

# Sugary Days

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Editor's Note:

16.6 onwards (but not 16.8.5) were part of the Material Edition releases of the Sword Art Online series and a direct sequel to [The Day Before](#). Kawahara Reki published them under his pen name, Kunori Fumio. The first one was sold at COMITIA 106, in November 2013 as Material Edition 10. It is the first chapter in the Forest Home series and is equivalent to Sugary Days 1.

## *Preface*

**As the numbers had run out in the «home in the forest» series that had continued from “Sword Art Online 16.6” to “16.9”, I have officially given it a title from this time onwards. The story is a proper sequel, so please do treat the prior four chapters as “Sugary Days 1 ~ 4”.**

Kawahara Reki, Sugary Days 5

# ソードアート・オンライン マテリアル・エディション 10



**WordGear**

# Sugary Days 1

## Chapter 16.6

### 1

Putting the index and middle fingers on my right hand together, I lightly extended them out. Some fold in the other three fingers, but I'm one of those who would leave them slack and opened.

Next, I moved the tips of the two extended digits slightly below my line of sight, then swung them down, parallel to the axis of my body. Putting a moderate amount of force into the speed of the fingers is fine for this, but the line drawn was rather strict.

I could let them fall straight down with the virtual gravity if I was standing, but it was rather difficult to feel the axis of my body when lying down on my side. Hence the usual recommendation to first stand up before pulling the window out, rather than trying to force it out while lying down.

However, I was now lying straight on a firm wooden surface, so my right arm succeeded in executing the gesture command, despite its awkward movement caused by my tension, and a translucent rectangle appeared under my raised right hand.

Called by its name, the "Main Menu Window" was the one and only interface between me, a player of the VRMMO game, «Sword Art Online», and the incorporeal game system. [Kirito], my name, was displayed at the top of the window along with my numerical level and two bars for my HP and EXP. On the left were tabs such as [EQUIPMENT], [STORAGE], [STATUS], and [SKILL] lined up vertically while on the right, the main region, first showed a human silhouette that was named the «Equipment Figure». And at the bottom were shortcut icons for activating each and every skill.

Taking my middle finger away, I touched the [OFFER] tab near the middle of the menu with my index finger.

The main region switched to a mode where the various forms of requests could be chosen from. From the top were trade requests, party requests, friend requests... and the button I was looking for at the bottom-most area.

[MARRIAGE]. This must be the button least pressed in this death game, SAO, where scams and double-crossing ran rampant. Two years and seventeen days had passed since the game began, but I could hardly recall meeting any married players.

However, my finger touched that button without any hesitation. Unlike trades and duels, proposals could only be sent to someone mutually registered as a friend. Without the need to switch to the offer cursor, the available targets were shown directly within the window. Right now, there was only a single player within a ten meter range... no, even if that was widened to a kilometer, there would only be a single name shown there.

I put my index finger on those five alphabets, that arrangement that I now thought of as beautiful; as sacred. I traced the letters with my gaze, an initial “A” followed by “s”, “u”, “n”, and “a”, then softly touched it with my finger.

There wouldn’t be any additional “YES/NO” dialogs coming out on my side at this point. The only one with the privilege to choose was the one who got proposed to. Raising my face, I stared hard at the girl standing two meters in front of me.

Aincrad, twenty-second floor, near the outskirts. The afterglow from over the log house’s roof in the back shone on the girl’s—Asuna’s long hair and her white-themed bodice, illuminated in gold. With its radiance so dazzling, I could barely see the girl’s expression.

A small window was shown in landscape orientation in front of Asuna. The message displayed there was probably something blunt, on the lines of “Kirito had sent a marriage proposal”, “YES/NO”.



To be honest, we had already gone through a verbal proposal last night. And Asuna had already replied with a “Yes”. But still, I could feel my heart rate accelerating without brakes.

Most of the sensations avatars receive in SAO were artificial signals generated by the Nerve Gear, but the common opinion was that internal senses like the heart rate and breathing were probably real. In other words, that meant my physical body lying down on a bed in some hospital in the real world, too, had the heart energetically pulsing away. I wondered if Asuna was the same, but I wouldn’t know just from her outward appearance.

The few seconds that felt like an eternity passed and finally, Asuna’s right hand moved. Light shone off the silver studs attached to the white leather long glove moving up towards the window. The extended index finger paused above one of the two buttons.

That finger stayed still for a short while, like what I had gone through, as Asuna raised her face.

Her hazel eyes peered straight into mine. My heart pounded.

“.....Kirito-kun.”

I wonder if I had truly heard that whisper, or if my brain had simply dreamed it up from how Asuna’s lips moved. Time froze once more and that slender index finger slowly touched down on that window in this sunset world enveloped in complete silence.

A new message window floated up atop the main window I had left open earlier. But I had no need to read words written down there. Asuna’s smile and those gem-like tears in her eyes told me her answer.

We both took a step forward. The windows vanished on their own. The gap of two meters turned to zero with another step.

It didn’t matter who was first; we reached our arms out and drew each other in. The closeness in our heights made our hearts overlap.

We were dragged into a certain quest that involved combat several tens of minutes ago and thus, a small chest protector covered my chest as a silver breastplate covered Asuna's. But I could vividly feel her heart beat where our avatars were connected.

Our hearts, pounding like alarms, soon synchronized as they slowed down to a gentle tempo. The perpetual beating, once each second, brought a mysterious calm to my heart. The nervousness that froze my breathing when I proposed yesterday was gone.

And thus, as of 24th October 2024, 5:19 PM, I—a swordsman, Kirito, was connected to this girl—a fencer, Asuna, through a bond called marriage, both in the system, and emotionally.

“Hey... you sure you don’t want it? Something like... a marriage ceremony.”

Asuna held her tea cup in both hands as she inclined her head with a “hmm”.

The many lamps we have bought scattered bright light into the log house’s living room where the afterglow from the window had almost faded. However, we had only started customizing these three rooms; with nothing much more than a dining room set and a sofa set for this room; a set of cooking utensils for the kitchen; and a bed for the bedroom. However, the wooden floor and walls were warm and a real (as real as it got in this world) flame flickered in the built-in Russian stove as it crackled.

Asuna who seemed lost in her thoughts on the other side of the round table looked up at me and gently nodded.

“Well, about that, I do wish for a marriage ceremony a little. And Ashley said she would make a dress for me too... I am actually a girl, after all, no matter how it seems like.”

“Y-Yeah, actually, I knew that from the start.”

The amazing swordswoman who held the nickname, «The Flash», giggled at my response, then drew her herb tea, steam faintly hovering above it, close to her lips. Her expression stiffened as she returned the cup to the saucer atop the table.

“...But you see, even so, we did retire from the guild due to personal reasons... the Knights of the Blood and Divine Dragon Alliance, as well as Agil, Klein, and the rest of the clearing group are all working hard to break through the seventy-fifth floor now, aren’t they? So... I figured it wouldn’t be very respectful towards them.”

“.....I see.”

I nodded as well while reaching my hand out towards my tea cup.

Even if we had a marriage ceremony, Agil, Klein, Lisbeth, Silica, and some others would probably happily attend—I couldn't claim to be certain that Argo the information dealer wouldn't abandon her work for this—but the most important factor was Asuna's feelings. I will give my all for what Asuna truly wants from this day onwards. She had always been supporting, encouraging, and guiding me this entire time, regardless of whether she was at my side or not.

Looking at me as I silently reflected on that resolution in the depths of my heart, Asuna smiled once again and spoke unwaveringly.

"I'm already happy enough being able to stay with you alone in this lovely house, Kirito-kun. ...I don't know how long this will last... but this is the happiest moment I had in these two years I've lived in Aincrad."

".....Yeah. The same goes for me."

Saying that out in a murmur took everything from me. After all, I felt it in Asuna's words. That living on the twenty-second floor like this would be our one and only short respite in the sun. That we would have to return to the frontlines one day and throw ourselves back into days of battles.

I took in a deep breath and shook off the irritation drawing close, and then spoke.

"Then, erm. Let's have a marriage ceremony when the hundredth floor's cleared and the fighting's all over. We'll call Klein and the rest, along with a whole lot of the others, when the time comes. Like Caynz and his group, the members of DDA and KoB... I wonder if Heathcliff will come if we ask..."

Asuna's eyes opened wide at that, but a smile came back to her face and she nodded.

"Hmm, I wonder. Let's ask the leader for a speech."

"Aah... I bet he'll make it all boring and solemn..."



Our laughter overlapped.

Of course—I, the one who suggested it, knew that the «marriage ceremony after clearing the hundredth floor» wouldn't happen and the same went for Asuna too, I'm sure. If the death game known as SAO were to be cleared, the players would all be logged out and never be allowed into Aincrad ever again in all likelihood.

The clearing group, including Asuna and me, had fought all the way here for two years in order to release all of the players. There were also many who lost their lives in the midst of battle and vanished into polygon fragments. That was why I couldn't possibly voice out this faint emotion bubbling up from the depths of my heart.

Instead, I stood up from the dining chair made from plain wood and then took two steps around the table. Asuna stood up with the same timing and moved before me.

I hugged Asuna tight as though to drive back the anxiety and unease. It wasn't an embrace filled with tranquility like the one from when I proposed; I put strength into my two arms in my urge to feel all of Asuna's existence. Both Asuna and I had removed our metallic armor, so the sensation of her slender yet clearly tangible body was transmitted to me.

“Asuna...”

I called out in a hoarse voice as I buried my face into her lustrously soft and fragrant hair. With my senses all focused on this being so dear to me I felt like I was going mad, I suddenly became aware of what seemed like an unusual numbness deep in my body.

Unusual, but this wasn't the first time I felt it. Yesterday, I had found out about a base desire included in the avatars of this world aside from hunger and drowsiness since getting imprisoned in SAO, in Asuna's room on the sixty-first floor's main city, Selmburg.

A single checkbox that appeared after earnestly following small buttons and links in explanation notes so deep in the depths of the main menu window's [SETTING] tab that I had to question who would actually find it. Checking that would allow players' virtual bodies to gain... or perhaps, recover, a certain function.

Just who was the one among the SAO development team who prepared an option like this? I did think that it might not be Kayaba Akihiko, the one who plotted this death game. I recall that in a magazine article I had read in the real world shortly before getting imprisoned in the game, several members of the development team had hinted at displeasure towards the ethics code of the game self-regulatory organization. They had committed the function into a version still in development as a joke and that was obviously deleted before the release edition, but it then made a return when it became a death game for one reason or another... or so I would like to imagine.

I had left the «Ethics Code removal setting» checked since last night. In other words, if my feelings intensify along a certain direction, a certain change would occur upon my avatar—

I tried to separate our bodies in a fluster, but Asuna's two arms, wrapped around my back, wouldn't permit that. She must have realized my response, as her slim body shook with a shudder.

"S-Sorry..."

Asuna apologized softly, but clung on to the embrace and raised her face before she whispered at point-blank range with her cheeks blushed pink.

"...I *am* your wife now, Kirito-kun."

"Y-Yeah..."

"...Let's go to the other room."

The kitchen? Abandoning the thought of verbalizing that joke, I silently nodded, then turned my feet towards the door that continued to the room that wasn't the kitchen.

Upon entering the dim bedroom from the bright living room, we turned to each other without switching the lamp on. The west window where the purple afterglow shone in from was the only source of light, but I could distinctly see Asuna's form as a result of my mastered Detection skill. Her metal armor, as well as her gloves and boots were removed, but the familiar knight uniform in the colors of the Knights of the Blood stayed on as always. Her gallant figure as a swordswoman heightened my desires all the more.

Whether she realized that or not, Asuna clasped her lowered hands in front of herself and spoke in an embarrassed tone.

"At times like this... should the guy be, erm... the one to take the girl's clothes off?"

"Erm... w-well, I wonder..."

There was no way an online game addict in his second year of middle school when this became a death game could give an immediate answer to such a question. But I would have to do my best if I had to. First taking in a deep breath, I took a step towards Asuna and my right hand—

".....Wait, that's impossible, isn't..."

To my knowledge, there weren't any methods for a player to remove another's equipment, even if it was a mere ring. I could reduce its durability and destroy it, if I had to state all possibilities, but that was obviously not happening here and now. Asuna looked up at my frozen expression with upturned eyes, blushed with a giggle, and spoke.

"Sorry, that was a joke."

—And she sets the pace from the start yet again.

That sense of impending danger, too, disappeared in the instant Asuna opened a window and pressed down on the «Remove All Clothes» button in her equipment figure.

The knight uniform and socks disintegrated into light particles and nothing more than modest, white undergarments lined with lace covered her avatar.

When I became absorbed in simply gazing at the texture of her moist skin and those graceful curves that practically rejected the notion of being mere polygons, Asuna's arms and legs squirmed as she slightly pouted.

"It'll end up just like yesterday at this rate."

"Hah... fweh...?"

I blinked, and finally remembered. Last night, I had turned towards Asuna, undressed as she was now, and made an unbelievable slip of the tongue, resulting in the fear of an in-the-area attack carved into me. It would be preposterous to repeat that same mistake. I, too, pulled out the window and removed my clothes, throwing caution to the wind. My familiar shirt and trousers vanished into my storage, but I felt no coldness on my skin, perhaps thanks to the stove still burning in the adjoining room.

Looking at me wearing nothing more than a single piece of black-colored equipment, Asuna continued her pursuit despite her blush turning even rosier.

"Well... let's press the next button on a 'ready, go'?"

I couldn't handle any more than stiff nods.

Matching Asuna who putting her right hand upon the window, I, too, braced my finger above the «Remove All Undergarments» button.

The great vice-leader of the strongest guild, Knights of the Blood, (retired for the moment) put on a solemn face for some reason and drew in her breath—

"Ready, go!"

And she let out a dignified yet lovely yell.

Our opposing fingers moved centimeter after centimeter and three articles of clothing vanished from the room in the next second.

Once again, I was mutely enthralled by Asuna's standing posture with all of her equipment taken away. I believe the word, *avatar*, originated from the Sanskrit word, «*avatara*», with its original meaning of «a manifestation of a deity». A fact that crossed my mind with just how beautiful, how unapproachable the existence before my eyes was.

But the longer that continued, the more my lust surged and heightened from the depths of my body. I could just barely hold myself back, but my breaths were shallow, my heart rate quickening without release. The saturation in my sight started fading to white as—

“...Go on, you can do what you want... I'm all yours now, Kirito-kun.”

With that line from Asuna while she tactfully covered up a part of her body with her arm, my sense of reason vanished into a gap to some other dimension just like my underwear did.

Though we had bought it in quite a hurry, the bed was wide enough, soft enough, and elastic enough, faithfully serving its purpose.



### 3

“Your heart’s... beating.”

Lying down on her face atop me, Asuna had her left ear on my chest as she said that with a murmur.

Nightfall occupied the entire world outside the window and the pallid moonlight sneaked in slantingly in the place of the afterlight. The fingers on my right hand toyed around with Asuna’s hair, clad in beads of sapphire light, as I muttered.

“Avatars’ hearts beat with the same timing as their real bodies’... or so I’ve heard somewhere else.”

“I see... then, this is, really the sound that your heart’s making, huh, Kirito-kun...”

A thought came to mind, and I voiced it out to Asuna, smiling as her eyelids fell.

“Let me listen to yours too, Asuna.”

An unexpected response returned after she glanced at me with upturned eyes.

“...You pervert.”

“Wh... th-that’s, after all that we’ve...”

“Well, the way you said it sounded perverted. ...But alright. After I’m done, though.”

And with that whisper, Asuna pressed her left ear even deeper against my chest.

(End)

## Afterword

Good day, I'm Kunori. Thank you very much for reading this book... though it could hardly be called one with how thin it is.

