusing the blade in its green glow. He moved it to the anvil and started striking it with his smith's hammer. *Clang, clang*, the same crisp sound I heard when he upgraded Asuna's fleuret.

When the fleuret broke and Nezha offered to return the cost of his labor, I'd said, "It's all right, you did your best. There are some crafters who say it doesn't matter how you do it as long as you hit the weapon enough times, so they just whack away"

However, the reason these strikes sounded so heartfelt was not because he was praying for the operation to be a success through them. Nezha was mourning the loss of the weapon he was about to break for the sake of his deception.

Once a piece of gear was spent–no more upgrade attempts left–it would break without fail when the process was initiated again. Argo had confirmed that for us two nights ago. That phenomenon was about to happen right before my eyes.

...Eight, nine, ten.

The last hammer strike rang loud and high.



The sword burst into shards atop the anvil. Nezha's back shivered and shrank. His right hand with the hammer slumped downward, and the sword-bound sheath in his left hand disappeared.

Hunched over, Nezha took a deep breath, screwed up his face, and was about to shriek an apology–until I cut him off.

"No need to apologize."

"...Huh...?"

He froze. I went up my equipment mannequin from the bottom, switching out armor. Giant ski-boot greaves, plate leggings, gauntlets, plate armor, heater shield...The items that made up my disguise vanished one by one.

When the great helm came off, my bangs flopped down over forehead I pushed them back and heaved a deep breath.

Finally, I equipped the Coat of Midnight, its black hem swaying. Nezha's narrow eyes went wide.

"...Y...you're...the guy...from..."

"Sorry for dressing in disguise. But I figured you would refuse my request if you recognized me."

I meant to say this in my most friendly, understanding tone of voice, but the moment he heard it, Nezha's shock morphed into fear. In that moment, he knew that I'd discovered the existence of his scam and even how it worked.

Without taking my eyes off the frozen blacksmith, I pushed an icon on my main menu–the weapon skill mod activation button. With a quiet swish, another sword appeared in my right hand, heavy and wrapped in a black leather sheath. It was my partner in battle since just after this game of death began; my Anneal Blade +6.

Nezha grimaced. It almost pained me to see that expression.

“No one would suspect another player of having the Quick Change mod so early, especially not a blacksmith...And hiding the menu to use it between the wares lined up on your carpet? Brilliant. Whoever thought that up is a genius.”

Nezha’s shoulders slowly sank, until he finally slumped over and hung his head.

A skill mod–short for modification–was a skill power-up available to the player at certain intervals of proficiency in a particular skill.

For example, when the Search skill reached a level of fifty, the first mod became available to the player. You could then choose from a number of options, such as a bonus to search for multiple targets, a bonus to increase search range, or the optional augmentation ability of Pursuit. There were tons of useful mods, and choosing between them was as hard as it was enjoyable.

Mods could also be applied to the numerous weapon skills in the game. Quick Change fell into that category. It was a common mod available at the very first choice for most one-handed weapons, but very few players ever picked it first. There was no need for anyone to make use of it until at least the fifth floor of Aincrad.

Following that theory, when my One-Handed Sword skill reached fifty halfway through the first floor, I chose the “shorten sword skill cooldown” mod. When I reached one hundred, I would choose “increase critical hit chance,” and only at one fifty would I go for Quick Change.

Quick Change was an active mod, not a passive one. By pressing a shortcut icon on the front page of the menu, my equipped weapon would switch out instantly.

The regular method of changing weapons was a five-step process: (1) opening the window, (2) tapping the right-(or left-)hand cell in the equipment mannequin, (3) selecting "change weapon" from the list of options, (4) selecting the desired weapon from the available items in storage, and (5) hitting the OK button. When faced with a monster that had the Snatch ability, it was a long enough process that anyone would take at least one defenseless hit while trying to equip a backup weapon.

But with Quick Change, several steps were removed: (1) opening the window, and (2) hitting the shortcut icon. With enough practice, it could be done in half a second. The instant after you lost your weapon, you could have another one in hand and ready for battle.

On top of that, Quick Change had a great variety of options to specify exactly which hand received exactly which weapon when the icon was hit. You could set it to pull up a specific weapon, tell it to make you empty-handed–even *allow you to automatically pull the same type of weapon as the one you were equipping, if you had a spare.*

That last part was the secret at the heart of Nezha's weapon-switching trick.

He held the customer's weapon in his left hand temporarily creating the condition in which it was "equipped" there. The ownership right was still with the client, but it was the same as the hand-over feature that made it possible to toss weapons to each other in the middle of battle. He could still use that weapon to activate sword skills...even Quick Change.

Next, Nezha extended the pointer finger of the hand holding the weapon to touch the shortcut icon on his window, which was cleverly hidden beneath his tightly packed wares.

At that instant, the client's sword in his hand went into his storage, and a sword of the same type was automatically pulled out. Except this weapon was spent, guaranteed to break into pieces as soon as he attempted to upgrade it.

The only outward signs of this elaborate trick were a momentary blink of the weapon and a faint swishing sound. Given that it happened at the exact same time that he tossed the upgrading materials into the forge with a bright flash and bang, you'd have to be watching for that precise action to even notice he was doing it.

And if the customer realized he was switching weapons and tried to confront him about it, Nezha could simply employ the same trick just as quickly and get the client's original weapon back. Plus, once he shattered the spent weapon on his anvil, there was no proof of anything.

In other words, to prove Nezha's upgrade fraud was happening, I either had to utilize the MATERIALIZE ALL ITEMS command to spill all of my belongings onto the ground here, or use Quick Change myself, thus pulling the sword directly out of Nezha's storage whether he liked it or not.

It was following the latter choice that had taken me two days from the time I noticed the trick to actually attempting it myself. I had spent all of the previous day and today in the second-floor labyrinth fighting endless hordes of half-naked bull-men tauruses to get my One-Handed Sword skill to one hundred so that I could take the Quick Change mod earlier than planned.

As a side benefit of this activity, I got some rare loot and mapped much farther into the twenty-level labyrinth. As usual, I offered the map data to Argo at no cost, and this generosity was apparently rankling both the Lind and Kibaou squads.

They were upset because someone else was always one or two levels ahead of them in the tower, but they hadn't realized yet that it was Kirito the evil beater. It was only a matter of time before they knew the truth. If there was one reassurance, it was that our relationship couldn't possibly get any worse.

At any rate, the two days of trouble were worth it, as I had finally uncovered and proven Nezha's upgrade fraud trick. I looked down at the curled-up blacksmith and sighed in satisfaction.

My goal was complete. It was not a quest, so there was no reward or bonus experience. On the contrary, it had cost me the 2,700 cor for labor and ingredients, but all I really cared about was making sure that Nezha didn't attempt this dangerous scheme anymore.

The trick itself was brilliant, but if he kept filching valuable weapons from other players, someone was going to notice. Depending on who that person was, Nezha might find himself on the wrong end of an ugly lynch mob.

The worst possible outcome was if all the players decided he ought to be executed and it became a precedent for how to deal with such crimes.

I wasn't of the mind that Nezha should be forgiven for his part in this. Rufiol and Shivata had lost their beloved swords...and even though it was returned in the end, Asuna cried at the loss of her Wind Fleuret. They deserved to see some kind of justice.

But that punishment must not be the murder of another player. If that was allowed once, it would lead to pure anarchy–squabbles over hunting grounds and loot would be solved with violence rather than words. I'd taken on the scarlet letter of the beater to prevent the retail players from purging the former beta testers. That sacrifice couldn't go to waste.

My solution to this was to demand that Nezha either function as a proper, honest blacksmith from now on, or to give up his smithing hammer and become a warrior. Asuna and I had talked it over and decided on this choice. Once the source of their ill-gotten wealth dried up, the Legend Braves would sink back to a level appropriate to their skill.

I stood there, lost in thought, sword dangling from my right hand, when the blacksmith spoke in a tiny voice.

"...I suppose this isn't something that a simple apology will atone for."

Nezha's body and voice were scrunched up in such a compact form that it seemed as though he were trying to disappear entirely.

"...It would be nice if I could return the swords I stole from all those people...but I can't. Nearly all of them were turned into money. The only thing I can do now is...is this!"

His voice reached a shriek by the end. He unsteadily got to his feet. The smithing hammer fell from his hand, and he took off running without a backward glance.

But he didn't get farther than a few feet. A new player descended upon his exit path, long hair gleaming in the streetlamps beneath a wool hood: Asuna the fencer.

She'd jumped out the second-story window of an empty house and blocked his path, lecturing sternly. "You won't solve anything by dying."

This time, Nezha recognized the face within the hood immediately. She was the female fencer whose Wind Fleuret he'd (temporarily) stolen three days earlier.

His already-timid face crumpled even further. I was the very model of an imperceptive dunce, and even I feel the powerful guilt, despair, and abandon raging within him.

Nezha turned his face down and away from Asuna, as though trying to escape her gaze. His voice was strained.

"...I decided right from the start...that if someone discovered my fraud, I'd die in atonement."

"Suicide is a heavier crime than fraud in Aincrad. Stealing weapons might be a betrayal of your customer, but suicide is a betrayal of every player working to defeat this game."

Her eloquence was every bit as sharp and piercing as her Linear. Nezha trembled and tensed–and his face shot upward as though on a spring.

"It'll happen anyway! I'm such a slow, clumsy oaf, I'll die eventually! Whether I get killed by monsters or kill myself, the only difference is whether it happens sooner or later!"

I couldn't stifle a small chuckle at those last words.

Asuna glared daggers at me, Nezha's teary face looked hurt among the desperation, so I put up both hands and tried to apologize.

"Sorry, I wasn't laughing at you. It's just that it was the exact same thing this lady here said just a week ago..."

"Huh...?"

Nezha, wide-eyed and bewildered, looked at Asuna again. He took several breaths, then finally worked up the will to ask, "Um...are you...Asuna, from the front-line fights?"

"Huh...?" Now it was Asuna's turn to blink in surprise. "How did you know?"

“Well, the fencer in the hooded cape is pretty well-known around here. You’re the only female player on the frontier...”

“...Oh...I see...”

She sounded very conflicted and shrank back beneath her hood. I took a few steps closer and offered some advice.

“Sounds like your disguise is actually starting to identify you. Maybe you should try something else, before you get stuck with a nickname like Little Gray Riding Hood.”

“Mind your own beeswax! I happen to like this hood! Besides, it’s nice and warm!”

“Oh...I see.”

I wisely chose not to ask her what would happen when the weather got warm again. Instead, I glanced at the stunned Nezha. I couldn’t overcome the urge to ask him a follow-up question.

“So, erm...Do you know who I am...?”

It wasn’t because I was interested in finding out how famous I was around the game. This was purely research to see how far the stories about “the first beater” had spread from that initial front-line squad.

“Um, well...I-I’m afraid I don’t...”

My reaction was equal parts relief and shock. That conflict must have showed on my face, for Asuna patted me on the shoulder. “There, what have I always told you? Stop worrying about it so much.”

“But...I really like that bandanna.”

“Tell you what–I’ll give you your own nickname, How about the Ukrainian Samurai?”

“Wh...why Ukrainian?”

“That bandanna’s got blue and yellow stripes, just like the Ukrainian flag. I guess you could also be the Swedish Samurai, if you prefer.”

“Sorry, can I choose neither?”

Nezha listened to our back-and-forth in timid silence, then worked up the nerve to interject.

“Um, pardon me...Is what you said true? Did Asuna really say she would die eventually...?”

It was obviously a difficult thing for her to answer. I tried to smooth things over by answering for her in as light and breezy a tone as I could

“Oh, yeah, yeah. It was wild, she just passed out right in front of me during a four-day camp-and-hunt expedition in the labyrinth. I couldn’t just leave her there, and I didn’t have the strength level yet to carry a player, so I had to take a sleeping bag and–”

*Shunk.*

Asuna slammed her heel down hard on my toes to shut me up. She composed herself and said quietly, “To be honest that feeling hasn’t disappeared. We’re only on the second floor, and there are a hundred. There’s a constant conflict inside me between my desire to get that far, and resignation that I’ll probably fall along the way. But...”

Her hazel eyes shone bright from the shade of her hood. While the brightness of that shine was no different from what I saw that first day in the labyrinth, it seemed to me that the nature of it had changed.

"...But I've decided that I'm not fighting in order to die. Maybe I'm not quite optimistic enough to say that I'm doing it to live, to beat the game...but I've found one simple goal to strive toward. That's what I'm fighting for."

"Oh...really? What's your goal, to eat an entire cake of that Tremble Shortcake?" I asked earnestly.

Asuna sighed for some reason and said, "Of course not." She turned to Nezha again.

"I'm sure you can find your own reason. It's already inside of you. Something you ought to fight for. I mean, you left the Town of Beginnings on your own two feet, didn't you?"

Nezha looked down, but his eyes were not closed. He was staring at the leather boots on his feet. I realized that they were not non-functional shoes for wearing in town, but actual leather armor.

"...It's true. There was something," he mumbled. Amid the resignation, it sounded like a tiny kernel of some kind, a burning ambition. But he shook his head several times, as if trying to extinguish the flame. "But it's gone now. It was gone before I even got here. That happened the day I bought this NerveGear. When I...when I tried the first connection test, I got an FNC..."

FNC. Full-Dive Nonconformity. The full-dive machine was an extremely delicate apparatus that sent signals back and forth to the brain with ultra-weak microwaves. It had to be finely tuned to work with each individual user.

But of course, they were producing thousands and thousands of units for mass-market use, and they couldn't spend ages of time on fine maintenance.

The machine had an automatic calibration system that went through a long and tedious connection test on first use. Once that was done and it knew the player's settings, you could dive in just by turning on the unit.

But on very rare occasions, a person received a "nonconforming" response during that initial test. Perhaps one of the five senses wasn't functioning properly, or there was a slight lag in the communication with the brain. In most cases it was merely a slight obstacle, but there were a few people who simply could not dive at all.

If he was here in Aincrad, Nezha's FNC couldn't have been that serious–but he would have been luckier if it had prevented him from playing. He wouldn't be trapped in this game of death.

We packed up all the tools and items into the carpet and moved to an empty house near the plaza to continue hearing out Nezha's story.

"In my case, I have hearing, touch, taste, and smell, but there's an issue with my sight..."

As he spoke, Nezha reached out to the cup of tea Asuna left for him on the round table. But he did not immediately grab it — he reached his fingers closer, and only when his fingertip brushed the handle did he carefully lift it up. "It's not that I'm entirely blind, but I have a binocular dysfunction. It's hard for me to grasp distance. I can't really tell how far my avatar's hand is from the object."

For an instant, I thought this didn't seem so bad...but I soon reconsidered.

If *SAO* was an orthodox fantasy MMORPG, Nezha's disability wouldn't be such a big deal. There were classes that had autohitting long-range attacks–a mage, for example.

But *SAO* didn't even have archers, much less mages. Every player who fought in the game did so with a weapon in his hand. And whether sword, axe, or spear, the ability to judge distance, to tell exactly how far away the monster was, made all the difference in the world. The very cornerstone of combat here was understanding, on a physical level, how far your weapon could reach.

Nezha took a sip of tea and carefully returned the cup to the saucer. He smiled hollowly.

"Even hitting a stationary weapon on top of an anvil with my short little hammer is extremely difficult..."

"So that was why you carried out the steps of the process so painstakingly."

