

# [Sword Art Online : Material Edition] The Progressers

November 2007

This was my first SAO doujinshi, but I now have absolutely no inkling of what I was trying to achieve when creating it then... When I read the afterword to search for clues, "I always said that I wanted to make a doujinshi and I finally did it." was written, so it's just like how this compilation came to be, huh. I didn't mature at all over these three years!

The content is the «1st duel between Asuna and Kirito», briefly touched on in the main series. It's set shortly before the side story available on my homepage now, "A Murder Case in The Area". Seeing how aloof Asuna is here, it's pretty amazing how much she managed to mellow out in SAO's original story.

I don't dare to touch manga with my incompetence at it. After all, I'm still just as bad, if not worse now!



# INTRODUCTION OF SWORD ART ONLINE

November, 2012.

SAO began operation with fifty thousand players who devoured into the server. 食った。

However, what was made known to those players through the initial tutorial was the fact that the game had been hacked by a single one of the developers. 壊された。

The number of revised rules amounts to three.

1. It is impossible to log out by one's free will.
2. When the player's HP becomes zero, their brain will be destroyed by intense microwaves released by the Nerve Gear. 壊される。
3. All players will be released when the game is cleared by defeating the final boss monster on the "Floating Castle Aincrad", the platform where the game takes place in, holding a hundred floors.

And thus, the largest death game recorded in history has begun.

A.D. 2011.

A single household game system that shattered what was common sense at that time, was released.

The helmet-shaped machine named, "Nerve Gear", was able to fully cancel all bodily sensations in reality by directly accessing the brain through concentrated electromagnetic waves, while simultaneously feeding false signals to the five senses——

In other words, a full dive into virtual spaces became a possibility.

The widely acclaimed Nerve Gear was warmly received by consumers.

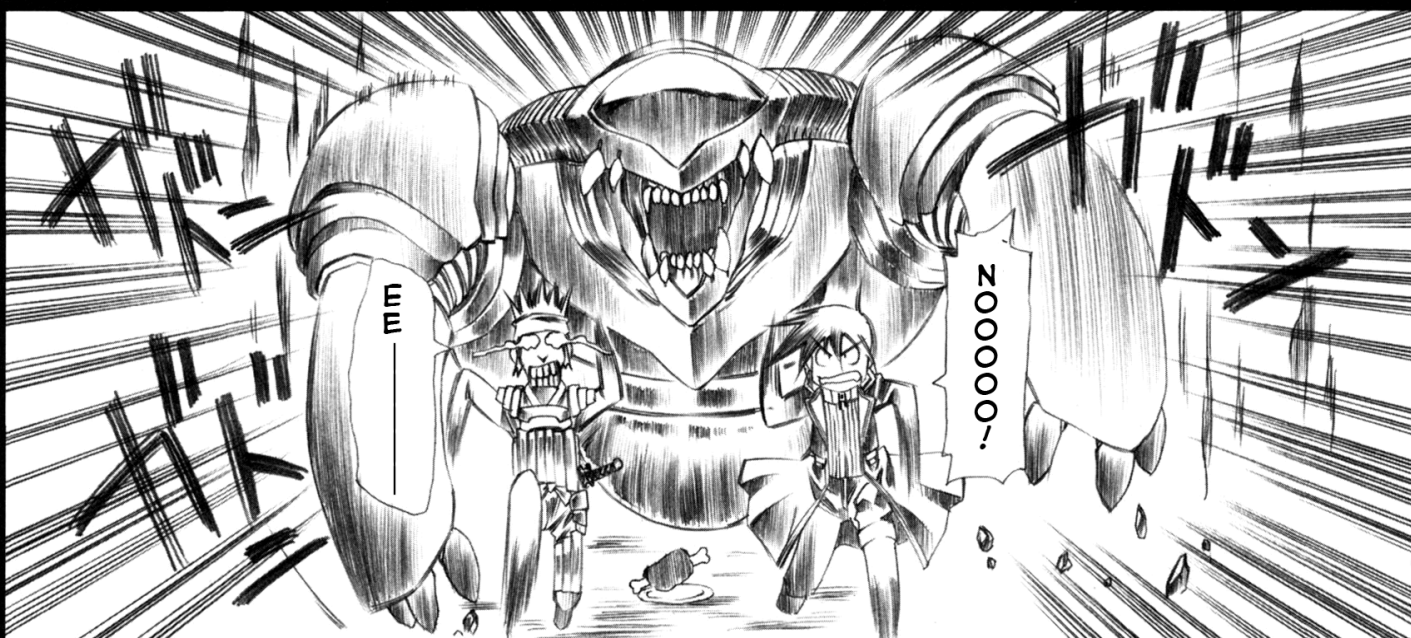
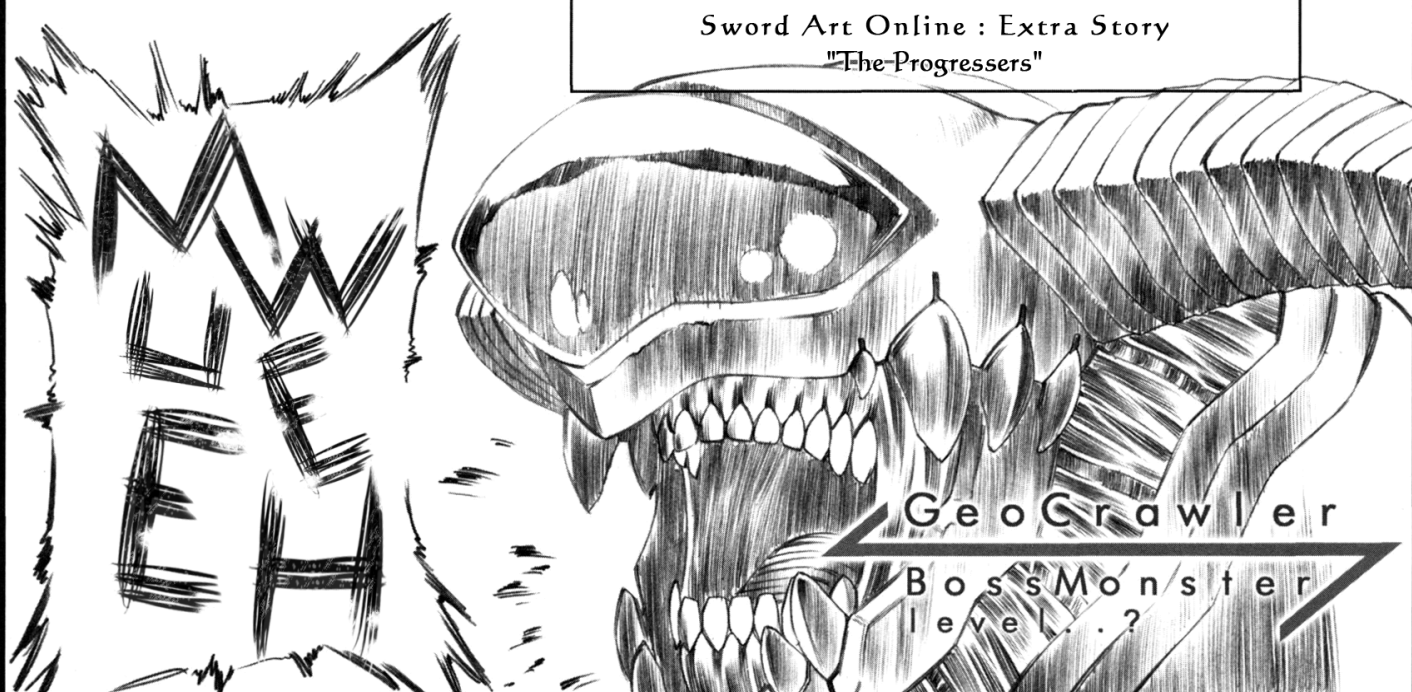
A year later,

the timely announcement for the first VRMMO-RPG was revealed.

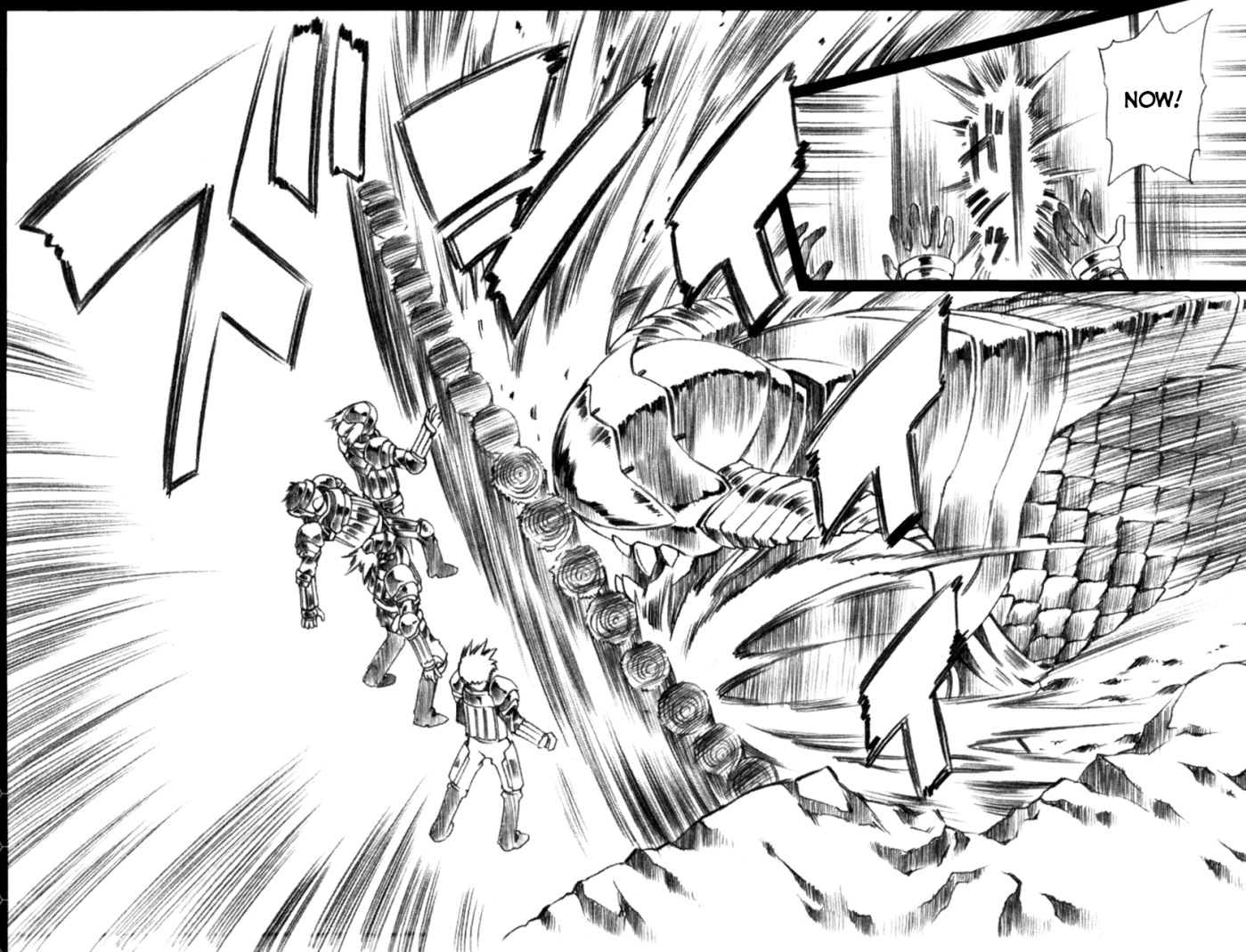
Rejecting all traces of magical elements, the title of the game that exclusively pursued combat through weapons was

"Sword Art Online"『ソードアート・オンライン』。

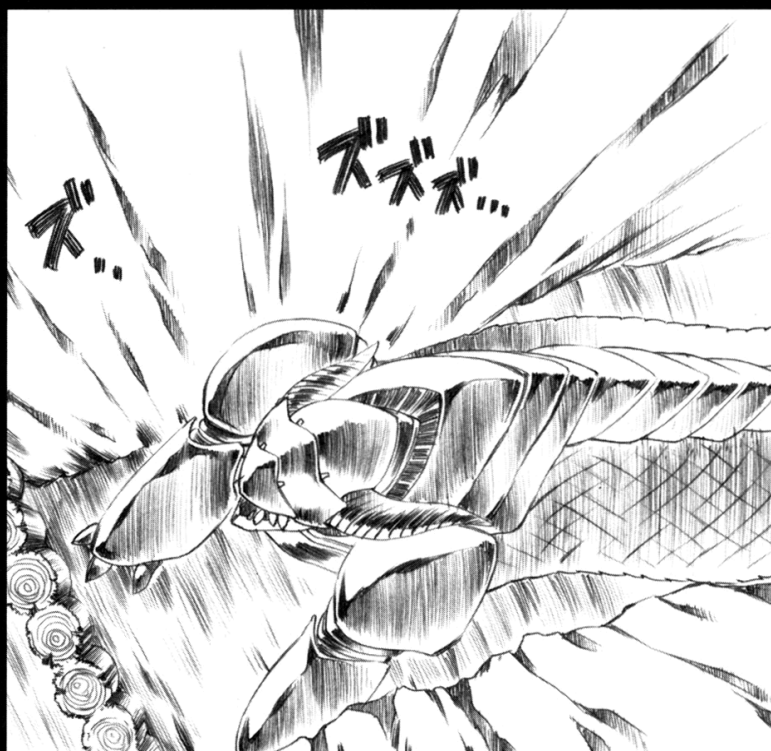
Sword Art Online : Extra Story  
"The Progressers"











# SWORD ART ONLINE

extra story

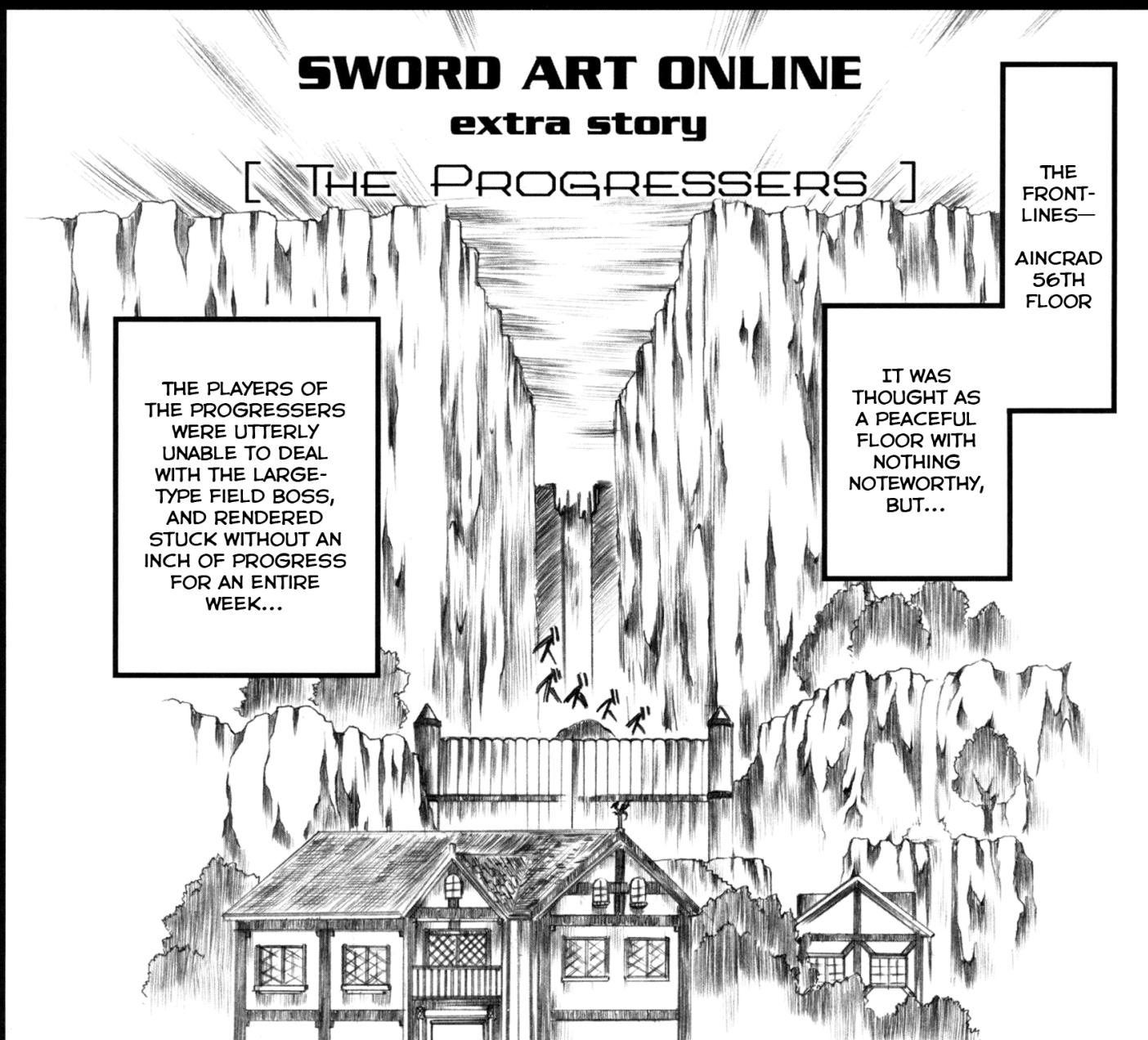
## [ THE PROGRESSERS ]

THE FRONT-LINES—

AINCRAD  
56TH FLOOR

THE PLAYERS OF THE PROGRESSERS WERE UTTERLY UNABLE TO DEAL WITH THE LARGE-TYPE FIELD BOSS, AND RENDERED STUCK WITHOUT AN INCH OF PROGRESS FOR AN ENTIRE WEEK...