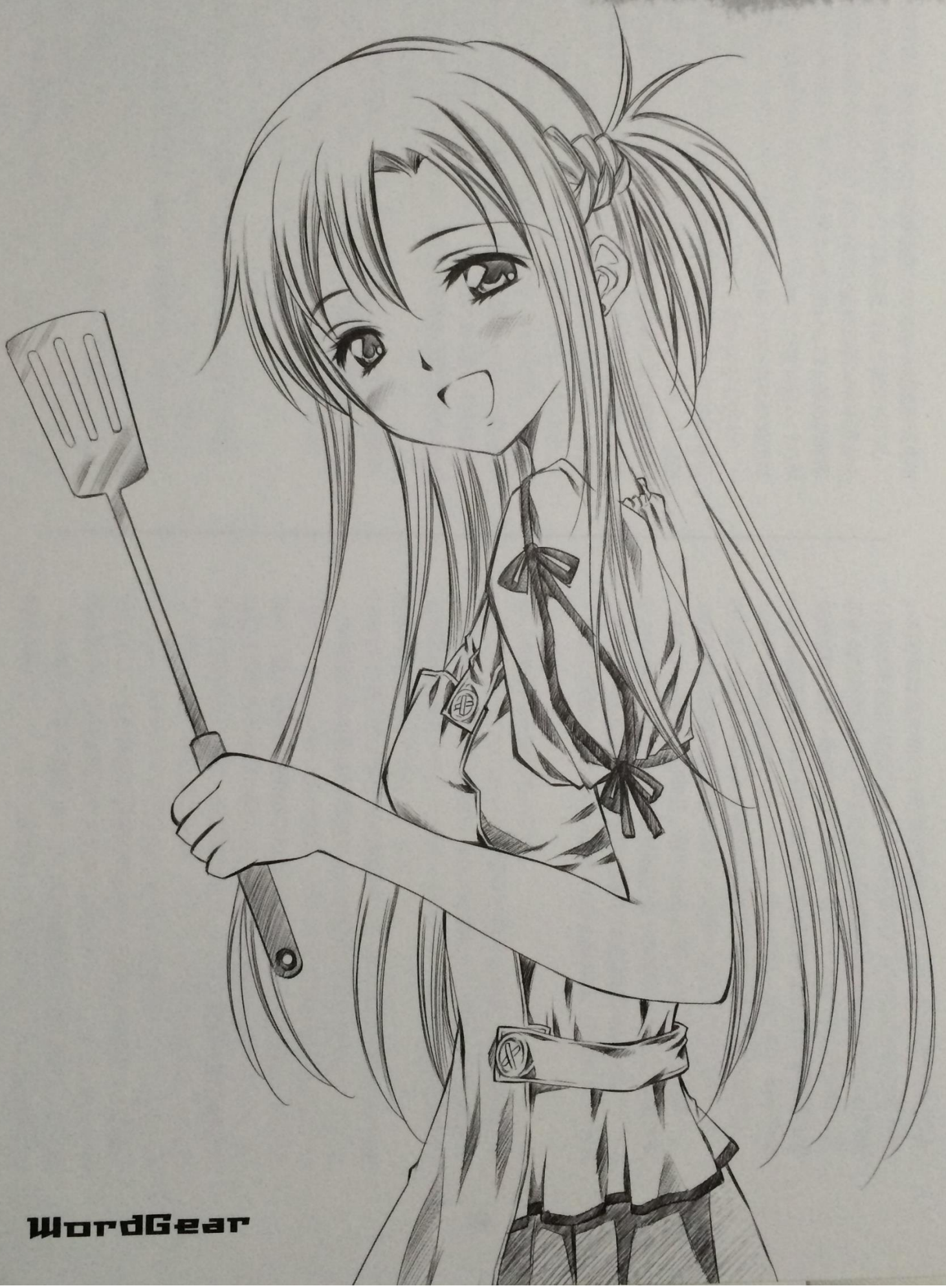
The story this time is the direct sequel to a short story, "The Day Before", written at a certain somewhere else. The first half of Kirito and Asuna's life on the twenty-second floor had never been told thus far, so I believe I would like to write the continuation to this if the chance presents itself. It would likely be a mellow story without any real incidents happening, though.

The title, "16.6 (sixteen point six)" doesn't hold any meaning in particular!<sup>1</sup> I hope for your support for the next book too!

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<sup>1</sup> The title, although denied by Kawahara Reki, is actually a play on the name of an author's doujin story titled 16.5, which had mature content and was once posted on a hidden part of his website.

# ソードアート・オンライン マテリアル・エディション 11



## Sugary Days 2

### Chapter 16.7

#### 1

Asuna sighed with her left ear atop my chest.

“This throbbing... This is the real sound made by Kirito’s heart, isn’t it?”

“Er.....”

I replied after a little thought.

“No, I wonder about that... It might be at the same frequency as the real body, but the sound itself is an SE reproduced by the system, right...?”

Asuna brought up a mildly upset face and pouted.

“Isn’t it the same if it has the same frequency? If you were to bring that up, then the voice you hear when you call someone over a mobile phone in the real world isn’t real, but a reproduction from the phone, right?”

“...That’s true.”

I nodded and a smile easily returned to my new wife who then placed her ear back on my chest, her mood recovered. With my eyelids shut, my thoughts, too, dimmed gradually as I listened to her gentle murmurs of my heart beating.

Now that I think about it, I had never heard anyone’s heartbeat in the real world.

Of course, I had heard them numerous times as sound effects in television dramas or movies, but in the first place, was it even possible to hear someone else’s heartbeat without a stethoscope?

Could those beating sounds actually be heard if one placed one's ear against a chest like Asuna was doing right now?

Above all, exactly what sound was a heartbeat? The sound of the muscles contracting? The sound of the valves opening and closing? The sound of blood flowing...?

...While considering countless questions of that sort, I developed the urge to listen to that sound too—even as a reproduced sound effect—and stuck my two hands under Asuna's arms.

“Kyaa, what?”

And I lifted the grand, flustered swordswoman's slender figure with a grunt. The sheets against Asuna's body slipped off and her bare skin, in its Remove All Equipment state, glittered beautifully under the moonlight; but to accomplish my initial objective, I pressed my face between her breasts.

“Noo, wait... e-erm...”

I wrapped my two arms tightly against her struggling body.

“I asked to listen to your heartbeat earlier, right, Asuna? It's my turn!”

Or so I declared—

“Then you should do that on your side instead of straight on!”

And with that, Asuna's two hands firmly caught my head and spun it ninety degrees to the right with a creak.

The day had changed, it was the twenty-fifth of October, 2024, fifteen minutes after midnight.

A quick seven hours had passed since Asuna and I married.



The murky night hung down on the log house we bought on the outskirts of Aincrad's twenty-second floor and the only sounds audible were gentle ones from insects and melancholic wails from far-away wolves (they were from non-active monsters, the «Maroon Wolf», to be specific).

The streets remained boisterous even in the middle of the night at Algade, where I lived until not long ago, so utter silence might actually be unsettling instead—I considered that before buying the house, but it seemed my worries were unfounded. Rather, lying on this bed here filled me with a sense of ease, rare in this world. Though that might just be thanks to having someone willing to share in the same warmth as myself.

With such thoughts running through my mind, I focused on my right ear, in contact with Asuna's cool, smooth, bare skin, and the faint sounds coming from beyond it.

Thump, thump, thump.

The sound was neither low, nor high; neither deep, nor shrill.

Living in Aincrad, our bodies were naturally avatars, so warmth, touch, taste, and such were all false sensations created by the Nerve Gears. However, there were a mere two actual sensations fed back from our real bodies lying in hospitals somewhere in the real world. Our breaths and our heartbeats.

Like Asuna mentioned earlier, Asuna's heartbeat that I felt now was at the same pace as her real heartbeat. It was a little fast... perhaps about eighty beats a minute?

“...Are you feeling a little nervous?”

I asked softly and Asuna replied with a slightly embarrassed voice with my head hugged in her breasts.

“O-Of course I'm nervous at least. This is... my first time.”

“Eh...? First... but yesterday... no, the day before that, at your room in Selmburg, we...”

Creak.

And my neck was spun a hundred and eighty degrees to the left this time.

“T-Th-That’s not what I was talking about! I was obviously saying that it’s the first time I let anyone listen to my heartbeat!”

Asuna’s heart rate rose to 100 BPM as she shouted out in a near falsetto voice, so I quickly nodded in panic. It seemed that action of mine had caused an unexpected tremor to a certain part of her body.

“Hyan.”

The great fencer froze after letting out that peculiar voice.

Could a young man who had just become sixteen years old remain coolheaded to such a response when in a full contact state during a Remove All Equipment state? The answer was naturally, a “no”.

I silently turned my head back ninety degrees, then put strength into my two arms that wrapped around Asuna’s body.

I couldn’t hear the sound of her heart any longer, but its beat was certainly conveyed to me. Placing my lips onto the skin right above it, I gently traced over it with my tongue.

“Aah... no, wait, come on, I said...”

Asuna softly denied me, but I definitely heard her declaring “you can do what you want” a few hours ago.

Hence, I continued doing what I wanted.

## 2

When I lived in the rented room, or rather, sleeping place in Algade, I managed to wake up each day somehow with the power of the alarm configurable from the time display window.

It wasn't like I was particularly bad with mornings—I did make it barely on time for school before the first bell at eight-fifteen, pre-SAO—but before I knew it, I had reverted to my classical nocturnal style since I came here. The reason, of course, was my hard work levelling up in the middle of the night when the hunting spots were empty.

My daily schedule was as follows for the last few months.

First, I wake at ten in the morning. I spend the morning settling the maintenance for my equipment, replenishing consumable items, and gathering information, then have a simple brunch and finally head out to the fields.

The main battlefield in the day is the front lines of that floor. I explore the uncharted areas in the fields and gather information if the labyrinth tower hasn't been reached yet, and devote my time to mapping it out otherwise. I can't quite claim this time period is very effective. The enemies are strong and the drops are of good quality, but I still have to keep safety as a priority with those being unknown areas.

I keep at it until six or so in the evening before returning to the main city of that floor. I walked back—naturally, without using those costly teleport crystals for these usual trips—while considering what to do for the day's greatest pleasure, dinner; the fulfilling fatigue then is a pretty nice thing.

After solo-ing a heart dinner in the area, I immediately head for an inn for a nap.

Doing that in the real world would be a straight conversion from an AGI build to a VIT build (VIT doesn't exist in SAO, though), but luckily, even devouring french fries for an entire day in this world would cause no change to one's avatar's build... probably.

Upon waking up after an hour and a half's nap, I begin my night life where I actually get «serious». There are times when I return to the labyrinth if the clearing seemed to have slowed down, but basically, I fight to strengthen myself here. I clear quests if I took up any or otherwise, stick to some spot for hunting. The latter's tough as expected, with me hunting straight from ten at night, through midnight, to four in the morning at a training spot that «has strong enemies, though not at the level of the front lines, which made it relatively dangerous», before getting close to collapsing at the end.

Using the bit of concentration barely remaining in my reserve tank, I return to the main city and head to Algade from the teleport gate this time. Upon retiring to my sleeping place, I shut away the refreshing rays of dawn pouring in from the window with the curtains and sleep like a log from five to ten in the morning.

Putting it all together, each day would be divided into six and a half hours of sleep, twelve hours of training and working for the conquest, and five hours for transport, meals, and breaks.

There certainly were those tenacious people in the existing MMOs I had played in the real world who could confidently play for twenty hours a day. I, too, had strived for such unreasonable levelling up right after I was trapped in this death game or after the first guild I belonged to was wiped out.

But I felt this while I fought back then. If I maintained that rate of training that shaved away at my mind, I would eventually draw the ace of spades.

But who cares—or so I did think, especially when my guild was wiped out. But there were those who reached out their hands and talked to me even in the state I was in.

It was thanks to them that I began my fight to live once again and that led me to finding a pace that suited me... and.....

I woke up to electronic noises from an alarm that practically stabbed into my mind—no, that sounded like a gentle and light simmer.

I looked at the time display window at the bottom-right of my sight with drowsy eyes. The digital numerals were 08:12, nearly two hours before the alarm would ring. I drew the blanket over my head, extending another invitation to the sandman, and this time, some sort of delightful scent invaded my nostrils.

Fragrant, rich, and abundant in sweetness; this was the smell of...

“Cream soup!”

I got up with a shout and the excess momentum propelled me off the bed as someone looked down at me with a dumbfounded expression from the living and dining room beyond the door: naturally, that was Asuna-san, «The Flash», no, «The Young Wife».

“...Good morning, Kirito-kun. That’s an unusual greeting for the morning.”

With my feet on the bed and back leaning against the floor, I voiced out a greeting more suitable for the morning of my new marriage’s second day.

“G-Good morning, Asuna. Erm, that was, I was having a dream... about all the cream soup I could drink and...”

Asuna’s bewilderment grew a degree deeper as she spoke.

“That’s no dream. There isn’t quite enough for that, though.”

“...What did you say.”

I muttered as my nose twitched and sure enough, the fragrant scent had yet to disappear.



In other words, that simmering that cut short my sleep was probably no other than the sound of the lid atop a pot on boil?

Despite it being an hour and fifteen minutes earlier than usual—though I did sleep at two last night—I felt completely awake and made full use of my AGI to backflip onto my feet and charge into the dining room.

Now that I had gotten a look, I saw a black pot with steam rising from it atop the wood-burning stove in the corner of the room. And to add on, there was a green salad and round bread already set up on the dining table where Asuna was reading the newspaper, wasn't there?

Putting down the newspaper and getting onto her feet, Asuna, with an apron on, finally showed a smile as she spoke.

“Let's eat after you're done washing your face. I'll be frying the eggs in the meantime. What do you want for yours?”

To be honest, I had no prior experience in both washing my face and choosing options for fried eggs in this world, but confessing that would likely bring about that astounded mode from my young wife again, so I replied after a little thought.

“H-Half-done and cooked on both sides.”

“Alright. *Over easy*, then.”

...That term was new to my ears, but if the grand master chef, Asuna, said it, that was probably right.

“W-Well then.”

I nodded and rushed off to the bathroom combined with the toilet room.

I focused on three points when hunting for the new property. ①, a place rarely visited by players; ②, a lack of spawn spots for active monsters in the vicinity; with ③ being a large bath.

The snug arrangements of this log house were as follows: living and dining room x 1; kitchen x 1; bedroom x 1; but despite that, the bathroom was relatively large with a plain wood bathtub that measured two meters long. The water and gas fees would probably be horrible in the real world, but in the dangerous and convenient VR world, fresh hot water was always running from the clay pipe installed on the wall, filling up the bathtub.

I was in no way obsessed with baths, but even I wanted to plunge my head in, instead of washing my face, upon looking at the surge of steam rising from beyond the wash basin. But it would likely turn those from *over easy* to *over difficult* if I did it, so I abandoned the idea of a morning bath and twisted the silver faucet.

The drawback of this bathroom was how the bath had an endless supply of hot water, but the wash basin had nothing more than water so cold it could give you frostbite. “Uhii!”, I screamed while washing my face, the last vestiges of drowsiness flowing away, before dashing back to the dining room.

“Coldcoldcold...”

And I chanted a mysterious spell while warming my face and hands at the stove before letting out a sigh of relief after the virtual chill was cancelled.

Asuna, standing in the kitchen and looking at me, turned to me in that same, old confounded mode.

“It feels best washing your face with cold water, doesn’t it?”

“That... That’s true, but it’s practically ice water here, so...”

“You’re a man, bear with it!”

And Asuna spoke a line that some older sister would probably use before shrugging her shoulders lightly.

“...Well, I went in the bath, though.”

“Wha..... th-that’s unfair! Or rather, you could have woken me up and...”

“...Woken you up, and?”

Asuna’s right hand held a spatula, glistening in the light, as she smiled brilliantly.

“Ah, n-no, it’s nothing... anyway, hey, the egg won’t be *easy* anymore.”

“There are still three seconds left. ...So. And. What?”

—Come to think of it, I believe I had been able to neither block nor dodge this attack from Asuna ever since she got me with that “Give. Me. Half!” in front of Agil’s general store. But I couldn’t very well be on the receiving end all the time as «The Black Swordsman». It was only recently that I noticed, but even Asuna who always seemed composed, too, was surprisingly weak against frontal attacks.

I cleared my throat and put on a smile with as much poise as I could muster along with a smidgen of severity—

“...You could have woken me up and we could have gotten in together.”

I inched my right foot away, bit by bit, in preparation to escape the instant that spatula gets the light effect for «Linear» (though I didn’t know if she could activate that), and before long, Asuna’s face was dyed a brilliant red from her chin to her forehead, with a bit of steam puffing out from near the roots of her hair. This was no analogy; that really happened.

Wow, so there was an emoticon like that.

I restrained my surprise from appearing on my face and Asuna turned back to the stove with extreme haste, poking at the fried egg in the frying pan with the spatula as she softly spoke.

“W-Well... If you insist... on it.....”

Poke, poke, poke.

“...But we’re only going in together, okay? ...I-I can wash your back at least, but...”

Poke, poke, poke, poke.

“...E-Erm, I’m not doing any perverted, okay? I mean, it’s still morning... and we need to get groceries for lunch..... wait, ah, kya——!”