"Yes, that's why. Of course, I did also feel apologetic toward the swords I was breaking...but..." He looked back and forth at me and Asuna, smiling weakly. "It might not be right for me to say this, but...I'm impressed that you saw through my switching trick. But it wasn't just today...you remotely retrieved Asuna's Wind Fleuret plus four three days ago. So you must have known then..."

"Oh, at that point it was just a suspicion. At the time I noticed, the hour limit to maintain ownership was nearly up, so I had to burst into Asuna's bedroom and force her to use the MATERIALIZE ALL ITEMS command, then–"

I felt a piercing stare from the right and narrowly avoided spilling the beans on what her inventory contained.

"–the Fleuret came back. That was when I knew you'd committed fraud...but it was two days ago that I figured out you were using Quick Change to pull it off. The key was in your name, Nezha...or should I say, Nataku."

Nezha (or Nataku) sucked in a sharp breath. His fists clenched and he even lifted up out of his seat for a moment. When he sat again, he looked straight down in shame.

"...I had no idea you'd figured that out, too..."

"Well, that required an information dealer to discover. I mean, even your friends in the Legend Braves were calling you Nezuo. It means they didn't know either, did they? Why you're named after Nataku."

"Just call me Nezha. I picked that spelling because I wanted people to call me that," the blacksmith said. He nodded and began to explain. "Yes, you're correct..."

Nataku. Also known as Na-zha, or Prince Nata.

He was a boy god in the Ming period fantasy novel, Fengshen Yanyu. He used a variety of magical weapons called paopei and flew through the sky on two wheels. He was every bit the legendary hero as Orlando or Beowulf.

In the Western alphabet, the Chinese name was transliterated to "Nezha," but only a true fanatic of Eastern mythology would recognize that as a reference to Nataku. It would be especially difficult here in Aincrad, without any Internet search engines.

I couldn't help but wonder what kind of brain trust Argo had in her network of contacts. At any rate, when I saw the blacksmith's true name at the end of her write-up on the Legend Braves, I finally had an epiphany.

He did not join this game intending to be a crafter. He tried to be a fighter, but due to his circumstances, he was eventually forced to become a blacksmith.

However, that meant that despite playing as a smith now, his weapon skills might already be above a certain level. Following that line of logic, I eventually hit upon the possibility that he was using the battle skill mod Quick Change to switch out weapons, and the rest was history.

"The Legend Braves are a team we formed for a different Nerve-Gear action game, three months before *SAO* came out," Nezha explained after another sip of tea. "It was a very simple game, where you used swords and axes to fight off monsters in a straight-line map, and tried to get the high score...but even that was difficult for me. Because I had no perspective, I'd swing when the monsters were too far away, and then they'd come in close and hit me. The team could never get into the top ranks because of me. It wasn't like I knew Orlando and the others in real life, so I probably should have left the team or quit playing the game...but..."

He clenched his fists again, his voice trembling. "...No one told me to leave the team, so I used that as an excuse to stick around. It wasn't because I liked that game. It was because we decided that we'd all switch over to the very first VRMMO, *Sword Art Online*, when it came out in three months. I really, really wanted to try out *SAO*. But because of the FNC, I didn't have the guts to start it up on my own. I was...weak. I figured, if I got to be in Orlando's party in *SAO*, I might be able to grow stronger...even if I still couldn't fight that well..."

We could only sit in silence as we listened to his painful confession. It would be easy to say that I understood how he felt.

The moment I saw the very first trailer for *SAO*, I swore to myself that I would play this game. Even if I'd had a worse FNC than Nezha, I'd have gone in headfirst, as long as I was able to dive.

But I couldn't say that aloud. I abandoned my very first friend back in the Town of Beginnings–someone seeking help, just like Nezha.

However he interpreted my silence, the blacksmith smirked in self-deprecation and continued his tale.

"I went by a different name in the previous game...I used a name that anyone would recognize as a hero, like Orlando or Cuchulainn. The reason I changed it to Nezha was a sign of humility, or flattery. I was trying to say, 'I won't call myself a great hero like you guys, so can I still stick around?' When they asked what it meant, I said it was based on my real name–that was a lie, of course. Every time they call me Nezuo, I want to say that it's still a hero's name. I don't know...It's silly..."

Neither I nor Asuna denied or agreed with Nezha's self-flagellation. Instead, a quiet question emerged from her hood, which was still up, even indoors.

"But then things changed when we got trapped in here, didn't they? You stopped venturing into the fields and switched to crafting. As a blacksmith, you can still support your friends without fighting. But...why would you make the jump to swindling people? Whose idea was it in the first place? Yours? Orlando's?"

She leapt to the point as quickly and accurately as if she were in battle. Nezha had no response. When he did answer, it was a surprise.

"It wasn't me, or Orlando...or any of us."

"Huh...? Then, who?"

"For the first two weeks, I tried to cut it as a fighter. There's one skill, just one, that allows you to fight remotely...I thought I might be able to hack it that way, even without being able to judge distance..."

That didn't seem like it would work to me, but I explained for Asuna s sake. "Ahh, the Throwing Knives skill. But that's kind of..."

"Yes. I bought as many of the cheapest throwing knives as I could in the Town of Beginnings, hoping to train up my skill, but once I used up my stock, there was nothing I could do. Plus, the stones out in the field you can throw hardly do any damage. So it wasn't really much use as a main weapon skill...I gave up once my proficiency reached fifty or so. And because the other Braves stuck around to help me with that, we ended up getting off to a slow start..."

The Legend Braves' slow start was probably not due to them helping Nezha train with throwing knives, but because the other beta testers and I rushed off at top speed on the very first day and left everyone in the dust. I had a feeling Asuna would throw me some very dirty looks if I mentioned that, however, so I kept it to myself.

"Things got very...tense when I said that I'd give up on learning how to use throwing knives. No one said it out loud, but I'm sure they were all thinking that the guild got off to a slow start because of me. Even after becoming a blacksmith, training a crafting skill takes a lot of money...It seemed like the other guys were just waiting for someone to suggest that they cut me loose and leave me back in the Town of Beginnings."

He bit his lip before continuing, "Really, I should have offered on my own...but I just couldn't say it. I was afraid of being alone...Anyway, in the corner of the bar where we were talking, someone I thought was just an NPC came up and said, 'If you're going to be a blacksmith with some weapon experience, there's a really cool way to make more money.'"

Asuna and I shared a look. It hadn't occurred to us that the idea for the Quick Change weapon trick came from someone outside of the Legend Braves altogether.

"Wh-who was it ...?"

"I don't know the name. They only told me how to switch the weapons, and left immediately after that. Haven't seem 'em since. It was a very...strange person, too. Funny way of talking...funny outfit. Wore a hooded cape like a rain poncho-glossy and black..."

"Poncho...?" Asuna and I repeated together.

Hooded capes were a fairly common item in fantasy-styled RPGs like *SAO*–practically a staple of the genre. Asuna herself was wearing one of her own at this very moment, though it was on the shorter side.

Just minutes earlier, she had claimed she wore it for its warmth, but the real reason for those hoods was not the ability to keep out the cold and rain but to hide her face. And whoever this man in the black poncho was, he likely wore it for the same reason...

Asuna seemed to read my mind, and she pulled back her gray hood with a snort. Even in the empty room, lit only by a single lamp, her gleaming chestnut-brown hair and pale skin seemed to give off a light of their own.

Upon seeing her face clearly, Nezha's wide eyes squinted, as though staring into the sun. Given that player names were not displayed by default in *SAO*, the main means of recognizing a person was the face, followed by the body. Eventually, the equipment and fighting style of a player might become part of their persona, but at this point in the game, everyone was rapidly switching to newer gear and even changing their main weapon skill. Someone playing a knife-wielding thief in leather armor one day might be a heavy warrior decked out in full plate armor the next.

Essentially, with an average build and a concealed face, pretty much anyone could pass anonymously. Even voices could be altered using a few special means, such as the great helm I was wearing when I approached Nezha.

But there might be a way to learn more identifying features of this man that taught Nezha how to swindle others. He was still staring at Asuna, so I brought him back to the topic at hand. "About the guy in the black poncho..."

"Ah...y-yes?"

"How did he demand the margin be paid? I mean, how did he want you to hand over his share of the money you made?" I asked. Asuna nodded in understanding. If they were making cash handoffs, we could stake out the place and catch a glimpse of the man.

But Nezha's answer blew that possibility to smithereens. "Um, actually, he didn't really say anything..."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Well...like I said, he taught me how to use Quick Change and the Vendor's Carpet to pull off the weapon-switching trick, but he didn't say a word about a share, or the payment for his idea, or anything."

Asuna and I stared at each other again, dumbfounded.

The trick was brilliant and nearly flawless. I made sure Nezha knew my opinion of it. The trick was certainly possible back in the beta test, but not one of the thousand testers had come up with the idea. Whoever devised it was a creative genius. If Nezha had chosen a player handle based on his own given name, or Asuna hadn't asked Argo for info on "Nataku," I would never have figured the trick out.

But because of that, it was very jarring to hear that the poncho man who devised this brilliant idea would hand it over without asking for anything in return. If he hadn't asked for cor...what did he stand to gain from giving his idea to the Legend Braves?

Clearly it wasn't out of sheer altruism. It was fraud, a means of ripping off other players.

"So you're saying...he just butted into your conversation, explained how to switch weapons like that, and then disappeared?" Asuna asked. Nezha was about to agree, but he stopped before committing.

"Well...Technically, he did say a bit more. A scam is a scam, so Orlando and the others weren't into the idea at first. They knew it was a crime. But then he just laughed. It wasn't put on or menacing. It was just a really pleasant laugh, like out of a movie."

"Pleasant...laugh?"

"Yes. It was like–like just hearing it made everything seem so unimportant anymore. The next thing I knew, Orlando, Beowulf, all of us were laughing with him. Then he said, 'We're in a game, don't you know? If we weren't supposed to do something, they'd outlaw it in the programming, right? So anything you can do...you're allowed to do. Don't you think?'"

"Th-that's total nonsense!" Asuna exploded before Nezha had barely finished. "That would mean you could butt in and attack someone else's monster, or create a train that attacks someone else, or any other thing that's completely against proper manners! In fact, since the anti-crime code is turned off outside of towns, that would mean it's totally okay to –"

She stopped mid-sentence as if afraid that saying it out loud might cause it come true.

Without thinking, I reached out and brushed Asuna's arm, the white skin even paler than usual. In most cases, she would pull several feet away in disgust, but now, that contact grounded her emotions and the tension drained out of her.

I pulled my hand away and asked Nezha, "Was that all the poncho man said?"

"Er...yes. We nodded to him, he stood up, said 'good luck' and left the bar. I haven't seen him since," he said, his eyes wandering as though searching his memory banks. "Now it all seems very mysterious...After he left, the guild most certainly changed.

Everyone seemed very gung ho on the idea. I'm ashamed to admit that I decided I would rather be the centerpiece of the money-making scheme than be relegated to useless baggage, dragging everyone down. But..."

Expression flooded back into Nezha's face. He squeezed his eyes shut and grimaced.

"But...the first time I tried the trick...when I broke that substitute weapon and saw the look on the customer's face, I knew. Just because it was possible within the game didn't make it right. I should have given the real sword back and explained everything...but I didn't have the guts. When I went back to the hangout bar, I was going to say we should call it quits but...but when they saw the sword I stole...they were so, so happy, and they said how great I was, and...and...and I just couldn't–!"

*Wham!* He suddenly slammed his forehead down straight onto the table. Purple light flashed off the walls of the room. He did the same thing again, then again, but his HP were protected by the game code in town.

He didn't know what to do. We'd prevented him from attempting suicide, he had no means of replacing the victims' belongings, and he couldn't even return to his friends.

If there was one way to atone for his sins, it would be to publicly admit his actions and apologize to the player base. But I couldn't demand that he do it. I couldn't guarantee that all of the honest, upfront players fighting to free us all from Aincrad, some of whom were his victims, would forgive Nezha for his actions. And I couldn't imagine the punishments they might devise for him if they didn't.

The only realistic solution I could come up with was to have him go through the teleporter back to the Town of Beginnings and hide himself in that vast city. Or perhaps he could reverse course, going back to fighting, and find some way to contribute through battle. The problem with that was that throwing knives were a total sub-skill, better for nothing more than distracting enemies...

But then I remembered a rare piece of loot I had gotten from a difficult Taurus Ringhurler in the labyrinth just earlier that day.

It was rare but not particularly valuable, and of no use to me– something very eccentric and long-ranged.

"...Nezha."

He raised his forehead off the table an inch. I saw cheeks wet with tears.

"What's your level?"

"...I'm level 10."

"Then you've still only got three skill slots. What are you using?"

"One-Handed Weapon Crafting, Inventory Expansion...and Throwing Knives..."

"I see. If I told you that I had a weapon you could use...would you be prepared to give up on crafting? On your Blacksmith skill?"

*Wednesday, December 14, 2022.*

## *11*

The tenth day since we had beaten the boss of the first floor, and the thirty-eighth day since we'd first been trapped inside this game of death.

The collective "front-line players" including me and Asuna, had finished progressing through the massive labyrinth tower brimming with muscled bull-men, and finally reached the chamber of the second-floor boss.

Our raid, made up of eight different parties, was at a total of forty-seven, just under the limit allowed by the game. Despite the loss of Diavel the knight and those too shocked by his death to take part, the group had grown, thanks to the addition of the five warriors from the Legend Braves.

Lind the scimitar user, formerly Diavel's right-hand man, led his blue group with three parties totaling eighteen members. Once we'd cleared the second floor and they initiated the guild quest on the next floor up, they were planning to establish the Dragon Knights guild. The *knights* part was clearly an homage to the spirit of their fallen leader, but I didn't know where the "dragon" came from.

With another eighteen was the green group, gathered around their opposition to beta testers. Led by Kibaou, who swung a one-handed sword just like me, they'd already decided on their own guild name: the Aincrad Liberation Squad.

That accounted for six parties and thirty-six members. Next was Agil, the massive axe-wielder and his three friends (all muscled like he was, for some reason), Asuna the fencer, the only female in the group, and then Kirito the evil beater. That made forty-two. With the five added members of the Legend Braves, that made a total of forty-seven, just one under the limit.

I sat in the corner of the large safe zone just outside the boss chamber, watching the separate groups check their equipment and distribute potions. I leaned over to Asuna, who was once again wearing her trademark hood, and whispered, "Just one more and we'd have a full raid."

"True...I guess he didn't make it in time."

"We got to the boss chamber a lot faster than I expected...It's a tough quest to beat in just three days," I bemoaned. Asuna shot me a dirty glare.

"Well, from what I hear, it even took a certain *someone* three days and two nights to finish it."

Three days earlier, in the village of Taran near the labyrinth, I had given Nezha a special kind of ranged weapon and a map.

The map pointed out the location of an NPC hidden in the rocky mountains along the outer perimeter of the second floor, and the secret passageway to reach him. This NPC was none other than the bearded Martial Arts skill master who had drawn the whiskers on my cheeks that turned me into Kiriemon.

I asked Nezha if he was prepared to give up on the weapon-crafting skill he'd spent so much time on, and take up Martial Arts instead. The weapon I'd picked up in the second-floor labyrinth required both the Throwing Knives and Martial Arts skills to use.