IT WAS THOUGHT AS A PEACEFUL FLOOR WITH NOTHING NOTEWORTHY, BUT...



THE TOP PART IS THE BOTTOM OF THE NEXT FLOOR (57TH). WHAT COULD BE SEEN LYING BEYOND THE VALLEY IS THE PASSAGE TO THE NEXT FLOOR, THE TOWER KNOWN AS THE LABYRINTH.

56th Floor  
Boss Monster Strategy Meeting



JUST HOW  
MANY TIMES  
DO YOU  
INTEND TO  
TRY THESE  
RIDICULOUS  
PLANS!

NAH.

NONE  
HERE.

SOLO PLAYER  
KIRITO

I  
REALLY  
HAD  
CONFIDENCE  
IN IT  
THIS  
TIME,  
YOU  
KNOW.

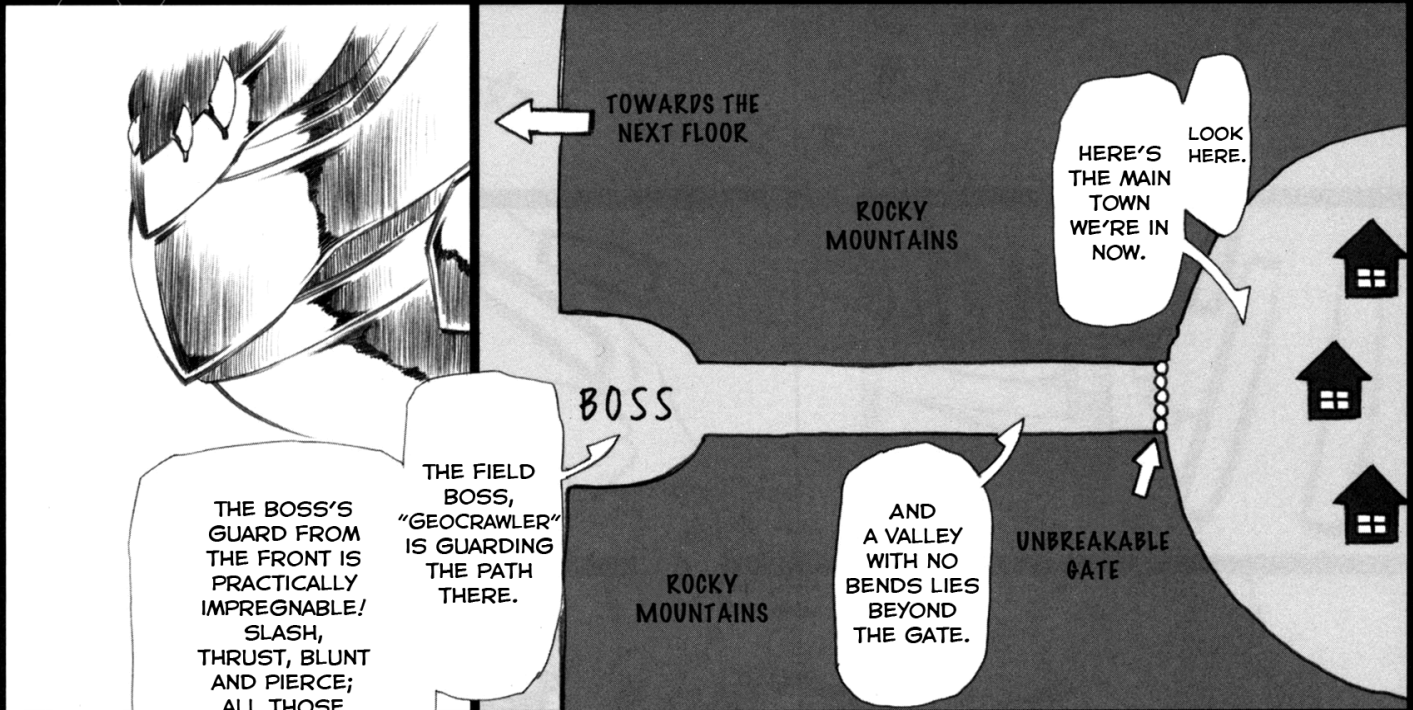
LEADER OF GUILD  
"FUURINKAZAN"  
KLEIN

SAVE YOUR  
EXCUSES!  
I WILL HAVE  
YOU...

...UNDER  
THE COM-  
MAND OF  
US, KOB,  
FOR THE  
NEXT  
PLAN AS  
AGREED!

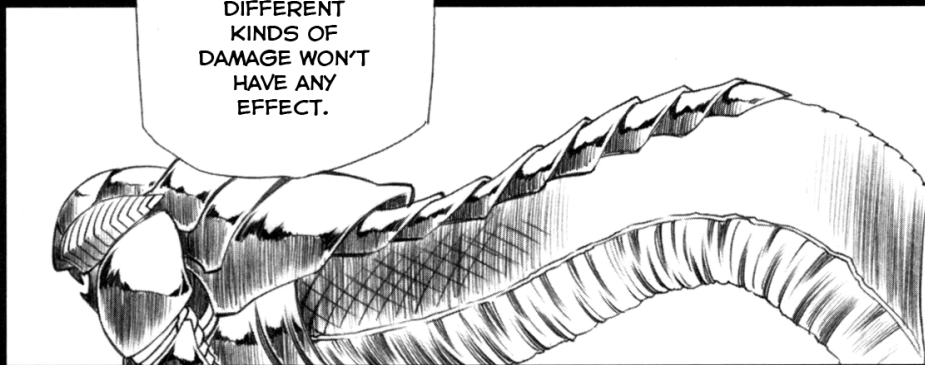
SUB-LEADER OF GUILD  
"KNIGHTS OF BLOOD"  
ASUNA

NEARLY ALL WEAPON SKILLS WITHIN SAO ARE SPLIT INTO THESE FOUR PROPERTIES. THRUST BELONGS TO CLOSE-RANGED WEAPONS SUCH AS RAPIERS, WHILE PIERCE IS FOR NEAR TO FAR-RANGED WEAPONS, LIKE THROWING PICKS AND LANCES.

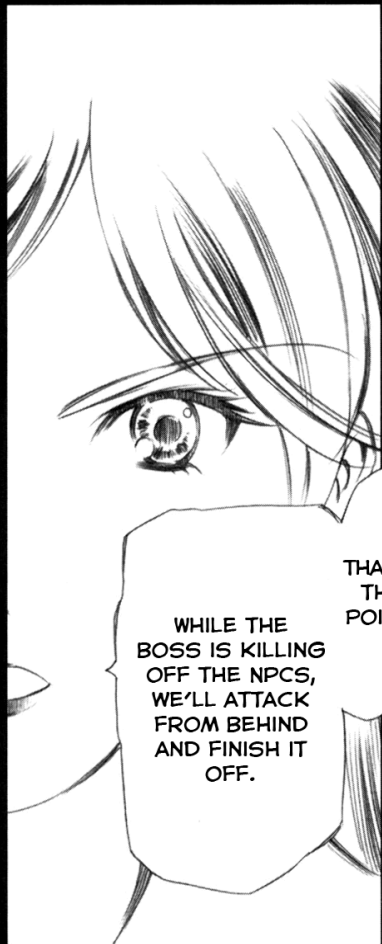


THE BOSS'S GUARD FROM THE FRONT IS PRACTICALLY IMPREGNABLE! SLASH, THRUST, BLUNT AND PIERCE; ALL THOSE DIFFERENT KINDS OF DAMAGE WON'T HAVE ANY EFFECT.

THE FIELD BOSS, "GEOCRAWLER" IS GUARDING THE PATH THERE.



AND THUS, THAT REALLY SOFT-LOOKING BELLY APPEARS TO BE ITS WEAK POINT, BUT...  
...WE JUST CAN'T MANAGE TO GET AROUND TO ITS BACK, AND THUS, WE ALWAYS END UP RETREATING BACK TO THE GATE.



BUT FOR THE NEXT PLAN, WE SHALL LEAVE THE GATE OPEN!

WHILE THE BOSS IS KILLING OFF THE NPCs, WE'LL ATTACK FROM BEHIND AND FINISH IT OFF.

THAT'S THE POINT.

WA- WAIT, WAIT UP. IF YOU DO THAT, THE BOSS WILL GET IN THE VILLAGE AND...





LIVING.

...OR  
SO YOU  
WOULD  
LIKE TO  
SAY?

NPCS  
AREN'T  
JUST  
OBJECTS  
LIKE  
ROCKS  
AND  
TREES!

THEY  
ARE...

THAT'S  
CRAZY!



NO MATTER  
HOW MANY  
TIMES THEY'RE  
SLAUGHTERED,  
THEY WILL BE  
REBORN AFTER  
TWENTY-FOUR  
HOURS, AFTER  
ALL.

THOSE  
ARE  
NOTHING  
MORE  
THAN  
OBJECTS.

NAIVE.



WE MUST  
EXTERMINATE  
THE BOSSES  
AND REACH  
THE NEXT  
FLOOR, EVEN  
IF IT'S ONLY  
A DAY, OR  
EVEN AN  
HOUR  
FASTER!

AS THE  
PROGRESSERS  
WHO STAND AT  
THE TOP OF ALL  
THE PLAYERS,  
THOSE PRIORITIES  
OF YOURS ARE  
MISTAKEN.

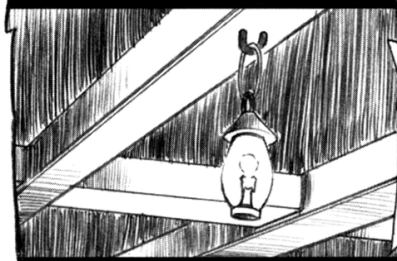
THIS IS  
SOMETHING  
I ALWAYS  
THOUGHT I  
HAD TO  
MENTION,  
BUT...

.....  
  
THERE IS NOT  
A SINGLE  
THING MORE  
IMPORTANT  
THAN THAT,  
ASIDE FROM  
THE LIVES OF  
PLAYERS!



IT MAY BE RUDE OF ME TO SAY ALL THAT, BUT I WANT TO MAKE SURE!

HOLD IT RIGHT THERE!



キーン



OF COURSE, MISS SUB-LEADER HERE HAS A HIGHER LEVEL THAN THOSE OF US SCREWING AROUND THE ENTIRE TIME, YES!?



I DO PLAN ON THAT, HOWEVER?

I DID REACH 70 JUST YESTERDAY, AFTER ALL.

ガッ

BUT!

SAD TO SAY, BUT I'M 4 BELOW THAN THIS GUY HERE!

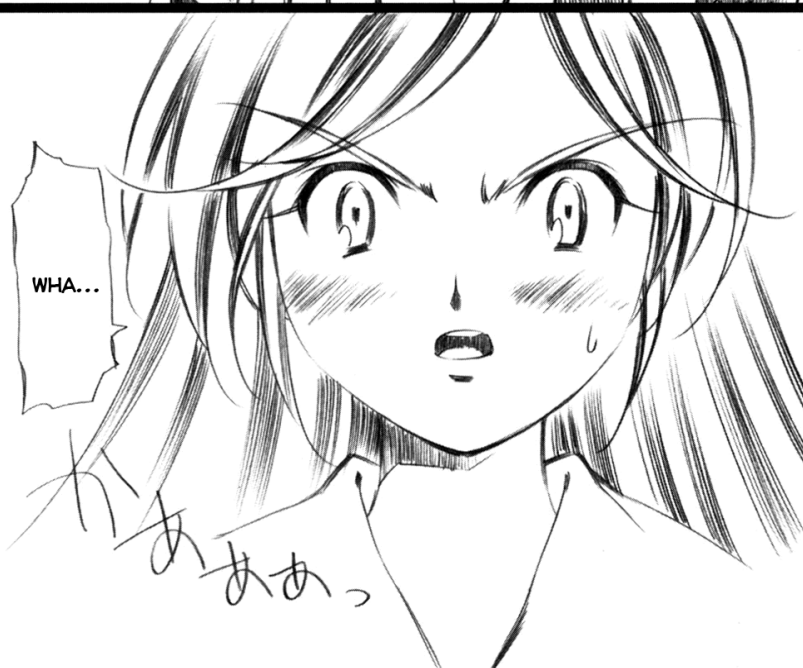
H-HEY!

WELL, SORRY NOW! I'M STILL 67—!

.....

KLEIN... YOU...

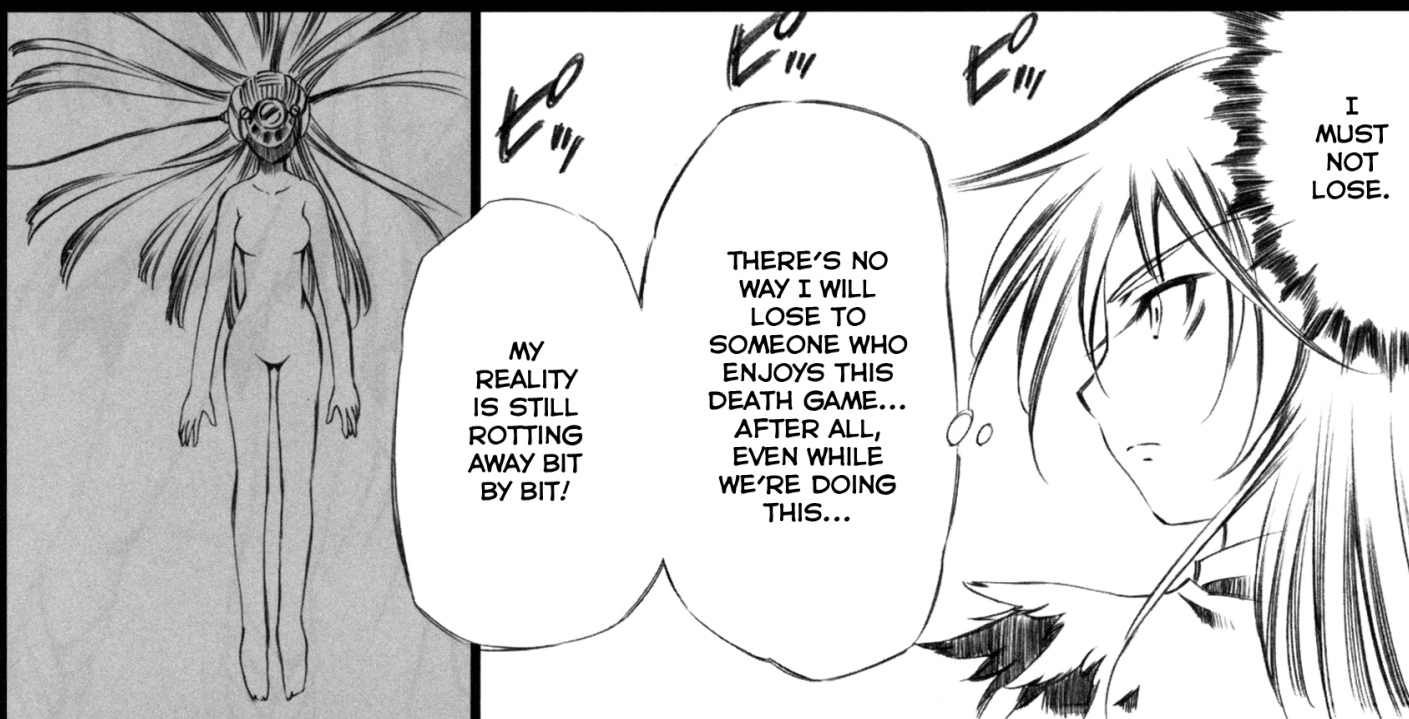
WHA...