Her left hand flashed out with that scream and tossed the frying pan with such vigor it became a blur.

The fried egg that were definitely beyond half-done and now overdone swiftly flew up and spun near the ceiling, landing back on the frying pan. Still holding onto it, Asuna turned back once more.

“Geez! It’s all because you said something weird like that that it ended up *over hard*, Kirito-kun!”

...So it wasn’t *difficult*.

That went through my mind as I obediently apologized. Though the way she scolded me was somewhat unreasonable, everything paled in comparison to the «Bath OK» agreement I got out of her.

“Sorry, really, but I’m sure the egg will turn out delicious even if they’re hard since you fried them for me.”

Those were my honest thoughts. It appeared Asuna understood that too, as my young bride’s face turned red again before finally giving her usual collected smile.

With a sense of fulfilment, I thanked Asuna for the breakfast more perfect than any I had before, made up of that fried egg that was well fried on both sides, fresh green salad, soft round bread, and a fragrant cream soup, that I took my own sweet time to polish off.

“Thank you for the meal, it was really delicious. This isn’t breakfast anymore, it’s *breakfast*... no, a *morning dinner*, huh...”

“You’re contradicting yourself there.”

A giggle escaped from Asuna before she replied with a “You’re very welcome”.

After absorbed in the sight of my wife gracefully tidying up the tableware on the table for a short while, a thought suddenly came to me. I had taken Asuna waking up before me and making breakfast for granted, but that wasn't an acceptable attitude to have in this time and age, was it?

In the real world, I had unwittingly built up walls between myself and both my mother and sister, hardly helping out with the housework. No matter how I thought about it, my mother, with her job as a magazine editor, and my sister, in the kendo club, should have had overwhelmingly less time to themselves than me, absorbed in online games without joining any clubs.

If this game was cleared and I could return to the real world, I should pitch in and do the housework. Or rather, I should start from today.

Pledging so in my heart, I stood up as well and carried the remaining tableware to the kitchen.

“Erm, I'll take care of the dishes.”

I called out, but Asuna turned back and shook her head with a smile.”

“It's fine, it only takes an instant.”

“...An instant?”

“Yes.”

Nodding and taking the dishes from me, she passed it through the water flowing from the tap once while they were still stacked on each other. With just that, the dirtied effect on the dishes completely vanished and they even dried immediately, so I ended up letting out an “Ooh!”. Asuna's eyes instantly changed to staring hard at me.

“Ooh, you say... Kirito-kun, what have you been doing in your home this whole time?”



“Erm... I basically eat out, or go with meals that don’t need tableware like sandwiches, or buns, or...”

“Ooh.”

“.....I humbly apologize...”

“Well, you are a man. But make sure you take your baths.”

After commenting with a wry smile, she apparently noticed the other nuance within the words she had just uttered and her face immediately went red once again.

“Ah, that’s not quite what I was trying to...”

Asuna’s shy murmurs were truly lovable and I couldn’t help but to grab hold of her left hand.

“Yeah, will do.”

There was nothing else I could have said.

(End)

## Afterword

Good day, Kunori here. Thank you very much for reading “ME11”.

The story this time is a direct sequel to the previous “ME10”. It ended at some weird part due to the lack of time, I’m so sorry... Kirito-san and Asuna-san’s newly-wed lives are still just starting, so I hope to write the continuation to this someday if there’s a chance! And someday, I hope to fix this story into a single book after there’s enough content and it actually reaches a proper conclusion... Though I have no idea when that would be, with my current pace...

ソードアート・オンライン  
マテリアル・エディション  
12



## Sugary Days 3

### Chapter 16.8

#### 1

The first consumer-use full-dive machine, the «Nerve Gear», sends extremely weak electromagnetic pulses into its wearer's brain, making it possible to experience the five senses, sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch, in a virtual reality environment.

But my impression of that virtual reality—or electronic prison—after spending close to two years in it was that the degree of its senses replication was somewhat spotty.

Sight and hearing could be said to be almost perfect. The information delivered were either artificial 3D objects or synthesized sounds, so it wasn't exactly like the real world, but I hardly ever felt any sense of disconnect in regards to seeing or hearing.

Taste and smell also worked pretty well. They gave up on creating the «sensation of eating something»—that was, the food's taste, aroma, texture, and feel—in real-time from the very start, instead combining pre-set data through the «taste reproduction engine» and recreating that, but after getting used to it, something sweet honestly would taste sweet. The food prepared by a certain esteemed fencer who completed her Cooking skill, in particular, granted a sense of satisfaction that would make one forget one was in virtual reality, even if it was a simple fried egg. —Well, I couldn't claim to be entirely uninfluenced by other factors, though.

And the final sense, touch: sensations on one's skin, including warmth.

Unfortunately, the sense of discomfort it had haunted it even to this day.

It was fine when actively touching something. The trusty ease of gripping the leather wrapped about my cherished sword's handle. Or the silky sensation of a loved one's long hair. Those felt more vivid than in reality, satisfying my touch.

But passive information, the various sensations constantly received on one's skin over the whole body, was undeniably much different from in the real world.

The feeling as clothes inside rub against one's skin. The weight of clothes outside and elasticity of bottoms. The temperature and fluctuations of air. The pressure against one's soles when standing or thighs when sitting on a chair. Most of those «composite sensations the entire body constantly experience» were actually simplified to the bare minimum in SAO. The reason was probably due to the excess of information. Of course, there was the sensation of wearing something, but its coarse surface ended up feeling flat, like an image at low bit rate.

That said, it was perfectly possible to get used to that. It wasn't like one would be conscious of the texture of clothes the entire time in the real world either. It was fine if one didn't pay much attention to it; it didn't feel strange or anything in everyday life (though it felt weird using that term for Aincrad).

But there was one situation where one couldn't avoid experiencing the low quality of the sense of touch.

When one's entire body, with all equipment removed, is soaked in warm fluid.

Or in other words, in the bath.

*25th October, 2024, 10 A.M.*

I could faint humming from beyond the door leading into the bath, going “Nn, nn, nn, fufuu, fuu, funn ♪”. And in addition to that, the soft sound of water.



The situation reminded me somewhat of a time long ago when I slept over in the Dark Elves' camp site, but I now possessed one thing that I didn't back then. That was, the right to open this door.

I took in a deep breath before lightly knocking on the wooden door.

The humming stopped with that and after a brief silence, a soft "Okay" came back.

"E-Excuse mee...."

And I, too, replied softly as I opened the door. The morning sunlight shining in from the window inside made the steam effect shrouding the bathroom glow white and my eyes narrowed.

The log house built on Aincrad's 22nd floor was in no way huge, but its bathroom alone was made to be quite spacious. It measured roughly two meters by four meters, a little below 2.8 times a size 1618 standard bath, or one that was 1.6 by 1.8 meters in other words, and it was closer to those in hot springs hotels... no, I'm going too deep into this.

According to rumours, the guild, «Divine Dragon Alliance», had a gigantic ten-meters-class marble bath in their fortress-class guild home set up on a knoll on the 56th floor, but it seemed hard to relax when it was that big. This size was likely exactly what would be considered luxurious in a player home. Not to mention how it was made entirely from cypress wood and had a free flow of hot water.....

"Hey, are you planning to stand there the whole day?"

Those words rang out from beyond the thick steam and interrupted my thoughts. Shocked back to my senses, I spoke in a fluster.

"Ah, I'll be there, I'll come in."

Just as I was about to unsteadily run towards the bathtub, another question came in.



“Like that?”

Taken aback, I looked down at myself and noticed I was wearing my usual blackish clothes. Replying with an “Ah, I’ll take them off, I’ll strip” as I pulled out the window, I spammed the buttons to unequip. The hot steam gently caressed my avatar’s revealed skin after I stored the various cloth equipment in my storage.

Sure, it might be possible to recover from this state, but if there was a young man of age sixteen capable of going through this situation with his presence of mind, he could become the main character of some standalone RPG. As a single player of a VRMMO, I could only stagger forward with a ninety percent debuff to my ability to think.

Parting the dense steam, I walked roughly three meters to the bathtub and saw the gleaming, quivering water surface spreading out. And the fencer with chestnut hair on one end, exposed from her shoulders upwards.

Asuna’s face, as she looked this way with upturned eyes, turned increasingly red, perhaps to the hot water, or maybe... such thoughts went through my head as I quickly finished pouring water over myself. It was probably the norm and only polite to first wash oneself before entering a hot spring in the real world, but in Aincrad, one would stay clean unless covered by mud, paint, or mucus from monsters. Muttering “Excuse mee...” softly once again, I slid into the plentiful hot water opposite Asuna. The bathtub was a whole two meters, so it didn’t feel tight at all, despite both of us around.

Even with the situation as it was, what I first noticed was the pleasantness of the bath as expected.

“Hauuoo...”

My voice naturally leaked out from my mouth. In terms of passion of baths, I probably only had a thirtieth of what Asuna had, but I certainly didn’t dislike it.

The sublime warmth, moderate pressure, and the feeling as hot water soaked into every single one of the cells that made up.....

“Houfhhhbbbbb...”

My mouth sank into the bath as well and let out a long sigh, forming bubbles, before I finally noticed «that».

“Bbbb.... bbb?”

Lifting my upper half, I first scooped up the water with both hands and letting it fall numerous times before looking into Asuna’s face on the other side of the steam.

“Huh... is it just me? The water sort of feels different from before...”

“Yes, it is, isn’t it?”

Curtly nodding her head that popped out from the surface, the young wife with a completed Bathe skill spoke.

“I thought so when I came in, in the morning too, but it seems to feel more natural. Bathing had always felt more like a warm membrane pushing against the whole body, rather than water, though there is a little of that too... but I feel like I’m actually wet in this bath.”

“It really does... There’s the water pressure, this floating sensation, and the feeling that all the drops of water are flowing over the skin too... —Aah, did bathing always feel this good...? Maybe I should take baths daily from now on too...”

I sank in, blowing bubbles, once again and drops of water came flying from in front. Asuna had flicked some of the water with her fingers.

“Hey, Kirito-kun, it’s not a ‘should’, but a ‘must’. ...No, the real question here is why it feels like this.”

“Bbbh? Bb.... bh, that’s right...”

Lifting myself up again, I stared hard at the gleaming, swaying water.

There and then, I finally noticed an important fact. The hot water filling the bathtub wasn't completely transparent—

“Ah, aaah!? There's something like bath salts in here!!”

I waved my right hand up and down in the water as I shouted, but the clarity of the cloudy water only allowed me to see about three centimeters down. I shifted my face back forward and on the other side of the steam, the fencer grinned brightly.

“It's a rare opportunity, so I tried putting in the herbal bath powder I gotten a hold of a while ago. By soaking in it for thirty minutes, you apparently get a buff that grants a bonus against poison for three hours. It's a pretty rare item.”

“...Bath for a buff.”

“Said something?”

“Nothing, sir.”

“You got a problem?”

“No problem, sir.”

I answered the esteemed sub-leader while still staring into the water. The two pale, slender, and charming legs that should have been in my sight originally were utterly hidden behind the unidentified cloudy composition.

Anguish that even I had no reason for filled me as I spoke.

“Then isn't that what caused this sensation too? Like, maybe the bathing powder had an effect that made the bath more bath-ish...”

“Well, I didn't add any in when I took one this morning. But it felt the same as this back then.”

“O-Oh really?”

Somehow regaining my enthusiasm for solving the bath's mystery, I splashed the water with my right hand while restarting my thoughts.

Though it surprised me at first, now that I focused on the sensation, I could say that it really wasn't exactly like a real bath. The way the water parted was unnatural and the sounds were too uniform. But those problems were for sight and hearing, and there was nearly no sense of discomfort with the sensations on my skin submerged in the hot water if I were to stay still with my eyes closed.

"Hmm... —Maybe there was an update for fluid interaction without us noticing or..."

I voiced out idea number one and Asuna shook her head, splashing water, on the other side of the steam.

"The water didn't feel any different when I washed the dishes earlier."

"Then... maybe there's a sensation magnification service exclusive to the bath in this log house or..."

"If it had a perk like that, I think it would have been written in the remarks in the purchase window."

Idea number two was shot down just as easily.

"Erm, erm..."

I slowly sank deeper into the water as I sought out idea number three and unconsciously stretched my folded legs straight out.

And the ends of my toes touched something soft. Asuna twitched at the same time. The ripple produced crossed a meter and seventy centimeters, and the water quivered at my nose.

"Hmm, hmmm..."

I hummed while moving my toes slightly. The thing they came into contact with had a lovely bounciness and with that, a new ripple came forth.

“...Come on, Kirito-kun, think about it seriously.”

“I am thinking, of course.”

...This would be the soles of Asuna’s feet... no, the distance would be off, huh. Then her calves... or maybe the bottom of her knees...

“Ah... n-no, don’t...”

Asuna tried to draw her legs back with that soft murmur, but I slid closer in the water and maintained contact. Finding somewhere remarkably soft and smooth before long, I continued my poking and rubbing assault.

“Nn... geez... like I said, we were only, going in together...”

The fencer fought back with a strained voice and a face three times as red as several minutes ago. Her expression was truly lovable as she lowered her eyelids, lightly chewed on her lower lip, and stopped the prods invoking her sense of touch. A sixteen years old young man capable of stopping in this situation would fit as the main character in a young adult fiction book with a narrative circling entirely around that main character<sup>2</sup>.

I was already closing in to the midpoint of the two meters long bathtub when I noticed. Careful attention would be necessary from this point onwards, along with the occasional daring advance.

Observing Asuna’s reaction, I extended my hand into the cloudy water and caught her petite right leg where I predicted it would be.

“Ah, no!”

A forward charge as she instinctively retreated. Finger sliding across the petite leg that shot out from the water, from the ankle to the calf. Gently massaging those tender muscles usually hidden by those long boots.

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2 “young adult fiction book with a narrative circling entirely around that main character” – Originally “sekai-kei”. It’s a loosely defined genre where... the fate of the “world (sekai)” circled around the main character(s). Examples include books like Iriya no Sora, UFO no Natsu.

“...!”

Asuna’s upper body, leaning against the bathtub, bent back sharply. Bulges, more white than even the hot water, were exposed as they parted the opaque water. I lost my sense of reason there, turning the distance of seventy-five centimeters to zero in an instant.



## 2

“.....Ah, I see, so that’s it.”

I let out those words and Asuna, drinking from a glass filled with iced water on the opposite side of the table, glanced over.

“...What did you say, what is it?”

Her words and expression were apprehensive, but the fencer looked truly adorable with a towel wrapped around her head and a large white bath towel around her body. Now that I think about it, this was the first time I saw her dressed in such a state, wasn’t it? Of course, I only had a towel around my waist as well—not wrapped by hand but by equipping a towel on the «lower underwear» section of the equipment figure—so the two of us should take a photograph to remember this moment... or so my mind thought, addled by the long hot bath, narrowly stopping after judging that suggesting it would result in iced water in my face.

Draining the water remaining in the half-filled glass in front of me, I cooled my thoughts down somehow before voicing out what I hit upon several seconds ago.

“Erm, look, about why the bath seemed more like a bath.”

“Eh... you know why?”

I began an explanation filled with confidence to my young wife who blinked in surprise.

“It’s simple. Look, the sensations on our skin are magnified to more than the usual for us at the moment, right?”

“The sensations on our skin...?”

Asuna made a doubtful expression, but roughly three seconds later, that face immediately turned red from her cheeks to her ears. I would rather not go into detail, so I put on a solemn expression and stopped at a nod with a “yes”.

The reason for what had occurred in the bathroom earlier was because Asuna and I currently had a hidden setting, «Ethics Code Off», switched on. In this state, it was like some limiters were removed, especially in regards to the sense of touch. The quantity of tactile data, kept to the minimum by default, must have been temporarily increased.

“...Of course, that will cause just as much burden on the circuits and Nerve Gear, so we should keep it off when we go out. But you agree, don’t you, if only I knew quicker that baths would be so much more realistic just by switching off the code... it probably didn’t take long for that Argo to find out about it, so if only she sold me that information...”

And immediately after I voiced out that absent-minded remark, I ended up suffering a *cold water* attack in the end, after all.

Asuna went off to the bedroom in a huff, so I continued my train of thought while cold drops of water dripped from my hair.

We switched the ethics code off the night before yesterday and left it off since then. But we were only conscious of the tactile sensations being different from usual when we entered the bath, with no feeling like my senses were amplified now as I sat here half-naked and moreover, half-wet. In other words, the effect only manifested itself when all equipment were removed. Thus, even if we leave it on, there wouldn’t be any problem with the load on the machine and circuits...