Abandoning a skill was not an easy decision to make, even when it was only a day or two of experience being lost in the case of a blacksmith, working the skill upward was both a matter of time and considerable money. In other MMOs, it was as easy as rolling an alternate character, but now that *SAO* was a "one character per account" system by virtue of our predicament, that wasn't an option. The most rational choice was to wait until he reached the level that would open up another skill slot. Another choice might be to remove the Inventory Expansion skill that gave him extra room for items.

But instead, in exchange for the weapon and map, I demanded that Nezha remove his blacksmithing skill.

In *SAO*'s current state, attempting to balance crafting and combat was too dangerous. A player venturing into the field needed to focus everything under his control on maximizing the chances of survival, from his skill choices, to his equipment, to his inventory. Plenty of even the most well-prepared players had lost their lives because they were missing that last bit of attack strength, or armor value, or one more potion. Nezha took just one deep breath before accepting my harsh demands.

"As long as I can be a swordsman here, I don't need anything else," he said, then smiled and added, "but I suppose using this thing won't make me a swordsman."

Surprisingly, it was Asuna who answered, "Everyone fighting to help beat this game is a swordsman. Even a pure crafter."

We had guided Nezha past the battles to the entrance of the secret passage and left him there. His level was high enough, and I considered inviting him to join the boss battle if his Martial Arts training finished in time, but it seemed three days wasn't enough for him to break that rock. There was no need to rush.

Nezha wouldn't be risking danger by attempting weapon fraud again.

"He'll be a big help in beating the third floor, I'm sure. It's a pretty good weapon if you can master it, and he'll be able to find a spot in some guild or other. One aside from the Braves, I'm guessing..."

"Yes...I hope so," Asuna agreed. We looked across the safe zone at a group of five. Orlando was wearing his usual pointed bascinet helm and Anneal Blade. Beowulf was the short man with the double-handed sword next to him, and the skinny spearman was Cuchulainn. There were also two others that weren't present during the battle against the Bullbous Bow: Gilgamesh, who fought with a hammer and shield, and Enkidu, who was outfitted with leather armor and daggers.

At this morning's meeting, I detected a mixture of unease and discontent among the Legend Braves. I had to assume it was the disappearance of Nezha, their sixth member. If they had been an established guild, they could use location trackers to find him, but here on the second floor, guilds were nothing but names.

I could understand their concern, but I was under no obligation to explain the situation to them. After all, they'd forced Nezha to undertake a weeklong string of dangerous scams that easily could have led to his execution if anything was exposed to the public.

"That's all nice and good, Kirito, but we shouldn't be spending our time worrying about the state of other parties."

"Oh? Why?" I blinked. She sighed in exasperation.

"Lind said we'd put the raid group together just before the boss fight, but think about it. There are three parties for the blue team, three parties for the green team, one for the Braves, and probably one last one for Agil's group. That makes eight."

"Oh...g-good point."

I hadn't given it any thought since she mentioned it, but eight parties was the maximum for a raid. In the first boss fight, we'd had a lower number, and Asuna and I got to be in our own leftover party, but that wouldn't be an option this time.

Without any magic, *SAO* didn't have the usual full-raid heals and buffs, so it was quite possible for extra people to take part in the battle outside of the raid. The problem was that being outside the group meant you couldn't see the HP of the other members, and they couldn't see yours. It made gauging the proper timing of potion rotation very tricky.

I had to make sure that Asuna at least made her way into Agil's party. I looked around for the axe-warrior's distinct shape.

"Hey, you two. Good to see you again," came a baritone voice from behind me. I turned around to see the very man I was looking for.

His craggy face split into a grin, the light shining off his bald head. "I hear you two have paired up. I guess I should congratulate you."

"Um...we're..."

*Not a pair,* I tried to say, but Asuna set the record straight. "We're not a pair. It's just a temporary partnership. Nice to see you, Agil."

Agil smiled again and looked at me, raising an eyebrow. It was a cool gesture, but it felt as though he meant it in a consoling way. I hastily cleared my throat.

"Y-yes, well, um...that's right. So I'm guessing we're about to finalize the raid structure, since we're almost at the absolute limit for eight parties..."

I was planning to ask them if they would take Asuna in their party, but again, I didn't get the chance to finish. "Yeah, that's what I came to ask you about, There are four of us, so why don't you two join our group?"

It was such a breezy, careless invitation that I couldn't help but hesitate.

"Um...well, that's really generous of you, but are you sure? I mean, given my standing..."

Asuna sighed and Agil shrugged his shoulders and threw his hands. That gesture, combined with his appearance, was clearly not Japanese, but his command of the language was perfect, so there was a strange mixture of exoticism and familiarity about the man that made him both fascinating and charismatic.

"What do they call you, a beater? It's only a tiny percent of people who actually call you that."

Even the word *beater* sounded fresh and new coming from his lips. Most people, including me, pronounced it with a flat intonation, like *cheater,* but he stressed the *bee* and softened the *ter*, which made it almost sound like a cool title to have.

"We actually have our own nickname for you."

“Really? What is it?” Asuna asked. Agil glanced at her and grinned.

“The Man in Black. Or Blackie.”

She snorted. I wasn’t exactly thrilled with that epithet–I hadn’t chosen the color of the coat I looted from the kobold boss–but even more startling to me was that she’d actually laughed. I peered into her hood in curiosity.

Asuna quickly composed her expression and gave me a familiar glare before continuing, “Thanks for the offer, Agil I suppose we’ll take you up on it–me *and* Blackie-san.”

“Oh, come on, you’re not going to run with that, are you?” I protested.

Asuna replied, “Blackie, as in, the prompters who wear all black during a play, right? Sounds perfect for a guy who hates being in the spotlight.”

“...Oh...I see. But that’s not exactly the same...”

“I mean, if you’d prefer that I just call you Kirito-kun all the time, I can do that.”

“...Like I said, that’s not exactly the same...” Agil, who grinned as he watched our bickering, burst out laughing at that point. “If you two are that in tune, then I’m leaving the switch timing up to you. The four of us will focus on tanking, so you guys do the damage.”

He held out both hands, and Asuna shook his right, while I took the left. I bowed briefly to the other three behind him and received waves and thumbs-up in return. I hadn’t talked with them much at the first-floor boss battle, but they all seemed to be as good-natured as Agil.

I accepted Agil’s party request and noted the six HP bars lined up on the left side of my view, just as we hit fifteen minutes until the battle would begin. The noise of conversation died down toward the front, so I turned to see that two players were now standing before the massive doors to the boss’s chamber.

One of them was Lind, decked out in silver armor, blue cape, and scimitar at his waist. The other was Kibaou, with his dark armor and moss-green jacket. “Ugh, not another double-leader situation,” I groaned. “Isn’t there only one leader by definition within the system?” Asuna asked.

“That’s a good point...”

As if sensing our confusion, Lind raised a hand and spoke loudly to the group. Unlike the area outside the first-floor boss chamber, this was a safe zone, so there was no fear of tauruses coming to investigate the noise.

“Well, it’s time. Let’s start forming the raid! First, an introduction: I’m Lind, chosen to be your leader today. Greetings, everyone!”

Before I could even wonder how Kibaou would willingly give up control, the cactus-headed man interjected, “Only chosen ‘cuz ya won a coin flip.”

Half the gathering laughed at this, while the other half looked upset. Lind shot Kibaou a dirty glare, but he did not respond to the bait.

“...The fact that we’re already here, just ten days after opening this floor, is a testament to your skill and dedication! If you lend me your help, there’s no way we can fail to beat this boss! Let’s finish the day on the third floor!”

He raised a fist, and all of those who didn’t laugh at Kibaou’s jibe roared in approval.

With his rousing speech and long hair, formerly brown but now dyed blue, Lind seemed to be fully accepting the role of Diavel’s heir. I couldn’t help but feel that here and there, hints of self-consciousness that his predecessor never displayed peeked through the facade.

“Now let’s form the raid! Of the eight parties, the Dragon Knights will form teams A, B, and C. Kibaou’s Liberation Squad will make up teams D, E, and F, and team G will be Orlando’s Braves. And team H...”

He looked to us in the very back. For an instant, his breezy smile seemed to vanish when his eyes met mine, but he looked past me just as quickly.

“...will be the rest of you. Teams A through F will concentrate on the boss, while G and H handle the mobs...”

This news did not come as a surprise to me. What was surprising, however, was the voice that spoke up in response.

“Hang on just a moment.”

It wasn’t Agil and certainly wasn’t Asuna. It was the leader of the group of five on the far wall: Orlando.

When he spoke, the eyes staring out from beneath his bascinet visor were just as piercing as when they’d nearly seen through my hiding ability outside the bar.

“We’re here to fight the boss. If you want us to rotate around, I might understand, but we’re not going to just hang back and deal with mobs.”

His brassy voice echoed off the walls and died out, the ensuing lull filled by the fevered murmuring of the blue and green players. I could make out mutters of “Who do they think they are?” and “Bloody newcomers.”

Then it all clicked into place for me.

With the disappearance of Nezha, Orlando and his team had just lost a huge source of income. This was their chance to leap out to the head of the clearers. The money earned by the raid party was equally shared between all members, but the experience points and skill boosts were not.

The enormous store of experience points the boss was worth would be distributed by the amount of damage done (or blocked), and the skill proficiency gained by attacking a powerful enemy was far beyond that of a normal foe. None of that went to them if they didn't attack the boss directly.

The five Braves had upgraded their equipment to about the maximum it could be at this point, but their player levels were below the average of the raid. They probably saw this boss battle as the best chance to close that gap.

And yet, disagreeing with the raid leader's orders wasn't going to get them anywhere. The scene could have easily turned into an ugly shouting match, but the blue and green players didn't let it get any worse than whispers.

I suspected that was due to the powerful aura the Legend Braves were exuding. Level, stats, and skill proficiency were all hidden variables not exposed to the public–but equipment power was different. Weapons and armor augmented close to the limit began to glow with a depth that reinforced their value.

At the present moment, the best any player–including me–could do was upgrade their weapon, and perhaps their shield, to that glowing state. But the Braves were a different story. With the massive sum of cor they reaped in the past week, they'd been able to buy full sets of excellent equipment and power it all up. All of their gear was glowing as if under a powerful buff spell, and it created the strong impression that these five men were not to be trifled with.

Of course, equipment strength was not all there was in the game. More important than anything in *SAO* was personal experience and the ability to react and adjust. But in the battle ahead against Baran the General Taurus, every value was important–especially armor strength.

This was because General Baran used an elite version of the taurus races special attack...

"All right. In that case, team G can join the fight against the boss," Lind said stiffly. I looked up and found myself staring right into the blue-haired man's eyes again.

While his hairstyle might have been the same as the one worn by breezy affable Diavel, Lind seemed to have a significantly more obstinate side to him. He held my gaze this time and said, "According to our prior intelligence, the boss only has one accompanying mob that does not re-pop. I trust team H will be able to handle that alone?"

Asuna and I sucked in a sharp breath, our hackles raised, but team leader Agil waved a hand to calm us. His voice and manner stayed perfectly calm.

"It might be one monster, but the intel says that it's not your average mob, but more of a mid-level boss on its own. Plus, maybe it's only the one, but we don't know that for sure. That's a lot to ask of a single party."

The prior intelligence they were referring to was, of course, the second-floor boss edition of Argo's strategy guide, which appeared just yesterday in Taran. It held the attack patterns and weak points of the boss and its attendant mob, but as the disclaimer on the cover said, all information was based on the beta test.

The first-floor boss used katana skills that hadn't been there in the beta, and it led to the death of Diavel the knight. We had to assume that there were alterations since the beta here, as well. In a worst-case scenario, there might be two or more of "Nato the Colonel Taurus" accompanying Baran instead of just one.

But Lind actually agreed with Agil's rebuttal.

"Of course, I have no intention of repeating the mistakes of the first floor. If we spot any difference in the patterns listed in our prior intelligence, we will immediately retreat and rethink our plan. If the attendant mob is too much for one party to handle, we'll send another team to help. Will that do?"

It was about as much as we could hope for at this stage. Agil murmured in the affirmative, and Asuna and I let out the breaths we'd been holding in.

Next came a review of the boss's attack patterns and a final check of each team's individual strategy, leaving just two minutes until the scheduled fight time of two o'clock. That was only a general guideline, so nothing was stopping us from beginning the fight slightly before or after the hour.

Lind raised his hand and said, "All right, it's a bit early, but..."

Suddenly, he was cut off by a familiar phrase from Kibaou, who had, somewhat surprisingly, kept quiet this entire time.

"Now, hang on just a sec!"

"...What is it, Kibaou?"

"You been basin' everything on this strategy guide so far, Lind. Now, all this info is comin' from the info dealer who ain't even been in the boss room, right? Is that really good enough for us?"

Lind's mouth twisted in displeasure. "I won't claim that it's perfect, but it's better than nothing, isn't it? What's your alternative? Are you going to walk in there to check out the boss for yourself?"

Now it was the green-clad Liberation Squad that bristled in anger, but Kibaou simply smiled confidently.

"What I'm sayin' is, we know we got at least one person here who's seen this boss for himself. So why don't we get his take on it?"

What?

I took a step back and to the left, to hide behind Asuna. But Kibaou lifted his right hand and pointed straight at me. Dozens of eyes turned in my direction, and Asuna callously stepped aside to avoid them.

"Whaddaya say, Black Beater? Why don'cha offer us some advice on this boss battle?" he bellowed. I couldn't read his expression to see what he was really thinking.

"...What does he think he's doing?" I muttered quietly, but Asuna could only shrug.

I'd heard that Kibaou's Aincrad Liberation Squad rallied around a resistance to the former beta testers. As a means to compete with the testers who rushed out to monopolize the game's best resources, they aggressively recruited new members from the thousands left down in the Town of Beginnings, distributed money and items fairly, planned to conquer the game through sheer numbers. At least, according to Kibaou's theory.

So what did he stand to gain by giving a known ex-tester a platform? You'd think it was clearly some kind of trap...but there was something in the cactus-haired swordsman's eyes that could be taken as honest fervor.

*If that look's an act, yer one helluva actor,* I muttered to myself. One, two, three steps forward, and I had a proper view of every face in the raid.

"Let me just make this dear. I only know the boss from the beta test as well. So it's totally possible that something...or everything about this boss has been changed."

As I spoke, the muttering players eventually fell silent. Even Lind, who I figured would interrupt, did not speak.

"But I can say that the regular tauruses in the labyrinth use the exact same attacks that they did in the beta. So I think it's a certainty that the boss will use sword skills that are an extension of that pattern. As you just discussed, you want to evade when he goes into his motion, but what's most important is how to react when you take the first hit. Avoid getting hit with double debuffs at all costs. In the beta, every player that got stunned and then paralyzed..."

*Pretty much died,* I stopped myself from saying.

“At any rate, if you stay calm and watch his hammer, you can avoid the second hit. As long as we all take that into account, this lineup can beat the boss without any casualties.”

Nothing I said couldn’t be found in Argo’s guide, but virtually all the players present nodded in understanding when I was done.

As usual, Kibaou’s expression was a cipher to me, but Lind had a look of surprise. He clapped his hands briskly. “All right, everyone: Avoid the second hit! Now let’s get started!”

He turned around and faced the giant set of doors and loudly drew his scimitar, holding it aloft.

“We’re going to crush the second-floor boss!!”