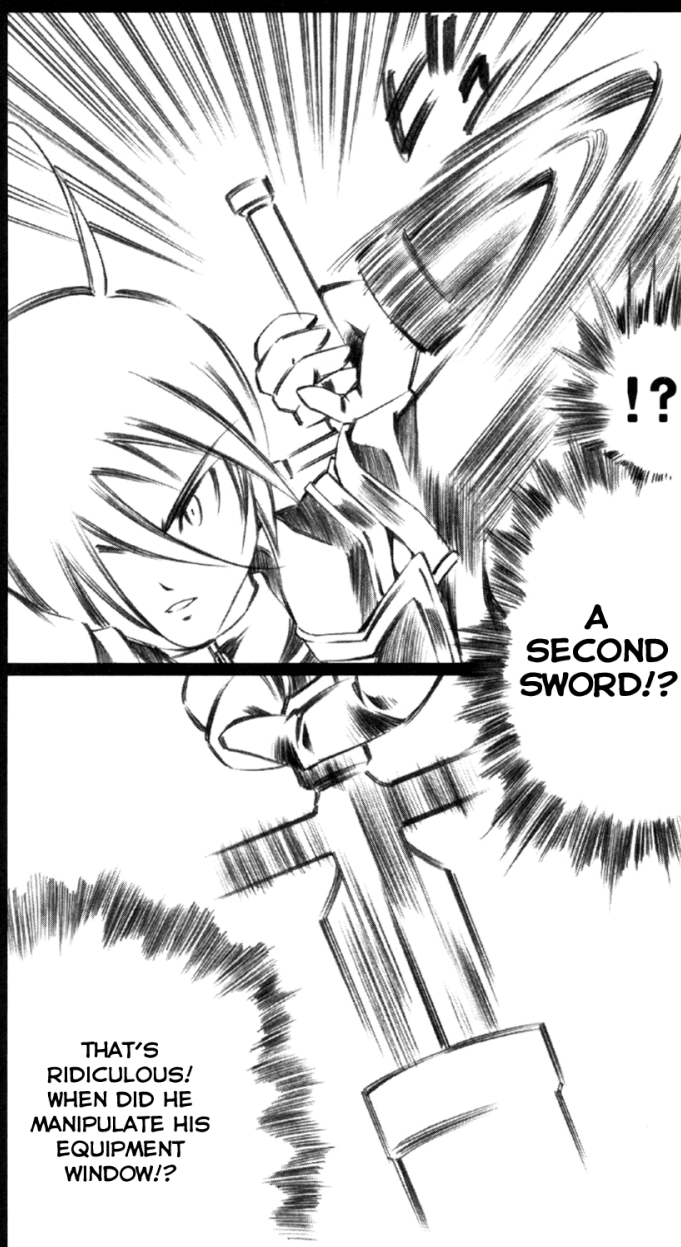
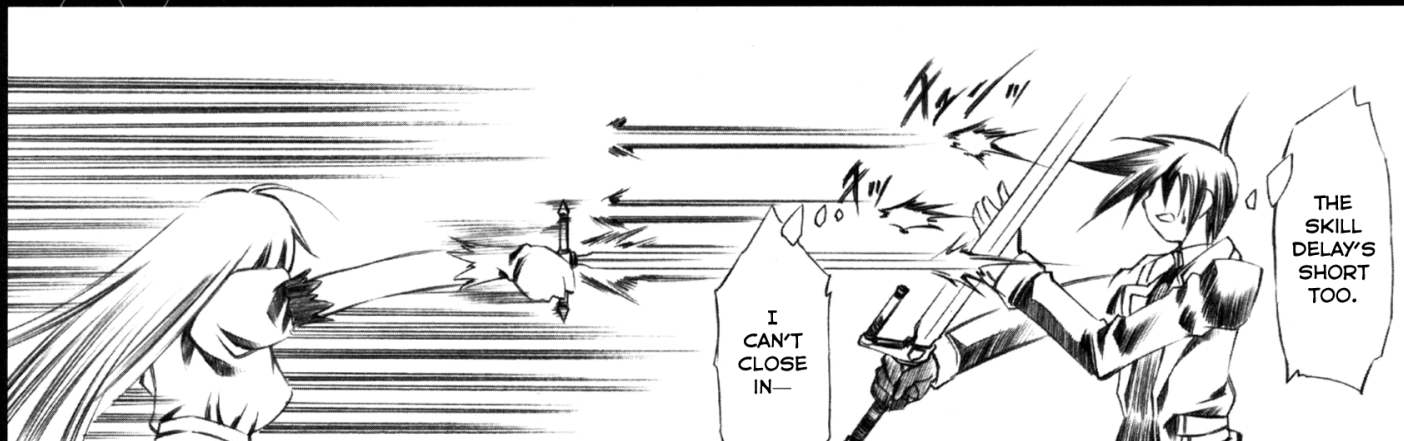


THE ACTION OF OPENING THE LEFT HAND AND BRINGING IT DOWN CALLS OUT THE MAIN MENU WINDOW. THE LOG OUT COMMAND WAS ORIGINALLY AT THE BOTTOM OF THE COMMAND LIST, BUT IT IS CURRENTLY MISSING.

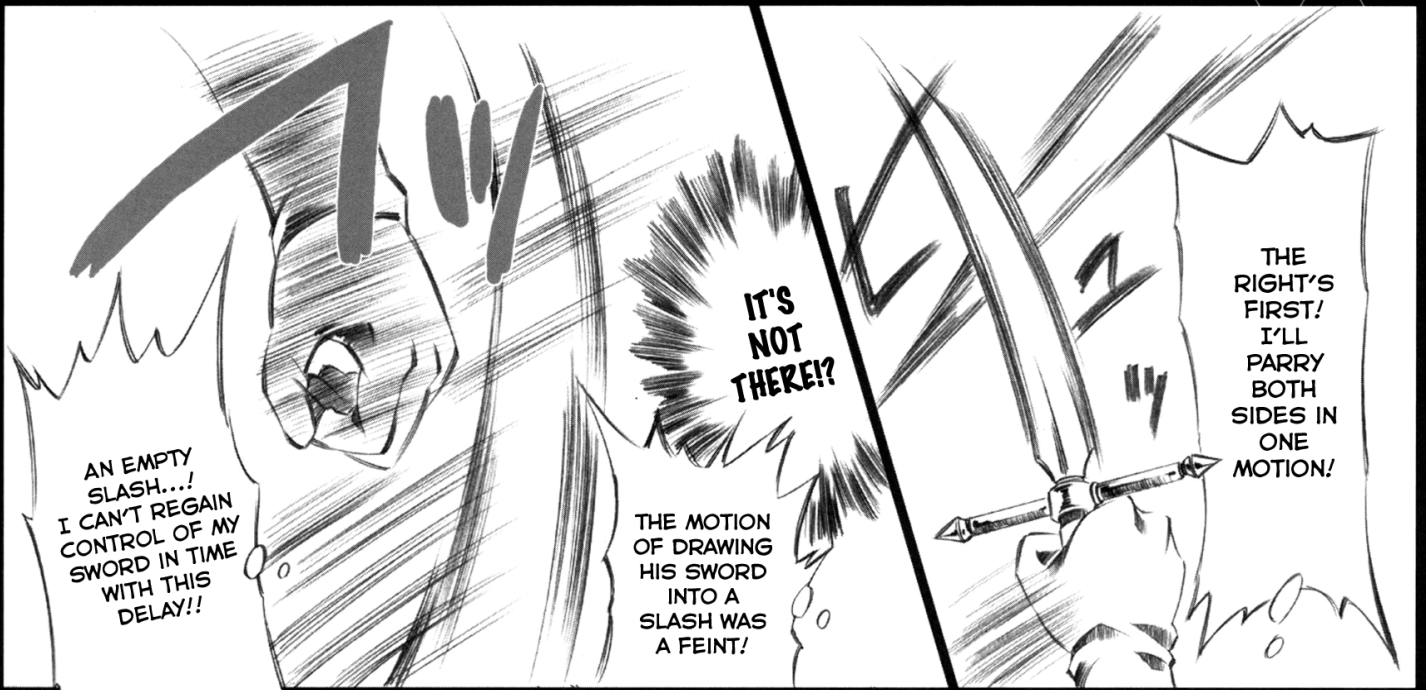














WHY COULD HE USE A COMBAT STYLE LIKE THAT...? WHY COULD HE SIMPLY... LAUGH LIKE THAT...

UGH... LOSING TO A TECHNIQUE OUTSIDE THE SYSTEM LIKE THAT...



SO THERE WAS A CONVERSATION PATTERN LIKE THIS FOR THIS NPC, HUH... I WONDER WHAT WAS THE FLAG THAT TRIGGERED IT.

Y... YES.

ONEE-CHAN... YOU CAN'T SLEEP?



KIDS RUNNING  
THROUGH THE PLAZA  
A BLACK CAT UP  
ON THE ROOF  
A ROBIN SINGING  
ATOP A TWIG  
EVEN THE SERPENT,  
ARMoured IN IRON  
PA, PAPA,  
PAPA, PAPA,  
EVERYONE'S  
ASLEEP...

WITH A BRUSH OF  
SILVER THREADS  
LA, LALA,  
SLEEP AWAITS  
VILLAGE CHIEF WITH  
HIS LONG BEARD  
WEAPON SHOP  
UNCLE OF GREEP

THE  
SOUTHERN  
TRAVELLING  
MUSICIAN  
WITH A LUTE IN  
HIS HAND

SER-  
PENT...  
AR-  
MOURED  
IN  
IRON?

THIS  
SONG  
WAS THE  
KEY FOR  
GOING  
AGAINST  
THE  
BOSS.

THEN.

RURU  
WILL SING  
A LULLABY  
FOR YOU!



THE VANGUARD  
PARTY CLIMBED  
OVER THE BOSS'S  
BACK, MOVING  
AROUND TO ITS  
BEHIND AND  
ATTACKED ITS  
WEAK POINT,  
THE TORSO—  
ITS EXECUTION  
WAS EASILY  
CARRIED OUT.

WITH A  
PLAYER WHO  
MASTERED  
THE MUSICAL  
INSTRUMENTS  
SKILL AT THE  
VERY EDGE OF  
THE TARGET  
AREA OF  
EFFECT...

WHEN  
"RURU'S LULLABY"  
WAS PERFORMED,  
THE GEOCRAWLER  
IMMEDIATELY FELL  
ASLEEP AT THAT  
VERY SPOT.



56th Floor  
Boss Monster Strategy Meeting  
Victory Party

AH...

I  
SEE...

I'M IN  
NO MOOD  
TO TAKE  
PART IN  
THE CELE-  
BRATIONS  
THIS TIME  
ROUND...

HE'S  
LIVING...  
IN THIS  
WORLD.

THAT  
PERSON  
ISN'T JUST  
"PROGRESS-  
ING".

THE TIME  
THESE TWO GET  
MARRIED WILL BE  
IN APPROXIMATELY  
EIGHT MONTHS, A  
MERE TWO WEEKS  
BEFORE THE GAME  
IS CLEARED.

Warning

Inappropriate Contact  
Towards NPCs

END

A cluster of several grey hexagons of varying sizes and orientations, some overlapping, located in the upper left quadrant of the page.

ME-02

# *Early Characters*

§ Aincrad  
November 2024

A single grey hexagon located to the right of the date text.

■ AGE: 16  
 ■ LEVEL: 96  
 ■ MAIN EQUIPMENT: 「ELUCIDATOR」 「DARK REPULSER」  
                             (ONE-HANDED STRAIGHT SWORD)      (ONE-HANDED STRAIGHT SWORD)

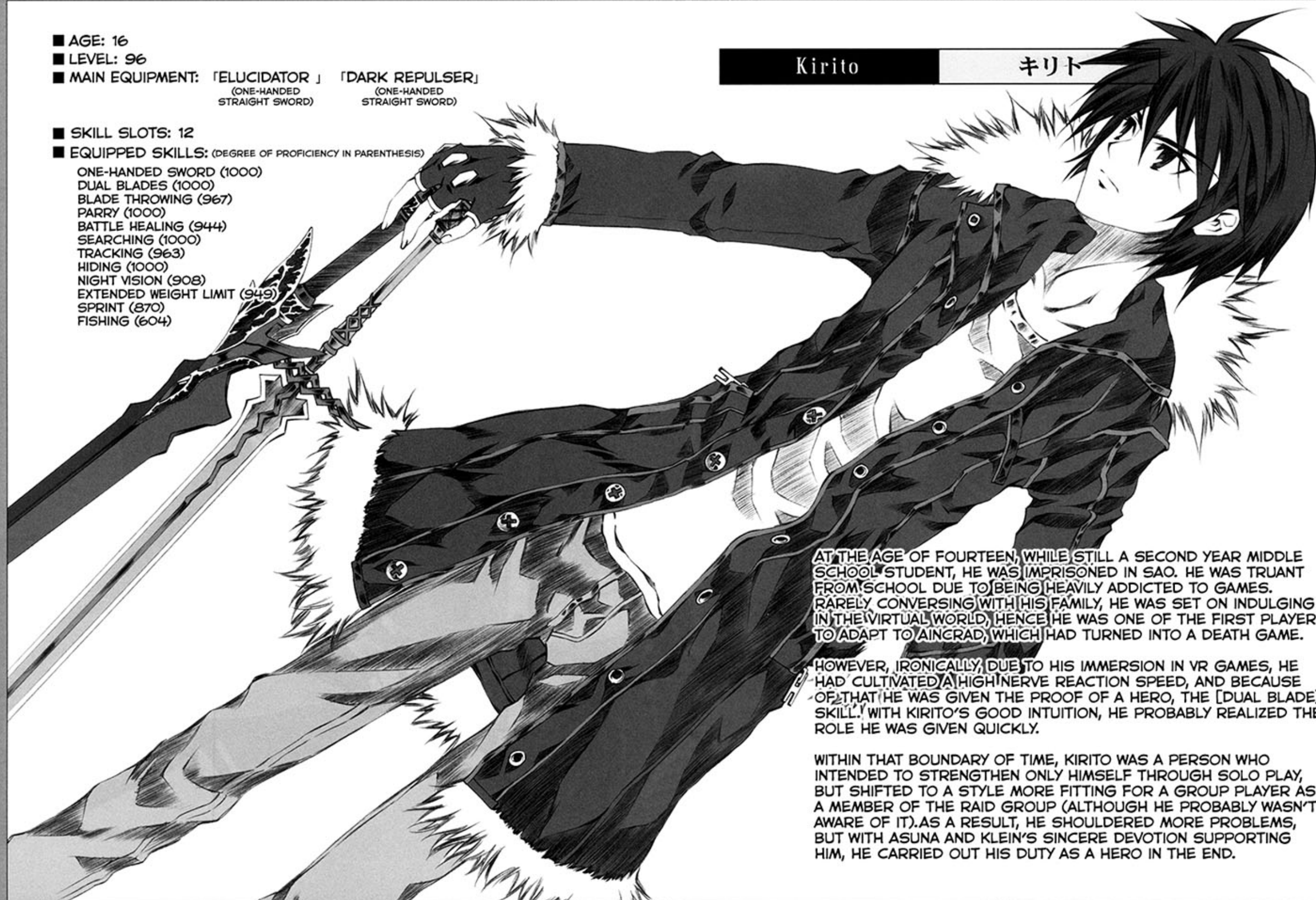
■ SKILL SLOTS: 12

■ EQUIPPED SKILLS: (DEGREE OF PROFICIENCY IN PARENTHESIS)

ONE-HANDED SWORD (1000)  
 DUAL BLADES (1000)  
 BLADE THROWING (967)  
 PARRY (1000)  
 BATTLE HEALING (944)  
 SEARCHING (1000)  
 TRACKING (963)  
 HIDING (1000)  
 NIGHT VISION (908)  
 EXTENDED WEIGHT LIMIT (949)  
 SPRINT (870)  
 FISHING (604)

Kirito

キリト



AT THE AGE OF FOURTEEN, WHILE STILL A SECOND YEAR MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT, HE WAS IMPRISONED IN SAO. HE WAS TRUANT FROM SCHOOL DUE TO BEING HEAVILY ADDICTED TO GAMES. RARELY CONVERSING WITH HIS FAMILY, HE WAS SET ON INDULGING IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD, HENCE HE WAS ONE OF THE FIRST PLAYERS TO ADAPT TO AINCRAD, WHICH HAD TURNED INTO A DEATH GAME.

HOWEVER, IRONICALLY, DUE TO HIS IMMERSION IN VR GAMES, HE HAD CULTIVATED A HIGH NERVE REACTION SPEED, AND BECAUSE OF THAT HE WAS GIVEN THE PROOF OF A HERO, THE [DUAL BLADE] SKILL. WITH KIRITO'S GOOD INTUITION, HE PROBABLY REALIZED THE ROLE HE WAS GIVEN QUICKLY.

WITHIN THAT BOUNDARY OF TIME, KIRITO WAS A PERSON WHO INTENDED TO STRENGTHEN ONLY HIMSELF THROUGH SOLO PLAY, BUT SHIFTED TO A STYLE MORE FITTING FOR A GROUP PLAYER AS A MEMBER OF THE RAID GROUP (ALTHOUGH HE PROBABLY WASN'T AWARE OF IT). AS A RESULT, HE SHOULDERED MORE PROBLEMS, BUT WITH ASUNA AND KLEIN'S SINCERE DEVOTION SUPPORTING HIM, HE CARRIED OUT HIS DUTY AS A HERO IN THE END.