“Come on, how long are you going to stay like that?”

I raised my face at that voice; Asuna stood with both hands on her waist, her bath towel changed into a dressing gown.

“Don’t come complaining to me when you catch a cold from after-bath chills.”

“R-Right.”

It remained a mystery whether such a phenomenon could happen in this world, but I could only nod obediently after being nursed by Asuna in an inn when I previously felt ill here due to my body in the real world catching a cold or something like that.

Standing up with only a towel on, I thought to turn towards the bedroom, but came to an abrupt stop. I had to tell Asuna the conclusion I arrived at several seconds ago even if it meant I had to suffer through another explosion of water.

“...Um, Asuna-san?”

“Whaat?”

Timidly, I asked the young wife who started tidying up the glasses and pitcher.

“Erm... I know I said all that about burden earlier... but apparently, those sensations only seem to amplify with all equipment removed, so I was just going to say that there’s no real need or hurry to switch it off and all...”

Is she going to get mad again?! I spoke out expecting that, but Asuna showed an unexpected reaction, holding tightly onto the pitcher with her face turned down.

“...it off yet.”

“Eh?”

“Like I said, I didn’t switch it off yet. After all... it’s such a bother going that far into the options every time...”

The fencer who quietly explained with her cheeks red was so adorable and captivating—

“Ah... I-I guess so...”

—that I could only reply in a giddy voice.

# Afterword

I ended up writing the main text to the very limit, so excuse me for placing this here.<sup>3</sup>

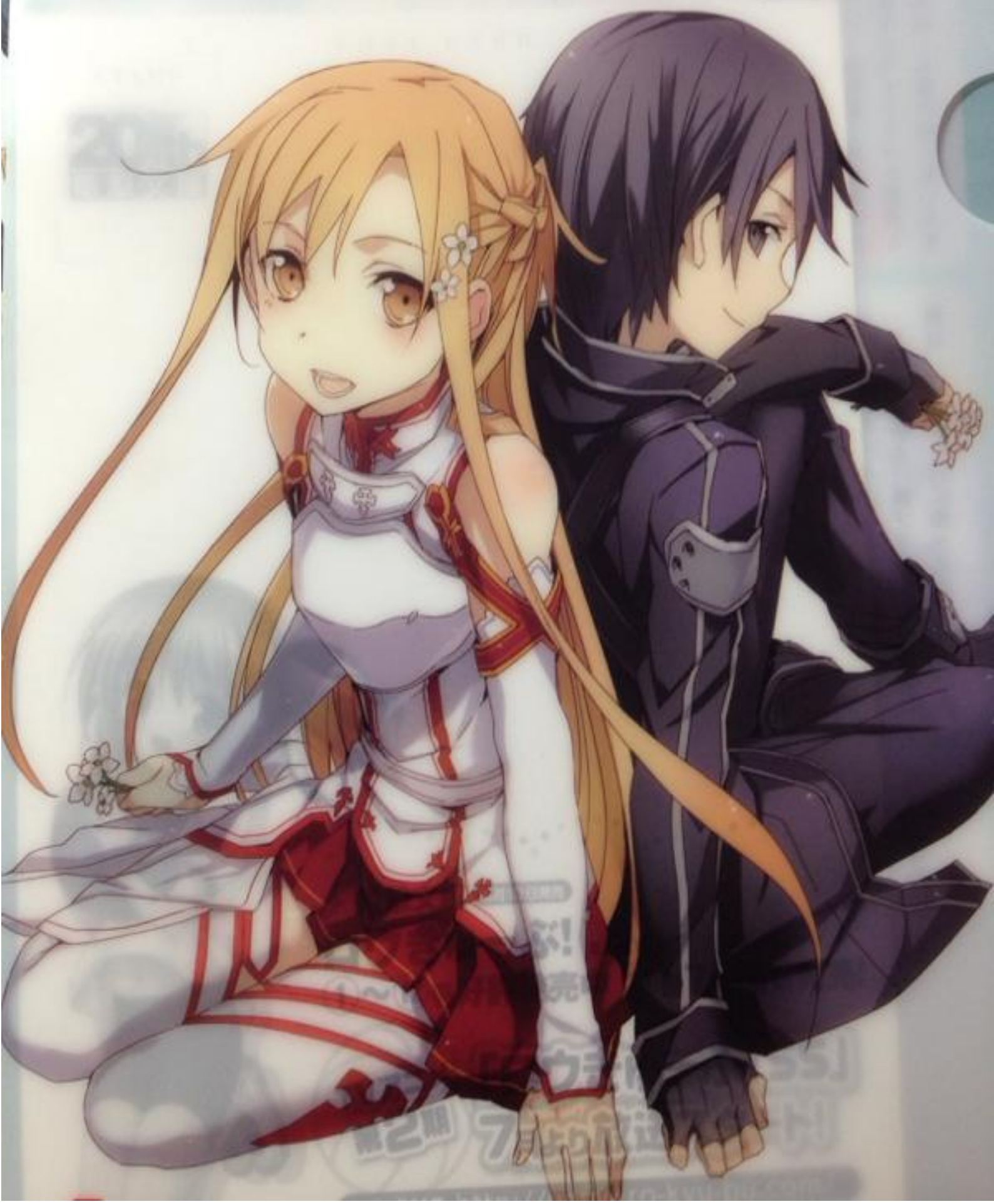
Eh, it finished right after they entered the bath... It seems next time, some sort of incident will happen or the day will change! I hope for your support for ME13!

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<sup>3</sup> “placing this here” – The afterword is on the back cover of the book. He really wrote to the limit of the pages.

WORD ART ONLINE  
ワードアート・オンライン

電撃文庫  
FIGHTING  
フェア





## Chapter 16.8.5<sup>4</sup>

“Eh, Kirito-kun, you don’t brush your teeth before sleeping?”

Upon being asked by a surprised Asuna who was in her pajamas, I nodded while feeling as though I had turned into some terrible barbarian.

“I-I mean, there’s no need, right? It’s not like we could get any plaque on our teeth here, anyway.”

“Don’t think about it logically, what matters is how it feels!”

“Or rather... in the first place, is it even possible to get a toothbrush in Aincrad?”

“Eh, if you don’t know that, that means you had never brushed your teeth? Not even once in these two years?”

I nodded once more, feeling like I had my class change from a barbarian to a caveman.

With that, Asuna nimbly manipulated her window with a face that suited the sub-leader of the Knights of the Blood. What appeared then, was a wooden handle with short hair set in it—a single toothbrush.

She spoke while quickly thrusting it forward.

“This is a masterpiece made by a master craftsman! Brush your teeth with this every night, starting from today! And in the morning too if possible!”

“Eeh~~”

Slanting my face forty-five degrees away, I groaned.

It wasn’t like I wanted to shout out that it would totally be a huge bother.

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<sup>4</sup> Sword Art Online 16.8.5, a short story on a clear file given with purchase of Sword Art Online Volume 15 from certain retailers.. Not counted as stand-alone Sugary Days story, but definitely belongs here.



I was simply wondering if the toothbrush had any reason to exist now that it lost its original purpose of protecting against tooth decay and gum diseases, so...

“I won’t kiss anyone who won’t brush his teeth.”

“I’ll brush them three times a day!”

Giving an immediate reply, I instantly jammed the toothbrush I received into my mouth and moved it vigorously.

—Well, honestly, I might not have that much of a prejudice against it. The short and stiff hair stimulated my mouth, evoking both refreshing and nostalgic feelings.

The moment the brush touched the top inner teeth on the right, I felt a sudden, strange sense of unease. Just as I began to wondering what it was, I noticed.

“Ah... I’m missing a tooth.”

“Eh, what do you mean?”

I opened my mouth wide as I explained to Asuna who was brushing her own teeth at my side.

“Actually, I had a wisdom tooth on top on the right. But it felt strange since that wasn’t reproduced on this avatar.”

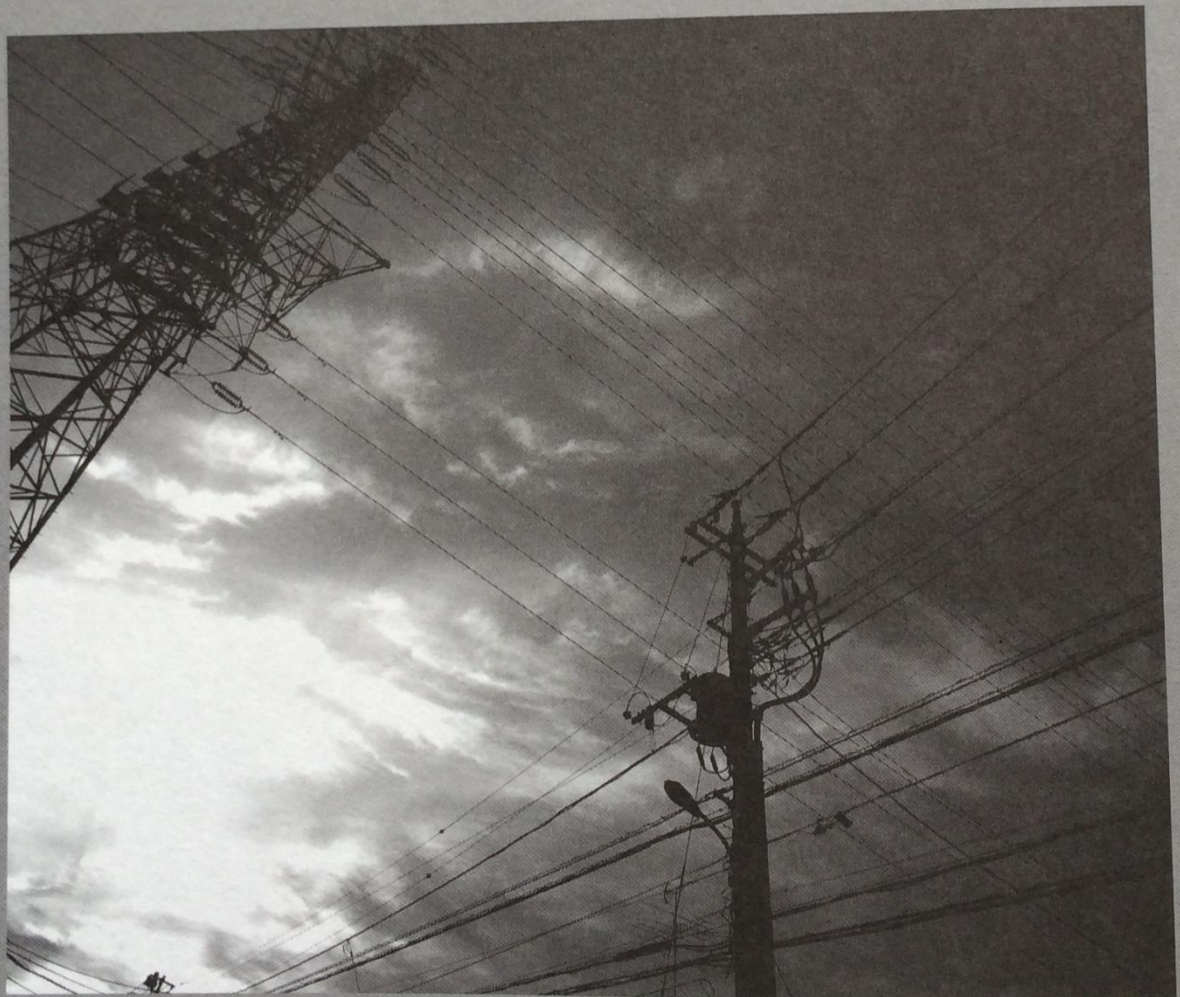
“Hmm, so that’s it. I didn’t have even a single one, so that means I evolved further than you did, Kirito-kun.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m just a primitive barbarian!”

Shouting that out, I sealed Asuna’s mouth that she proudly left opened with my own.

SWORD ART ONLINE  
material edition

13



## Sugary Days 4

### Chapter 16.9

#### 1

Clunk, clunk.

The large rocking chair's runners made a soothing sound atop the wooden deck.

The gentle up-down motion, like swaying atop waves, drew one into slumber alongside the sunlight filtering through the trees. Shutting one's eyes would set a certain course for sleep. However, I resisted the weight on my eyelids and continued staring into the profile of the one I loved most, lying atop myself.

The faint breathing from slumber had reached my ears since minutes ago. The grains of light on her lowered, long eyelashes trembled without sound. Though the breeze from the lake was slightly chilly, I felt no cold thanks to the heat from where our two avatars touched.

Yes—these were all fictitious data.

Our bodies, both hers and mine, were fictitious ones composed of countless polygons and the same went for the rocking chair, the wooden deck, and the log house behind; they were no more than data sent into the Nerve Gear my real, unconscious body somewhere in the real world worn on the head, alongside the up-down motion, the light flowing through the trees, and the warmth and suppleness from our touching skin.

The word, «fiction»<sup>ka kuu</sup> \* apparently meant a «bridge erected across the empty<sup>kuu</sup> air». Of course, a bridge could not possibly be constructed over vacant air. Hence, it could not be real.



In that sense, the floating castle, Aincrad, where we lived—or were imprisoned—in was a true fictional world. A castle of stone and steel, over ten kilometers tall, floating in an endless sky. It far exceeded that bridge constructed over empty space.

It was practically a dream without end.

No, that would be off. Though this dream had continued for two years already, the time to wake from it will come. When the death game could be cleared and all of its players freed—or when the HP bar, our fictitious life, reaches zero.

Thus, I might as well remain here... in a corner of Aincrad's twenty-second floor, far from the front lines. After all, here, where there were no terrifying monsters or villainous player killers, I could view this warm, pleasant, and beautiful dream forever. Until the time comes when the game was cleared by someone else's hands.....

The desire from deep within my consciousness made my avatar tremble slightly.

“Nn.....”

Mild breathing. Her pale pink lips moved a little and her whispers streamed across.

“.....What is the matter, Kirito-kun...?”

It seemed she felt my fears and unease even when asleep. Raising my left hand, I gently caressed that long hazel hair as I replied.

“No... it's nothing. I was just... a little.....”

A childish voice that sounded so unreliable, it surprised myself.

Her eyelashes lifted slowly and her hazelnut-colored eyes looked up at me. Urged on by her soothing gaze that drew in all of my fear, I continued my words.

“...I was just feeling a little uneasy. Everything around us is merely fictional... no, even we are... so I was thinking how we would wake up from this dream, too, someday...”

“.....I suppose so...”

The lips that answered so showed a smile tinged faintly with sorrow.

Her gaze shifted towards the outer circumference’s opening barely visible beyond the trees.

“You know, I’ve always liked power lines ever since I was a child.”

I initially thought I heard wrong. Chasing her sight, I gazed towards the distant blue skies, but naturally, there was not even a single power line to be seen.

“Power line... you mean those cables for electric power or signals, right?”

“Yes.”

“...And why those? I recall there always being talk about how they made the scenery worse and was being buried into the ground here and there...”

“Yes, most of those around where I lived in the real world were made underground too. But since they were hidden after being buried, don’t you think that disqualified them from being liked or disliked?”

“Well... I guess so...”

I nodded in neither confusion nor comprehension.

That pure white right hand then lifted up and sketched a smooth line in the air.

“I had always felt curious upon seeing power lines. I thought about how the mail, photos, and such sent by many people were all flowing through those lines. I was really amazed those could reach who they were addressed to, without becoming jumbled up.”

Thoughts about packets, headers, and how it would be optic lines rather than power lines that transmit data went through my mind, but the conversation likely had nothing to do with those.

Data from different senders to different receivers crisscrossed endlessly within a single transmission line. In that sense, it certainly seemed like a small miracle a single mail could reach its destination.

Still, why the sudden topic... those hazelnut-colored eyes stared into my own as though sensing that doubt.

“Kirito-kun, we can currently feel each other’s presence.”

Her voice was soft, yet firm.

“That sensation data is travelling to and fro through the long distance between us in the real world at an immense speed. This world and our bodies may be fictional... but the signals transmitting our voices, these sensations, and everything else certainly exist, don’t they? To reach me, they’re rushing through those many cables as quickly as they can.”

Her finger, pointing towards the sky, poked into my left cheek as she spoke.

Adjusting herself, she reached up and our lips overlapped. It began with gentle pecks. The union of our fictional organs gradually deepened, gradually intensified. Tender, moist noises. A sweet fragrance. Breaths, growing rough.