The dim corridor shook with the roar of the gathering.

Blue hair waving, his left hand pushing the door open, Lind looked very much like Diavel had in that same exact moment back on the first floor.

# *12*

Monster attacks against players fell under two general categories. One was direct attacks that dealt HP damage.

The other was indirect attacks that did not cause direct damage but occasionally posed a significant threat, in other words, debuffs.

Akihiko Kayaba, the designer of this game of death, at least had a minimum of sympathy for new players, for he did not grant any of the kobolds in the first-floor labyrinth debuff attacks. The delay effect that led to Diavel's death was a debuff, in a way, but it was an effect that occurred at a high likelihood when suffering multiple consecutive attacks, and wasn't a special skill that the kobold lord could use at will.

Which meant that the tauruses that dwelt in the second-floor labyrinth were the player's first real experience with serious, regular debuffs.

"Here it comes!" I cried, recognizing that the double-handed hammer was being lifted straight aloft.

The rest of my party called out their acknowledgment and jumped backward. The hammer stopped high overhead for an instant, its wide surface glowing with brilliant yellow sparks.

"Vrrrooooooo!!"

With a roar so fierce, it might as well have been a long-range attack of its own, the beast brought down the hammer. The mass of metal, rippling with lightning, slammed against the dark stone floor. It was the taurus face's special debuffing skill, Numbing Impact.

No one was standing within the direct damage range of the blow, of course, but there were also narrow sparking tendrils that extended out from the impact point.

One of them shot toward me along the floor, fading out, until it just barely licked the end of my boot.

Instantly, I felt an unpleasant prickle at my toes. Fortunately, I was just outside of the debuff range, so there was no stun icon showing beneath my HP bar. Everyone else kept farther away from the shockwave, so none of them were affected.

"Full-power attack!" I shouted, and the six of us fanned out in a semicircle around the taurus and closed. Each person unleashed the strongest sword skill in their weapons repertoire. Agil's two-handed axe, his crewmates' similar weapons, Asuna's Wind Fleuret, and my Anneal Blade blasted the beast with an array of colored lights. The bull-man's three-part HP gauge finally emptied its first bar and opened the second.

"I think we can do this!" Asuna shouted from her familiar position to my left.

"Yeah, just don't get overconfident! Once we get to the third bar, he'll start using consecutive numbing attacks! Plus," I raised my voice to ensure that Agil's group heard me, "based on the first-floor battle, we should assume there might be a new attack when we hit that last bar! If that happens, we all pull back!"

"Got it!"

The taurus recovered from its delay at the same time our skill cooldown ended. Agil's tanks recognized that the next attack would be a sideways blow and took defensive stances along its trajectory. Asuna and I hung back, waiting for the right moment to counter.

Just over five minutes had passed in the battle against the boss.

So far, our team was performing well. None of us had suffered the Numbing Impact effects yet, and none had taken heavy damage.

The four tanks were losing HP with each attack they blocked, of course, but the pace of damage was slow enough that we were making do with just a one-man pot rotation so far.

And yet, the fact that our battle was going well meant hardly anything.

The blue-skinned, bull-headed beast that team H faced right now was only Nato the Colonel Taurus, an extra thrown into the boss monster fight...a distraction at worst.

“Evade! Evaaaade!” came a somewhat panicked scream from the other side of the vast boss chamber. When I had the chance, I glanced over the heads of the dozens of players to see a frightfully large shadow.

A bristly, crimson red pelt enveloped rippling muscles. His waist was covered with a luxurious golden cloth, but in keeping with taurus tradition, his upper half was bare. The chain dangling over his shoulders was also made of gold. To top it off, the golden battle hammer in his hands shone with a dazzling brilliance.

Coloring aside, Colonel Nato might as well have been a body double of Baran, but there was one other major difference: size. General Baran, the boss of the second floor, was at least twice the size of Nato.

Because of the physical height limit of the ceilings in the labyrinths of Aincrad, Baran was not as tall as the mammoth Bullbous Bow that prowled the landscape, but there was no escaping the primal fear inspired by a sixteen-foot beast man. Even the kobold lord from the first floor felt huge, and he was only seven feet tall and change.

Naturally, General Baran’s golden hammer was massive as well, its powerful head the size of a barrel. When he lifted it, the surface shot golden sparks. The tanks and attackers pulled back as one, in accordance with Lind’s order.

“Vrruuuuvraaaaa!!”

Baran’s roar was appropriately twice as fierce as Nato’s, and he smashed the floor. Even at our distance, we could feel the shockwave, which was followed by a burst of sparks.

Again, the effective range was twice that of his subordinate. It was Baran's unique skill, Numbing Detonation.

The queuing-up motion was very easy to identify, but the blast Radius was so wide that two members failed to get to a safe distance, and their feet were swallowed by the golden sparks. The lightning wrapped around their limbs and demobilized them–the stun effect, one of the most common debuffs of the many in the game, though not one to be overlooked. The stun effect caused by the taurus's numbing attacks lasted three seconds, and unlike many debuffs, it wore off automatically.

But while three seconds might not feel long against garden-variety mobs, it was a lifetime against a deadly floor boss. Even at this distance, I was keenly aware of the fear and panic those stunned warriors were feeling.

One second, two seconds...and just before the third, one of the stunned fighters dropped his short spear to clatter onto the ground. It was a fumble, a secondary debuff that sometimes occurred in the midst of a stun. In the next instant, the soldier was free, and the blue-shirted member of Lind's group bent over to pick up his weapon.

"No–"

Get back, here comes the next one! I wanted to yell, but I held it in. He wouldn't hear me at this distance, and my companions in team H would confuse it for an order directed at them. After a brief but powerful Slant to Colonel Nato's ribs, I looked to see General Baran raising his hammer again.

Thwam! A second Numbing Detonation.

The hammer struck the same spot as the last one, and more yellow lightning shot forth. Again, they swallowed the spearman attempting to pick up his weapon.

But while he'd been standing upright last time, he fell down to the floor in this instance.

The visual effect that surrounded his avatar was not yellow, but pale green. This was not a stun but a more powerful and dangerous debuff, paralysis.

It was the true terror of the tauruses' numbing skills–the second hit in succession would turn the stun to a paralyzing effect.

Unlike a stun, paralysis did not disappear after a few seconds. It wasn't indefinite either, but even the weakest effect would last ten minutes...a full 600 seconds. Obviously, no one could survive a battle while prone for that length of time, so healing items were necessary.

The main methods of recovery were healing potions or purification crystals. The latter were impossible to find until later in the game, so potions were the only choice. However, paralysis left only the dominant hand of the player able to move–and slowly, at that–so even pulling a bottle out of a pouch was a trial. Crawling out of the boss's attack range was completely out of the question.

I told them not to pick up their weapons but wait until they were sure the boss wasn't going to attack twice!

But there was no use complaining to myself. Besides, picking up a dropped weapon was just human instinct. I couldn't count the number of times I'd done the same thing and suffered additional hits during the beta. I only learned to deal with that particular challenge with a cool head once I gained the Quick Change mod so that I could call up a replacement from my inventory.

Baran callously targeted the paralyzed spearman and prepared to stomp him with a massive foot. Fortunately, his party members quickly intervened to pull him out of harm's way.

I heaved a sigh of relief, but when I saw where they were taking him, my eyes bulged.

Lined up along the back wall were already seven or eight players, clutching green potions in their stiff hands and waiting for the effect to wear off.

The entire time that we'd been carefully chipping away at Colonel Nato, a large number of the main force was suffering from secondary numbing.

"Things aren't going well in the main fight," Agil rumbled as he returned from his potion rotation.

I quickly responded, "Yes, but the more they fight, the more they'll get accustomed to the rhythm. I haven t seen any differences from the beta yet, so I think–"

We'll be all right, I was about to finish, but Asuna cut me off with a sobering note.

"But Kirito, if any more of them get paralyzed...it'll make a temporary retreat much harder."

"...!"

I tensed and clenched the handle of my Anneal Blade. The weapon wouldn't fall unless I intentionally dropped it (or an external factor caused me to fumble it), but my subconscious was working in overdrive after witnessing the prior scene with the spearman.

The boss chambers in Aincrad, at least as far as I'd seen, did not lock the players inside once the battle had begun. If things got hairy, it was always possible to beat a hasty retreat. That didn't mean it was a simple matter, of course; there was a considerable distance between the battle zone and the door, so if everyone took off running at once, the boss would catch up to us in no time and cause delays, stunning, and ultimately, death.

So in a way, escaping from the boss chamber required a trickier coordinated effort than actually fighting the adversary. Could we even pull it off, burdened by a large number of paralyzed fighters?

For one thing, lifting an immobile player in your arms to carry them out required a significant strength value. I couldn't lift

Asuna up with my skinny arms when she had passed out in the first-floor labyrinth, so I had had to drag her out using a sleeping bag–an emergency measure still fresh in my memory.

From what I could see, about four-fifths of Lind and Kibaou's forces were balanced or speed-first fighters, with only a few pure strength tanks. As Asuna pointed out, if many more players got paralyzed, it would be much harder to disengage.

"We might need to refocus and prioritize dealing with the numbing," I said, stepping out of the way of a three-part hammer combo from Nato. Asuna nimbly matched my steps beside me.

"I agree. But if we start calling out orders for the main force, it's only going to confuse the chain of command. We need to get our ideas to Lind's ears."

Her hazel eyes darted over the HP of team H, and then Colonel Nato.

"We can handle him with just five. Go and talk to Lind, Kirito."

"Um...a-are you sure?"

"Yeah, no problem!" boomed Agil, who must have overheard. "The four of us can handle guarding for now! You've easily got two or three minutes to go talk with him!"

I turned back to look at the chocolate-skinned warrior and his friends, who seemed resolute, and I made up my mind. The key to defeating Baran was to keep his paralysis out of the equation. The battle was holding up for now thanks to our large number and high average level, but if this was the same party that tackled him in the beta, we'd be wiped out by now.

"All right, just for a bit! I'll be right back!"

Before I left, I unleashed a Vertical Arc into Nato's back as he stood frozen after missing with a big attack, and sped off for my target.

I shot across the coliseum-styled chamber, more than a hundred yards across, and headed for the main battle in the back.

My pasty, skinny real body back home would be lucky to break fourteen seconds in the hundred-meter dash, but the agility-heavy Kirito crossed the space in ten flat. My boot heels screeched to a halt as I lined up next to a blue cape at the rear.

For a moment, it occurred to me that this was the first time I'd ever been face-to-face with Lind, leader of this raid and former confidant of Diavel the knight.

Ten days earlier, just after we defeated the previous boss, he'd screamed, Why did you abandon Diavel to die? You knew the moves the boss was using! If you'd told us that information to start with, Diavel wouldn't have died!

I hadn't apologized. I'd met him with a cold smile.

I'm a beater. Don't you ever insult my skill by calling me a former tester.

And having said my piece, I had put on the Coat of Midnight I was still wearing, and left the first-floor boss chamber. I hadn't interacted with Lind since that very moment.

So it shouldn't have been a surprise that when I sidled up next to him, Lind's first reaction was a grimace of disgust. His narrow eyes went wide, his blade-sharp chin trembled, and his thin lips went even thinner.

But that manifestation of his true emotions soon sank back beneath his skin. It bothered me that both he and Kibaou were attempting to mask their true feelings about me–though it also wasn't my business to care about it–but now was not the time to worry about feelings.

"I ordered you to handle the sub-boss. Why are you–" he growled before I interrupted with the line I'd prepared,

"Let's regroup. If any more members get paralyzed, it's going to make escape nearly impossible."

The raid leader looked back at the seven or eight players waiting to recover, then at the state of the fight itself.

Following his lead, I checked the HP bar of General Baran. Out of his five bars, they'd lowered the third to the halfway point–we were already half-done with the boss.

"We're halfway there. Why would we need to retreat now?"

I had to admit, there was a part of me that thought it would be a waste to give up now. In the ten minutes since we had started the battle, several people had been paralyzed, but no one's HP had fallen into the red zone, and the pace of our damage against the boss was better than expected. There was more than a small chance that we could continue to press on, and make it through...But as if seeing through my hesitation, a voice rang out from behind us.

"How's about we pull back if one more person gets paralyzed?" I turned around to see Kibaou's familiar, light-brown spikes of hair. No doubt he was also filled with a powerful disgust at me for being a tried-and-true beta tester, but the look on his face was honest and forthright.

"Everyone's got the hang of the numbing range and timing. They're focused, an' morale is high. We been poundin' paralysis and healing potions, so if we stop now, we might not have the supplies ta give it another shot until tomorrow."

"..."

Again, I let my mind race for half a second before reaching a conclusion.

The most important thing here was not the number of tries or the sum of spent resources but human life. We had to succeed without losing anyone. That was the first rule of any boss battle in Aincrad.

But Lind and Kibaou already knew that. And if the leader and sub-leader of the raid decided that we could still win, the only thing that a single fighter from an outlying party would do by disagreeing was sabotage the chain of command–obviously, a bad decision.

And on top of that, my own instincts were telling me that if we could just maintain our current progress, we could defeat Baran without any casualties.

“All right, one more. Just be careful when we get down to the last HP gauge,” I said. Kibaou growled in acknowledgment and turned back to his station. Lind nodded silently and resumed his command.

“Team E, prepare to retreat! Team G, prepare to advance! Switch at the next stagger!” he ordered as I turned back and crossed the coliseum to rejoin team H.

Asuna wasted no time in asking, “What happened?!”

“We’ll pull back if one more person gets paralyzed! But at our current pace, we can probably make!”

“I see...” She briefly looked upset and glanced over at the main battle, but grudgingly agreed with the decision.

“All right. In that case, let’s finish off this blue guy quick, so we can join the others.”

“Yeah!”

Having reached a rapid consensus, we turned back to see that Colonel Nato had just unleashed a massive attack that was expertly blocked by Agil’s group. There was just a bit over one full HP bar left. With perfect precision, we hit the beast with sword skills to either flank.

That attack brought Nato to his final HP bar, and the blue skinned minotaur bellowed up at the ceiling. He stamped the ground with hooves as big as buckets, then hunched over to expose his horns and tensed like a coiled spring. It was a new pattern to this fight, but not one I’d never seen before.

“He’s gonna charge! Watch the tail, not the head! He’ll go along that diagonal!”

Nato turned to his left and charged right for Agil. But the axe-warrior, poised and prepared, easily dodged out of the way and unloaded his double-handed combo, Whirlwind. He stepped back, and Asuna and I switched in to continue the onslaught. The damage was so great that spinning yellow rings appeared over the colonel's head, and he began to wobble. We'd inflicted our own stun status on him.

"Now's our chance! Everyone use two full-power attacks!!"

"Raaah!!"

All six of us surrounded the taurus and pummeled him with flashes of light in red, blue, and green. His HP bar lost refreshingly large chunks in quick succession and soon plunged into the yellow zone that signified less than half remained.

Our full attack a success, we held distance once more, and the taurus's skin turned purple as he raged even louder. This berserk state before he died was, again, the same as in the beta. His attack speed was half again as fast as before, but with a calm head, this was not an issue.

On the other side of the chamber, the players let out a roar. I nearly lost my balance for a moment before I realized it was a cry of high spirits. General Baran's final HP bar had gone yellow as well. Meanwhile, the number of paralyzed along the wall had not risen but had shrunk to five.

