Chapter 2
Rondo of the Transient Sword
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 Hornet Boots 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, Mr. Kirito."

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 "Miss Asuna" 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 col?"

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 col. 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 col. 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 Dower 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 col 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 col.”

“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 dose 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–five time–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 too easy. Or a little too *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? 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, 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 thee 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!” 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...Miss Asuna, 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 col 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-boy. 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-boy 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 col 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, please. I’ll pay for the materials. Enough for a ninety percent chance.”

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 col, 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 col, 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 col 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 honesty 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 col...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?"

11

Wednesday, December 14, 2022.

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."

"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 Mr. Kirito 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 col 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 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.

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“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 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 col, 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 col, 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 e 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."



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"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 col 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 col 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 col 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 for eagerly tackling series at once, to my editor Mr. Miki for eagerly (I think) tackling this five hundred-page monster of a book, and to my vice editor Mr. Tsuchiya 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