I imagined while accepting the multitude of signals for these sensations. The unending lights flitting through the multicore fibers running through the sky or under the ground. Those were hardly fictional. That definitely existed there—or perhaps here.

This connection between Asuna and me.

A maddening longing welled up from the depths of my body, compelling me to hug her slim frame tight. My hand had unconsciously slipped in her thin sweater.

“Nn... don’t, no more today, until... the night...”



Despite Asuna's whispers interspersed with her breathing, she made no effort to stop my hunger kiss. The rocking chair hit against the wooden deck at an irregular, heavy rhythm.

Before long, an entreaty, half stifled with tears, pierced through my sense of hearing.

“Kirito-kun... reach me... to me... send me, you, Kirito-kun...!”

I drew Asuna's body closer with both hands in place of a vocal answer.

## 2

*25th October, 2024, 2:30 PM.*

While walking through the small path leading to the main town through the lake's shore from the log house, Asuna shook her head violently without warning.

"U-Uggh!"

"W-What happened?"

Despite my flustered question, she simply brought up both hands and hid her face.

"Uggggh~~~~"

"I-Is your stomach hurting?"

"Uggh—!"

Guess not. Though eating strange mushrooms here could still cause one to experience the bad status effect, «Stomachache», our lunch was teriyaki chicken with Asuna's special soy sauce and even in the rare chance our real bodies were to experience a stomachache, that sensation should be intercepted by the Nerve Gear.

And so, I wondered exactly what could be causing her such anguish, before—

Asuna abruptly spoke in a soft voice with her head down, depressed.

"Ugh... was I always like this...?"

"Like this... like what?"

The heel of her palm immediately stabbed into my left shoulder.

"What are you trying to make me say out loud, it's that!"

I finally understood what Asuna was getting at after a peek revealed her side profile to be crimson red. She must be embarrassed over the multiple violations of the Ethics Code since this morning.

“What, you just meant that?”

“Don’t just call it that and brush it off so easily!”

“Aren’t you the one who called it ‘that’ first...?”

Another palm heel strike came flying, so I cleared my throat and picked my words better.

“No, well, erm, right... we are married, so doing something like that is only natural and there’s no need to be so upset.”

“Don’t just call it s-something like that, that’ll make me all the more embarrassed.”

“Then... what?”

“Er... erm, hmm, s... wait, what are you making me say!”

A third palm heel strike shot forth and I almost tumbled into the lake’s water on our immediate right.

The main town for Aincrad’s 22th floor, «Coral», appeared more like a village rather than a town. Separating the inner and outer areas was a wooden fence, a meter and a half in height, too, with its buildings all made from wood. This thoroughness applied to the teleport gate in the village’s heart, constructed from polished logs, as well. Its residents were few and not even a single player was around beside us.

In exchange, it had a rather extravagant selection of wood products. The rocking chair Asuna and I were on earlier was bought on impulse from this village when we passed by yesterday and saw it in the store front. We have visited this village again in order to get together the furniture for the log house.

The bedding, table, and chairs were provided from the start, so all we had to buy were furniture for storage. And in Aincrad, ninety percent of their significance laid in their value as «interior decoration». After all, most items could be stashed in one's own inventory and the main feature of a player house, «a large capacity storage at home», was provided from the beginning in the shape of a treasure chest.

As such, I was thinking we only had to buy shelves for the living room and drawers for the bedroom.

“Wow, this is amazing!”

Upon entering the first furniture shop, Asuna let out an elated cry without any trace of the shyness from earlier.

“Look, look, Kirito-kun! What a lovely table!”

“Ooh, it sure is huge.”

An unsatisfied glare came from my wife despite my pure intentions in expressing my honest opinion.

“What, that's all?”

“No, well, all tables have going for them is their size, so...”

“Look closer, look at this smooth walnut! It can easily sit ten people, the tabletop's over ten centimeters thick, and the grain's utterly exquisite.”

Quietly distancing myself from Asuna whose cheek was practically on its smooth surface, I checked the price pasted on the other side of the table.

“Dggehh——”

I leapt up high with that shout.

That surprised Asuna as expected, and she asked, “W-What happened!?”, which I answered by pointing at the price tag with my trembling right hand.

“I-I-I-I mean, just look, i-i-i-it says seven hundred thousand col here...”

However, Asuna simply nodded in acceptance upon hearing that.

“700k, huh... well, I guess I can’t expect it to be too far from around that much...”

“E-Eeeh!? This must be a rip-off, it’s just a table, you know!? It’s just wood, just some plank!!”

“Listen here, Kirito-kun, if this same table was sold in the real world, it would probably cost 10m yen.”

“W-Whaat!? Ten million... can’t you buy an entire house at that price...?”

Feeling strength leave my waist, I stumbled as I backed away and sat on heavily onto a chair on display.

Now with an exasperated look on, Asuna approached me from the front and beamed as though out of retaliation for earlier.

“Hey, Kirito dearest. I’ve simply fallen in love with this table. ♪”

My head shook from side to side in quivering motions.

“I just know it’ll look dreamy in our living room. I’m sure it’ll make our meals all that better too.”

My body shivered in jerking motions.

“Also, 100k’s written on that chair’s price tag.”

Leaping off and rolling onto the floor, I was welcomed with gentle words from my young bride who looked down at me with a smile.

“But it could be a little too big for our home. Shall we search for something smaller?”

My head nodded endlessly, denied from any other course of action.

### 3

In the end, Asuna and I exited the village and returned after buying a table of a reasonable size at a reasonable price along with its chairs, both rather more refined than what the house started with, a decorative shelf and chest, various other smaller articles, and a heap of groceries.

As we stored all of our belongings into our joint storage, we were empty-handed like on the journey here. Though we did not even hold onto our swords, we could equip them in an instant with the «Quick Change» mod if the time called for it.

We had spent our own sweet time shopping and the bottom of the upper floor was dyed crimson with the setting sun. I honestly did not have much interest in the interior design, but Asuna's footsteps seemed light as though satisfied after shopping for the first time in a while.

"Hey, Kirito-kun. About that huge table we saw in the first shop..."

I answered with an involuntarily strained smile to her sudden words spoken with a smile.

"R-Right, well, it would be nice if we can buy it in the future."

"No, I didn't mean that. You didn't look too closely at the price tag, did you? That was made by a player. It must have been consigned to the NPC shop."

"Eh, seriously...?"

"The maker was called «Mahokl». Ring any bell?"

"No... can't say I do..."

"Same here. But I think making a table like that must have needed a mastered woodworking skill. That's amazing... I was reminded again that Aincrad has so many people living with all they have, even outside the clearing group."

“.....There sure are...”

I nodded deeply at Asuna’s words.

Even while we wholeheartedly enjoyed this brief intermission now, the players of the clearing group must be fighting their way to the labyrinth in the seventy-fifth floor far above. And the blacksmiths, like Lisbeth, must be creating and repairing their weapons. And the merchants, like Agil, must be purchasing and facilitating the trade of their drop items. Aside from them, there were the leather craftsmen, the tailors, the information brokers, the medicine dealers... The thousands of players were putting their all towards their individual goals day after day.

Their efforts were no fictional illusion either. Even if this world could vanish someday, their memories here would remain. If they wished for it, even until they met with true death in the real world.

I reached out with my right hand as I walked and held Asuna’s left hand.

Asuna, too, smiled as she gripped my hand back.

“You know, Kirito-kun? You know how you were saying everything in this world were fictional?”

“Ye... yeah.”

After I nodded at that abrupt question, bewildered, Asuna continued while gazing at the sunset skies in the distance.

“Fiction means that it isn’t real, right? Like a fictitious claim or a fictional account of war.”

“Or a fictional creature.”

“Hehe, yes, yes. But you see, there is something that actually exists despite being fictional.”

“Eeh?”

I tilted my head at those puzzling words.



“Wouldn’t that be a contradiction? It’s fictional because it doesn’t really exist...”

“You’ll understand if you think back to the word’s meaning.”

“Nn.....?”

A bridge could not be constructed over the air. Hence, it could not exist. That would be the etymology behind the word. With that in mind, I looked up at the bottom of the upper floor soaked in madder red.

The words Asuna spoke hours ago suddenly came back to me—the phantasmal scene she showed me.

“Ah... do you mean that, bridged across the sky... the power lines?”

Asuna happily nodded at my murmur.

“Correct! The power lines stretched up high with utility poles and pylons are called «aerial cables<sup>ka kuu sen</sup>». I remembered since the term sounded strange. Though aerial cables are disappearing in Japan in the real world... still, I like them even if they obstruct the view. I think about how they connect the whole world.”

“.....Honestly, I hadn’t thought about power lines at all...”

Lowering my sight from the skies above, I muttered.

“...But I’m glad to learn all of that from you today, Asuna. It made me feel like looking at them from my room’s window again when we’re back in the real world.”

“Ehehe... I’m glad you think so.”

I trembled as my love for Asuna welled up upon seeing her innocent smile, and I drew her slender body closer and hugged it tight.

“Hold on, Kirito-kun, we’re in the middle of the road!”

I gently sealed the mouth that flustered shout came from.

It might have been out of anger or exasperation, or perhaps she simply gave up... but after my face separated a long ten seconds later, Asuna stared at me with teasing eyes and whispered.

“Geez... —It’s only a little farther, so let’s hurry home.”

(End)

## Afterword

Good day, Kunori Fumio here.

Even the “16.X” series I randomly stumbled onto is now on its fourth book. Though it reached “16.9” numerically, Kirito and Asuna’s married life isn’t even on its second night yet... (haha)

It’s far too late now, but with regards to the title, it’s because in “Sword Art Online” that I once serialized on my website, I skipped through the six days from Kirito proposing to Asuna in chapter 16 to chapter 17 where they move into their forest home. And between those two chapters was a short story with the title, “16.5”.

This doujinshi series is an immediate continuation of that short story, so it began with “16.6”. However, the next story will neither be “17.0” nor wind up here... (it seems there were even character names that first appeared here and all...) I’ll think a little more about whether I’ll struggle on futilely with “16.9.1” or something else!

By the way, I’m writing a short short with the title of “16.8.5” for a mini clear file, a novelty for the «Evolution Declaration! Dengeki Bunko Fighting Fair» that begins on 10th August. As the name suggests, it’ll be a few hours before this story, so do get it if it pleases you!

Also, I’m cutting it too close with my work this time, so I wasn’t able to draw art for the cover... The photo resource was gratefully obtained from «mandegan» \*. I hope to try harder next time...!

SWORD ART ONLINE  
material edition

14



# Sugary Days 5

## Material Edition 14

### *Preface*

As the numbers had run out in the «home in the forest» series that had continued from “Sword Art Online 16.6” to “16.9”, I have officially given it a title from this time onwards. The story is a proper sequel, so please do treat the prior four chapters as “Sugary Days 1 ~ 4”.

Kawahara Reki, Sugary Days 5

## **1**

“...Three, two, one...”

Asuna began a sudden, unexplained countdown while looking at the main menu’s time display.

“Zero!”

I ducked with a jerk at that, but nothing happened even after a five-second wait. The mellow atmosphere permeating the log house built near the edge of the twenty-second floor lingered as its always had. It seemed this was no prank with the sofa Asuna and I sitting upon suddenly springing upwards or the house itself blowing up.

“...W-What’s with that zero?”

I nervously asked and Asuna wiped away the window with a smile.

“It has just passed into five-nineteen p.m.”

That time was neither here nor there to point out as a time that has just passed. I pondered upon what it signified before realizing.

“Ah... so that’s it. A day just passed since we married...”

“Correct! Though it hasn’t been a year, it has been a day.”

With a crooked smile, I drew closer to Asuna who said so happily.

“I suppose we’ll have to celebrate, then.”

As I swept away the long hair covering her cheek with my fingertips, Asuna lowered her eyelids as her face grew red. I placed my mouth over her petite lips.

Our long kiss ended and Asuna asked in a small voice.

“Is it still a day... or already a day?”

It seemed she was asking whether the twenty-four hours we had spent in this house felt far too short or long.

I answered after some thought.

“Both, I guess... The day felt so complete, spending it and talking so much with you, Asuna... but I do feel like that one day passed too quick as well.”

That thought must have been from my feeling that our days at this log house could not continue for long.

Asuna and I had left the clearing guild, «Knights of the Blood», announced our temporary withdrawal from the front lines, and descended down to the twenty-second floor here.

Of course, the frontliners would, by no means, pause the clearing simply because the two of us left. They must be still fighting, aiming for the seventy-fifth floor’s labyrinth even now: the KoB, led by Heathcliff the invincible swordsman, the «Divine Dragon Alliance», the largest guild among them, the «Fuurinkazan», where Klein, my old friend, served as leader... and the many other players outside of them.

The frontliners were certainly not monolithic, but if I were to state what joined them together, it would be a common understanding—that they had all put their lives on the line, fighting on while shouldering the risk of death.

SAO lacks magic. As such, there are no healers or buff-based classes to be protected more than the others like in other games.



Though there are roles assigned such as tanks, damage dealers, and scouts, each and every player among the frontliners had to stand before the monsters and fight while suppressing their fear.

That was exactly why players like Heathcliff, who exuded an absolute sense of ease, and Asuna, who could cut down monsters with overwhelming power, could garner a level of respect akin to worship.

However, turning that around, that meant those who do not fight lose their place among the frontliners.

Though few, there were cases of players among them who fell victim to their fear and lost their ability to stand before monsters. Though it did not matter much in battles against weaklings, those who ignore orders to *switch* when clearing the floor boss could bring about the collapse of a party... or even the raid group. Hence, it was normal for those players to signal their withdrawal from the frontliners through their speech or behavior and disappear without much notice.

Asuna's and my withdrawal was basically not much difference from that either. There must be some with bitter emotions over our sudden withdrawal among those players fighting on the seventy-fifth floor—especially those in the guild, KoB. This momentary respite would likely only last until the seventy-fifth floor was cleared at most.

No... the seventy-fifth floor, in particular, would be the third quarter in Aincrad. There was a chance the floor boss would be strengthened to a dire extent, similar to the twenty-fifth and fiftieth floors. If that turned out to be true, they might request for us to return upon discovering the boss room.

“...It's *already* been a day, huh.”

I muttered once more and hugged Asuna's slender frame closer.

If we returned to the front lines, we would have fewer opportunities for contact like this too.

Or rather, that would be an understatement with Asuna being reinstated as KoB's sub-leader; it might be tough for us to even meet.

As though sensing my unease, Asuna whispered at my ear.

"It's okay, it has *only* been a day."

".....Yeah."

"Besides, the day isn't over yet. There's still much more stuff we can do, isn't there?"

".....Y-Yeah."

My avatar twitched at those alluring words. Asuna blinked in that instant before her entire body became dyed in crimson.

"T-That's not it, I didn't mean *that* when I said that."

I placed my lips on her nape as she quickly spoke. Tasting the sensation of her warm skin, smooth as silk, I recall what Asuna had asked in the afternoon.

She said she liked power lines as a child. That she felt fascinated by the data incessantly transmitted through the power lines.

Asuna's shudders and panting that I now sense were sent from her brain as she laid down in a place far away in the real world, making their way to my NerveGear through the massive web of fiber cables and the SAO server. I felt that fact to be both a precious miracle and a vexing obstacle.

"...Asuna..."

I mumbled as I hugged my beloved tight.

"If....."

However, I could speak no further. After all, that future felt far too distant, too precarious. I still lacked the courage to wonder what lay beyond the completion of this death game.

Even Asuna with her astute, telepathy-like ability to read my thoughts chose to keep her silence this time. Instead, her two hands firmly returned my embrace.

Eventually, she vocalized a single word: my name.

“Kirito-kun.”

Her voice seemed as though soothing a young child, saying that everything would turn out okay.

## 2

The menu for dinner was savory fish and bread, baked in the oven, potato potage, and green salad.

As expected of a maxed out cooking skill, the white fish's skin was exquisitely charred and I stuffed it into my mouth with a herb sauce, chewing and swallowing it before making an inquiry of the chef.

"Is the fish the one we bought at the village earlier?"

"That's right. ...Is it not to your taste?"

"N-No, it's super good, really!"

After shaking my head in a fluster, I added on.

"It's just, since there's that soy sauce you spent so effort on, Asuna, I thought making it sashimi could have been great too."

"Aah, sashimi does sound good..."

Asuna stared off into the distance in a daze, imagining that dish that would never be served in an NPC restaurant in Aincrad, but immediately showed a somewhat bitter smile.