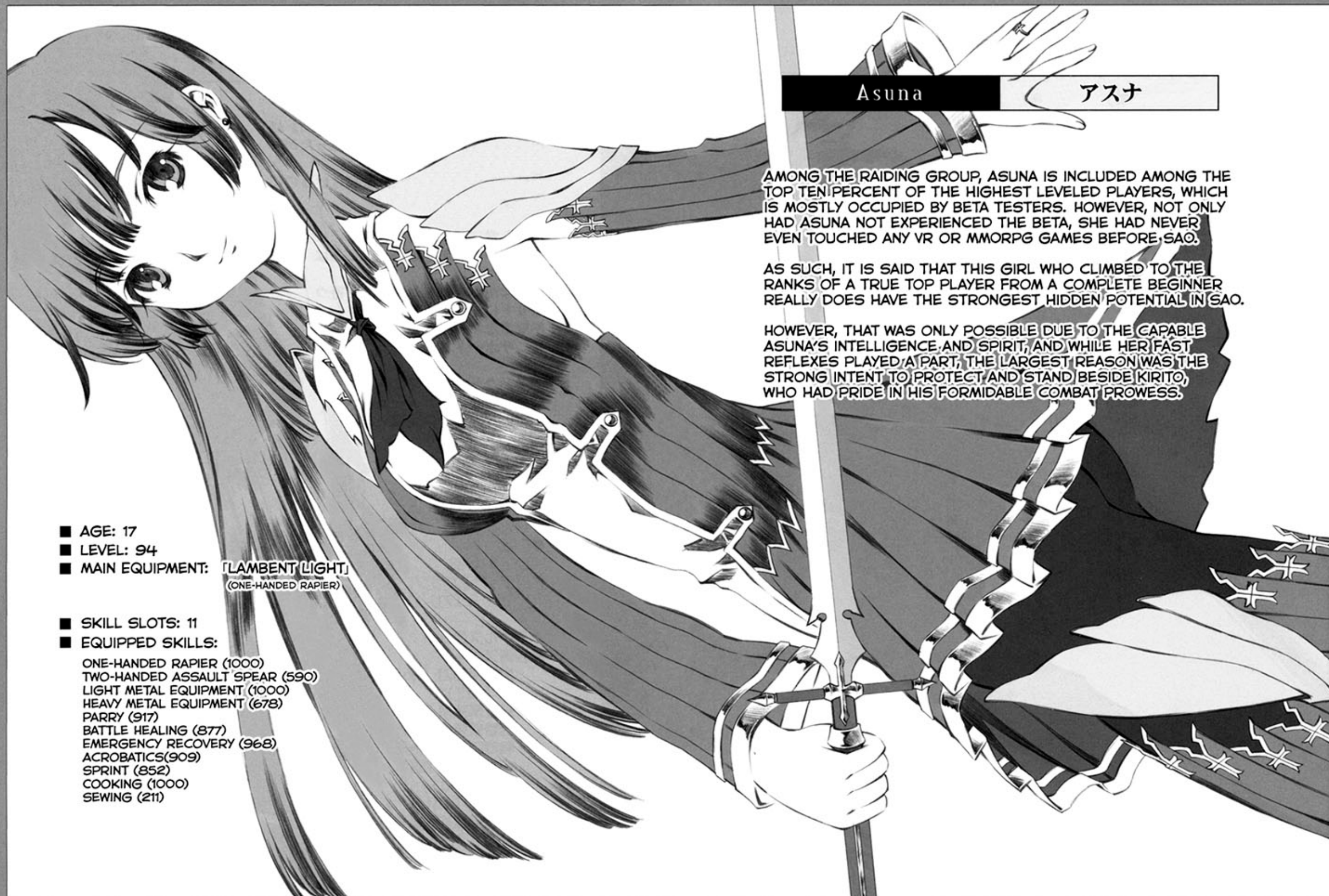
Sword Art Online  
 material edition 2

Early Characters

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Early Characters





Asuna

アスナ

AMONG THE RAIDING GROUP, ASUNA IS INCLUDED AMONG THE TOP TEN PERCENT OF THE HIGHEST LEVELED PLAYERS, WHICH IS MOSTLY OCCUPIED BY BETA TESTERS. HOWEVER, NOT ONLY HAD ASUNA NOT EXPERIENCED THE BETA, SHE HAD NEVER EVEN TOUCHED ANY VR OR MMORPG GAMES BEFORE SAO.

AS SUCH, IT IS SAID THAT THIS GIRL WHO CLIMBED TO THE RANKS OF A TRUE TOP PLAYER FROM A COMPLETE BEGINNER REALLY DOES HAVE THE STRONGEST HIDDEN POTENTIAL IN SAO.

HOWEVER, THAT WAS ONLY POSSIBLE DUE TO THE CAPABLE ASUNA'S INTELLIGENCE AND SPIRIT, AND WHILE HER FAST REFLEXES PLAYED A PART, THE LARGEST REASON WAS THE STRONG INTENT TO PROTECT AND STAND BESIDE KIRITO, WHO HAD PRIDE IN HIS FORMIDABLE COMBAT PROWESS.

- AGE: 17
- LEVEL: 94
- MAIN EQUIPMENT: **LAMBERT LIGHT**  
(ONE-HANDED RAPIER)
- SKILL SLOTS: 11
- EQUIPPED SKILLS:
  - ONE-HANDED RAPIER (1000)
  - TWO-HANDED ASSAULT SPEAR (590)
  - LIGHT METAL EQUIPMENT (1000)
  - HEAVY METAL EQUIPMENT (678)
  - PARRY (917)
  - BATTLE HEALING (877)
  - EMERGENCY RECOVERY (968)
  - ACROBATICS (909)
  - SPRINT (852)
  - COOKING (1000)
  - SEWING (211)

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Early Characters

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Early Characters

Klein

クライン

THE GUILD 『FUURINKAZAN』 LED BY KLEIN WAS THE CORE CLASS AMONG THE RAID GROUP, THEY CONTRIBUTED GREATLY IN THE SPOT THEY FILLED WITH THEIR CALM MOOD, WHICH HELPED RELIEVE THE SAVAGE ATMOSPHERE OF THE FRONT LINES.

HE HAS A CAREFREE ATTITUDE, BUT IT ISN'T EASY TO SEE THROUGH THE BOTTOM OF HIS HEART. HE WAS CHARMED BY KIRITO, WHOSE COMBAT PROWESS MADE HIM STAND OUT DESPITE BEING YOUNGER, AND WAS ALWAYS THERE TO SUPPORT KIRITO'S INSECURE MENTAL STATE.

IN AN AINCRAD RAID, HE IS THE MOOD MAKER, AND IS CERTAINLY INDISPENSABLE.

■ AGE: 24

■ LEVEL: 88

■ MAIN EQUIPMENT: 『KARAKURENAI』  
(KATANA)

■ SKILL SLOTS: 11

■ EQUIPPED SKILLS:

ONE-HANDED CURVED BLADE (957)  
KATANA (822)  
LIGHT METAL EQUIPMENT (913)  
LIGHT SHIELD EQUIPMENT (861)  
BATTLE HEALING (562)  
EMERGENCY RECOVERY (759)  
SEARCHING (710)  
LISTENING (594)  
EXTENDED WEIGHT LIMIT (685)  
FIGHTING SPIRIT (712) (HATE SKILL)  
SEWING (366)

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Early Characters



Agil

エギル

- AGE: 29
- LEVEL: 80
- MAIN EQUIPMENT:  
「GROUND GORGE」  
(TWO-HANDED BATTLE AXE)
- SKILL SLOTS: 10
- EQUIPPED SKILLS:

TWO-HANDED BATTLE AXE (875)  
HAND-TO-HAND COMBAT (726)  
PARRY (726)  
LEATHER EQUIPMENT (733)  
EQUIPMENT APPRAISAL (930)  
TOOLS APPRAISAL (901)  
PURCHASE NEGOTIATION (846)  
SALES NEGOTIATION (716)  
EXTENDED WEIGHT LIMIT (838)  
COOKING (514)

THE SAO AINCRAD PACKAGE IS SOLD NOWHERE ELSE ASIDE FROM WITHIN JAPAN, AND THE USERS WHO CONNECTED ON THE RELEASE DATE BECAME "PRISONERS", THUS PLAYERS FROM OTHER COUNTRIES MADE UP AND REMAINED QUITE A SMALL MINORITY.

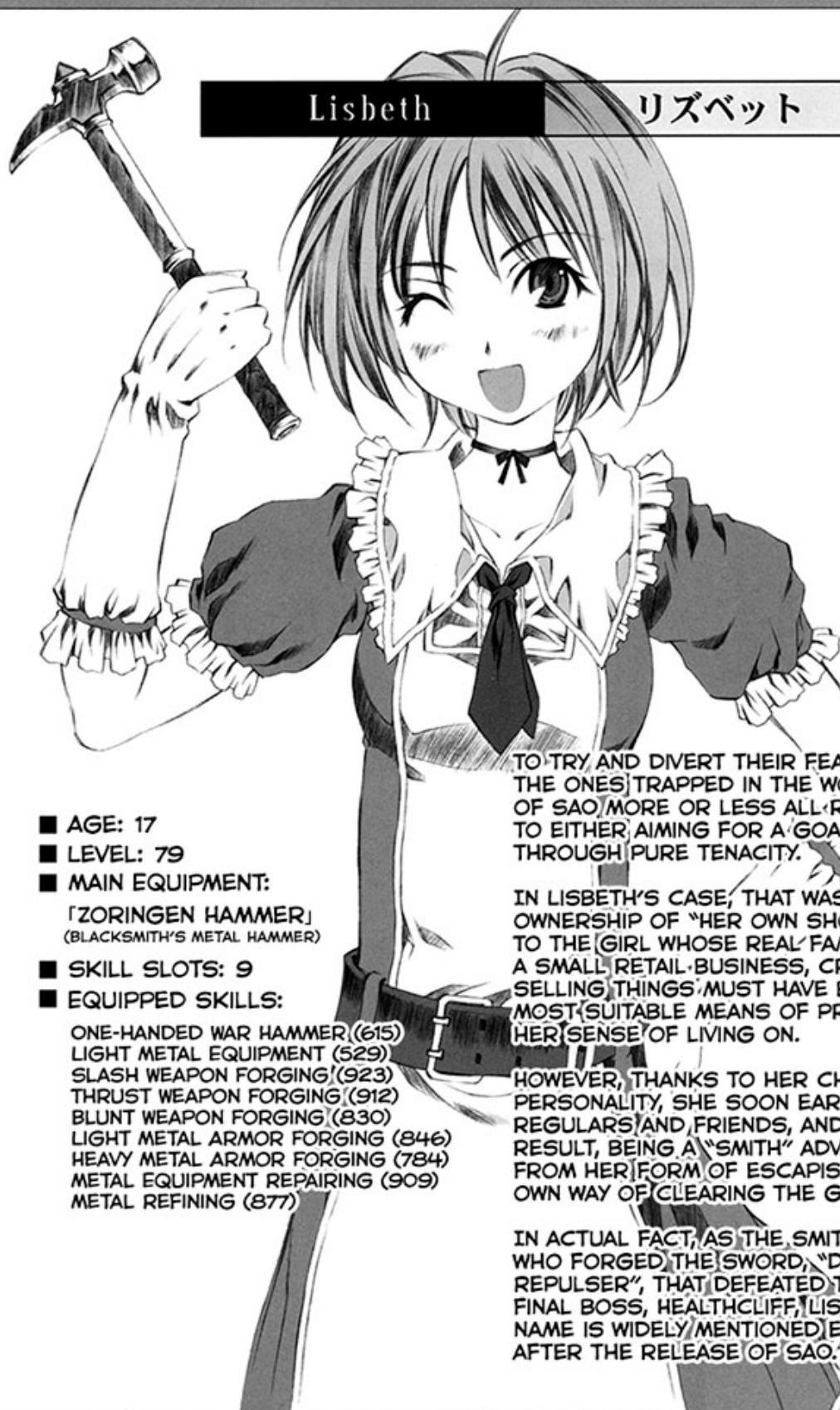
AGIL IS ONE OF THEM, BUT FORTUNATELY, THANKS TO HIS PERFECTLY FLUENT JAPANESE, HIS MUSCULAR PHYSIQUE TURNED OUT TO BE POPULAR INSTEAD, AND HE RAN HIS SHOP WITH ABSOLUTELY NO LACK OF CUSTOMERS.

HE IS LIKELY THOUGHT OF AS TOP CLASS IN TERMS OF ASSETS HELD EVEN AMONG ALL THE PLAYERS, BUT THERE IS A RUMOR THAT HE INVESTS THE PROFITS FROM SALES INTO INCREASING THE POPULATION OF THE RAID GROUP. DUE TO THE PERSON IN QUESTION KEEPING HIS SILENCE, THE TRUTH BEHIND THE MATTER REMAINS UNCLEAR.

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Early Characters





Lisbeth

リズベット

- AGE: 17
- LEVEL: 79
- MAIN EQUIPMENT:  
「ZORINGEN HAMMER」  
(BLACKSMITH'S METAL HAMMER)

- SKILL SLOTS: 9
- EQUIPPED SKILLS:

ONE-HANDED WAR HAMMER (615)  
LIGHT METAL EQUIPMENT (529)  
SLASH WEAPON FORGING (923)  
THRUST WEAPON FORGING (912)  
BLUNT WEAPON FORGING (830)  
LIGHT METAL ARMOR FORGING (846)  
HEAVY METAL ARMOR FORGING (784)  
METAL EQUIPMENT REPAIRING (909)  
METAL REFINING (877)

TO TRY AND DIVERT THEIR FEAR, THE ONES TRAPPED IN THE WORLD OF SAO MORE OR LESS ALL RESORTED TO EITHER AIMING FOR A GOAL, OR THROUGH PURE TENACITY.

IN LISBETH'S CASE, THAT WAS THE OWNERSHIP OF "HER OWN SHOP". TO THE GIRL WHOSE REAL FAMILY RUNS A SMALL RETAIL BUSINESS, CREATING AND SELLING THINGS MUST HAVE BEEN THE MOST SUITABLE MEANS OF PRESERVING HER SENSE OF LIVING ON.

HOWEVER, THANKS TO HER CHEERFUL PERSONALITY, SHE SOON EARNED MANY REGULARS AND FRIENDS, AND AS A RESULT, BEING A "SMITH" ADVANCED FROM HER FORM OF ESCAPISM TO HER OWN WAY OF CLEARING THE GAME.

IN ACTUAL FACT, AS THE SMITH WHO FORGED THE SWORD, "DARK REPULSER", THAT DEFEATED THE FINAL BOSS, HEALTHCLIFF, LISBETH'S NAME IS WIDELY MENTIONED EVEN AFTER THE RELEASE OF SAO.



Silica

シリカ

THE GAME SOFTWARE, "SAO", HAD AN AGE RATING RECOMMENDED FOR 15 AND ABOVE, BUT OF COURSE, THAT RATING WAS NOT PERFECTLY UPHOLD.

MOST OF THE CHILDREN SIMILAR TO SILICA, WHO WERE BELOW 12 YEARS OF AGE AT THE START, DID NOT LEAVE THE STARTING CITY ON THE FIRST FLOOR, BUT SILICA WAS AN EXCEPTION WHO WAS ABLE TO REACH THE RANKS OF THE HIGH LEVELS.

THE REASON MUST HAVE BEEN DUE TO THE GIRL GETTING HOLD OF THE FAMILIAR NAMED PINA THROUGH HER LUCK, AND THE BOTTOMLESS AFFECTION SHE POURED INTO IT AS SHE BROUGHT IT UP.

THERE IS NO MISTAKE THAT THE PLAYERS OF THE RAID GROUP WHO GOT TO KNOW SILICA THROUGH KIRITO DEEPLY REGRET NOT RESEARCHING THE MEANS OF UTILIZING A FAMILIAR.

- AGE: 14
- LEVEL: 62
- MAIN EQUIPMENT:  
「SHADOW DAGGER」  
(ONE-HANDED SHORT SWORD)

- SKILL SLOTS: 8
- EQUIPPED SKILLS:

ONE-HANDED SHORT SWORD (710)  
LIGHT METAL EQUIPMENT (644)  
FAMILIAR RECOVERY (681)  
FAMILIAR COMMUNICATION (597)  
ACROBATICS (623)  
MUSICAL INSTRUMENT (749)  
SEWING (606)  
COOKING (560)

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Early Characters

Kuradeel

クラディール

- AGE: 26
- LEVEL: 81
- MAIN EQUIPMENT:  
「TYRANT DRAGON」  
(TWO-HANDED STRAIGHT SWORD)

- SKILL SLOTS: 10
- EQUIPPED SKILLS:

TWO-HANDED STRAIGHT SWORD (841)  
ONE-HANDED STRAIGHT SWORD (204)  
ONE-HANDED SHORT SWORD (453)  
HEAVY METAL EQUIPMENT (755)  
BATTLE RECOVERY (328)  
HIDING (829)  
SEARCHING (776)  
DISCERN (697)  
MEDICINE MIXING (897)

VRMMO-RPGs HIGHLIGHTED THE IMPORTANCE OF A CERTAIN ABILITY NOT NECESSARY IN MMOS FOR PCS UP TILL THEN.