"It's a good thing there weren't any surprises since the beta," Asuna opined to me while we waited for our skills to cool down behind Agil's protective wall. I looked back to the battle at hand and nodded.

"Yeah. But if we'd been paying attention against the kobold lord, we'd have noticed that the weapon on his back was a katana, not a talwar. And General Baran hasn't changed an inch from the beta. So..."

I suddenly realized that a shadow had passed across Asuna's face. "What's wrong?"

"...Um...nothing. I'm just overthinking things...I was just noticing that it's weird the first-floor boss was a lord, but the second one is only a..."

Ga-gong!

A sudden crash interrupted our conversation. We all turned as one to the source of the sound–the center of the coliseum chamber.

But there was nothing there. Only a series of concentric floor rings made of blackish stone...

No. It was moving. The three circles of paving stones were sliding, rotating counterclockwise and slowly picking up speed. The stones were rising from the floor before my eyes, elevating into a three-step stage at the center of the room.

Suddenly, the view of the far wall over the center platform began to waver.

"Uh-oh..." I grunted. That was the visual effect that signaled a very large object being generated into the map. As I feared, the wavering in the air rapidly spread and began to generate a thick, menacing shadow at the center.

The shadow soon coalesced into a humanoid form and grew legs thick as tree trunks that thudded heavily onto the stage.

Sturdy, dark chainmail covered the figure's waist, but its torso was, as usual, bare. This one had a long, twisted beard that hung down to its stomach. The head was that of a bull, but it had six horns instead of two, and atop the center of its head was a round accessory of silvery platinum–a crown.

The mammoth figure, so black it might as well have been painted with ink, reared back, and the third and largest of the tauruses let out a roar. Flashes of lightning spread around the minotaur, filling the chamber with blinding light.

Finally, a six-part HP bar appeared so high in my field of view that it seemed to be stuck to the ceiling. I gazed dully at the letters that appeared.

ASTERIOS THE TAURUS KING.

*Keep your mind moving!* Think! I told myself so hard that if I wasn't gritting my teeth, I'd have spoken the words aloud.

It was clear what had just happened. General Baran, whom every player present, including me, had assumed was the second-floor boss, was just as much an opening act as Colonel Nato.

Baran's final HP bar turning yellow must have been the trigger to generate the true boss pitch–black King Asterios. But speculation about the origin of the creature was pointless. What mattered was what we did next.

There was no need to think. We had to retreat out of the chamber. We didn't even know how this monster would attack...and the risks of fighting this taurus king were clearly far greater than that of the general.

The problem was that Asterios had spawned in the center of the chamber, and the raid party was fighting in the back of the room. The group would need to charge through his attack range in order to reach the exit. Team H, fighting Colonel Nato, was the closest to the exit, and we could probably make it out safely now, if we broke for it...but if we did that, and teams A through G were wiped out by the king, our chances of beating this game of death disappeared along with them.

How to evacuate a forty-seven-man raid party? The first step was eliminating our present foes as quickly as possible.

Time seemed to spring back into motion once our path became clear, and I promptly raised my sword high and shouted, "All units, all-out attack!!"

I tore my eyes away from Asterios atop his three-step stage, and fixed a gaze on the berserk Colonel Nato. I leapt as hard as I could, following the path of his hammer as he raised it behind him.

As a speed-focused swordsman with no heavy metal armor, I could jump about six feet from a standing position. Nato was closer to seven or eight feet, but with the added reach of my sword, I could easily get to his head.

My Slant skill hit the shining black horns directly. Nato's attack motion stopped partway, and he reared back and roared. The tauruses of the second-floor labyrinth, excepting only a few (say, the Taurus Ironguard, which wore a heavy metal helm), were weak to blows to the horns. I hadn't tried to strike their foreheads at any point until now because jumping attacks were inherently risky, and even a clean hit from a sword skill was no guarantee that the opponent would suffer a movement delay. But this situation called for desperate measures.

At the exact moment I landed, Asuna and Agil's team followed up with attacks of their own, knocking Nato's HP into the red zone. His delay wore off, and the minotaur roared and began his motion for a numbing skill. In any other case, now was the time to pull back, but I pushed forward.

"Raaah!"

With a roar of my own, I unleashed my very best Horizontal. Even if I hit the beast's weak point, I couldn't stagger the creature on consecutive attacks, but it wasn't the forehead I was aiming for–it was Nato's giant hammer. The timing window was extremely short, but if I hit his sword skill with one of my own just before he fired it off, it was possible to cancel the attacks out.

There was a piercing clang that seemed to strike directly into the center of my brain, and my sword shot backward. Meanwhile, the hammer was pushed back overhead. Without missing their chance, my five companions proceeded to launch another wave of attacks. Only a few pixels of HP remained.

Under normal circumstances, chaining sword skills together was impossible. But I knew from our hunting of the Windwasps the other day that you could get past that limitation if you used weapons of different categories. I curled up in midair and kicked out with my left foot. The resulting Crescent Moon, a vertical kick attack as I spun backward, caught Nato right on the forehead.

The taurus hurtled backward and let out a high-pitched screech before freezing stiff, then exploding into a massive cloud of polygons. It must have been treated as a proper sub-boss, not just a typical mob, because I promptly saw a Last Attack bonus read-out. I didn't have time for that, however; I spun around as I hit the ground.

The first thing I saw across the room was a towering ebony back. King Asterios was on the move. Fortunately, he hadn't targeted any of the five paralyzed along the east wall, but his destination was the thirty-six remaining fighters of the main party–who were still busy with General Baran.

My worst fear was that the main force would fall into total panicked chaos and retreat if faced by a boss on either side. Fortunately, that was not happening. But very soon, his lumbering steps would take him within attack range of the raid. We had to defeat the general before then.

"Let's go, Kirito!" said Asuna, her voice tense. But I wasn't sure if I should agree. It wasn't that I was afraid for my own life–for some reason that I couldn't explain, I was gripped with a sudden feeling that once I set foot into the battle ahead, I could not guarantee that she'd survive,

I knew damn well just how good Asuna was. I wasn't even sure if I could beat her in a one-on-one duel. But there was no denying my urge to force her to escape right there and then.

After I had abandoned my first and only friend at the start of this game, and was nearly killed by a fellow beta tester just hours later, I had sworn to live as a solo player, relying on no one but myself.

The week that we had just spent as a partnership-of-sorts was only a means to uncovering and stopping Nezha's fraud. Nothing more.

So why was I being ruled by this emotion...this sentimentality?

Why was I so desperate to keep Asuna from dying? "Asuna, you need..."

To run, I wanted to say–but I saw the powerful light in her hazel eyes. They told me that she knew full well what I was thinking. Her eyes were full of an emotion that was neither anger nor sadness but something even purer. Again, she said, "Let's go." There was enough strength in that voice that it bottled up the fear that had overtaken me.

"...All right," I said, and looked back at Agil's party. The axe-warrior nodded at me, not frightened in the least.

"We'll swing around the right flank and defeat Baran first. If the king attacks before then, we've got to pull him away as best we can to help buy them time."

"Got it!" the others shouted. Bolstered by their courage, I leapt forward. By the time I reached full speed, my hesitation was gone.

The monster's reaction zone, also called its "aggro range" was invisible to the naked eye. But the more experience one built, the more it felt like a tangible thing. I followed my instinct and circled around the right side of the plodding King Asterios toward the main party.

Baran's HP bar was already down into the red zone. But as with Nato when he was nearly dead, Baran had gone into a berserk state and was using his Numbing Detonation at every possible chance, slowing the group's attack progress.

We had thirty seconds until the king started to attack, I gauged.

I darted right between the wide-eyed Lind and Kibaou, directly in front General Baran, and leapt high into the air, aiming for his blazing orange horns. But the general was nearly twice the size of

the colonel. Even my highest jump combined with my longest reach couldn't make it all the way.

"Rrraah!"

At the apex of my jump, I took pains to hold my stance and just barely managed to throw off a sword skill. My Anneal Blade glowed green, and my body sped back into motion as though pushed by invisible hands: Sonic Leap, a one-handed sword charge skill.

This desperate attack hit him right in the weak point, and the general's body arched backward. This staggering was our final chance.

Asuna and the other four didn't need my order to know what to do. They raced in to land blows, then pulled back. The rest of the raid followed their lead, and General Baran was enveloped in flashing effects of every color.

But once again, it wasn't quite enough. There was still a pixel or two left on his HP bar.

"Not again!" I cursed, clenching my left fist. Coming out of a major sword skill off-balance, my only option was a simple attack. I roared and swung forward with a Flash Blow, hitting him square in the chest. It was just enough damage to do the job, and that tiny little jab sent the massive body expanding...and exploding.

I landed hard, ignoring the LA bonus readout entirely, and took a deep breath to command everyone to retreat back against the wall. There was no time to worry about whether I was overstepping my bounds or not.

But my breath caught in my throat before I could speak.

The onyx taurus king, who should have still been ten seconds away, was leaning backward, his massive chest bulging like a barrel. That looked like...

A breath attack. Long range.

And right in his path, back to him, her eyes fixed straight at me, was Asuna.

If she didn't move now, there would be no escape. I couldn't waste time racing over to her. But that kind of logical reasoning went out the window.

"Asuna, jump to your right!" I shouted as I dashed toward her. There were other players in the breath range, of course, but my tunnel vision was fixed on no one but the hooded fencer. She must have sensed the danger approaching from behind in my voice and expression. She leapt as I commanded, not bothering to turn around.



As soon as her boots left the black paving stone, I reached her and slipped my left arm around her slender body, leaping in the same direction to add to our momentum. Even at full strength, the jump speed was unbearably slow. The arabesque pattern in the floor flowed past, glacial in pace...

The right side of my vision went pure white.

The dry shockwave that hit me was exactly a clap of thunder. Asterios the Taurus Kings breath attack was not poison or fire but lightning. And by the time we realized it, the both of us, and over twenty other players in the raid, were enveloped in its white blaze.

There was no such thing as attack, healing, or support magic in *Sword Art Online*. But that didn't mean that all traces of magic were absent from the game world. There was an infinite variety of magical items to be found that raised stats or provided buff effects, and the blessing of an NPC priest at a church in one of the bigger towns granted a player's weapon a temporary holy effect.

But those supernatural effects did not exist solely for our benefit. In fact, the majority were a detriment. For example, the many special attack skills employed by monsters: poison, fire, ice, and lightning breath.

The most powerful breath attack in terms of damage was fire, but lightning was no joke. For one, it was instantaneous–it traveled the full length of its range in the instant it was unleashed.

Worse, it had a very high chance of stunning its victims, with the worst-case scenario involving an even more dangerous debuff.

Asuna and I took Asterios's lightning breath to our legs, and we both lost close to 20 percent of our health in one go. A green border began to blink around the gauge, and a debuff icon of the same color appeared as well.

Instantly, I felt my physical senses growing distant I couldn't move my legs to land upright, even if I tried. Asuna and I slammed into the ground on our backs. This was no mere tumble effect–after all of my warnings, we were now paralyzed.

"Asu...na," I rasped. She was laid across my chest like an immobile plank. "Heal with...potion."

I tried desperately to move my stiff hand. There were two red HP potions and one green paralysis antidote in the belt pouch on my right side. Somehow, I felt around and grabbed the green one, popped the cork and held it up to my lips, even as the rumbling footsteps grew closer.

Once I finished the minty liquid, I hesitantly looked up to see that the massive taurus king was barely ten yards away. His attack had hit several other players with paralysis, and over a dozen of them littered the ground between us and him.

The other thirty players who escaped the lightning breath were making their way around the slowly moving boss, but they weren't sure how to react. The reason why was clear: The raid's leader and sub-leader, Lind and Kibaou, were both paralyzed, and the closest to the boss's position. They were desperately trying to give orders, but a whisper was the best anyone suffering from paralysis could produce. None of the players outside Asterios's attack range could hear them.

But very close to my ears came the sound of a fragile, beautiful voice.

"Why...did you come?"

I looked back to see two very large hazel eyes right in front of my face. Asuna was collapsed directly on top of me, empty potion bottle clutched in her hand. She repeated herself. "Why...?"

She was asking me why I'd run toward her when I realized the taurus's breath attack was coming, rather than darting directly out of harm's way. I wondered what the answer was myself, but it did not become apparent All I could say was "I don't know."

And for reasons that were once again a mystery to me, she smiled gently, closed her eyes, and set her hooded head against my shoulder.

I looked over Asuna's back to see Asterios raising his massive hammer high overhead. The crushing implement, twice as large as even Baran's, was aimed right at Lind and Kibaou.

*So this is it*, I told myself.

If our two leaders died, the rest of the raid party would flee out of the boss chamber, leaving behind the ten or so paralyzed, including me and Asuna, to die...But at some later point in time, they would be able to use the information gleaned from Asterios's appearance and attacks to launch a second attempt The worst regret of all this was that I wasn't able to save Asuna and her limitless potential. As I'd told her after the first-floor boss, she could have one day led an enormous guild and been a leader to the player population. Like a shooting star, endlessly lighting up the sky of this dark, hopeless game of death.

I hallucinated a strange light, passing across the ceiling of the dim chamber.

But even after opening my eyes wider, the shining arc did not disappear. It reached an apex and began to fall, heading right for the crown on Asterios's brow as he was preparing to swing his hammer...

It wasn't until a high-pitched squeal of metal rang through the coliseum and Asterios lurched in pain that I realized the light wasn't a trick of the eye.

That was a long-range attack that shouldn't have been possible at this point in *SAO*, a sword skill under the Throwing Knife category. But the thrown weapon didn't simply fall to the ground after hitting the boss's weak point; it spun around and flew back across the room, as though pulled by an invisible string.

Asterios recovered from his delay and roared in anger, making a slow turn back to his attacker. That was the first actual hit on the boss, so it automatically drew the enemy's attention.

Suddenly, a powerful set of arms pulled me and Asuna off the floor. The mighty warrior, holding two people aloft without any help, spoke in a deep baritone.

"Sorry about that! I actually got a little spooked!"

Agil the axe-warrior carried us over to the eastern wall. His three companions were also busy moving paralyzed party members to a safer position. As if brought to their senses, the remainders of the blue and green teams raced over to the other immobilized fighters.

I tried to crane my neck up so I could see as he ferried us under his arms like suitcases. As we moved, the southern side of the coliseum came into view behind the boss's massive bulk.

About thirty feet from the entrance, a small figure clutching a bizarre weapon was staring up at the looming giant with a resolute look on his face.

"Isn't that–?!" Agil cried in surprise as he dropped us on the floor against the wall. And it wasn't just him–virtually everyone in the chamber was staring with shock at this new, forty-eighth player.

Not because he had suddenly appeared just before the boss routed us, or because he used a strange and unfamiliar weapon. It was because we had all seen this man hammering away at an anvil in the eastern plaza of Taran just a few days ago. It was Nezha the blacksmith.

He was dressed much differently now, of course. The brown leather apron was replaced by a bronze breastplate, gauntlets of the same material, and an open-faced helmet. But the image of a beardless dwarf that his short, stocky build and round, dour face created hadn't been neutralized by this new look; if anything, his accentuated it.

The entire raid was shocked that a blacksmith would be here, participating in the boss raid, with only two exceptions: Asuna and me, the ones who'd convinced him to change careers in the first place. I was surprised as well, of course, but only because I hadn't expected him to be able to charge straight through the labyrinth alone, after just three days of training.