"But you see, though I may be overthinking this... there aren't any refrigerators in this world, are there?"

"T-There aren't, are there?"

"And the fishmonger puts them on display in a case at room temperature, right... there's just, this hesitance to eat the fish raw after buying it in that manner."

"R-Right."

Technically, in this world, even if you were to drop the fish onto the ground and leave it there, as long as it existed as an object—that is to say, as long as its durability remained, there would be no difference in its quality (and of course, taste).

Though it would get a dirtied effect three seconds after dropped, that would fade after it's washed in water.

Still, on the other hand, I did understand Asuna's hesitance. When it comes to sashimi, freshly fished ingredients would definitely make for a better tasting dish, or feel that way.

"Then, maybe we should raid the fishmonger right after it opens in the morning and dash back... no, we still wouldn't know when the fish is from, huh... —ah, that's it."

With a thought coming to me, I opened the skill tab on the main menu.

I possessed 12 skill slots at my current level of 96. The skills set there are «One-Handed Sword», «Dual Blades», «Two-Handed Sword», «Martial Arts», «Blade Throwing», «Parry», «Battle Healing», «Searching», «Hiding», «Sprint», «Extended Weight Limit», and «First Aid».

Among those, the one with the lowest proficiency and usage was unmistakably Two-Handed Sword. Though I had taken it up, thinking to try equipping a somewhat rare two-handed sword I obtained long ago, I ended up barely making use of it in the end.

Then again, looking into the Two-Handed Sword skill played its role in duels against two-handed sword users in the future, so it wasn't a waste—but there was no purpose in letting it remain in my slots.

"Don't tell me you're thinking of changing your skills?"

Asuna who stood behind me without my notice peeked into the window I displayed and spoke. I gave a deep nod and answered.

"Yeah... I'm thinking of discarding Two-Handed Sword and becoming a fisherman."

"Eeh?"

"I know what you want to say, but don't stop me, Asuna! This is for the sake of having fresh sashimi!"

Asuna returned to the other side of the table and nodded without hesitation at that.

“It’s not like I’ll stop you, though.”

“Oh... r-really?”

“I mean, with you having Dual Blades, it’s not like you’ll ever use two-handed swords now. Besides, I’ve always thought it would be good for you to have at least one Life-type skill.”

“R-Really?”

“Also, I want to have some tasty sashimi too. Do your best with the skill levelling!”

All I could do against such encouragement was to thump my chest with a “Y-Yeah, leave it to me!”.

After clearing the dining table together, we sat on the rocking chairs in front of the fireplace while drinking coffee before Asuna suddenly spoke.

“That’s right... this came to me after you mentioned about Life-type skills, but we went to look at furniture in Coral Village in the afternoon, didn’t we?”

“Yep.”

“There was that simply lovely table in the shop, wasn’t there?”

“Ye... yep.”

That slight mumbling was due to the slim chance of her suggesting we buy that seven hundred thousand col table. However, Asuna smiled as though to deny that and continued her words.

“I wonder, can we find that wood crafter named, «Mahokl», who made that table?”

“Eh... hmm, I wonder? I guess we could stake out that NPC shop... it should be quick if we count on Argo instead. Why?”



“You see...”

Asuna’s cheeks redden for some reason then.

“I was thinking about ordering a custom rocking chair.”

“Huh?”

I could only blink. After all, we currently were sitting on matching rocking chairs in this moment. It was something ready-made from the NPCs, but it wasn’t bad in terms of comfort.

“W-Why that out of the blue?”

“You see...”

Placing her coffee cup onto the side table before standing up, Asuna tottered to me and sat down on my lap without warning. I put my cup down as well in a panic and supported Asuna from behind with my right hand.

“Look, if we were to sit on this chair together, I’ll be completely on top of you, Kirito-kun, won’t I?”

“...Y-Yeah, you would.”

“With a little more sitting space, we would be able to sit side-by-side, won’t we?”

“Y-Yeah, we would.”

“Also, I was thinking it would be nice if the backrest angle was a little more gentle and all.”

“Y-Yeah, it might.”

My left hand moved along onwards even as I answered, but Asuna pointed a slight glare of disapproval at me before standing up. Returning to her own chair, she brightly opened up a window.

“Then, I’ll send a message to Argo-san. If she finds Mahokl-san, let’s head there together tomorrow?”

“...Let’s.”

A thought came to me as I nodded. Wood crafters should be able to make fishing rods too. It would be all «a good angler never blames his rod» for fishing in the real world, but the quality of tools affects the results in Aincrad. Raising the fishing skill was considered a chore, so being able to fish some would make it more enjoyable too.

I thought while gazing upon Asuna's earnest profile as she tapped away at the holo-keyboard.

True, there were still many more fun events to come. Instead of thinking about how this would end in a few more days, I should live each day to its fullest. That was no different from the days on the front lines.

Turning my eyes towards the window that was still open, I touched the slot the Two-handed Sword skill was set in with my fingertip. From the submenu that popped up, I chose to erase the skill. While reading the warning text about how my proficiency would fall to zero if I did so, I murmured in my heart.

—Sorry for not making use of you much.

After pressing the OK button, the slot turned empty with a somewhat forlorn sound effect.

### 3

25th October, 2024, was bright.

Having eaten breakfast, Asuna and I passed through the teleport gate at twenty-second floor's main town and descended even farther down, to Aincrad's third floor.

The main town, Zumfut, was a town constructed by hollowing out three monstrously gigantic baobab trees. Upon exiting the teleport gate, Asuna looked up towards the short and stout giant trees and whispered with her eyes narrowed.

"...It's been a while, huh?"

"Yeah..."

We immersed ourselves in those memories from long ago as we stood side by side.

The one who first spoke was, once again, Asuna.

"Now, let's go. Mahokl's workshop is in... this tree, huh?"

Our hands hooked up despite neither in particular initiating it and we headed towards the south-eastern baobab.

The information dealer, Argo, had hounded down where the wood crafter, Mahokl, stayed in just a single night. I had thought the shop would be opened on some floor far above, considering that craftsmanship with a maxed out skill level, so it came as a surprise it hear it was on the third floor.

Still, it seems understandable after actually visiting like this.

What a wood crafter needs, most of all, would be high-quality lumber. Aincrad's third floor is a «forest» floor and its surface area was wide too with it being among the lower floors. In addition, few players would pass by now of all times, so it would be uncommon for any disputes over rare materials with those in the same trade to occur.

Crossing through the quiet—or rather, utterly devoid of other players—teleport gate plaza, we entered the baobab building and climbed to its third floor. The workshop was beyond the circular path.

A small signboard hung beside a small door. [Mahokl's atelier] was written on it.

“...No one would be able to tell what kind of shop this is from that alone...”

Asuna nodded to my opinion as well, but it appeared we were at the right place, judging from the name.

I approached and knocked, but with the lack of response, I gently pushed the door open. A loud *gikogikogiko* blared out right after and I unconsciously leaned back.

The atelier spanned much larger inside than it appeared outside—that said, huge logs, square lumber, and planks were piled up anywhere possible, so it turned out like a maze with only parts of the room visible. The *gikogiko* noise seemed to be coming from the center of the room.

Navigating through the lumber, turning left and right, we somehow reached it—a log almost a meter in diameter and three meters long being cut along its length into two with an extremely large saw manned by a truly petite player.

That height was likely two or three centimeters shorter than Argo the «Rat». The sight of that avatar who looked practically like a child, possibly smaller than the deftly handled huge saw, cutting the log which was over two times as tall into two looked as if it was some sort of artistic performance.

The saw, where the earlier noise came from, cut a straight line through the gigantic log without pause and flashed brilliantly in the instant it touched the floor.

Within the light, the log transformed into numerous planks. Come to think of it, this would be my first time watching a wood crafter's technique in person.

After they turned into objects, Asuna and I gave a synchronized round of applause.

The player with a small frame spun about towards us with that saw against her right shoulder and spoke in an adorable voice while her round glasses, adorned with a texture resemblant of classic manga, gleamed.

“—What business do you have with me?”

(To be continued)



# SWORD ART ONLINE

material edition

15





## Sugary Days 6

### Material Edition 15

#### 1

“—What business do you have with me?”

Suddenly interrogated by the petite female player with swirly glasses and hair in braids, in a manner of speech familiar to period dramas, I was momentarily at a loss as to how to reply.

The meaningless thought about how I could answer with the hackneyed “I am no one strange!” had she only gone and asked “Name yourself!” went through my head before Asuna showed off her usual communication skills, answering in a crisp voice.

“We apologize for interrupting your work, but you are the wood crafter, Mahokl-san, aren’t you? I am Asuna and this is Kirito. We have visited today with a request for crafting furniture.”

“Hmm, customers, huh?”

Mahokl plopped the extremely large saw, which had just split that gigantic log into two, straight onto a rack before approaching with her plain work shoes shuffling against the floor.

Even after she came right before our eyes, the swirly texture of her round glasses obstructed her eyes from being seen. Her braided hair was a bright brown, she wore a blue denim apron, and thick leather gloves covered her two hands. Unlike the maid-like apron dress Lisbeth, Asuna’s and my blacksmith friend, usually wore, her appearance was the very image of a craftsman-class.

Having examined us in detail through her swirly glasses, Mahokl placed her hands at her waist and voiced out a second question.

“How did you find this shop?”

“We had an information dealer search on our behalf.”

Asuna answered truthfully and, apparently realizing where the information passed through from that alone, Mahokl snorted with a *hmph*.

“That «Rat», huh?”

“...Yes, we do apologize if that has offended you.”

The wood crafter lightly waved her hand as Asuna tried to lower her head.

“That’s not quite it. There is a signboard out and all. It’s simply... nn, who have you heard my name from in the first place?”

“We hadn’t heard of you from anyone, but we saw a table you made in a shop, Mahokl-san. It was really exquisite, so we thought about putting in an order with the craftsman who made it.”

“A table?”

Having heard Asuna’s answer, Mahokl’s eyebrows drew together above her glasses.

“That is odd, I did think I recalled all of the products I consigned... where was that shop?”

“It’s in Coral Village on the 22nd floor.”

“Coral..... ah, aah.”

Mahokl nodded, hitting her right fist onto her left palm.

“There was that, wasn’t there, there was a village like that. Come to think of it, I did entrust some with the NPC furniture shop there... I had completely forgotten about it.”

I substituted Asuna, who finally let out a question mark above her head, at that moment and spoke of the doubts I had after following the conversation.

“...Erm, from what I’ve heard so far, it seems you’ve been trying to hide yourself... but is it just my imagination?”

“It is not.”

The wood crafter casually shrugged before bringing up her right hand, still in the glove, and raising a finger.

“I suppose I will ask this at least, but what did you want made here?”

Asuna answered that question.

“A rocking chair!”

“...I see.”

Mahokl lowered that index finger and turned towards the depths of the atelier.

“Well, that makes the both of you customers, then. I can serve some tea at least, so this way.”

## 2

A table in a strange shape, resembling the letter «Z», and four chairs with armrests were placed farther in the atelier. Sitting down beside Asuna, I was shocked by how the surface felt so soft despite being an unfinished wood plank.

Putting three mugs, made from wood as well, on the table side by side, Mahokl picked up a kettle—made from metal, naturally—from a nearby stove before gradually pouring hot water into those cups.

“Go on.”

...Even if you say so, this isn't tea but plain hot water; I politely kept that thought to myself and accepted it.

And upon bringing up my own cup while Asuna did too, we took a sip. In that instant, a richly sweet, aromatic, and refreshing flavor unfolded to my surprise and I could not help but to exchange looks with Asuna.

Grinning as her swirly glasses gleamed, Mahokl brought her own mouth to her cup as well and spoke.

“These mugs are made from S-ranked fragrant wood and you get tea just by pouring hot water into them.”

“Ooohh~ there's more to the Woodcraft skill than I thought, huh...”

While I was overwhelmed with admiration, Asuna continued as she rubbed the table's surface.

“Did you make this table and these chairs too, Mahokl-san?”

“Of course.”

“The comfort, feel, and appearance are top-class. ...Why are you in hiding despite being able to make products of this quality...?”

Asuna asked, and Mahokl gulped down another mouthful of tea before answering the question with another.

“...Asuna-chan and Kirito-kun, was it? Are the both of you among those who stay only within the area? Or those who go outside of it?”

We exchanged looks once more at the question we were hardly ever asked. She would know at a glance that we belonged to the latter if we were fully equipped, but both Asuna and I were in casual wear at the moment, without even a bit of metal. Scratching my head, I replied curtly.

“For what it’s worth, we do go outside of it, I guess...”

“Well, of course you do. You are here with an order, after all, even after seeing the price of that table.”

Though Mahokl lifted the corners of her mouth in a grin, that smile soon vanished with wrinkles forming on her brow above her glasses. She groaned with a “hmmm” with some sort of hesitation but eventually spoke out a new question at a lowered volume.

“Then, do you know of «*Composition*»?”

I blinked at the unexpected query before nodding.

“Yes, well...”

Composition, or composite effect, was a term in SAO that referred to the «combined effect» produced with multiple skills. For example, among those I learned, after the One-handed Sword and Martial Arts skills reached certain values, the requirements to use the sword skill, «Meteor Break», would be cleared. It was not limited to combat skills: there were numerous composite effects among the Life-type skills, like how raising the «Polearm Weapon Creation Skill» and «One-handed Weapon Creation Skill» would allow the creation of weapons like the «Halberd» with both piercing and slashing attributes, or how raising the «Cooking» and «Mixing» skills would allow the creation of food mixed with medicine or laced with poison.

At the start of the death game, many players would search out those compositions and keep those they found under wraps, but with the nearly two years that passed since the beginning, all sorts of compositions were discovered and such listings could be bought from information dealers too. In other words, there was no need to keep them a secret nowadays, so I held on to a sense of uneasiness at the wood crafter's solemn behavior while waiting for her to continue.

It took a while before Mahokl, stirring the tea in her mug, talked.

"It's precisely because of composition that I had my entire shop go into hiding."

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

"Nn~~....."

Mahokl groaned once more, perhaps wondering if she should expose more information or not. Looking up, she stared hard at Asuna and me through those swirly lenses before nodding as though to convince herself at last.

"...I will put my trust in your expression of appreciation for my tables. ...Last month, I discovered a new composition."

"Ooh!"

Honestly surprised, I could not help but raise my voice.

"I have always thought they were already all found."

"There aren't many wood crafters, you see. At the current moment, I believe there are only around five players who have completed the «Woodcraft» skill."

"Hm-hmm."

"Among those five, aside from me, there is only one who has the «Sewing» skill at a decent level in addition to «Woodcraft»."

"Hm-hmm."



“And I am the only one who raised «Polearm Weapon Creation» as well.”

“Hm-hmm.”

Swapping in for me, who could only nod in awe, Asuna put her quick-wittedness on display.

“In other words, the new composition Mahokl-san found is a three-skills composite from «Woodcraft», «Sewing», and «Polearm Weapon Creation»... is that how it is?”

“That it is!”

Her two hands, still in their leather gloves, softly hit together and Mahokl leaned against the back of her chair.

“...Polearm weapons often make use of wood in their materials, so I raised it thinking to make effective use of the offcuts resulting from making furniture. I consigned the weapons I made to NPC weapon shops and made some money off them, but I had no intention of living mainly off that. Furniture’s what I like, after all.”

That was understandable, seeing as she had completed the Woodcraft skill. Unlike combat skills that naturally level up while fighting against monsters, Life-type skills have to be accumulated through plain, earnest training. They were not something that could be reluctantly completed.

“As for the Sewing skill, I raised it because it was necessary when making beds or sofas. ...I noticed the new composition displayed in the production window after my Sewing skill level was over 900 and my Polearm Weapon Creation was over 800.”

I let out a soft whistle. Despite how tough it was to master even a single Life-type skill, to have the skill levels for three separate types at 1000, 900, and 800 was rather amazing. It would be only understandable for Mahokl to be the only one who reached it.

If that was how it was, she certainly had my interest in finding out exactly what composition she had discovered now.

There were various composite products from Woodcraft and Sewing, but just what would result from adding Polearm Weapon creation to them? A mop? Or a carp streamer?

I asked while leaning across the table.

“...So, what was that composition...?”

Mahokl’s answer struck both Asuna and I dumbfounded.

“A ballista.”

“Eh? ...S-Some sort of coffee machine?”

“In Japanese, it would be «dohou»<sup>ballista</sup>.”

“Balli... wait..... e-eeeeehh?!”

Asuna tugged on my right sleeve as I bent back in shock.