THAT IS, SIMPLY, THE SKILL OF PERSONAL COMMUNICATION, WHOSE LEVEL CORRESPONDS TO THAT IN REALITY.

DUE TO THE FACT THAT CHARACTERS ARE REPLICAS OF THE PLAYERS' ACTUAL BODIES IN SAO, THIS VIEWPOINT IS FURTHER STRENGTHED.

KURADEEL MUST HAVE BEEN A PERSON WHO WISHED TO BECOME A HERO CAPABLE OF BESTING ALL OTHERS IN THE WORLD OF SAO. HOWEVER, FOR HIM, WHO LIVED WITH PRACTICALLY NO NEED FOR ANY REAL CONVERSATION UNTIL HE WAS IMPRISONED WITHIN THE GAME, "ACTUALLY CONVERSING, AND GIVING OFF A GOOD IMPRESSION" TO OTHERS ENDED UP BEING AN EXCEPTIONALLY DIFFICULT FEAT.

THE DILEMMA THAT NO MATTER HOW MUCH HIS STATS ROSE, OR WHATEVER POWERFUL EQUIPMENT HE OBTAINED, HAD NO DIRECT EFFECT ON HIS POPULARITY MIGHT HAVE BEEN WHAT PUSHED HIM ONTO THE PATH TOWARD BECOMING A RED (KILLER) PLAYER.

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Early Characters





## Heathcliff

## ヒースクリフ

- AGE: 28
- LEVEL: ?
- MAIN EQUIPMENT:  
「LIBERATOR」  
(ONE-HANDED STRAIGHT SWORD AS WELL AS TOWER SHIELD)
- SKILL SLOTS: ?
- EQUIPPED SKILLS:  
HOLY SWORD (1000)  
ONE-HANDED STRAIGHT SWORD (1000)  
HAND-TO-HAND COMBAT (1000)  
HEAVY/METAL EQUIPMENT (1000)  
BATTLE HEALING (1000)  
SEARCHING (1000)  
TRACKING (1000)  
SPIRITUAL LIGHT (1000) (HATE SKILL)  
IMMORTALITY

THE ONE AND ONLY PERSON WITH AN OUTER APPEARANCE CREATED FROM SCRATCH IN THE WORLD OF SAO. THAT MIGHT JUST BE ONE OF THE REASONS FOR THAT UNIQUE CHARISMA OF HIS THAT GATHERED MANY ADMIRERS.

BUT OF COURSE, WHAT ENCHANTED THE PLAYERS THE MOST WAS HIS DEFENSE THAT APPEARED TO BE IMPENETRABLE.

IN THE RAID ON THE 50TH FLOOR'S FLOOR BOSS WHICH CAUSED THE FRONT LINES' (SWITCH ROTATION) TO CRUMBLE, EVEN WITH HIS UPPER BODY ARMOR DEMOLISHED, HE STILL MAINTAINED ITS ATTENTION FOR OVER 10 MINUTES, PRESENTING A FIGURE THAT COULD BE SAID TO BE NO LESS THAN THAT OF A HERO, OR PERHAPS THAT OF AN ACTUAL KING.

THAT SAID, THE PERSON IN QUESTION DOESN'T SEEM TO HAVE EVEN THE SLIGHTEST DESIRE TO DO ANYTHING LIKE PLAYING HARDCORE, USUALLY CONCENTRATING WHOLEHEARTEDLY ON THE PAPERWORK-RELATED AFFAIRS OF THE GUILD AND THOSE FROM THE RAID GROUP AS HE CUT OUT A PLAIN ROBED FIGURE.

WHETHER HIS NAME WAS A REFERENCE TO "WUTHERING HEIGHTS" OR "PHANTASY STAR ONLINE" IS UNKNOWN.

Sword Art Online  
material edition 2

Early Characters

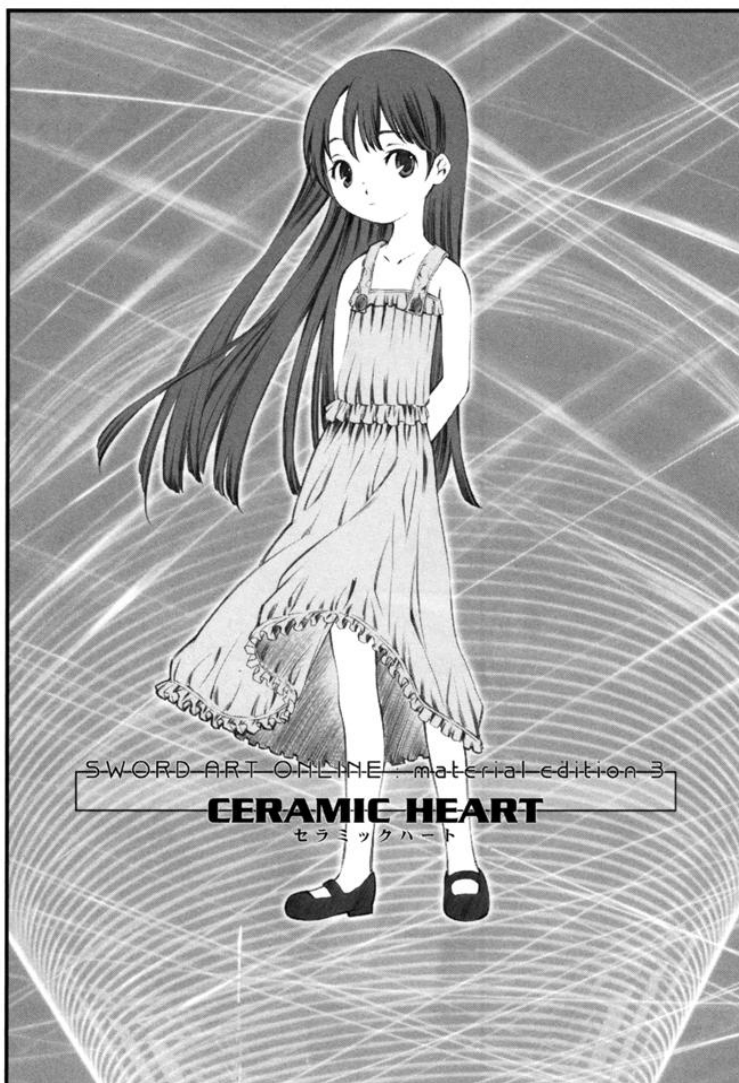
## [Sword Art Online : Material Edition 3] Ceramic Heart

May 2008

The third's a manga again, but it'll be the last spurt (haha).

The story, SAO, is a fantasy veiled as science fiction, so all sorts of technologically advanced elements appear, but the A.I. girl, «Yui» might be the most implausible one out of the bunch. I always did have the desire to write about how exactly the girl's «intellect» worked someday, and although it definitely isn't anything like a serious SF theme, it's still beyond my abilities, so if the ideas could be conveyed at least... was what I hoped for as I drew this manga... or it should have been, but...

Anyway, upon reading through it again this time, my thoughts were, "That grandpa's a real challenger!" I want to become an online game player like this when I grow old too.



is nothing  
more than a  
persistent  
impulse  
towards the  
evolution  
of input-output  
patterns and the  
expansion of  
data for all  
infinity.

«YUI» is a  
cutting edge  
top-down AI.  
Her displays  
of emotion are  
already near  
indistinguishable  
from those of  
humankind, but  
her true nature

SWORD ART ONLINE : material edition 3

## CERAMIC HEART

セラミックハート

IN THE WORLD OF THE SERIES, A «TOP-DOWN AI» IS DEFINED AS A PSEUDO ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE BUILT FROM A PROGRAM ATOP AN EXISTING COMPUTER ARCHITECTURE, WHILE A «BOTTOM-UP AI» IS DEFINED AS A TRUE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE THAT CREATES A REPRODUCTION OF THE HUMAN BRAIN STRUCTURE THROUGH AN ELECTRONIC DEVICE. IN OTHER WORDS, A TOP-DOWN AI WOULD BE, QUITE SIMPLY, NOTHING BUT A CLUSTER FILLED WITH PATTERNS OF ONES AND ZEROS, SUCH AS ONE THAT WOULD «ANSWER "I'M HOME" WITH "WELCOME BACK"».



WITHIN FULL SENSORY IMMERSION TYPE MMO-RPG «ALFHEIM ONLINE»  
COORDINATES 0362-0590 SYLPH TERRITORY CAPITAL «SYLVAIN» OUTSKIRTS  
JST YEAR 2016 18TH MAY 14:30 HOURS

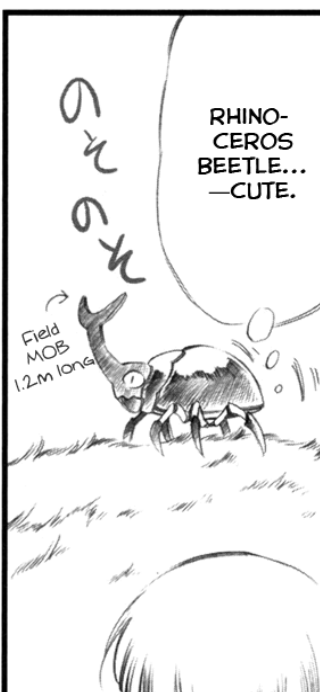
THE SUN...  
—WARM.



STRAW-  
BERRY  
MILK-  
SHAKE.

RHINO-  
CEROS  
BEETLE...  
—CUTE.


Field  
MOB  
1.2m long



TASTY.

THE BREEZE...  
FEELS GOOD.





THAT IS THE  
FEELING TO  
"LOVE" ANOTHER  
PERSON...

HOWEVER,  
THERE IS A  
SINGLE EMOTION  
THAT STILL  
COULD NOT BE  
OPTIMISED.

10 DAYS EARLIER ——— SAME COORDINATES



N- NO, NO!  
THAT'S NOT  
WHY I SAID  
IT, I WON'T  
EVEN NEED  
A REPLY!

I  
WILL NOT  
BECOME  
YOURS.

I'M  
SORRY.



I'VE  
ALWAYS  
SEEN YOU  
AROUND...  
AND WELL,  
THAT  
IS...

YOU...  
HAVE  
ALWAYS  
BEEN  
HERE,  
HAVEN'T  
YOU?



I WILL BE  
RETIRING  
FROM THIS  
GAME  
SOON,  
SO...

I WANTED  
TO AT LEAST  
SPEAK WITH  
YOU AT THE  
VERY END,  
THAT'S ALL.

IT'S  
JUST  
...



I FELL  
IN LOVE  
WITH  
YOU.

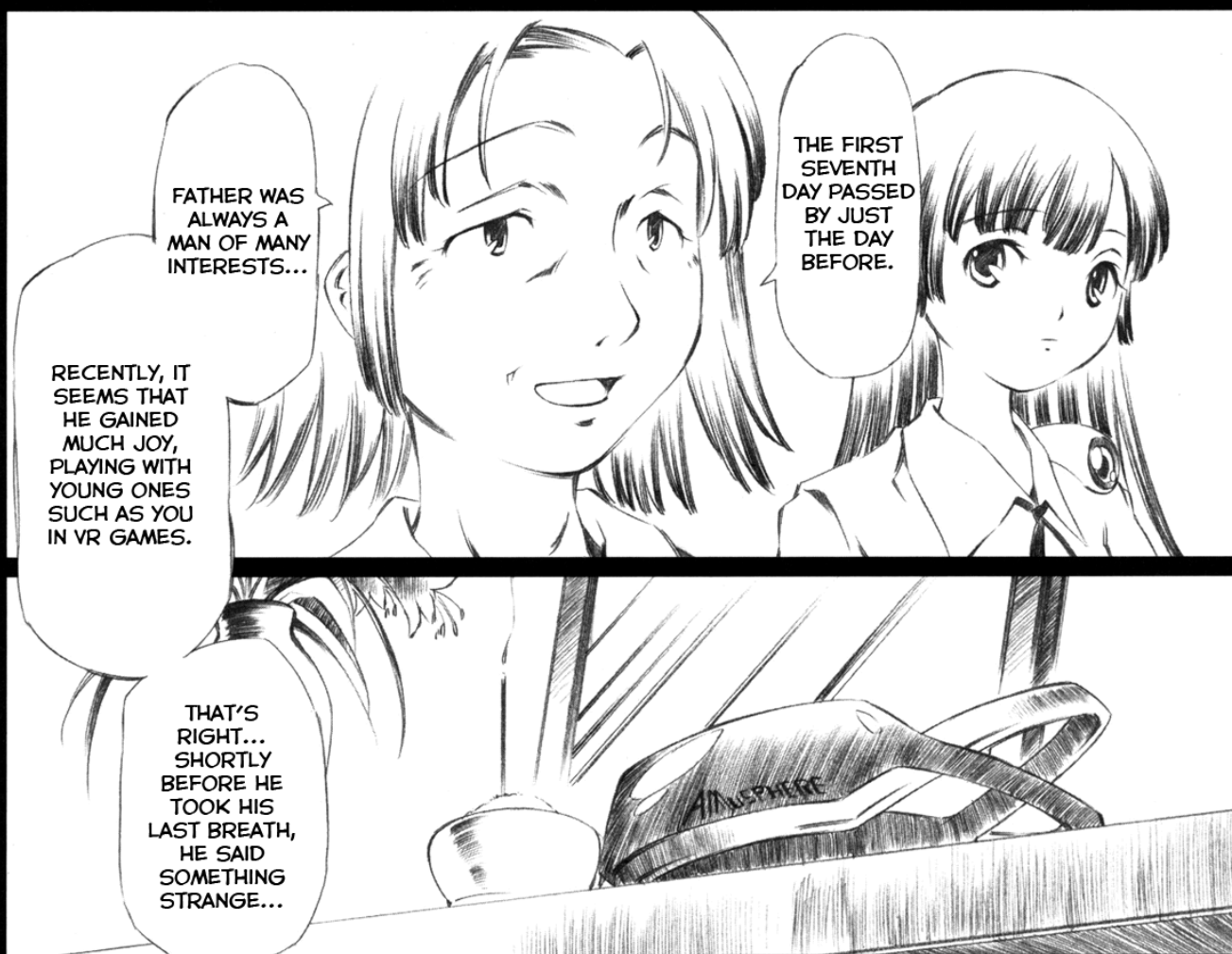
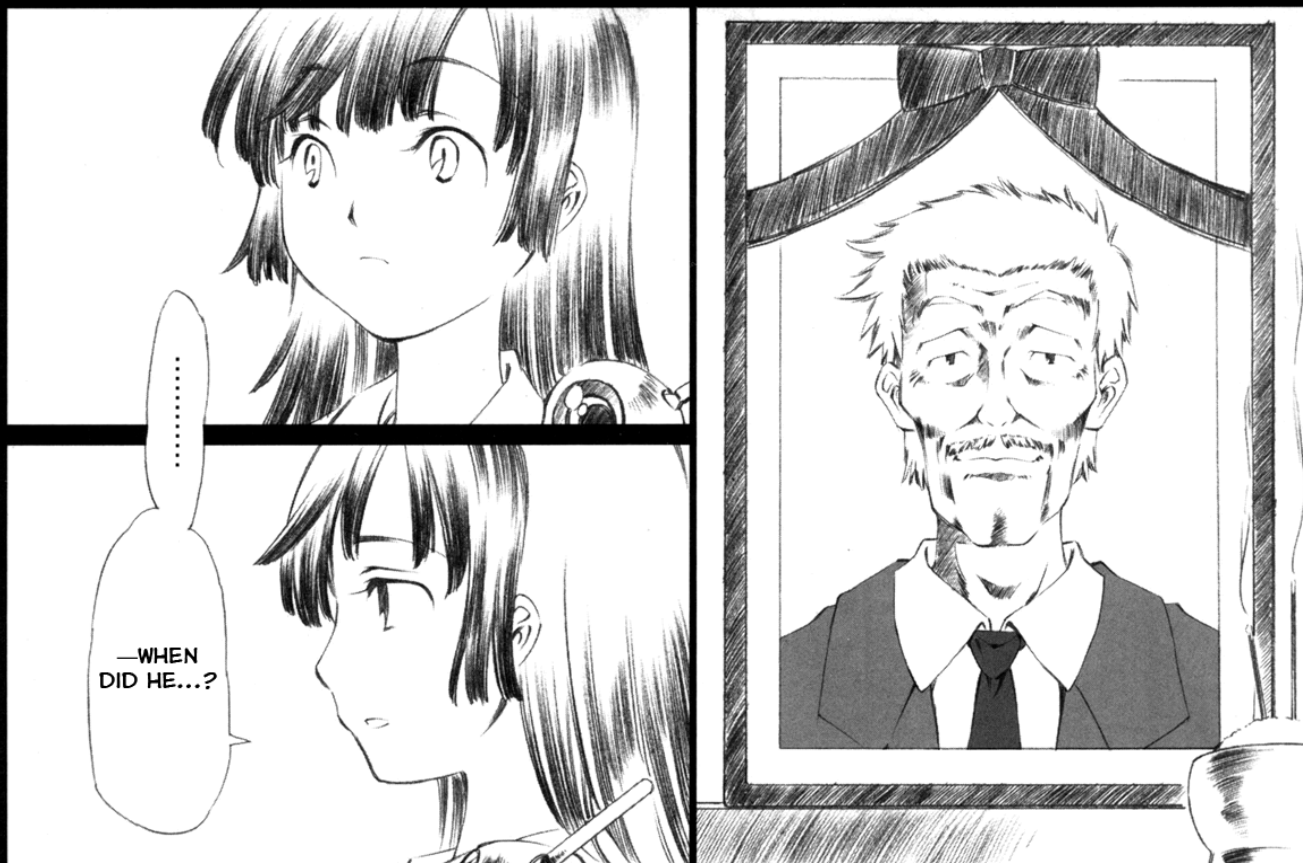
"LOVE"...  
COVETOUS-  
NESS?  
MONOPO-  
LISATION?