But there were others here who would be shocked in a much different way from the rest of us. As soon as the thought occurred to me, a group rushed forward from the raid party in the center of the room. They came to a stop once they reached an angle that gave them a clear view of Nezha's face around the side of the boss. It was team G...the Legend Braves.

"Nez..."

Orlando started to call the name of his missing partner, but he held back at the last instant. It seemed the Braves were still trying to hide the fact that Nezha was part of their guild.

For an instant, Nezha looked back at his silent former companions with a pained look, but he composed himself and yelled, "I'll draw the boss away! Get everyone back on their feet now, while you can!"

Asterios's walking speed–for the first of his many HP bars, at least–was quite slow. If Nezha used the hundred-yard hall effectively, he could probably continue to occupy the enemy's attention all by himself. If he held out until all of the paralyzed had recovered, we might be able to evacuate the entire raid group safely...

But no. It wouldn't work. The boss moved slowly, yes, but he had that instantaneous lightning breath to make up for it. There was no way to dodge that onslaught on your very first encounter with it. And based on the moment of Nezha's appearance, he probably hadn't seen Asterios's first attack.

"Agil, warn him about..."

The breath attack, I wanted to say, but I was already too late. Asterios stopped still and pulled his head back again, sucking in breath. His chest puffed up into a round ball, and little sparks crackled out of his nostrils. Nezha was standing still, looking up at the boss's head.

"Move..." I rasped.

"Get out of the way!!" someone in the raid shouted. But Nezha nimbly leapt aside before the words were even out of his mouth. The next instant, a brilliant cone of white lightning shot from the boss's gaping mouth. The breath attack reached nearly to the exit of the room, but Nezha was clear of its path by a good six feet.

The way he moved...Did he know exactly when to dodge?

My eyes went wide, and I suddenly heard a very familiar voice...but not one I would have expected to hear here, of all places.

"The boss's eyes glow just before the breath attack."

I looked up from the floor, stunned, to see the tile pattern on the wall warp out of place. An even smaller figure than Nezha appeared out of thin air. My mouth fell open (as did Asuna's and Agil's, if I had to guess) as I stared at that familiar whiskered face–Argo the Rat, the information dealer.

It was only afterward that I learned that she'd undertaken a series of quests beginning in the jungle outside the labyrinth that eventually earned her information on Asterios the Taurus King, the true boss of this floor. She learned not just his attack patterns, but the best way to counteract him–such as staggering him with a thrown weapon to the crown atop his head.

When Argo discovered that quest, she zipped around turning in objectives, and only finished just after the raid party entered the labyrinth. Messages couldn't reach anyone in a dungeon, and it was a question whether Argo and her agility-heavy build could make it through the labyrinth alone.

As she wavered with indecision outside the tower, she happened across Nezha, who was also preparing to brave the dangers of the labyrinth alone. They worked together–using Argo's Hiding skill and Nezha's throwing weapons to avoid or lure mobs out of their way–and reached the boss chamber just before Asterios appeared and threw the battle into chaos.

"Why are you still lying around? You're not paralyzed anymore," Argo said. I finally noticed that the paralysis icon beneath my HP bar was gone. I sprang to my feet and sprinted over to the Anneal Blade where it lay after I was hit by the breath attack. Asuna's Wind Fleuret was also nearby so I brought them both back to the wall. I considered whether or not to address what Asuna said while we were on the ground, then decided it wasn't the right moment.

A quick look around told me that nearly everyone else had recovered from their paralysis. Lind and Kibaou were on their feet, but I saw Argo marching over toward them. For an instant, I even forgot that Nezha was single-handedly keeping the boss occupied.

Argo the Rat was, along with me, one of the most prominent publicly known beta testers in the game, and Lind and Kibaou were leaders of the anti-tester movement. As I expected, Lind didn't even pretend to hide his disgust, while Kibaou's expression was more uneasy and uncertain.

"Hey, spiky. Long time no see," Argo greeted Kibaou, ignoring Lind entirely. That's when it hit me.

Kibaou was the very man who'd attempted to buy my Anneal Blade through Argo. It was the kind of shady dealing that no leader would want associated with him, and Argo could sell the details to anyone who paid the price.

He didn't respond to her greeting, so she continued, "If you're gonna pull out, better do it now. But if you want info, I can sell it to you. For the low, low price of...nothing."

The moment Asterios's lightning breath hit Lind and Kibaou, they were at the greatest risk of dying of anyone in the raid. So it was a bit of a surprise to me that after just a few seconds of deliberation, they chose to continue the fight. Of course, we wouldn't know if that was the right choice or not until the end of the fight. But the tables had turned significantly since the moment just after the boss appeared. Nezha had successfully pulled Asterios's aggro for over two minutes, giving the rest of the raid enough time to recover from paralysis and refill their HP. On top of that, now we had the details on the boss's patterns.

"All right, let's begin the attack! Teams A and D, forward!" Lind ordered. The heavily armored tanks rushed in at King Asterios. Their body-blow charge hit him in the legs, finally drawing his attention away from Nezha.

Instantly, he started to sway, as though all of the tension keeping him upright had snapped. Asuna and I raced over.

"Nezha!"

The former blacksmith looked up, his expression as weak as usual...but with a new core of strength behind his smile. He held up the throwing weapon in his right hand.

It was the weapon I'd given him–a thick, bladed, circular throwing tool about eight inches across. The only way to get it at this point was as a rare drop from the Taurus Ringhurler enemies in this labyrinth. It fell under the Chakram subcategory of throwing knives, but unlike the actual chakrams from ancient India, this one had a leather grip along part of the circle. The grip made it useful for both throwing like a disc, or augmenting a punch like a set of brass knuckles.

Because of that versatility, chakrams in *SAO* couldn't be used with the Throwing Knives skill alone. They also required the mastery of Martial Arts, the extra skill that could only be learned from the bearded master hidden deep in the mountains.

As he said himself three days ago, he could hit monsters with a thrown weapon without having to worry too much about his perspective issues. But orthodox throwing knives were a quantifiable weapon that ran out over time and weren't suited for a main weapon. But the chakram was like a boomerang: It returned to the thrower's hand automatically. Thanks to that, he didn't need to worry about ammunition.

Nezha steadied his weary legs and held up his chakram. The was glowing yellow. Even though I was the one who'd given him the weapon, I didn't know the name of this sword skill.

"Yaah!"

With a powerful cry, his hand flashed, and the sparkling ring flew high in the air. It raced across the ceiling, a brilliant burst of light, and hit Asterios on the crown with perfect accuracy as he raised his giant hammer. There was another high-pitched clang, and the boss's muscled torso writhed. One of the attackers in Kibaou's team shouted, "Nice!" from the taurus king's feet.

The chakram hurtled back with alarming speed and smacked right back into Nezha's hand, thanks to the assistance of the game engine. He turned to me and Asuna and smiled again as though he were about to burst into tears.

"It's like a dream come true. Here I am...in the boss battle, playing a role..."

His voice quavered and died out there. Nezha swallowed and tried again.

"I'll be fine! Go ahead and join the battle!"

"All right. Do your best to read his lightning breath ahead of time and stagger him before he uses it. You're the key to our victory!"

I turned around and not just Asuna but Agil and his band of hearty toughs, ready for action.

Wasn't Agil supposed to be the leader of this team? I'll have to apologize to him later for taking over. I shouted an order to the group. "Let's go!"

They echoed my call, and we headed for the unceasing series of sword flashes centered around our foe.

The true boss of the second floor of Aincrad, Asterios the Taurus King, was a third bigger than even Baran the General Taurus. His paralyzing lightning breath had terrified us momentarily, but with Argo's knowledge of his patterns, the group had devised a safe and steady strategy that was chipping away at his health.

The greatest role in the battle was undoubtedly Nezha and his throwing weapon, but it soon became clear that the single strongest group was team not Lind or Kibaou's forces, but the Legend Braves.

Like General Baran, Asterios used the area-effect skill Numbing Detonation, but Orlando and his team were able to take the numbing effects at very close range without ever being stunned.

When the king lifted his mighty hammer, the other groups had to evacuate to safety, but team G stayed right on him, continuing their assault without fear of his detrimental attacks. Even Lind had no idea when to give the order for them to retreat.

All of the Braves had high debuff resistance, thanks to their heavily upgraded gear. The unfortunate truth was that they'd "earned" the money for that herculean task through Nezha's upgrading scam, but now that Nezha was no longer a blacksmith, there was no longer any chance that they'd take the heat for it.

"...It's a complicated feeling, isn't it?" Asuna mumbled when we retreated temporarily to drink healing potions.

"Yeah. But at least they shouldn't be able to do it anymore," I replied, referring to the weapon-switching fraud. "If they're able to help us advance through the game like this, we'll just have to accept it. I still feel bad for those who lost their weapons, though."

“Yeah...”

She still looked conflicted, so I took her mind off things by leaning in close and sharing an idea.

“Y’know, I don’t really feel like letting them win the battle MVP, so how about we fight back a little bit? If the timing permits it, of course.”

“Fight back...?”

I lifted the edge of her hood and whispered into her ear. Asuna’s eyes looked skeptical and exasperated, but she nodded in agreement. When she pulled the hood back up over her head, I thought I detected a hint of a smile on her lips, but I couldn’t peer in close for a second look.

“Hey, Kirito,” Agil rumbled from behind, with an odd tone in his voice and an empty bottle in his hand, “You said you weren’t a pair, right?”

Asuna straightened up and pivoted on her heel. Her voice was frosty.

“We are not.”

Fortunately, I didn’t need to weigh in on the topic, because a cheer broke out from the direction of the battle. Asterios’s last HP bar had gone red. Our team’s HP had just hit maximum again, which was perfect timing.

“Team E, pull back! Team H, up forward!” Lind commanded.

I held up my free hand and clenched my Anneal Blade +6. Even if it was our turn in the rotation, it spoke to Lind’s fairness as a leader that he didn’t try to hold me back.

“Okay, hang on,” I said, waiting for the right timing. “Go!”

We darted in to take the place of green team E along the boss’s left flank. First, Asuna and I traded off with single skills against those tree-trunk legs. The monster roared in rage and swiped at us, which Agil and his friends blocked as they switched in.

Asterios's size was certainly frightening, but on the other hand, the larger a monster was, the more people could attack it at once. One full party was all that could fight Colonel Nato at a time, while two could tackle General Baran, and King Asterios was large enough for three at once.

Team H took the left side, blue team B handled him front and center, and Orlando's team G was still tearing away at his right flank. The king's black skin was burning through like coal, a sign of his berserk state, but we were on pace to finish him off with this set.

"Vrrruaaraagh!!"

With a terrible, primal roar, Asterios began to suck in air again.

I didn't t need to see the sparks around his mouth to know he was preparing his breath attack. But just as quickly as he started, the chakram flew in and struck him on the crown. Lightning exploded harmlessly from the king's nostrils.

If this was a normal MMO, that 100-percent-guaranteed stagger from the chakram would get nerfed to oblivion, I thought to myself, referring to the practice of reducing its power to restore proper game balance.

Floor bosses in *SAO* were a one-time affair–once defeated, they would never return. If Akihiko Kayaba was indeed watching over the battle from afar, would he be gnashing his teeth at the sight of his guardian, unable to stay poised long enough to unleash its best attack? Or would he be applauding the ingenuity (and luck) of the players who hit upon this unlikely strategy?

We're going to beat your second floor in just ten days, Kayaba! I thought triumphantly. A glance at the king's HP bar showed just a tiny sliver of red about to disappear. He raged even harder, stomping three times in succession before raising his hammer! Team B pulled back, recognizing the Numbing Detonation motion, while team G readied their best sword skills.

If the Legend Braves seized the Last Attack bonus here, they'd go from the backup force during the Bullbous Bow fight to the best fighters in the game. But I wasn't charitable enough to sit back and let them reap those rewards. I had a beater reputation to uphold. "Now, Asuna!"

I leapt as high as I could. The fencer kept right up with me–in fact, her jumping speed was faster than mine. The force ripped the hood off of her head, and long chestnut-brown hair flowed through the air.

"Vraaaah!!"

Asterios brought down the hammer. A circular shockwave spread from the impact point, followed by bursts of sparks. Two of the Braves couldn't fully resist, succumbing to the stun effect of this final attack. Numbing Impact was weaker, but Detonation couldn't be avoided just by jumping, so Asuna and I would suffer the same effects once we touched the ground.

But...

"Sey-yaaaa!"

Asuna unleashed a fierce cry and shot off the rapier charge attack Shooting Star in midair.

"Rrrmaaah!"

I followed her with the one-handed sword charge attack Sonic Leap. We both shot up vertically, followed by trails of blue and green light. We were headed straight for the forehead of King Asterios, which was protected by his metal crown.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the flashing of the three mobile members of the Legend Braves firing off their own sword skills.

The next instant, our Anneal Blade and Wind Fleuret pierced the crown entirely and sank deep into the enemy's head. The crown splintered and cracked into pieces.

The massive body of King Asterios burst in an explosion that filled the entire coliseum chamber.

# *13*

"Congratulations," came a familiar voice, making a familiar statement in English with a familiar native accent. Asuna and I turned, exhausted after the long battle, to see Agil's smiling face. His meaty hand was curved into a thumbs-up, which I returned. Asuna didn't bother with that, but there was a rare smile on her beautiful face.

Agil lowered his hand and let his eyes gaze into the distance.

"Your skill and teamwork are as brilliant as ever. But this victory doesn't belong to you...it's his."

"Yeah. If it wasn't for him, we'd have lost at least ten people in this fight," I replied. Asuna nodded in agreement.

Standing done on the far side of the celebrating mass of players was the small figure of Nezha the former blacksmith. He stared up at the ceiling, watching the vanishing fragments of the boss, golden ring clutched in his hand.

I was distracted by a sudden cheer that rose from the group. At the center, Lind and Kibaou were locked in a bracing handshake. The blue and green squads were applauding wildly, and I joined in by clapping.

"Sheesh. They're best friends after all..."

"At least until we reach the third floor," Asuna noted sardonically. I got to my feet, whispered thanks to my Anneal Blade for its duty, and returned it to the sheath. After pulling Asuna up to a standing position and sharing a brief fist bump, I finally felt the satisfaction of the victory...of winning safe and sound.

We'd finished the second floor of Aincrad. It had taken us ten days, and there were zero fatalities in the boss battle.

After taking an entire month on the first floor, and losing our promising leader Diavel in the fight, this was better than I could have hoped for. But I reminded myself that we were a hairs-breadth from being wiped out entirely. The sudden and surprising appearance of King Asterios nearly killed Lind and Kibaou, not to mention Asuna and me.

We learned two lessons from this battle.

One, fulfill every quest around the last town and the labyrinth, because they might impart info on the boss.

And two, we had to assume that every boss from this point on had been changed in some way from the beta test. Of course, we'd only made it to the ninth floor in the beta, so once we reached the tenth, it was all new to us regardless.

Not only did gathering info through quests become important, but so would scouting out the boss first. The latter would not be easy, however. Most boss monsters didn't appear until you reached the back of the chamber and destroyed some key object, so there was no guarantee that a reconnaissance party would escape safely. There were a fair number of speedy scout types among us, but very few that could use throwing tools.

From this point on, the role of Nezha the chakram-thrower, as well as Argo, would become even more crucial.