“Hey, Kirito-kun, what’s a ballista?”

“A b-ballista is, well, to make it short... it’s a stationary, gigantic crossbow. Like a cannon that doesn’t use gunpowder.”

“.....E-Eeeeeehh?!”

And Asuna was the one to shout this time.

### 3

The bell signaling midday rang just as we exited the teleport gate on the 22nd floor.

Coral Village's central plaza was quiet as always with no other player in sight. There were no players at the plaza at Zumfut on the 3rd floor too, but there were barely any NPCs walking around here either. Few would imagine this to be the main town representative of the floor.

"...Aah, I did gather some lumber from here, didn't I. That would be almost a year ago, though."

Stepping onto the plaza's stone paving after Asuna and me, Mahokl spoke in a small voice. She continued in a nostalgic tone even as she diligently checked through the surroundings.

"I had gathered a large amount of good quality wood, with my inventory almost bursting, so I borrowed a corner in the NPC shop and made a table. Since I consigned it there and then, I forgot to register it in my account book."

"...So that means you could make a table of that quality a year ago?"

Asuna asked, apparently surprised, and the craftsman with swirly glasses grinned.

"Well, it would, but to put it in another way, it took nearly a year to complete the skill from there. Now, let us head to the shop."

The three of us moved to the furniture shop and the table in question, its top made from a single walnut plank and with a net price of seven hundred thousand cor, was still exuding a massive presence in the depths of the shop just like the day before, naturally enough.

Briskly stepping over to her creation, its maker removed the glove from her right hand and gently caressed the table's top. Muttering "It wasn't too badly done.", she tapped the table's surface.

The window accessible only to the one who consigned the product appeared and just as Mahokl was about to press the «End Consignment» button, I quickly stopped her.

"Erm, h-hold on!"

"...What is it?"

"Are you going to stop selling that table?"

"I am, you should know why, after what I have mentioned earlier."

"T-That's true..."

What we had heard from Mahokl at her atelier in Zumfut was certainly reason enough for her seclusion. It would be best for her to put her business on hold and go into hiding for the time being when considering her safety. Asuna and I had tracked her down precisely from this table alone—even if it was through the staggering investigative abilities of the «Rat», Argo.

Still, I could hardly find it in myself to give up easily when recalling the expression Asuna had worn when we found this table yesterday. Nonetheless, unfortunately, I did not have the means to casually drop seven hundred thousand cor for furniture.

Feeling as though my «reliability as a husband» was being tested on the third day of our marriage, I growled and Asuna giggled before gently patting my shoulder.

Drawing her face closer to my ear, she whispered.

"Thank you, Kirito-kun. But the thought is enough."

"Y-Yeah, still..."

"We can still go back and buy it once we've saved up enough money."

“N-Nnnn.....”

Mahokl watched over our exchange through her thick lenses and grinned once more.

“The both of you.”

“Y... yes?”

“I would not mind taking ninety percent off this table.”

“Oh... nine... ——eh, ehh?! Ninety percent off?!”

Mahokl thrust a finger on her right hand forward as I nearly hopped up.

“Of course, I will make that rocking chair you wanted to order too. However, there is a condition attached.”

“...T-That’s only natural... ...What is it...?”

“You will have to gather all of the material items I ask for!”

Temporarily withdrawing the table that was effectively sold now, Asuna and I accompanied Mahokl back to the teleport gate as she returned to the 3rd floor and looked down upon the small parchment handed to us by the wood crafter.

Five types of material items were listed there. Each was relatively rare, but the problem laid beyond that.

“...These are likely the materials for the ballista, aren’t they...?”

I curtly nodded to Asuna’s whispers.

“Yeah, they must be. But I wonder why... She should have vacated her last atelier and hid on the 3rd floor because she didn’t want to make it...”

“Hmm... —Well, for the time being, let’s go back and have some food?”

With my forgotten empty stomach reawakened by my wife's words, I briskly answered with a "Yeah!".

Purchasing the ingredients in the village, we walked along the lake shore path and returned to the log house. It was just after five in the afternoon on the twenty-fourth of October that Asuna and I married in front of this house, and since it was now one on the twenty-sixth, it had actually not even been two whole days yet.

Nonetheless, the moment I saw that roof and the unadorned chimney on it beyond the hill, nostalgia squeezed tightly deep in my chest. Perhaps feeling similarly, Asuna put more strength into our linked hands.

"...It's nice having a home, isn't it?"

I hugged Asuna's shoulders as she murmured and replied with our heads against each other.

"Yeah. I feel like I've finally understood the significance behind the term, «Player Home»."

"Yes... It is our home, isn't it?"

The serene expression, veiling what seemed like a strong longing, Asuna showed to me as she said so forced my left hand onto her cheek as I laid my lips over hers. Asuna's lips conveyed an aphonic "I love you" as our long kiss continued.

We went out together in the morning, passed through various places, and came home together. I felt nothing else could be more joyful, fun, and precious than even just those now.

"I love you... I really do, Kirito-kun..."

I hugged Asuna's slender frame close with all my strength as she whispered in a quivering voice.



## 4

After polishing off a breakfast of *prosciutto crudo*, cheese, and lettuce generously placed between rye bread along with *croque-madame* with the sunny-side-up fried eggs atop, I took out a memo written on parchment from my shirt's breast pocket.

Reading from the top of the listed material items, we had:

- Solidite Ingot 30
- Acutite Ingot 20
- Aged Teak Log 10
- Greatrock Dragon Tendon 8
- Legendary Bear Fats 8

The top two were rare metal ingots, the middle was wood, likely just as rare, the fourth was a material gathered from ground dragons, and the fifth—was an item of a truly nostalgic name.

Bringing cups of steaming hot coffee over in her two hands, Asuna sat by my side and peeked at my hand.

“...The last one's that, isn't it... on the 4th floor...”

“It should be. To think we'll be fighting that fire-breathing bear again, huh...?”

Distant memories came back to me for a moment as I sipped the coffee.

The «Legendary Bear Fats» was a rare material necessary when constructing the gondola for moving across the 4th floor, the floor of lakes and waterways. The gigantic bear that breathed fire everywhere, «Magnatherium», dropped it, but it was a disaster when we challenged it on our first encounter.

Still, our levels were now over 90 contrast to nearly two years ago when we were about level 15. Even the terribly frightening Magnatherium from back then would probably be go down in a fight with a single sword skill now.

We could simply hold back on the fire-breathing bear fighting and obtain it from players... that thought occurred to me before Asuna gave a quiet “hmm”.

“...What is it?”

“Hmm... —I am happy over getting ninety percent off that table too... but it is really okay for us to gather these materials...?”

“Hmm.”

Or so I went this time.

There was a strange contradiction in Mahokl’s actions. After all, she vacated her atelier from that floor high above and moved to Zumfut on the lower floors because she did not want to construct that composition weapon, the «ballista», that she personally discovered, or so she had explained.

A major premise of SAO was the lack of «projectile weapons». Through that principle, not only was magic, something basic to the usual fantasy RPG, missing but also bows and arrows.

The reason was to abolish any shooting aspect from the game and have players experience combat as intimately as possible or so the game design went, but there was a reason behind that setting in this world as well.

That was— A long, long time ago, the humans, elves, and dwarves established and lived in their respective nations on the great earth. However, at one point, the catastrophe called «The Great Separation» broke out and many towns and villages, including all of the nations’ capitals, were cut away from the earth in circles and stacked up as they floated into the sky, forming a humongous castle. All magical powers were lost since then and arrows shot from bows lost their ability to fly straight.

I opened my mouth while sentimentally recalling the dark elf knight who taught us of that legend.

“...It’ll be earth-shattering if the ballista’s real and usable, huh. We don’t know if we can bring it to the labyrinth’s boss room, but at the very least, I believe it’ll change the face of field boss clearing and such. I can understand Mahokl’s unease based on that alone... if those divine dragon people from the frontliners or the Aincrad Liberation Force were to find out that she’s the only one capable of creating the ballista, they would never leave her alone.”

“True... they are the type to go ‘anything to clear this death game is okay aside from PK’, so they may even confine her at worst.”

Asuna, somewhat assuming the air of the Knight of the Blood’s sub-leader, nodded solemnly.

To Mahokl, who put that much passion into making high-quality furniture, being forced to make nothing but ballistas, a weapon, no, weaponry would hardly be bearable. No one could blame her for choosing to hide herself before any uproar occurred.

Still, why had she told us about the ballista, then?

Also, why had she gave us this condition to gather the rare materials likely for the ballista...?

“.....What should we do, Kirito-kun?”

I considered for another ten second before letting out a breath and answering when questioned by Asuna.

“Let’s do it. Not because of the table, but... I’m sure Mahokl has something in mind. If things get dangerous, we’ll just have to put a stop to it.”

“...Nn, I understand. Then, let’s get ready.”

Nodding and standing up, Asuna waved her right hand and brought out a window.

After briefly fiddling with her equipment figure, her plain sweater and skirt were replaced with a bodice for knights, pure white with a red accent.

Despite it being a mere two days since I last saw it, her beauty, grace, and charm overwhelmed my ability to speak.

The hem of her skirt fluttered gently as she spun about.

“Kirito-kun, you should hurry and...”

Asuna got that far before my two hands reached out and drew her closer.

“Ah, wait, you can’t, we’re going to gather those items, so...”

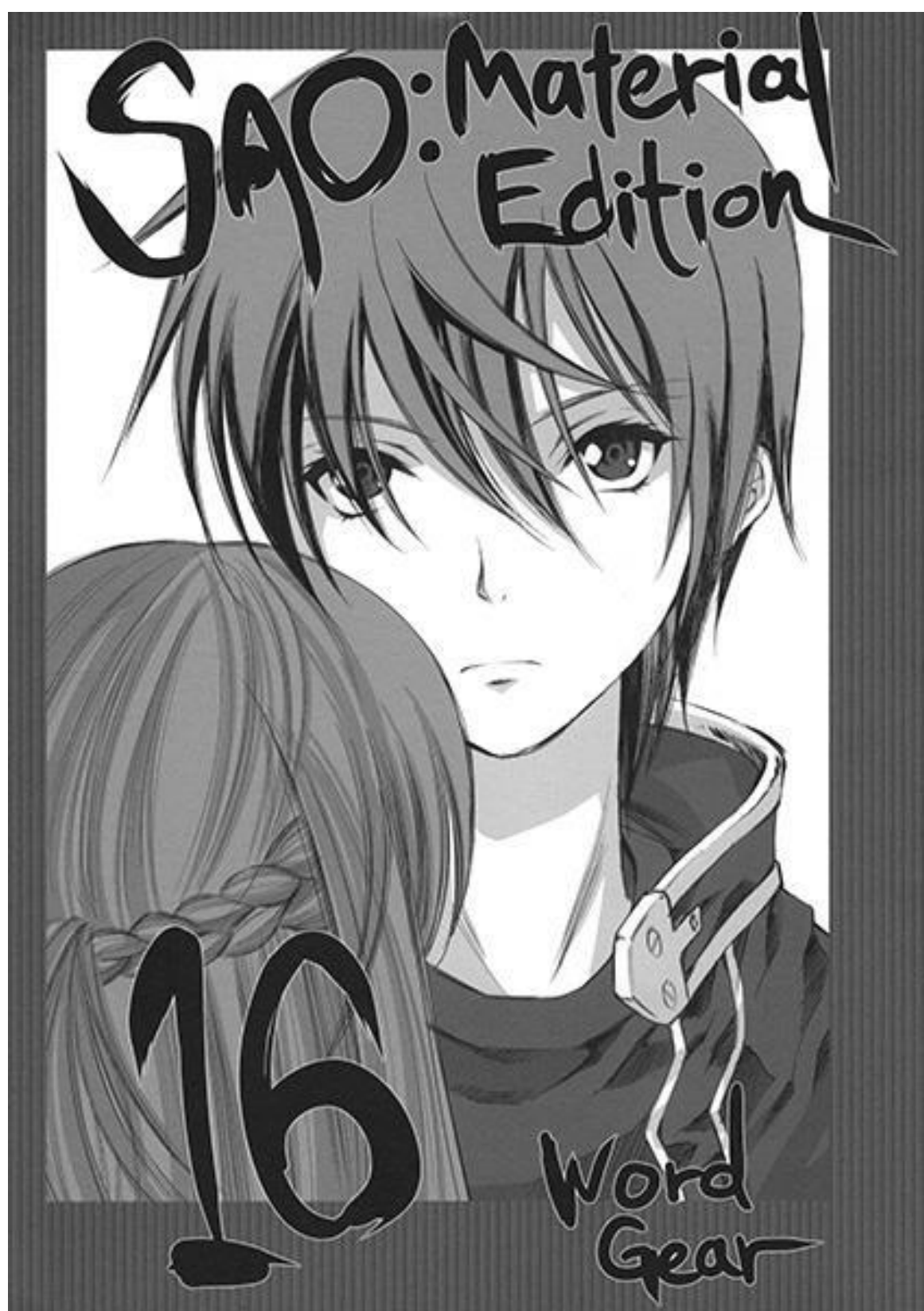
Slowly tracing my lips over the fencer’s nape as her face reddened, I whispered.

“It’s fine, we can gather those easily enough in three hours.”

“Geez, what do you mean that it’s fine... nn.....”

A warmth slowly crept into Asuna’s breaths as her body shuddered—

(To be continued)



# SAO: Material Edition

16

Word  
Gear

# Sugary Days 7

## Material Edition 16

It may be good to read up to SAO Progressive v3 before this!

### 1

Aincrad's 4th floor, main town, Rovia.

The «capital of water», with an elegant townscape resemblant of Southern Europe and waterways boasting of clear water, had stayed as the most popular sightseeing spot for some time after the opening of its teleport gate. Visitors would form long lines at the docks for gondolas handled by NPC gondoliers, and there would even be congestion in the main canal on days with clear skies.

However, that was a thing of the past—

Barely any players were at the teleport gate plaza Asuna and I descended to. Even if it might be now known as no more than a town difficult to get around in, with its catchphrase as the Town of Water stolen by the main town of the 61st floor, Selmburg, this fall in population felt rather bleak. Though the 3rd floor's Zumfut, where we visited in the morning, felt desolate as well, that paled in comparison, strangely enough.

“...It's a little cold, isn't it?”

I held Asuna's hand tightly after she offered it with those words. It was 26th October, 2024, and despite how it should have been colder on 21st December, 2022, when Asuna and I activated this town's teleport gate, I could not recall it being so. In the first place, we came to this town by swimming through the river with just a swimming ring from where that staircase led.





And yet, for it to be so chilly when it was still the latter half of October, it might have been due to Aincrad turning colder over these two years, the scenery supporting that thought—or that one sorrowful memory that still remained in my chest.

I turned and scanned through the plaza once more with our hands still linked. However, my hopes were dashed.

“There’s not even a single player stall, huh...”

I muttered and Asuna nodded along.

“And there were lines of stalls selling the materials for gondolas back then too, weren’t there?”

“If only we could move the gondolas to the floors above, that stubborn old shipwright would still be making a killing too, though...”

At my comment, Asuna looked towards the north-western block of the town. She must have been thinking about paying another visit to the workshop of that old shipwright, Romolo. But she soon shook her head lightly and looked into my face.

“If there aren’t any stalls, it looks we’ll have to get the drops on our own.”

“Aah... that’s true, let’s pay that fire-breathing bear a visit for the first time in a while.”

Exchanging nods, we began our walk towards the wharf on the western side of the plaza.

Asuna and I came all the way down to this 4th floor on a request from the grandmaster wood-crafter, Mahokl, to gather various materials. The list included eight «Legendary Bear Fats» which also served as materials for gondolas, but without any players to purchase them from, we would have to go for it on our own as Asuna mentioned.

Wharfs were built in all four cardinal directions from the square teleport gate plaza: the north and south were for shared gondolas

with NPC gondoliers while the east and west were exclusively for those owned by players.

During the 4th floor's clearing, the east and west wharfs would have been mostly occupied by the large ships constructed by the two large guilds—come to think of it, the term, «clearing group», hadn't yet been established then—of that time, but all that were there now were numerous small boats wavering on the ripples.

Asuna and I came to a stop before a gondola for two, quietly moored on the northern end of the east wharf.

Its hull, painted ivory-white and forest-green, was still as beautiful as a gem despite the damage it had previously received from surface combat. Its name, “Tilnel”, was marked upon its side, gleaming in the lambent light glancing off the water's surface. Our beloved boat that we had the old Romolo construct after frantically gathering its materials roughly two years ago, Tilnel.