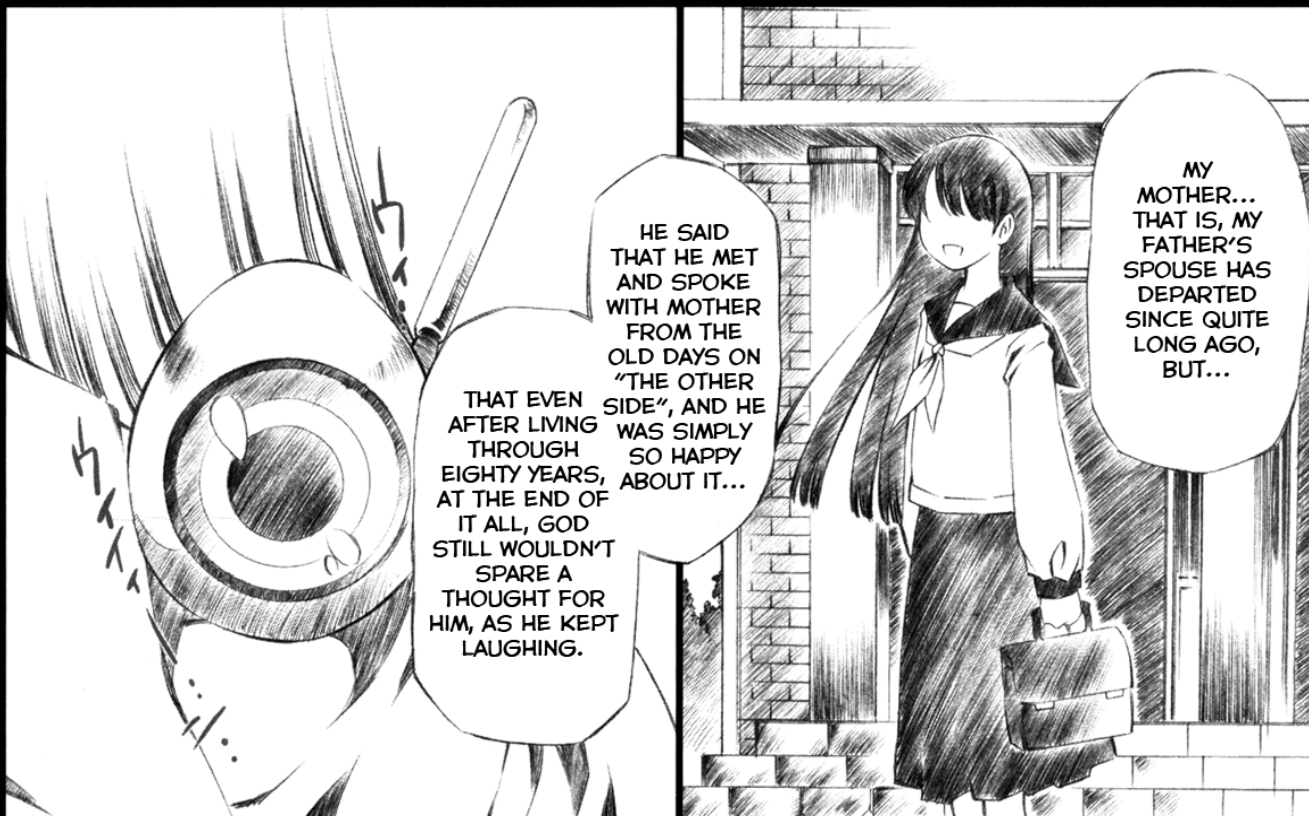
※THE OBJECT MOUNTED ON ASUNA'S LEFT SHOULDER IS THE «BIDIRECTIONAL COMMUNICATION PROBE». IT IS MERELY A COMMUNICATION DEVICE, NOT YUI'S ACTUAL BODY.

※ USER INFORMATION HACKED BY YUI FROM THE ADMINISTRATION SIDE IS LOADED ONTO THE TERMINAL.





※THE AMUSPHERE IS THE FULL VR MACHINE THAT SUCCEEDED THE FIRST-GEN NERVE GEAR, TARGETED AT CONSUMERS. ALTHOUGH THE SPECIFICATIONS HAVE BEEN SLIGHTLY LOWERED, ITS STRENGTHENED SECURITY AND LOW PRICE EARNED IT MANY USERS.



THAT EVEN AFTER LIVING THROUGH EIGHTY YEARS, AT THE END OF IT ALL, GOD STILL WOULDN'T SPARE A THOUGHT FOR HIM, AS HE KEPT LAUGHING.

HE SAID THAT HE MET AND SPOKE WITH MOTHER FROM THE OLD DAYS ON "THE OTHER SIDE", AND HE WAS SIMPLY SO HAPPY ABOUT IT...

MY MOTHER... THAT IS, MY FATHER'S SPOUSE HAS DEPARTED SINCE QUITE LONG AGO, BUT...



BUT THAT WOULD HAPPEN NO MORE. ALL THE EXPERIENCES AND MEMORIES ACCUMULATED BY THAT PERSON HAVE ALREADY BEEN ERASED, WITHOUT A SINGLE BYTE REMAINING.

COULD HE HAVE TAUGHT ME WHAT HE LAUGHED AT AND GOTTEN DEPRESSED OVER; THE THOUGHTS AND EMOTIONS HE WENT THROUGH OVER THAT EXTENSIVE "LIFE" THAT STRETCHED BEYOND TWO AND A HALF BILLION SECONDS?

—I WONDER IF THAT PERSON WOULD HAVE TALKED MUCH MORE IF I ANSWERED DIFFERENTLY?

AAH—I SEE.  
SO THIS SENSE  
OF LOSS IS WHAT  
IT TRULY MEANS  
"TO LOVE".

GOOD-  
BYE.

ALONG WITH  
OBTAINING  
SOMETHING,  
LOSING THAT  
SOMETHING  
IS NATURALLY  
INCLUDED.

DATA THAT CAN NEVER  
BE ACCESSED AGAIN.

LOST POSSIBILITIES.

A BRANCH UNIVERSE  
BEYOND REACH.

THE VERY  
MOMENT WE  
MET SOMEONE,  
WAS THE TIME  
WE STARTED  
TOWARDS OUR  
FAREWELLS.

—THAT IS WHY  
IT IS PRECIOUS.

THAT IS WHY IT  
IS DEAR TO US.

E N D





# *Cold hand, Warm heart*

§ Aincrad 50<sup>th</sup> Floor  
September 2024



# [ソードアート・オンライン：マテリアル・エディション4]

Cold hand, Warm heart

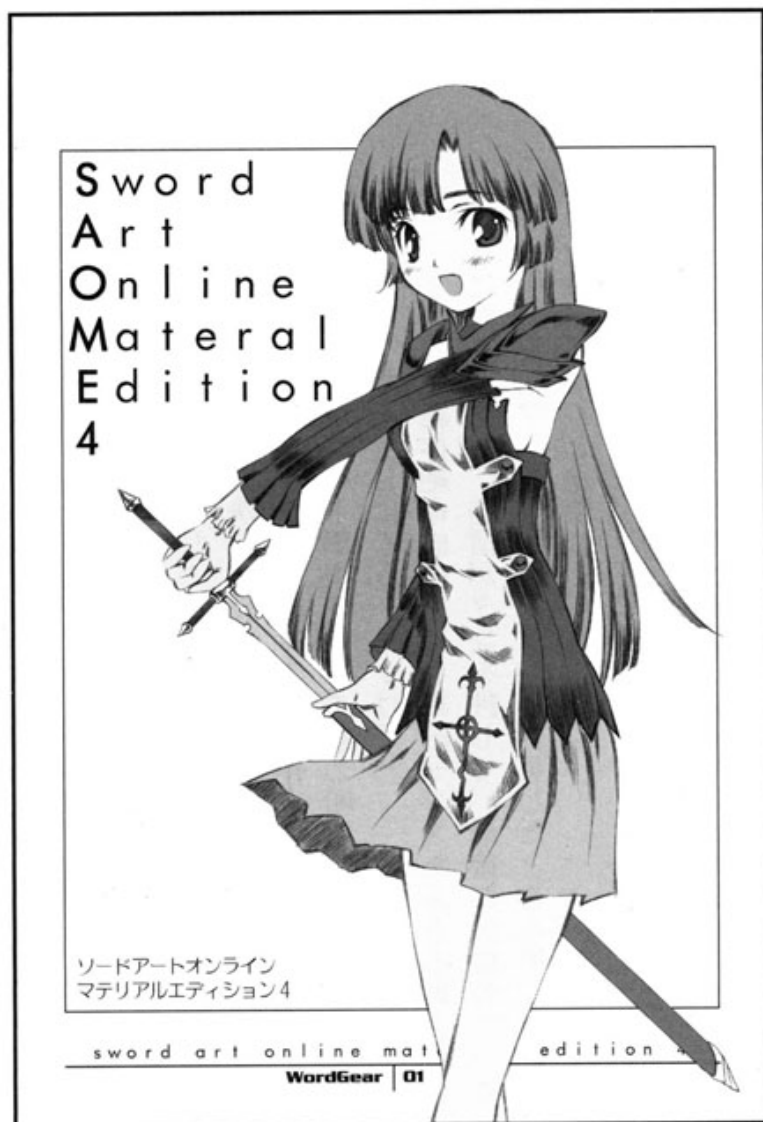
2008年11月

この『4』から、マテリアル・エディションは小説本へとシフトしていきます。

ちょっと言い訳みたいなことを書きますが(笑)私にとっての創作というのは、《頭の中の視覚的イメージを伝達する》作業ですので、伝達のためのツールが絵か文字かというのは本質的な差異ではないと考えています。

もちろん絵(漫画)のほうがビジュアルイメージを伝える力は基本大きいのですが、時には《絵に描きづらい情景》というの也存在しますし……。いちおう小説家として活動している現在の目標は《読んだだけでビジュアルが見える》文章を書くことでしょうか。なかなか難しいですが。

あ 本文について何も書いてなかった……。えーと いつものキリト氏といつものアスナさんですね。



After completing a day of hunting, I returned to my house on the fiftieth floor, which was located in «Algade», but my body still had that marvelously uncomfortable feeling.

My body movement became slow. I couldn't stand straight. My entire body felt like I was carrying a prop which my back could not achieve the required strength, it felt really heavy, as I opened the main menu window, but could not see any place written in red.

As I unsteadily staggered out onto the path from the square, my thoughts remained uninterrupted.

If this discomfort is a negative status, there should be a warning flashing before my eyes. And since I'm within the District Boundary, negative status such as poison and paralysis should be removed.

Maybe I got affected by a new unknown monster's negative status effects. Even after entering the boundary it did not disappear, and at the same time does not trigger a warning — something like «Curse».

At this point, an evil cold crept up from my toes to my body, causing me to shiver.

It is still September in Aincrad, too early for winter. But, going through my coat, penetrating deep into my muscles and bones, was like the wind of winter.

I couldn't return to my room under these conditions. Thinking like this, I increased my pace, going into the first hotel I discovered. I



quickly rented an empty room at the front desk, and after taking the key I rolled and crawled to the front of the furthest door from the desk.

As I sat on a simple bed in the narrow room, I unequipped all my equipment to make my body feel lighter, then took out all kinds of antidotes for all kinds of negative statuses and tried them all one by one. I then used a Crystal which could remove all negative effects, and awaited the moment I would be returned to normal.

—— However.

“.....This..... is..... Really bad.....”

This evil cold did not leave, and my field of vision began to blur.

I could no longer withstand it and collapsed onto the bed, and using my brain, whose operating speed had dropped to very low levels, to think, desperately searched for a countermeasure. If this was a «Curse», an NPC in the church should be able to remove it right? However, was there really a church in the “disorderly” [Chaos] Algade’s streets?

As I was filtering out the buildings on the map, my consciousness began to fade, so I had no choice but to decide to seek help from others. In other words, I had given up on the idea of solving it on my own.

I opened the directory to my list of friends. With my blurred vision, I searched for Klein’s name from a list that couldn’t be considered long, selected it, and pressed the button for sending messages then immediately typed out on the virtual keyboard.

[I can’t handle it    I’m dying    Save me]

After keying in this message which was rich with melodrama, yet did not lose its poetic flavor, I pressed the send button, then turned the room into the «Friends Allowed» mode, and lost consciousness.

My forehead was caressed by a cool comforting touch.

As I stirred, I discovered that I was covered by a thick quilt. The bone chilling evil cold had also changed into sweltering sweat inducing heat.

In this uncomfortable heat, the only cool object was applied to my forehead, controlled by a constantly moving hand. At this moment ——

“Ah, you’re awake?”

A refreshingly sweet voice came from beside my pillow. As the word repeated itself a few times in my brain, I realized that it totally didn’t sound like Klein’s crude “Oi, you’ve woken up”.

I desperately opened my heavy eyelids, the thing swaying in my sight was... the «Knights of the Blood» Sub Leader, the strongest rapier user, «The Flash» Asuna who actually revealed a gentle smile.

“.....!!?!?”

I was so surprised I wanted to bounce up, but Asuna immediately used her left hand to hold me down.

“Not lying down won’t do. Although it won’t make you better immediately.”

She used her index finger to poke at my cheeks.

What is this all about? How did this happen? Is seeing Klein as Asuna caused by this mysterious negative effect? If this is the case should I call Agil?

These bursts of stupid questions hit me as my brain functioned, before finally realizing the truth.

According to the order in the list of friends, Asuna's name was just above Klein's. In my semi conscious state and blurring vision, I just wanted to press his name, and must have pressed the wrong one. In other words, I had sent Asuna — Aincrad's idol, as well as the heroine of the raiders, some embarrassing information.

What should I do? What is the best action to take?

My brain continued to operate inside my head, as Asuna dunked the damp towel into a basin next to me. \*Plop\*, the sound of water being displaced could be heard.

The towel was quickly taken back out, squeezed dry, and applied to my forehead once more. The cool comfortable feeling slightly dispersed the heat gathered onto my body.

"The cooling effect of water doesn't last long, but this is the only option. It's better than nothing."

Seeing the smiling Asuna, I could only emit — a single phrase.

"Tha.....Thank you. Helping me with this."

Subsequently, my cheeks turned into a pink shade, and feeling this change, quickly turned my head to the side, to see Asuna smiling again.

"It's nothing. We should help each other in a moment of need. A person on his own would definitely feel uncomfortable, I understand."





At this kind of time.

That said, Asuna should have experienced this mysterious negative status effect before.

“What kind of negative status effect is this.....? All kinds of antidotes, as well as the Crystal doesn’t work on it.....?”

After I inquired, Asuna’s hazel eyes blinked.

Then broke out in laughter.

“Ahahaha..... So-sorry..... but..... huff huff..... Being like this, is it your first time?”

“Of..... Of course it is the first time. I’ve never heard of this status effect.”

I replied in an injured tone, and Asuna apologized a few more times, while mopping my head with the wet towel.

“I say, this negative status effect, is neither poison nor paralysis.... it’s a sickness. You caught a cold.”

“Co.....Cold?”

“Um. It’s not your avatar, but your body in the real world which caught a cold. Right now, the seasons should be changing over there. Around this time last year, many people collapsed from this.”

“A.....Aah.....”

I could not help but sigh.

It was completely in my blind spot. However, this was truly possible. Although the body’s five senses were completely cut off, the Nerve Gear was unable to isolate fever and other physical discomfort.

In other words, as Asuna said, my real body was what gave me such discomfort.

“Which is why I said, a cool forehead can let you feel more comfortable.”

With that said, I looked away from Asuna who was once again wetting the towel, to determine the time. It was eleven thirty at night.

Since I rolled and crawled into this hotel at around six, Asuna had continued to do this for five hours.

Using the «Wettable cloth equipment» to produce a cooling effect, could only last for five minutes at most. Although it was very comfortable, isn't it a waste of effort?

Suddenly, an odd feeling emerged from my chest, causing me to have no idea what to do. In my semi conscious state, I had no idea what this feeling meant.