I took a quick look around the room and didn't see the Rat, even with my Search skill–she must be hiding again. I nudged Asuna and we made our way over to Nezha.

When the ex-blacksmith saw us, he smiled radiantly, as though a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Nezha bowed and said, "Great work, Kirito and Asuna. That last midair sword skill was incredible."

"Well, actually..."

I scratched my head uncomfortably. I didn't want to tell him that it was just me trying to make sure I beat Orlando's group to the prize. Instead, Asuna answered for me.

"Incredible? That was your appearance. How did you manage to use a brand-new weapon with such skill? You must have practiced quite a lot."

"No, it didn't seem hard to me. I mean, I finally got to be what I'd always wanted. Really...thank you so much. Now I have..."

He trailed off and bowed deeply one more time, then turned back to face the center of the room. I followed his gaze and saw a group of five about twenty yards from the crowd. They were lined up and exchanging handshakes–Orlando with Lind, Beowulf with Kibaou, and the three others with other leading players. They wore the proud smiles of true heroes.

If you looked at the results screen for the battle against Asterios, the score based on damage defended and caused by the Legend Braves would easily outclass any other team. They'd found their place front and center among the best players in the game. I didn't know if they'd end up joining Lind's Dragon Knights or Kibaou's Liberation Squad, or if they'd start their own guild. But...

"Nezha, shouldn't you be there with them?" I asked.

But the single most important person in the fight simply shook his head.

"No, it's fine. There's something else I still need to do."

"Huh? What's that?" I asked. Nezha looked at me and then at Asuna, whose brows were furrowed in apparent understanding. He bowed once more, then lovingly traced the surface of his chakram's blade with a finger, and began to walk away.

That's when I noticed that three players from the raid were coming this way. At first, I assumed they were coming to thank and congratulate Nezha, but their faces were hard.

After examining the tall man in front with the broadsword, I finally realized why. This man, now wearing a breastplate over the blue doubly of Lind's group, was none other than Shivata, the man who'd asked Nezha to upgrade his sword five days ago. Next to him was another man in blue, and the third wore the green of Kibaou's team. They were all scowling.

Shivata pulled up in front of the Nezha and growled, "You re the blacksmith who was working in Urbus and Taran just a few days ago, aren't you?"

"...Yes," Nezha replied.

"Why did you switch to a fighter? And how'd you get that rare weapon? It's a drop-only item, isn't it? Did you make that much money from smithing?"

Oh, no.

Shivata's tone of voice said that he already suspected Nezha of shady dealing. Even if he didn't have a clue about the weapon switching trick, he was clearly guessing that some kind of foul play had occurred.

In truth, Nezha's chakram was a rare weapon, but not particularly valuable. After all, it required both the Throwing Knives supplementary skill and the Martial Arts extra skill to use. But explaining all of that wouldn't remove the suspicion from Shivata's mind.

Eventually, all of the celebrating players fell silent, including Lind, Kibaou, and the Legend Braves, watching this new turn of events. Most had looks of grave concern, but even at a distance, the panic and tension on the faces of the Legend Braves was written plain as day.

In the moment, neither I nor Asuna knew what to do.

It would be easy to speak up and say that I gave him that chakram. But was deflecting the brunt of Shivata's anger and forcing him to back down really the right choice?

It was undeniable truth that Nezha had seized Shivata's precious, treasured Stout Blade and broken a spent weapon in exchange.

Shivata used all of his willpower to control himself at that moment. He left without insulting or blaming Nezha. The broadsword he wore now was two ranks below his old Stout Blade. Shivata had done his best to power it up in the five days between then and now, and had managed to survive through this terrible battle. Did we really have the right to trick him again, to lead him way from the truth?

Nezha sidestepped my indecision entirely. He laid his chakram on the ground and got down on his knees, then pressed his hands to the ground and lowered his head.

"I deceived you, Shivata, and the two others with you. I switched out your swords before attempting to upgrade them, replacing them with spent weapons that I broke instead."

The coliseum was full of a silence even heavier than the one before the battle, ear-piercing and thick.

*Sword Art Online* had an astonishing system of recreating players' emotions on their virtual avatars, but if there was one glaring weakness, it was a tendency to exaggerate for effect. I hadn't seen it for myself, but from what others said, it took very little time for sadness to manifest as tears. A happy feeling translated to a wide smile, and anger was represented by a reddened face and a bulging vein on the forehead.

So the fact that Shivata's only response was a furrowed brow was a true testament to his self-control. By contrast, the two men at his sides looked as though they were ready to explode, but they held it in as well.

I looked over at Asuna and saw that she was trying to suppress her feelings as well, but her face was visibly paler than usual. I must have looked the same way.

Shivata's hoarse voice finally broke the painful silence.

“Do you still have the weapons you stole?” Nezha shook his head, hands still firmly on the floor.

“No...I already sold them for money,” he rasped.

Shivata clenched his eyes shut at the answer, but he knew it was coming. He only grunted and then asked, “Can you pay me back the value?”

This time, Nezha had no immediate answer, Asuna and I held our breath. Far behind Shivata, standing at the left edge of the raid, Orlando’s group was visibly uncomfortable.

In terms of simple feasibility, the sum of money that he’d taken from them was far from impossible to raise again.

Only ten days had passed since Nezha and the Legend Braves had started their fraud. The market prices for those items couldn’t have changed that much, so if they sold off the assets they’d bought with the money they received, it should turn back into roughly the same amount.

But that was where the problem lay.

It wasn’t just Nezha who had spent the money they’d unfairly earned, but the entire Legend Braves. The brightly gleaming armor covering their bodies was that very sum of money in physical form. In order to pay back their victims in cor, Orlando and his group would have to sell off their equipment. After they’d just played a major role in this boss battle, would they really just give up the source of their power? And more fundamentally, how did Nezha plan to get out of this situation?

As I watched, holding my breath, the short ex-blacksmith answered, forehead still scraped against the floor tiles.

“No...I cannot repay you now. I used all of the money on all-you-can-eat meals at expensive restaurants, and high-priced inns.” Asuna sucked in a sharp breath.

Nezha wasn’t trying to weasel his way out of anything.

He was going to take responsibility for all of the crimes, and force Shivata and the others to focus their anger and hatred solely on him. He was covering for his companions, the ones who treated him like a nuisance and egged him into committing those acts.

The large member of Lind's team to Shivata's right finally snapped.

"You...why, you filthy–!!" He raised a clenched fist and stomped his right foot on the ground multiple times. "Do you have any idea what it's like to see your favorite, beloved sword smashed to pieces?! And you sold it off...to have yourself a feast?! To stay in deluxe hotels?! Then you use the rest to buy yourself a valuable weapon, barge into the boss battle, and fancy yourself a hero?!"

Kibaou's companion on the left shrieked, "When I lost my sword, I thought I'd never fight on the front line again! But my friends donated some funds to me and helped me gather materials...You didn't just betray us, you stabbed everyone fighting to complete this game in the back!" And like a lit fuse, those shouts caused all the other players who'd been silently watching this scene to explode.

"Traitor!"

"Do you have any idea what you've done?!"

"You caused our pace to slow down!"

"Apologizing isn't going to fix anything!"

Dozens of voices overlapped into one mass of angry noise. Nezha's lonely back shrank, as though succumbing to the pressure of all that rage.

When the crowd's anger at beta testers threatened to explode during the planning for the first-floor boss battle, Agil had been the voice of reason. But there was nothing he could do here. He and his companions stood off at a distance, watching pensively.

Orlando's group was equally quiet. The five of them were whispering to each other, but it was inaudible over all the angry bellowing.

I couldn't do anything but watch, either. There was no magic word to solve the situation at this point. Now that the truth of Shivata's weapon was open knowledge, the only thing that could mend the wrongdoing was an equal sum of cor, or something similarly heavy...

Suddenly, I remembered something Nezha had said minutes before.

I finally got to be what'd always wanted. Really...thank you so much. Now I have...

...nothing left to regret.

Those were the final words he'd said, the ones I couldn't hear.

"Nezha...you can't mean..." I mumbled.

One of the two people who had the power to bring this scene to a close strode forward, his hand held high. Blue hair and blue cape. A shining silver scimitar at his waist. Lind, the leader of the raid.

Shivata's trio stepped back to give him the stage, and the furious shouts that filled the chamber gradually died down. When it was at least quiet enough to have a conversation, he spoke.

"Will you tell us your name?"

At that point, I realized that Nezha was never a part of the raid party as classified by the system. It was one thing for Argo, who passed on her info and split, but Nezha took on a crucial role in hitting the boss's weak point. He deserved to be part of the raid, and we'd been one short of the limit, anyway. The only team with five members was G...the Legend Braves.

Something rubbed me wrong about the fact that Orlando hadn't extended a party offer to Nezha, a friend since before the days of SAO. But more important than that was how Lind decided to rule on this situation.

"...It's Nezha," the ex-blacksmith said, still prostrate on the ground. Lind nodded a few times. His features were sharp by nature, but he looked more nervous now than he did in the midst of the battle. He cleared his throat.

"I see. Your cursor is still green, Nezha...but that speaks to the severity of your crime. If you'd committed a properly recognized crime and turned orange, it would be possible to return it to green through good karma quests. But no quest will wipe your sins clean now. If you cannot repay what you owe to others in the game...we will have to find a different means of punishment."

*He can't*, I thought to myself, teeth gritted. Lind's thin lips grimaced, then opened again.

"It was not just swords that you stole from Shivata and others. It was a great amount of time that they poured into those blades. Therefore..."

Some of the weight lifted off my shoulders. Lind was about to demand that Nezha pay back his crimes by contributing to the game's advancement, and most likely regular payments over a long-term period. It was the same punishment that Diavel would have meted out if this had happened ten days earlier.

However...

Before Lind could finish, a high-pitched voice drowned him out. "No...it wasn't just time that he stole!"

A green-clad member of Kibaou's team ran forward. His skinny body shook left and right as he screeched–

“I...I know the truth! There are plenty more players he stole weapons from! One of them had to use a cheap store-bought weapon, and ended up getting killed by mobs he’d handled just fine before!!”

The vast, masterless chamber fell silent once more.

After a few seconds, the blue-clad man next to Shivata spoke again, his voice hoarse.

“If...if someone died because of this...then he’s not just a swindler anymore. He’s a puh...puh...”

The scrawny green man jabbed a finger forward and said what the other one couldn’t.

“That’s right! He’s a murderer! A PKer!!”

It was the first time I’d heard the term PK in the open since we’d been trapped in the flying castle.

It was one of the most well-known terms among all the many MMOs out there. It wasn’t short for “penalty kick,” or “psychokinesis,” or anything like that. It stood for “player kill,” or “player killer”–the act of killing another player, rather than a monster.

Unlike most MMORPGs made these days, PK-ing was possible in SAO. There was absolute safety within any town, thanks to a stringent anti-crime code, but that protection disappeared outside of town limits. The only things that protected players then were their own equipment, skills, and trusted companions.

In the month-long beta test, a thousand players cooperated and competed in a race upward, sometimes erupting into combat where players crossed swords with one another. But PK did not apply to honest duels between two willing combatants. A player killer was someone who set upon unsuspecting adventurers in the wilderness or dungeons, a pejorative term slapped on those who killed for fun and profit.

Several times during the beta, I'd been attacked by PKers, but not once since the full game launched. On the very first night, I was nearly killed by another former tester who formed a party with me, via MPK: a monster player kill, using monsters to do his dirty work. But that was a passive means of killing and done in an attempt to win a quest item to further his own survival.

Now that the chaos of that initial starting dash had died down, it was impossible to imagine someone committing a true PK for the purpose of sick pleasure.

With the linking of our virtual and physical fates, PK-ing was out-and-out murder. In a normal MMO, engaging in such behavior was a form of roleplay, but that excuse didn't fly anymore. After all, killing players–in particular, players who showed enough willpower to venture into the wilderness and fight for themselves–only prolonged the possibility of our eventual freedom.

The day I met Asuna again in Urbus and we went Windwasp-hunting together, I said that wearing a burlap sack for a mask would make me look like a PKer. The only reason I made a joke like that was my belief that no one in Aincrad would actually stoop to such a thing. But here we were, and that ugly term was out in the open.

The skinny dagger user from Kibaou's team kept shrieking, his finger still pointed at Nezha's head.

"A few bows and scrapes can't make up for a PK! No amount of apologizing or money is going to bring back the dead! What's your plan? How are you gonna make this right? Well?!"

There was a painful edge to his voice, a screech like the point of a knife scraping against metal. Within a cold, sobered corner of my mind, I wondered where I'd heard it before. The memory came within an instant.

This dagger-wielding man had leveled a similar charge against me, right after we beat the first-floor boss. “I know the truth! He’s a beta tester!” rang the voice in my ears. I’d shut him up haughtily demanding that he not lump me in with the other testers, but that trick wouldn’t work here.

Nezha’s tiny back absorbed all of the accusations hurled at it. He clenched his fists atop the stones and spoke, his voice trembling.

“I will accept...whatever judgment you decide upon.”

Another silence.

I felt like every person present understood the meaning behind the word “judgment.” The air in the coliseum grew even colder and pricklier than before. That invisible energy reached a critical point, everyone waiting for the one person who would break the tension.

Eventually, I succumbed, ready to tell everyone to just wait a moment, even though I didn’t have any ideas of how to follow it up.

But I was half a second too late. One of the dozens of raid members who’d been inching up on Nezha finally uttered a short burst.

“Then pay the price.”

It was just four words, a statement that didn’t hold any specific meaning of its own. But it was like a pin that burst an overinflated balloon.

Suddenly the chamber was full with a roar of noise. Dozens of players were shouting all at once: “Yeah, pay the price!”

“Go apologize to the ones who died!”

“Live by the PK, die by the PK!” Their cries grew more and more overt until spilling into direct threats.

“Pay with your life, fraudster!”

"Settle your account by dying, you PK-ing bastard!"

"Kill him! Kill the filthy scheming scum!"

I couldn't help but feel like the rage on their faces wasn't entirely anger at his crime. There was fury and hatred for the game of *Sword Art Online* that had trapped them here, as well. It was the thirty-eighth day since we'd been locked in this flying fortress. Ninety-eight floors remained to conquer. The overwhelming, desperate pressure of those astronomical odds had finally found an outlet, a target ripe for punishment: a swindler and murderer among our ranks.

Neither Lind nor Kibaou had the means to resolve this situation now. Even I'd just been sitting on my heels the entire time, watching the scene unfold, since Nezha had admitted to his crimes. My eyes wandered until they happened across the five Legend Braves standing at the side of the raid. They weren't shouting like the others but staring down at the ground, avoiding looking at Nezha.

*You should have known this could happen someday, Orlando...Didn't you ever see it coming?* I asked silently, but there was no answer. In fact, if I was making accusations, the same went for the man in the black poncho who'd taught them the trick. If he was generous enough to show them a fancy trick for free, why didn't he explain the potential dangers to them?

Unless...

What if this situation–the group turning on Nezha, demanding his execution–was exactly what the black poncho was hoping for in return?

In that case, what he wanted was not the help of the Braves, but the opposite. He wanted Nezha to be killed at the express desire of all the top players in the game for his direct role in the scam. That would create a precedent for direct player-on-player killing and lower the mental hurdle to reaching the act of murder across Aincrad.