We had it in the custody of the dark elves' fortress, «Yofel Castle», built on the southern side of the 4th floor's lake, but that exquisite castle was now an uninhabited ruin. My memories, from when we sailed aboard Tilnel with the castle's children on the lake, surfaced and provoked a terrible, squeezing ache in my chest.

“.....”

Standing by my side, Asuna suddenly turned around and buried her face into my shoulder. I softly drew closer the fencer whose shoulders slightly quivered as she gripped tightly upon the fabric of my undershirt with her two petite hands.

A hushed voice echoed close to my ears before long.

“...I'm sorry... I thought I would be fine... but it, still, hurts...”

“Aah... —I'm sorry, too, for not thinking about your feelings. Maybe we shouldn't have come here after all...”

I whispered back, and Asuna shook her head slightly, side to side, still sunken in my shoulder.

“No... I am somewhat glad, too, that this pain still remains with me... —Still... if only... if only we could, have another.....”

Asuna closed her mouth there, but my heart had received her words loud and clear.

Asuna and I had met on the first floor’s labyrinth, and though it was due to a series of coincidences after that, we did team up as a combination for a not-too-short period of time. What left the most vivid impression from the early days of the death game was the «Elf War Campaign Quest», spread throughout the lower floors, that we took on as a pair. Tilnel’s blemishes were suffered during those quests as well.

Back then, even if we held special feelings for each other, our obstinacy would not allow us to show that openly. As a combination that could be said to be on both good and bad terms, we often squabbled with me pulling various pranks on Asuna and her hurling various objects at me, but still, those days were lovely. However, irrevocable regret and melancholy accompanied the end of the Elf War quest—and that contributed to us walking our separate paths in the end: Asuna, towards that of the «Knights of the Blood», and I, back down that of an independent solo player.

—If only, if only we could have another chance at that campaign quest.

Asuna was likely about to say that and I thought the same too. However, if we were granted the authority to turn back time, we should return to the beginning of this death game and put our all into reducing the number of casualties among the players to zero... in the first place, we would be able to prevent this major incident from even happening. Even if it meant Asuna and I would have never met.

“.....If we return to the front lines, let’s put our all into clearing the game. I am sure that, too, is what Kizmel wishes for...”

Asuna nodded, strongly, at my words despite her soft sobs.



## 2

The gondola for two, Tilnel, glided through the waterway with that same agility from before. Exiting the town from the southern water gate, we went through the large river for some time before landing at the forest area where the fire-breathing bear, the named monster, «Magnatherium», lived.

Though less so than the 3rd floor, the forest of aged trees was splendid and gleamed a pale hue of gold in the afternoon light filtered through. Most of the trees were gnarly and broad-leaved, exhibiting a charm different from that of the 22nd floor's coniferous trees.

“Now then, the bear's...”

I turned about, taking a look around, while leisurely walking across the mossy ground. There were neither the bloodthirsty atmosphere from the Magnatherium scramble from back then nor the sign of any players aside from us. As long as we found the bear, it would be fine carrying out the hunt at our own pace.

—Or so I thought.

“Hey, Kirito-kun... did you hear someone speak...?”

Asuna, having regained her mood after sailing for the first time in a while, placed her hands behind her ears. That gesture, which seemed to possess no more than a psychological effect in reality, actually had a hearing bonus effect in SAO. I did so too, and focused my ears on the sounds around.

It was several seconds after that when an extremely soft sound, like the tail-end of a player calling out, provoked my hearing.

“—This way!”

Nodding along with Asuna, we ran towards the north-eastern side of the forest.



Numerous springs dotted the ground and we had to detour around them whenever we encountered any before, but a single jump now could get us over them. It took a mere thirty seconds, dashing through the cluster of trees like ninjas, landing on tree trunks at times.

An enormous silhouette could be seen before us, charging from the right towards the left. That was unmistakably our target, Magnatherium, even without hearing its “zugyarooon!!” roar that hardly sounded like a mammal.

However, that was not all we found.

Two players desperately ran on, practically a hairbreadth from the tip of the fire-breathing bear’s nose. Upon focusing my sight, the faintly red cursor appeared for the bear with green ones for the players. The HPs displayed were at ninety-percent for the bear and fifty-percent for each of them. I wouldn’t know their levels, but for them to lose that much against a fourth-floor monster, even if it was against the named Magnatherium, they must be around 10 to 15?

“They look like they’re in trouble, huh...”

Asuna replied my words with a short “They do”. Confirming her intentions as our eyes met, we accelerated.

To assure the fleeing pair that this was not a PK, I shouted out “We’re backing you up!!” before they noticed and ran into the charging Magnatherium’s path.

The bear roared at that same moment.

“Gyazgooaaahh!!”

It came to an abrupt stop using its four burly limbs and lifted its upper body all at once. The bear that measured over eight meters tall raised the horn protruding from its head up high and bared its gigantic jaw before wildly sucking in air like a vacuum cleaner. The red light shimmering in the depths of its throat quivered. The indicator for its fire breath.

To avoid this breath two years ago, we had to jump into the many springs in the forest. However, this time, I drew my beloved «Elucidator +45» from my back at last and stood straight with it brandished.

Flames burning crimson breathed out fiercely from the boar's throat. I rapidly spun my sword in that moment and activated the sword skill, «Spinning Shield». Though its activation was difficult, entering the motion only after dexterously using my five fingers and spinning the sword twice, like twirling, it was a useful skill capable of blocking flame and ice breaths (though unfortunately ineffective against lightning and poison).

Elucidator's blade, rapidly spinning within my hand, blew away the bear's flame breath as a shield gleaming white. I called out to my bride some distance away while keeping up the skill.

“Asuna, counting on you for the counter.”

“Okay, I've got you.”

Asuna drew her rapier, «Lambent Light +32», from her waist with a refreshing *shing*. Deftly stepping into the bear's side, she activated a four-hit «Quadruple Pain» the instant its breath attack ended.

The four thrusts, faster than the eye could follow, carved a red cross into the bear's flank. Its giant frame gleamed blue as it swelled out and I watched it explode into countless scattered particles as I slightly twisted my neck.

With Asuna's current attack power, it should be possible for a single basic, one-hit «Linear» to down the bear. Hence, why would she go for an overkill, using that four-hit skill—?

That doubt cleared away upon hearing the players who were fleeing from the bear.

“Th... thank you very much!”

After returning my sword into the sheath on my back as I turned around, I saw the ones standing there were a man and a woman, a combination like us. Both had the orthodox one-handed sword and shield, and the man was equipped with light metal armor while the woman was equipped with reinforced leather armor. They certainly were around level 15, judging from the grades of those. Though that was within the safety margin for fighting on the fourth floor, there were no absolutes in combat in SAO. All the more so with a named mob as an opponent.

“Hey there, we’re sorry too, for deciding to cut in on our own.”

The pair started head-shaking exercises with complete synchronization at my reply.

“No, no, really, don’t be, it really helped us out~~”

The female player replied this time round with a cute voice. Asuna walked to us from my back and the pair deeply bowed to her as well.

The male player sprung back up and let out an enthusiastic voice towards Asuna.

“But still, that was amazing! Bringing down that tough Magnatherium with a single four-hit sword skill!”

Yes, Asuna must have wanted the pair to think that «a four-hit attack was necessary». If she downed the bear with a single Linear, they might recognize us as from the clearing group and if rumors of that reached the front lines, our break might just get canceled with a “You call bullying the weak monsters around the fourth floor resting?!” from someone like the prim and proper Heathcliff.

That said, it was clear finishing it off with a four-hit skill meant we weren’t at the proper level for this floor, so Asuna gave a modest reply.

“No, its HP was reduced by a little beforehand, so...”

“That really was just a little! Besides, that skill to block its breath was amazing too... so there are sword skills like that too, huh...”

The emotional male player looked to be around twenty years old from the appearance of his avatar. He had brown hair, tinged red and curled backwards, with a rather manly face. On the other hand, the female player had almost-white platinum gold hair in a billowy ponytail with somewhat soft facial features. She seemed younger than her partner too.

Deciding it was best to avoid dragging this talk about ourselves on any further, I threw out a question for the pair.

“And you are on the «Shipwright of Yore» quest?”

The pair replied with a “Yes!” in concert and I could only grin as I spoke.

“Must be tough dealing with that stubbornness of old Romolo.”

“Yes, it sure is~~ We had to go through so much before he would even accept our request~~”

The female player vigorously nodded and Asuna giggled. It appeared we had found out why they were battling with the fire-breathing bear for now, but that brought up a new doubt in itself.

“Err... judging from your equipment, the two of you aren’t crafters but fighters, aren’t you? If your aim is to level up, instead of clearing that bothersome quest... or rather, why not skip this troublesome floor? I personally think it’s more effective, in terms of both cor and experience points, if you ignored this place and farmed at the 5th floor’s underground burial grounds...”

When we first came to the 4th floor, we had no choice but to clear the labyrinth and defeat the floor boss before heading up to the 5th floor by the stairs. As such, we need our own gondola for moving throughout the floor, but with the teleport gate now unlocked, it’s possible, or rather, standard, for players to level up solely at the «best farming spots» if they were aiming to head up.

The pair exchanged looks at my question before the man displayed an embarrassed smile and answered.

“No, well, actually, we’re on the Elf War campaign...”

It seemed only I could hear Asuna softly catching her breath. The man continued on, his expression unflinching.

“We initially planned to stop after receiving the quest rewards on the 3rd floor. The walkthrough book did write that the 4th floor’s event quest was rather tough too.”

“But you see~ it really bothered us wondering how the story was going to go~”

The female player followed up while beaming.

“We’re on it from the dark elves’ side~ and we really, really wanted to take a look at the queen’s castle on the 9th floor~ So, we thought to do what we could~ And still, we fell flat on the very first step on the 4th floor~”

The woman laughed with a *tehehe* and the man opened his mouth once again.

“—We hunted down boars and worms around the borders of Starting City until just recently, earning enough to cover the cost of the inn and food. But after keeping that up for over a year, we got above level 10... and when the «Army» found out, they told us to enlist. We wanted none of that, so...”

“That’s why we left Starting City~ And so, we figured, why don’t we get stronger for real~? I guess you must be thinking, like~ why now~ being so strong already and us focusing so much on the elf quest is totally what some casual would do too~...”

Asuna yelled out the moment the female player giggled once more.

“That’s not true at all!”

Taking a step forward, she stared at the two swordsmen with an earnest look.

“Trying your best, aiming for some goal... I believe that is all that’s truly important in this world. It doesn’t matter when or why... I believe all of the players are doing their part against this game, be it someone who left the city wanting to grow stronger like the both of you, or someone who trained their Life skills... or even someone who simply lived on, day after day, in Starting City.”

The pair widened their eyes at Asuna’s words for a moment but eventually nodded gently as though understanding.

As six «Legendary Bear Fats» dropped from the Magnatherium Asuna defeated, we gave them the four needed for the ship building quest, conveyed warnings regarding the fallen elves they would encounter from now on as a side note, and parted with the two players at the forest’s entrance.

Asuna and I waited for the fire-breathing bear’s respawn and defeated it again—finishing it off with a single «Vertical» from me this round—and returned to Rovia by gondola.

Anchoring Tilnel on the west wharf once again, we went up the stairs towards the teleport plaza. We took a look around just in case, but the pair were nowhere to be seen. They must be awaiting the gondola’s completion in the old Romolo’s workshop by now.

Asuna muttered as we walked towards the gate.

“Those two... I wonder if they saved that dark elven knight at the start...”

That must be impossible, I thought to myself. I had looked into it afterwards, but it was confirmed that even after reaching level 50 and becoming strong enough to defeat the enemy elite knight normally, both knights would die without fail at the opening quest for the campaign. All aside from that one irregularity Asuna and I encountered.

However, I gripped Asuna’s hand while I answered.



“They might have, huh? Seeing as they’re on the elf quest now of all times.”

“Nn... that’s true.”

Looking at each other, we both laughed softly.

Our hands remained connected as I opened our inventory window with my spare hand and withdrew two plain, grey, hooded mantles. Passing one to Asuna, we both put them on. We pulled the hoods down deep and stepped into the teleport gate, flickering blue. Taking in a deep breath, we called out as one.

“Teleport, Algade!”

### 3

50th floor, main town, Algade.

The town I made my home until Asuna and I purchased the log house on the 22nd floor and began our life together. I still kept up the rent for the room I called my sleeping place, but I wouldn't be returning ever again—or so I hoped.

Algade was the largest city in Aincrad even now, nearly ten months after the 50th floor was cleared, and there was an absurd number of shops around, whether they were set up by players or NPCs. Naturally, it was not uncommon for even the top players to come shopping, too, hence the reason for hiding our faces with the hoods.

We walked through the squalid streets, strangely enough nostalgic despite being less than a week since I moved, for a bit and slipped into a certain player shop.

It could not be more chaotic inside the shop with its weapons, armor, materials, potions, and various other goods of various categories; and fortunately, while it was filled with numerous customers, there were none who turned their attention away from the goods. Approaching the counter further inside the shop, I quietly greeted the shop owner who had a window open and a difficult expression on.

“Yo, I’m here.”

The skinhead giant looked up at that, and his mouth bent along with his beard as he let out a groan.

“What do you mean, I’m here?! At least contact me an hour in advance!”

The giant’s name was Agil. The manager for this general store and a cunning businessman, as well as a two-handed axe veteran

among the clearing group. Asuna and I had known him ever since the floor boss clearing battle on the first floor.

Grinning from within the hood, I rapped his burly arm.

“Well, that’s just how much trust I have in your capabilities, see.”

“How am I supposed to fulfill an order that demanding on such short notice...?”

Looking at Agil complaining away, Asuna giggled from my side.

“We are sorry, Agil-san. Sorry for requesting something so difficult out of the blue.”

“No, well, it’s not like that matters. It’s my motto to stock up everything from potions to full plates and to offer them at a fair price.”

The effects of a beauty’s smile were immediate; the wrinkles on the shop owner’s brow vanished and he voiced out his shady slogan as he scrolled through a window. He tilted his head even while deftly getting together the items for a trade with me.

“Thirty solidite ingots, twenty acutite ingots, ten aged teak logs, eight greatrock dragon tendons... exactly what are these materials for? As far as I know, there’s no such recipe like this, though.”

—There should have been eight legendary bear fats added in there too, I thought to myself as I interrupted with a shrug of my shoulders.

Among the five material items requested by the wood-crafter, Mahokl, I had requested the four that were in frequent-enough circulation, though costly, from Agil. I hadn’t asked for the bear fats because I had predicted no player would be selling the material needed exclusively for the ship-building quest on the 4th floor in their shops now of all times, and I had no desire to expose the entire recipe to any outsider. It wasn’t like I didn’t trust Agil, but at any rate, it was best to have some insurance, considering what would be made from these materials.

Checking the contents of the trade window from Agil with care, I confirmed the items' names and quantities before nodding.

“Okay, no problem here. How much are they?”

“It would go for several times the market rate if it was a one-time customer, but... well, eighteen thousand col will do.”

This would be where our unscrupulous haggling war would start if this was our usual barter, but out of respect for Agil in gathering these rare materials within just two hours, I decided to yield to his price. Entering the digits into the window, we both pressed the OK button and the window disappeared with the successful trade sound effect.

“Thanks, Agil.”

“Thank you, Agil-san.”

Asuna and I expressed our gratitude in unison and the big man answered with a “Thanks!” before grinning.

“That’s that, and now to the both of you, how’s the newlywed life going...”

“Aah, oh, right, how’s the 75th floor’s clearing going?”

Forcing that question in and shutting down Agil’s probe, I heard out his reply of “That would be about half done.” before beating a retreat from the shop with a “Right, then, see you around!”.

We went through the teleport gate once again, this time moving to Zumfut on the 3rd floor. Exiting onto the silent plaza, an utter change from the hustle and bustle of Algade, we removed our hooded mantles at the same time.

“...Agil-san has become completely at home as a merchant, hasn’t he?”

“No kidding... I couldn’t even have imagined him buying his own shop back when I gave up the «Vendor’s Carpet» to him...”

We turned our sight towards the gigantic tree towers after some brief laughter.

“...Now then, it’s about time.”

(To be continued)

# Credits

Translation:<sup>5</sup>

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**Thanks!**

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<sup>5</sup> Translations from <http://www.taptaptaptaptap.net/?s=Sugary+Days> on August 15, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Editing since Sugary Days 6 (ME15)