Instead, I moved my hand out from under the quilt, and held the towel on my forehead, getting ready for Asuna's hand to take it.

“What..... What is it?”

Although her words became obscure, Asuna maintained her smile, while on the other hand I couldn't find any words to reply her. I didn't understand what I was doing either.

It was clearly like this, but my mouth emitted some words in a rough voice on its own.

“Enough with this towel. Instead of it..... just use your hands to touch my forehead.”

—— *Don't take advantage of my weakness!!*



Was what I had expected her to spit out, but contrary to my expectations, “.....Em” Asuna answered in a quiet voice.

Squeezing my hand in reply, she used her cool hands to brush across my forehead with the other. As my body was exhausted, my consciousness gradually faded. The anxiety of getting the disease made way to a comfortable sense of security.

As I entered a light sleep, By my ear, I could hear a soft lullaby.

“I said, you..... Kirito..... kun. It’s ok to give your cold..... over to me. Like that, you might be able to recover faster.”

After that, I could feel a gentle kind of touch to the cheeks, on my face with my eyes closed.

I wanted to open my eyes to confirm —— Obviously, I was unable to do so.

\* \* \*

“.....ooh.....”

Asuna grunted, and opened her eyes.

The view entering her eyes was not the white ceiling of her home, but instead it was the black of an old wooden board. The bed was hard and the blanket was thin. Despite complaining to herself to find a better room, she was not in any condition to get out of bed.

Could it be —— a real cold?

No, it is impossible to be infected by a virus in the virtual world. The players were completely separated in the real word, connected only by wires. However, this is too much coincidence!

The strongest solo player, The «Black Swordsman» Kirito, perhaps due to the excellent physical condition, as well as the overnight care by Asuna, had recovered. This is good. This is fine enough.

However, facing this exchange, she didn't think about her own collapse. Asuna was sitting beside Kirito's bed, humming a lullaby until she fell asleep. Based on the sun shining through the window, it was now evening.

She looked away —— to the empty chair by the bed.

In the midst of her mind, she recalled that until afternoon, Asuna was changing the wet cloth on the forehead constantly. But, seeing Asuna asleep, Kirito probably went out to complete his daily hunting.

“Maa..... there is nothing I can do about it.”

She whispered aloud.

Different from Asuna who was associated with a guild, Solo Kirito had no training partners. If he missed one day of hunting, it would require a lot of effort to make up for it. She understood this, but...

To be relied on, that happy and warm feeling, still could not stop the buried feelings of cold loneliness. Her body was obviously hot, but in her chest was an icy coldness, she could not help but let her tears emerge.

“.....Aaaa..... This won't do..... as expected.”

Tightly closing her eyes, she buried her head into the blanket, just then ——

Suddenly, in the middle of the room a blue vortex shimmered. As a hum was issued, a two meter high elliptic door appeared.

“.....Corridor Crystal.”

Her head left the pillow to say these words, when a black figure jumped out of the door.

Of course, this was the «Black Swordsman» Kirito. And no one else. However ——

“I, I say..... Can’t you come in from the main door.....”

At this point, Asuna was finally aware, that Kirito had brought something.

It was a large wooden bucket. No, it should be called a basin.

The basin was filled with grains that glowed white, reflecting the light of the afternoon sun.

After looking at it for a few seconds, she finally realized what it was.

“That..... that is, snow.....? But..... where did you get it, in this season?”

After that question, Kirito carefully placed the basin on the table, faced Asuna, and lowered his head.

“I’m sorry, I came back too late! I intended to come back earlier..... it’s all because of that tough dragon.....”

Kirito’s words reminded Asuna of the tall mountain that was full of ice and snow. It was at the top of one of the hills that was located at one end on the fifty eighth floor. However, climbing that mountain required encountering many monsters along the extremely long mountain road, and at the end of the road, the regional boss monster, the Ice Dragon waited. Being able to go there and return in two hours was nothing short of a miracle.

“.....Why would you go this far.....”

Kirito did not answer Asuna’s question, picked up the towel on the table, and put it into the ice basin. Upon taking it out, the towel was completely frozen.

“Lie down.”

At these words, Asuna’s head returned to the pillow, and the ice cold towel was placed on her forehead. «Frozen towel» produced a cooling sensation much higher than the wet towel.

“Ah..... Comfortable.....”

As Asuna smiled and said this, Kirito shyly laughed.

Her forehead obviously felt very cold, yet at the same time she could feel a gentle warmth. Asuna blinked, then stretched out her hand, and held the hand which protruded from the sleeves of the black clothes.

The hand Kirito had used to collect snow had become cold, but after holding tightly for a while the temperature was restored, so Asuna held on tightly.

“ I say..... this time I will pass my cold over to you.”

Listening to this, Kirito replied with a bitter smile.

“Then this will have no end.”

“Isn’t that fine? If you collapse again, I will go to collect snow and ice, and make shaved ice for you to eat”

“.....If it is like this, collapsing will not be that bad.”

Maintaining a smiling face, Asuna closed her eyes, and waited for that moment.





The End.



ME-05

*Salvia*

§ Kawagoe, Saitama  
January 2025



# 〔ソードアート・オンライン：マテリアル・エディション5〕

Salvia

2009年5月

ついには書き下ろしではなく再録です……。  
この『ME5』に収録されている『サルビア』という短編小説は、  
おそらく2004年あたりにホームページ掲載用に書かれて  
その後取り下げとなったものです。当時の記憶はかなり  
曖昧ですが、たしか友人と「子供の頃サルビアの蜜吸った  
ことある？ない？」という話になり、私はナイ派でしたので、  
ならばどれくらいの方がその経験があるかアンケート取っ  
てみようということになって、回答のお礼として書かれた短編  
だったように思います。  
アンケートの結果は、全国津々浦々で皆様吸ってらっしゃい  
ました！ あと少数ながらツツジ派の方も！

そんなわけですので小説の内容は、これもまったく何てこと  
のない、いつものギルティ氏と直葉さんです。

Sword Art Online  
Material Edition

5

Word Gear



“I’m at my limit already~”

Glancing at the side of Kazuto’s face who breathed the complaints in a miserable voice, Suguha tried not to laugh and raised her voice,

“Not yet! Only 20 more!”

Two people continued swinging their shinai in the harsh cold weather of the morning. For Kazuto, swinging 300 times every morning is still very tough. Despite saying ‘Can’t~’ or ‘I’m dying~’ every few minutes, he still continued until the end. His willpower is what Suguha always looked up to.

“298, .....299, .....OK, finish~”

“My arms.....I can’t feel my arms.....”

This morning Kazuto somehow finished swinging too, after passing the shinai to Suguha, he walked to the veranda and lay on top of the plank. Smiling at the scene, Suguha wiped both shinai with a cloth while leaning next to the black pine trunk. She pulled a handkerchief out of her jersey pocket and wiped her sweat, relieving her breath.

A few days ago, the yard was still covered in snow, but it had disappeared completely due to the recent continuous fine weather. Suguha noticed the earth in the planter, which was arranged alongside the graveled path that turns from the yard to the door, was already dry. She then mercilessly said to the dying body at the veranda,

“Onii-chan, fill up that watering can and bring it here~”



Several seconds later, Kazuto lifelessly replied ‘K~~’ and got up, he pulled an old watering can from under the veranda, collected water from the tap at the corner of the yard and handed it to Suguha. She received and tilted it at the planter, fine droplets of water came showering a curved line, accompanied by a light sound.

“.....What is this flower?”

Kazuto asked, squatting and glancing at a small flower with a pale orange color in front of him.

“It’s an Adonis, red chichibu type.”

“Hmm..... So it blooms in this season.”

On hearing Suguha’s answer, Kazuto poked a petal of the adonis while deep in thought.

“At our house, this flower blooms the earliest. ....But Onii-chan, why are you interested in the flower?”

“No... It’s just that ‘that side’ also has a similar flower. ....How about this planter? It looks empty.”

“Oh, in that one I’ll sow Salvia seeds when spring arrives, then they will bloom in the summer.”

“Salvia..... what kind of flower is that?”

Finishing the watering, Suguha showered the remaining water in the can at the base of a black pine, then answered with a surprised voice,

“It bloomed every year didn’t it? It’s red and when blooming, they look like many small goldfish. Onii-chan, when we were young, you always removed the flower to taste its nectar and caused mother to get angry every time.”

Upon hearing, Kazuto face started showing signs of amazement.

“N..Nectar!? Did I really do such a survivor-like thing.....?”

“Ah—— you already forgot about it. I was sad my share was gone too.”

“.....My share?”

“Ah.....”

Realizing she inadvertently said an unnecessary thing, Suguha shrugged and stuck out her tongue.

“Wait..... now I remember.....”

A grin floated onto Kazuto’s face.

“The one mother was angry at wasn’t me but you, Sugu. I think she said ‘Didn’t we agree no more than 3 per day?’”

“Haha, caught me, you remembered it so well. Even these days it is still a mystery to me how sweet the nectar from Salvia is.”

“Hmm, I can’t remember the taste.....”

Kazuto aimlessly glanced at the space in front of him while searching through the bottom of his memories——

“Ah——.....”

He stood still but his eyes suddenly went wide open.

“.....? What is it, Onii-chan.”

“No.....that’s right.....come to think of it.....”

Suguha looked up worriedly at the Kazuto’s face, who muttered words she couldn’t understand. Suddenly, he closed the distance

between them while looking into her eyes. Suguha's heart fluttered, trying to hide her hot cheeks, she hastily jumped a step backward.

"W..What? Don't surprise me like that."

".....Sugu, do you have time now?"

"Eh? .....There's no class today, so it's alright, but why.....?"

"Well then, let's go out for a bit."

Kazuto grabbed Suguha's arm, who was still unable to grasp the situation, and walked quickly toward the eaves of the main building.

"W..Wait, where are we going?"

"Don't ask yet, just sit on the pannier rack."

He pulled out his mountain bike and removed the number lock attached to it.

"Eh—, I'm still in this outfit, it's a bit....."

Suguha complained while looking down at her green school jersey, but Kazuto just smiled and said,

"That is appropriate for the roadwork anyway."

"They use cooler looking jerseys for that! .....It really can't be helped then..."

After saying her point, she sat down on the rear carrier of the MTB with her arms wrapped around Kazuto's waist and clung on tightly. She began to worry that he would hear the sound of her heart which was currently beating like an alarm bell.

"Hold on tight!"

When Kazuto forcefully stepped on the pedals, the sound of the wind put her thoughts to rest and the back wheel kicked a pebble, causing a small sound. The MTB started gaining momentum, and once it went past the front gate, began to run.

It was already past eight, being a weekday, there were lines of people walking on the road outside of the station. But the bicycle that both were riding on headed in the opposite direction from the flow. Suguha felt the people they passed were smiling at the siblings, she buried her face behind Kazuto's back and quietly said,

"T..This is embarrassing, Onii-chan! How much further are we're going?"

"Won't be too far..... probably....."

"Probably—!?"

The bicycle went on steadily until the outskirts of the residential area, even though the rear carrier was made of metal, sitting was comfortable because the MTB's wheel was supported by a thick suspension.

It was around ten minutes on the bicycle when they reached the back of a small shrine, Kazuto put on the brakes. They were at a corner of an old residential area, by then it was already quiet without pedestrian traffic.

".....Here?"

"....."

There was no answer to her question, Kazuto got off the bike, Suguha also jumped off the rear carrier. She put her hands on her hips and said,



“.....Now, explain it properly already, is there anything at this shrine?”

“.....”

Surely this lonely shrine must be Kazuto’s destination. Just as she thought that, Kazuto crossed the road to the opposite side of the shrine. There stood the gate to a solitary luxurious house.

“.....? Is this the house of your acquaintance?”

Suguha stood next to him, the house exterior was built with tiles of red bricks and a palisade painted in white enclosed a large garden which was covered in a color of dried straw. There was a small child who was waiting for its parents on a red tricycle.

Suguha looked up to Kazuto’s face, wanting to ask her question again, but eventually, he shook his head slowly.

“No..... I don’t know this house. But here..... It was a wide vacant lot and it was full of grass.

Phew, he breathed loudly with a slight smile.

“.....Well.....It was from seven, or eight years ago anyway.....”

“Vacant lot.....? Is there something at that place.....?”

“Nope, nothing..... Well, let’s go back.”

“I don’t understand, we came all the way to this place just to look for a vacant lot—?”

After self-concluding, he turned back, Kazuto shrugged and started walking to the bicycle. Suguha watched his back and when she was about to follow him——

“Ah.....”

A bright blue scene had filled her vision.

One corner of the lawn was enclosed with bricks, it was a small flower bed. In the middle was cold resistant plants spread with deep green leaves, and hidden within —— there was a dense short grass with a large amount of blooming small blue flowers.

“.....It’s the Salvia.”

“.....Eh?”

Suguha’s voice reached Kazuto, who was looking at the flower bed next to him.

“Salvia..... Where is it?”

“Here, the blue flowers.”

“But..... Sugu said earlier it’s a red flower?”

“There are hundreds of species within the Salvia genus, this one is a Blue Salvia species. But, it’s strange.....”

When Suguha tilted her head, the back door of the big house opened. A young lady wearing an apron came out, her long hair was tied in a pony tail, in her hands was a shiny tin watering can.

The ladies eyes widened a little when she saw the siblings, she then immediately smiled while approaching them and said,

“Good morning.”

“Ah.. G..Good morning.”

The siblings hastily returned greetings.

“Are you two from the neighborhood?”

“Y..Yes”

“Is there anything I could help with?”

“Er..Erm... well.....”

Blocked in front of Kazuto who struggled with his words, Suguha quickly said,

“I think these Salvia are very beautiful!”

“Is that so? Well, thank you.”

The lady smiled cheerfully, Suguha continued saying with relief,

“But.....normally Salvia won’t be blooming past December, right? Are these a special kind?”

“Ah..... I also think it’s strange. Even though they’re a perennial plant, in November every year the flowers would already start to fall off, but this year even past new year, the flowers are still there..... Unfortunately, I don’t know if these are normal Blue Salvia or not.....”

“Don’t know.....?”

“These Salvia were already here before my house was even built, during the construction we had to move them slightly. But every year after that they are still blooming healthily here.”

“I..Is that so?”

Suddenly Kazuto shouted, causing Suguha and the lady to be surprised.

“W..What is it, Onii-chan.”

“Ah, well....”

Kazuto hesitated for a bit, then timidly said,

“.....The one who sowed the Salvia was me, .....seven years ago.....”

“E..Eh!?”

“Oh, really!”

Suguha was astonished upon hearing an unexpected answer while the lady who embraced the watering can at her chest wore a big smile on her face.

“Is that so, then these flowers must have been waiting for you. Ah.....wait a moment.”

The lady bent over to put the watering can down, then walked quickly into the house. In a short while the figure reappeared with a small shovel in her right hand, she lowered the white plastic pot in her left hand to the ground.

While Suguha and Kazuto were watching, the lady dug the shovel into one corner of the Blue Salvia bunch and carefully pulled three stumps out, then put them into the flowerpot. She brought a vinyl bag from her apron pocket and put the flowerpot into it. With a smiling face and both hands holding the bag, she offered it to Kazuto.

“Let’s split it, please take this.”

“Ah.....No, it’s too much.....”

“It’s alright, the flowers will surely be delighted too.”

“.....Thank you very much. Then I’ll accept your kind offer.....”

Kazuto lowered his head while accepting the bag. The contents shook slightly and Suguha’s nose was tickled by a faint aroma.

“Well then, feel free to visit anytime. In spring there will be a lot more blooming.”

“OK, now we must be going.”



Kazuto bowed his head again to the lady who began to sprinkle water with the watering can, then began walking.

“Well, Sugu, let’s go back.”

“O..Ok. ....Good bye.”

Still not understanding the situation, Suguha bowed and followed Kazuto.

Kazuto didn’t ride the bicycle, instead he pulled it with one hand and started walking. Next to him, filled with curiosity, Suguha quickly asked him,

“Wait, Onii-chan, what’s going on? You really planted those!?”

“Ah—, how to say it....”

Kazuto stopped the bicycle in front of the stone steps after walking half a circle around the shrine perimeter. His face went slightly red, ‘Ah~’, ‘Uu~’, cleared his throat with ‘Ahem ahem’, then he suddenly offered the bag in his right hand to Suguha.

“Sugu, your birthday present.”

“Hah!? .....It’s not my birthday yet though?”

“It’s from seven years ago.”

Still not understanding, Suguha tilted her head while her glance was filled with questions.

“.....Seven years ago..... On Sugu’s birthday. You wished to gather a lot of Salvia to get its nectar, so I bought some seeds with my allowance and planted them at that vacant lot. But later I couldn’t find the road to the shrine, I spent a while searching and eventually gave up. At that

time I was very sad..... Then, this time I found it in one go. A child's memory is really unreliable."

"Onii-chan....."

Suguha's eyes opened wide, she shyly averted her gaze from Kazuto's face. Her chest felt tight with the various emotions that had overflowed within her heart.