If my fears were correct, that man in the black poncho was the real PKer here. But rather than soil his own hands with the act, he set up other players to do the dirty work for him, dragging them down to his level.

This was bad. We couldn't allow his devious plan to work. We couldn't have Nezha publicly executed. After all, I was the one who recommended that Nezha switch to a combat role and make up for his crimes by helping advance the game. In effect, I brought him here to this situation. I had a responsibility to prevent his death.

Amidst the hail of jeers, someone finally moved into action. Not Lind, not Kibaou, not even Nezha–but the Legend Braves. They slowly crossed the vast room, metal armor clanking, toward the prostrate Nezha. Orlando's bascinet visor was half-down, so I couldn't see his face. The other four marched in step with him, their faces downcast.

The semicircle of Lind, the dagger user, and Shivata sensed that something was happening, and they stepped back to make room for the newcomers.

The group came to a halt with heavy footsteps. Nezha must have sensed the approach of his former comrades, but he did not look up. His fists were still balled on the floor, his forehead pressed to the tile. Orlando stopped directly across from Nezha, the chakram placed on the floor in between. His right hand moved to his left side. Asuna gasped.

His gauntleted hand gripped the hilt of his sword and pulled. Orlando's weapon was, like mine, an Anneal Blade. It appeared to be powered up to a similar level. If he was going to strike Nezha's unprotected back, it would only take three or four hits to finish the job.

"Orlando..."

I called out the name of the paladin who had just helped defeat the boss monster minutes ago.

You spent far more time with Nezha than I ever did. But I can't stand here and watch you kill him–no matter what that does to my reputation.

I put all of my weight into my right foot, preparing to dart forward the instant he raised his blade. At the same time, I sensed Asuna shifting position as well.

"Don't do anything, Asuna."

"No," she said flatly.

"Don't you get it? If you interfere with this, you won't be allowed among this group anymore. You might even be labeled a criminal."

"I still won't stop. Don't you remember what I said the first time we met? I left the Town of Beginnings so that I could be myself."

"..."

I didn't have any time or arguments with which to convince her. Instead, I merely signed in resignation and nodded.

Somehow, the angry shouting that filled the coliseum had turned to silence again, everyone watched wide-eyed, waiting with bated breath for the fateful moment.

And perhaps because I was concentrating so hard...I picked out the quiet voice from Orlando's helmet, even though I was nowhere near close enough to hear it. "I'm sorry...I'm so sorry, Nezuo."

The paladin laid down his sword next to the chakram on the ground. He took a few steps and got down on his knees next to Nezha, facing the same direction, removed his helmet, and put his hands flat on the tile.

Beowulf, Cuchulainn, Gilgamesh, and Enkidu followed his lead, setting down their weapons and helmets and getting into a line with Nezha at the center.

Amid dead silence, the five–no, six Legend Braves bowed in apology to the rest of the raid.

Eventually, Orlando spoke up, his trembling voice the only sound in the coliseum,

“Nezuo...Nezha is our partner. We’re the ones who forced him to commit that fraud.”



# *14*

"So why do we have to be the errand-runners here?" Asuna grumbled as she trudged along.

I shrugged and answered, "What can you do? It's just the way it is."

"No, not that! We were a party of two during the first boss fight, but this time we had a full six!"

"Only because Agil was considerate enough to let us join him. We'll need to thank him when this all blows over."

Asuna raised an eyebrow at me. "W-what?"

"Nothing. I'm just wondering if your skill at getting along is earning a few proficiency points."

"That's..." *my line*, I wanted to say, but I held it in. "That should be clear, since I have a gift for him, too."

"Oh? What's that, the Mighty Straps you found in the labyrinth?"

"...Ooh, good idea. I'll have to give those to him, too." I patted my fist into my palm.

Asuna looked at me doubtfully, then her eyes went wide with understanding.

"Oh, I know! You're going to foist that thing you've been keeping in the inn chest off on Agil!"

"Indeed."

She was referring to the large Vendor's Carpet that Nezha left with me when he abandoned his blacksmithing and went off to learn the Martial Arts skill. It was an expensive and useful item, but offered little benefit to a combat-focused character. Plus, it couldn't be placed in one's inventory, so it had to be rolled up and hoisted around by hand.

“Agil might be a warrior, but he seems likely to know some promising future blacksmiths, wouldn’t you suspect? I’m sure Nezha would be happy knowing that it went to good use.”

“But what if Agil himself wakes up to the lures of running his own business?”

“...Then I’ll be his first customer,” I answered glibly.

Asuna sighed and glanced ahead. We were walking up the spiral staircase between the second and third floors. But for some unknown design purpose, the stairs spiraled around the entire eight-hundred-foot-wide tower, meaning that we actually had to walk a distance of over 2,500 feet...plus height.

But because there were no monsters on the staircase, it was still a much easier exit from the tower than going from the boss chamber all the way down to the front entrance.

As the roving strikers (or, if you prefer, leftovers) of the raid, Asuna and I had been given our orders by Lind: to leave the labyrinth, which was shut off from all instant messages, and deliver the news of our victory to all the players who were eagerly awaiting an update.

Normally this would be the job–no, privilege–of Lind or Kibaou. But the main raid force could not leave the boss chamber for another hour or so. Not because they were locked inside but because they were too busy talking. The debate raged on about how to deal with Nezha and the Legend Braves.

But I no longer had any concerns about the outcome of that discussion. The instant that Orlando and his partners had laid down their weapons and admitted their sins, the conclusion was foretold. No matter how heated up the group was, they weren’t so bloodthirsty that they would execute a group of six players, and the addition of the Braves to the guilty side changed the equation: Now Shivata and the others could realistically be repaid for their lost weapons.

Orlando explained every last detail of the deception and removed all of his equipment, not just the sword and helm. The other four followed his lead, and produced a small mountain of high-level gear that would fetch a price beyond my estimation.

He told the group that if they turned all of these items into cash, it would surpass the value of the lost weapons–they'd sunk their own honestly earned money into the armor as well–and serve as a repayment for all the victims of their scheme. If there was cor left over, it could be used as a potion fund for the next boss battle.

Now that the damages were able to be repaid, the remaining problem was the player who died because his weapon was stolen.

Under the current configuration of SAO, no amount of money could make up for a lost life. The Legend Braves offered to go find the fellows companions and apologize in person, if that would help in any way. When they asked the dagger user who'd brought this story up, he backed down on his assertion, saying that it was just a rumor and he didn't know the name.

In the end, the group decided to ask the information agent to discover the truth of the matter. The first controversy over player-swindling in Aincrad was about to reach a close without bloodshed, but there was one problem remaining: how to convert the dozens of pieces of high-powered equipment into cash.

There was always the option of selling them to NPC merchants in town. But the NPC's prices were always kept below the market rate by the "invisible hand" of the system in order to combat inflation. If we were going to get the maximum value, the transitions had to be with other players.

The people with the most cor and the largest need for good equipment were the front-line players. So Lind and Kibaou considered the possibility of selling that equipment to the few dozen players present in the boss chamber and donating the money to Shivata's group of three.

Of course, there were more victims of the scheme than just the people present here, so proper payment would need to be made once everyone went back to town.

So the delay in leaving the boss chamber was due to a spontaneous auction. Sadly, none of the items was suitable for agile leather-wearers like me and Asuna–and even if there were some, I wouldn't have been in the mood to buy and equip them. As we stood around feeling relieved that a peaceful solution was found, Lind came over and said, "If you don't have anything better to do, could you leave the dungeon and tell the newspapers that our conquest was successful?"

I couldn't find a good reason to decline his request, so I prodded the reluctant Asuna, and we went out the door in the back of the chamber to the next floor. Agil and his friends waved good-bye, but we didn't have an opportunity to say anything to Nezha the former blacksmith.

As soon as Orlando and his friends lined up around him, his little back trembled and shook with constant sobs.

"Well, it seems like the case of fraud is going to wrap up safely...What do you suppose Nezha and the Braves are going to do next?" Asuna wondered as she climbed the gently sloping staircase.

I mulled it over. "Depends on them. They can't prevent the tale of the Braves' shady behavior from spreading around the front line. Either they'll have to avoid everyone here and go back down to the Town of Beginnings, or start over from scratch and try to reach our level again. Before we left, Lind told me that if they wanted to, he'd allow them to keep a minimum of cor necessary for the equipment they'll need to hang around. But no matter what they choose, they won't treat Nezha like a third wheel."

"Hmm...To be honest, I'm still not sure how I feel about Orlando...But if they do make it back to the front line, I'll do my best to work with them. I mean, even you did all right with Lind and Kibaou, didn't you?"

I nearly missed a step.

“I-I haven’t changed my attitude a bit! If anything, they’re the ones who are acting weird. Kibaou’s totally anti-tester, and Lind’s trying to raise an elite fighting force, so solos like me are only an obstacle to his goals. And yet, both of them were being oddly normal...”

Asuna momentarily looked frosty when I uttered the word solo. She sighed and said, “As usual, you’re completely clueless.”

“Huh? How so?”

“If all of the frontier players were under the lead of either Lind or Kibaou alone, they would have been much more open about excluding you. But the blue Dragon Knights and the green Aincrad Liberation Squad are jockeying for power even as they work together, right?”

“Um, yeah...”

“In the current situation, they’re both on edge. They think that if they antagonize you too much, you’ll end up aligning with the other team.”

“Me? With either blue or green?” I came to a standstill and chuckled. “Ha-ha, no way. They’d shut the door in my face, even if I actually wanted to join. I’m the evil beater, right? I mean, even today...”

I shut my mouth and started hopping up the steps. Asuna hurried to catch up, looking skeptical, then raised a finger in sudden understanding.

“Hey, by the way, what happened to the boss’s last attack bonus? On Asterios the Taurus Xing, I mean. I didn’t get the prompt.”

“Uhh, ahh, umm...”

“And now that I think about it, didn’t you win the LA on Colonel Nato *and* General Baran? You didn’t get the king too, did you...?”

“Um, well, that’s, uh–hey, is that the exit?”

“Oh, no, you don’t! You *did* win it, didn’t you? What did he drop? Tell me!”

Suddenly we were both jogging up the stairs. At the end of the gently curving staircase was a thick door decorated with a relief. The scene was of two swordsmen facing off among gnarled old trees. The left was dark-skinned, and the right was pale, but both were slender and fragile, with pointed ears.

The picture was meant to represent the theme of the floor ahead, I thought to myself.

Nezha–no, Nataku. You were the real MVP of the second floor. Come on back to us. The front line’s a scary, dangerous place...but it’s where you’ll find what you really wanted. And the front line needs you, too. After all...

“In a way, the third floor is where *SAO* really starts,” I said aloud. Asuna caught up to me, looking puzzled rather than harassing me more about the LA. “It is? Why is that?”

I started off with my now-familiar, unhelpful refrain: “Um, well...”

And savoring each and every step, I crossed the final thirty feet of the second floor of Aincrad.

# Afterword

Hello, this is Reki Kawahara, author of *Sword Art Online Progressive 1.*

The word *progressive* might make you think of video formats, but in this case it is meant in the "incremental increase" sense. I chose this title to represent the task of conquering Aincrad bit by bit, from the very first floor. From this point on, I'll be using the abbreviation *SAOP*.

So first of all, I should explain why I decided to start writing this series.

If you'll permit me to repeat what I said in the afterword of the first volume of *SAO*, I wrote the story as a submission for the Dengeki Novel Award, so I had to finish the story with the game being beaten, right in the very first installment. Later on, I wrote a number of shorter prequel stories that filled in gaps (see Volumes 2 and 8), but they're more like little episodes, and don't focus on the meat and potatoes of the players advancing through game.

So I've always harbored a secret desire to write about how Kirito and the others cleared each floor and defeated each boss in the game, it just didn't really happen until now. Because I'm now trying to write it all over again from the first floor, it creates a number of issues.

Biggest of all is how to deal with Asuna, the heroine. In the previously published series, Kirito doesn't get to know Asuna until much, much later. If I depicted Kirito as working with Asuna on the first and second floor of Aincrad, it would contradict what I've already published.

For a long time, I wavered between two options: avoiding that contradiction by starting off Progressive with a different heroine, or embracing the contradiction and going with Asuna right from the start.

Ultimately, I admitted to myself that it didn't feel right having anyone but Asuna at Kirito's side, and I suspect that most of my readers feel the same way. So I decided to have Kirito meet Asuna right away.

Of course, I'm certain that some readers will not be able to accept the contradictions with what I've written before, and that's okay. But I will do my utmost to make sure that the choices I make line up with the established events as best I can. My hope is that you'll be able to overcome my inconsistency and enjoy this new series for what it is.

Now that I've gotten my customary apologies out of the way, let's go over each of these stories.

"Aria of a Starless Night," the story of the first floor of Aincrad, picks up right after the story of "The First Day," which is found in Volume 8 of the main series. We see characters that had only appeared in name before, such as Kibaou, future leader of the Army, and the information dealer, Argo the Rat. Then, of course, there are old favorites like Agil before he became a businessman, and Asuna when she was just a beginner to MMORPGs. It was a very strange mix of the new and familiar as I was writing. Of course, Kirito is still Kirito.

Part of the point of Progressive is to explain the systems of in greater detail, so "Aria" spends a lot of time covering the concept of a "boss raid." I hope you really got the feel for a great big group of eight parties of six members each. If it didn't make sense to you, watch the second episode of the *SAO* anime series, please! Ha-ha.

The story of the second floor, "Rondo of a Fragile Blade," features a whole host of new faces. It took me quite a while to decide if the character of Nezha should be a man or a woman. Eventually, I got the feeling that having him be a girl would pose a whole new set of problems, so I took the easy route in making him a man.

I meant to have this tale feature the weapon upgrading system, but I let it slip away from me a bit, and the result was more of a mystery story surrounding the concept of upgrade fraud.

Since there wasn't much fighting in the early part of the story, I wanted to feature a nice, meaty boss battle, and ended up bringing out quite a nasty boss for just the second floor of the game. If that happened in a real MMO, I would totally throw in the towel!

Those two stories made up the first volume of SAOP. I've already got the title of the third-floor story picked out: "Concerto of Black and White." In game system terms, I'm going to focus on the theme of campaign quests.

Well, now that I've gone and done a sneak peek for the next volume, I should probably come clean and admit that I don't think I can write more than one volume of Progressive a year. So if I cover two floors a year, when will I actually get to the seventy-fifth floor...? I'm too scared to consider the possibilities! Hope to see you in Volume 2!

And of course, I'll be continuing with the main SAO series. Part Three of the Alicization arc, Volume 11, should be coming out in December. Kirito and Eugeo will be tackling the mysteries of the Underworld. Please check it out.

Also, the continuation of *SAO* means that I'll need to skip Accel World this time around. Deep apologies! But since Volume 9 and 10 of that came put in quick succession, it should be back to its normal schedule now. I'm not sure how long I will be able to keep up writing a book every other month (in fact, it's already looking hairy)...but I'll do my best!

Thanks once again to my illustrator abec-san for eagerly tackling two series at once, to my editor Miki-san for eagerly (I think) tackling this five hundred-page monster of a book, and to my vice editor Tsuchiya-san for dealing with the ulcers (I assume) of waiting for my very late replies to every message. And to those of you who read to the end of this very thick book, the greatest LA bonus of my gratitude!

Reki Kawahara–August 2012

# Credits

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