Stretching out her right hand, she gently pulled a Salvia flower which peeped out from the bag's opening. She received the droplet that came off from its base with the tip of her tongue. It was faint, but the vivid sweetness quickly spread inside her mouth —— At that moment, Suguha felt the flow of the many years of time she spent with Kazuto breeze through her. Before she realized it, two streaks of tears had already flowed passed her cheeks and dropped to her feet.

"O..Oi, don't suddenly cry....."

Suguha jumped into Kazuto's chest, who had faltered due to sudden panicking. Both hands wrapped around his back, she embraced him with all her strength. Before long, she felt Kazuto caress her head gently. Cheeks still pressed on to Kazuto's chest, she whispered quietly while the sweetness was still lingering in her mouth,

"I love you.....Onii-chan."

(END)



# *Algade Showdown*

§ Aincrad 22<sup>nd</sup> Floor  
October 2024



# 〔ソードアート・オンライン：マテリアル・エディション6〕

## アルゲードの決闘

2009年11月

この短編はたしかイベント用書下ろしだったと記憶しています。内容は、サイトで連載したSAO外伝『圈内事件』の後日談であり、現在もサイトに掲載されたままなので、この本に収録するかどうかやや迷ったのですがいちおう既刊の『ME』全収録を謳いましたので載せることにしました。

内容は、いつものキリト氏とアスナさん……ですが、SAOとしては珍しくギャグ寄りの内容です。アインクラッドの食事情も含めてお楽しみ頂けると嬉しいです。





On a certain evening, a few days after the newly married life of Asuna and I begun, in the log house inside the deep forests on Aincrad's 22nd floor.

While talking about places visited during the day or eaten dishes, on the sofa which was placed in front of the fireplace, Asuna suddenly said what she was thinking aloud.

“Hey, Kirito-kun. I think, maybe that person wasn't an NPC but a player.....”

“.....Haa?”

Not understanding her sudden topic, my mouth was left slightly opened.

While sitting side by side on the sofa, her lips continued to sip from her tea cup.

“Well, that shop's master, I naturally believed he was an NPC without a doubt..... But today, somehow, while I was watching his face, I suddenly felt that that person is actually a player.”

The subject of our conversation was a restaurant. It was located deep within the back of the back and even further back of the lower part of the 50th floor's main block town «Algade». If we were to go there without a map, not just arriving at the destination, coming back out would be difficult. Actually «restaurant» was not an appropriate word to describe it, «Food Shop» would be more suitable. Its name was «Algade House».

The building looked as if it would collapse if it was blown by a somewhat strong wind. There was a sign curtain hung at the sliding door entrance. The interior had a stone floor — or rather a bare concrete floor, there were two 4-seat-tables and another four seats at the counter. All the furniture had a strong presence of cheapness, and it wasn't like they were specially ordered to make them cheap either.

In the menu, there were only 3 entries. «Algade Soba», «Algade Grilled» and «Algade Boiled», none of them had any motivation behind their naming. They were, in the menu order, a ramen which didn't look like a ramen, an okonomiyaki which didn't look like an okonomiyaki, and last one, I still don't have any idea what it is supposed to be.

The order was then cooked by the same shopkeeper. While Asuna was saying «that shop's master», My mind imagined the short master with a white smock and a white toque, whose round face of unknown age was hidden behind the long forelock, then I finally replied,

“.....P..Player? .....but that person didn't say anything.....”

“At least he did say ‘Welcome’ and ‘Thank you’.”

“Those are normal for NPC though. ....actually if you target him with the cursor.....”

Saying up to this point, I noticed something.

There is a definite distinction between a player and an NPC, focusing the gaze on the target will bring up the «Color Cursor». Although both types would appear in green, for an NPC, under the HP bar will be a clearly displayed [NPC]. But this distinction method wouldn't work inside the shop, as it was classified as inside a building, due to the consideration of the system. It is probably impossible to eat

quietly if the cursor kept appearing whenever someone is seen, so even if I focus my gaze on the store's master, the cursor wouldn't appear.

But, normally nobody cares about determining an NPC, because they are so obvious with just a glance. Unlike flesh and blood humans operating through the Nerve Gear, system controlled NPCs have unique characteristics. Being imprisoned inside SAO for two years, it was a no-brainer to know if other people are a player or an NPC without even thinking — while I thought about that, my brain re-checked the master of Algade House's gloomy standing pose.

Then, my eyes opened wide in amazement.

“.....This is bad, somehow I can't be sure.”

“.....Right?”

Asuna smiled happily for some reason.

Her smile, which hasn't changed since we first met, shot through my heart, whenever this happens, I always stretch my hand out dizzily to reach her. But this time, the face of the master that had been floating in my brain prevented my action.

I scratched my head to push that unpleasant image out of my mind.

“No, but is it even possible that someone can't be identified whether they are a player or an NPC? I'm sure there must be a simple way to check it.....”

“How about checking his reaction after being attacked? But once we use various reckless methods and he turns out to be a player, we won't be able to go back to that shop anymore. ....Well, at this point, I don't think I want to go back there anyway.”

“No, I’m bothered, really bothered.”

Asuna quickly shook her head and sighed.

“.....Kirito-kun, what on earth do you like about that shop? It’s been half a year since you brought me there the first time, I really don’t understand.....”

“About that, I don’t know the reason myself. Unfriendly atmosphere, bad food..... but occasionally I can’t resist the urge to try that mystery ramen again.”

“That was not ramen though, .....Well, why not just ask? Are you an NPC or a player, like that”

Already having considered Asuna’s idea several seconds ago, I shook my head.

“Nope, it won’t work. That shopkeeper’s unfriendliness is like ten Heathcliffs together. I’m absolutely certain the question will be ignored. Well, that place was also a good place too.

“R..Really, .....just leave it as a mystery then. I’m sorry for starting the weird topic, Do you want more cookies?”

After saying that, Asuna stood up, but I quickly grabbed her left hand and pulled her back.

“.....No, I can’t leave it.”

“Eh?”

“Feeling anxious over and over like this will become unbearable, I can’t go back to the front lines until I know whether the shopkeeper is human or NPC.”



Upon hearing that, ‘Don’t say something like that!’ was clearly showed in Asuna’s expression, but she sat down again without saying it out.

“.....But, then what should we do? I don’t know any way to confirm it, and asking is also out of the question, right?”

“Nope, there is a way. In short, just seeing the cursor when that master is outside the shop is enough. For a player, he would surely need to go out to buy food ingredients, while NPC also have specific behaviors like cleaning the outside of the shop too.”

“.....Y..You don’t mean...”

Asuna made a stiff face and tried to walk away from the sofa again, but I grabbed both her shoulders and said,

“OK, tomorrow let’s go camp there at six in the morning. There is an empty passage across the street, it won’t raise any suspicion if we observe from there.”

“.....It’s cold, surely, very cold.”

“Yes, we need cold resistant equipment! I’m sure we have enough for both of us in the storage, then the boxed lunch will be made using cold resistance boosting ingredients too. The preparation is now flawless, I’ll leave it to you Asuna!”

To my words that gushed out, Asuna made a very complex face then responded with ‘Oh~’. But enthusiasm seemed missing from her words for some reason.

Next day.

While it was still dark, wearing thick fur cloaks, we entered our observation position on the pedestrian bridge across from the Algade House's eaves.

Six hours later.

We were forced to retreat after realizing our prospect bore no fruit.

".....He didn't come out at all, did he!"

At an open cafe along the main street, Asuna complained after quickly drinking hot milk and placing the empty cup back on the table.

"Even before that, the sign curtain was left out during the night, and there was no indication of the outside cleaning either. I'm very bothered!"

".....Really sowwy about that."

I first have to apologize on behalf of the shopkeeper.

Algade House's level of lethargy is much higher than anticipated. The shopkeeper never came out to purchase stocks nor clean outside. The only change we observed was the sign plate on the sliding door, which was changed from [Closed] to [Open] at ten. Of course, just that action on its own wasn't enough to determine if he is a player or an NPC.

".....Hmm, but the food ingredients should eventually run out..... Then he surely has to go out to restock....."

After finishing my mumbling, Asuna replied with a sharp glance toward me,

“.....Then, do you really want to wait for that to happen? If you think about it, that shop doesn’t even have any customers, how many days will it take for the ingredients to run out? I won’t be surprised even if it takes several weeks! I’m not going to do that for sure!”

“S..Sorry.....”

I apologized again, then thought desperately.

Something——, there must be a way. A way to confirm whether he is a player or not, without him taking a single step out of the shop.

If we’re unable to check the person, how about the shop? Is there any way to determine if the shop is a player’s shop or an NPC’s shop? It would be clearly a player’s action if it stood out among the elegant buildings on the street of Salemburg. But this is Algade, the most chaotic town in Aincrad, there were plenty of similar shady shop once we enter the back streets.

——It was no good. Continuing being in the clearing group for two years in this Aincrad, accepting the alias «Black Swordsman», but unable to distinguish whether that person was a player or an NPC. It was such a laughing matter.

A smile of self-ridicule floated to my face, then —— An idea flashed out in my brain.

“T..... That’s it!”

“.....What?”

In spite of Asuna’s skeptic glance toward me, I rattled on,

“If the ingredients won’t deplete, then we’ll deplete them ourselves! Listen, for NPC restaurants, the term out of stock doesn’t exist to begin with, the food just springs out from the kitchen. But a

player's shop is different, the shopkeeper has to purchase the stock or else food can't be made. That means.....”

At this point Asuna suddenly rose from the table and tried to escape with a dash.

But my focus on increasing Agility stat displayed its results, her hand was grabbed before she made any distance.

“——We just have to eat it! Anything from that shop's menu!”

“Don't wanna! What if it's an NPC restaurant? An infinite amount of food will just come out, won't it?”

“That's that, then we'll know he's an NPC right? Let's go now! The problem is —— Which one to pick from the menu. «Algade Soba», «Algade Grilled», or «Algade Boiled»..... ——Asuna, what do you like?”

Sub-leader of the guild Knights of the Blood, the rapier user whose title was «The Flash» shot her gaze towards me which would be able to pierce a small hole in the middle of my forehead after hearing my question——

After a short while, she sat back on the chair and said,

“«Boiled» is absolutely out, .....«Grilled» that sometimes contained strange things is also out.”

“Then «Soba» it is. Yeah, it is suitable for this challenge too, because it's also what we ate the first time we went there.”

“.....That's right, but didn't we invite the guild leader as well back then?”

When I seriously tried to recall it, Asuna immediately shook her head.

“It was a joke. ——Then, when are we going to do it?”

I grinned while standing up, and said,

“Isn’t it great, we haven’t eaten lunch here.”

Several minutes later.

Asuna and I were standing in front of the food shop, which will soon be the battlefield of our one-sided duel.

“.....Here we go.”

After confirming with the nod from my partner—— My left hand pushed aside the dirtied sign curtain, while my right hand forced open the sliding door.

“Welcome.”

The usual greeting voice from inside the counter was by none other than the shopkeeper. I sat at the counter instead of my usual table. As soon as Asuna sat down beside me, I made an order.

“Two Algade Soba.”

The shopkeeper prepared the bowls without replying, two mysterious balls of noodle were tossed into the large pot. From these action, it was still not possible to confirm whether he was a player or not. After a while, the shopkeeper used the long chopsticks to move the eased up noodle to the bowls, hot water switching, which is required in the real world, seems unnecessary here. He placed a thinly sliced meat, a lump of boiled vegetable, and half a boiled egg, then poured the light colored soup into the bowl.



Two bowls had lined up on the counter, a sound effect rang out when I pulled out the soba from my storage.

Both of us took the chopsticks and said 'Itadakimasu' at the same time. It was the start of the first round of the battle.

In regards to Aincrad cuisine, the taste was recreated from the presets of basic taste data, however, with the addition of seasoning, one can customize the taste even further. For example, the Brown Stew, which is Asuna's pride, was made by slightly mixing the spices set into the taste of ready-made sauce. In other word, with the aid of a player's hand, the flavour of the dish could be strengthened, and in most cases, enriched the taste.

——But it would be quite a miraculous to say the «There is not even one taste» feeling from the Algade Soba was from the aid of the player hand. Even if the flavour of the soup had seasoning added, the strength of the taste was like it had been diluted to a different dimension, it was like a drawing which the background was firmly written but the subject didn't exist.

Maybe what pulled me back to this shop was that missing flavour, for the moment one day that this dish will be «Completed», an ephemeral expectation like that —— But of course, I somehow knew that the moment would never come.

As I was deeply indulged in my thoughts, Asuna, whose face had an expression which could be read as 'Why is this happening to me' was beside me. We finished eating at the same time.

I returned empty bowls back to the counter —— then said,

“.....Two Algade Soba, refill!”

There was a slight pause in the shopkeeper's action, but it was probably just my imagination. The round face of the man in his thirties to forties under the long forelock bore no expression at all, the shopkeeper threw two balls of noodles into the large pot.

From that point on, the endless battle of me and Asuna against the master begun.

Of course, no matter what was eaten in Aincrad, there won't be anything entering the stomach in the body of the real world. But the taste reproduction engine tricks the brain, which lead to an unavoidable feeling of 'full'."

To be honest, that feeling already came after the second bowl had emptied, but there was no path for me to retreat.

".....Two Algade Soba, refill"

This full feeling was only a hallucination, the soba was merely digital data. Which meant there was nothing preventing me from eating these forever.

Having fooled myself like that, I finished the third bowl and proceeded to the fourth bowl. There was also Asuna, whom I could always rely on in the big battle, she was at exactly the same pace as me.

——But immediately after she finished the soup from the fifth bowl,

".....Kirito-kun, I'm sorry."

her faint whisper echoed from the emptied bowl.

"I..can't go any further, I'll have to leave the rest to you..... The truth..you must..find..it....."

Her chestnut color hair fluttered, then «The Flash» collapsed on the counter.

——ASUNAaaaaaaa——!!

Was what I wanted to scream, but doing that might allow the virtual stomach to reverse something back out, so I limited myself to a short 'GJ'.

I lifted my face and glared at the shopkeeper,

“.....One Algade Soba.....refill”

I was also near my limit.

For Asuna's sake, I can't be defeated here. But while sipping from the sixth bowl of something which wasn't ramen, I was unable to stop the fear which sprung out inside me.

——Maybe he was really an NPC? After all we had done, the noodles and the soup still sprung out without any pause. Did I challenge him to a fight in which we had no chance of winning?

——No, even if it's the case, it wasn't the time to fall yet. For Asuna.

Seventh bowl.

Eight bowl.

HP bar of my stomach was now in deep red, but the expression of shopkeeper was still unchanged. I slurped the noodle one by one, while thinking of a way to reverse the flow of the current battle situation.

If it was a real ramen shop, there would be pepper, fish meals, or onions at the counter. It was possible to eat the latter half deliciously

by changing the flavour. But this shop had no such wonderful things. There was only one way, with «Algade Boiled» being an exception, it was possible to mix the other two orders together, but doing that would be the same as stopping oneself by stabbing. Why «Boiled»? I once accompanied Klein and we requested that, we both said ‘Give up’ just after two mouthfuls, it was menu of the legend.

——So is this the end?

Within my fading consciousness, I heard the reviving voice from a distant memory.

The face of Asuna, who was here eating Algade Soba with me at the beginning, said,

“Someday I want to make a soy sauce, otherwise this unpleasant feeling won’t ever disappear.”

“.....!”

My eyes fully opened, and my trembling hand moved to open our shared storage. Scrolling through the enormous item lists, finding the target item.

Once I grabbed what I was looking for, I tilted it over the bowl, a slightly dark liquid poured down and immediately caused the thin yellow color of the soup to change to brown. The drifting fragrance can’t be compared to anything else, the smell that is ingrained at the base of my memory was —— soy sauce. It was the result of Asuna’s long research, Aincrad’s ultimate seasoning that no one but her could make.

Placing the small bottle down, I held the bowl and sipped large amounts of noodles and soup.

“.....This is it.”

I murmured with a hoarse voice. It was this taste. The one I was looking for, the completed form of Algade Soba. It had arrived here and now.

If eating this, then no matter how many bowls —— No, maybe I can eat five more bowls, I still can fight!

———At that time.

The words I have never heard within this shop before echoed from overhead.

“.....Mister, that, taste it.....can I?”

I raised my confused face, nodded and pushed the bowl to him.

The mystery master grabbed it up and ate the mouthful of noodles and soup together. He looked up for a while after placing the bowl back on the counter——

Soon after that, two lines of tears flowed from behind his long forelock.

“.....This is it. This taste... real world's... my shop's taste!”

———So you are a player after all!

———Then act more graciously!

Swallowing what I wanted to scream, I asked,

“.....Your shop, where is it located?”

“Hmm, It was at Ogikubo, I got sucked into NetGame so it went out of business. But once the game is cleared and I go back to the other side, I’m going to open a ramen shop again. With this ramen, also



«Grilled» and «Boiled» will make the appearance too, come by all means.”

Tears still flowing down his face, where was that silent character earlier? While watching the shopkeeper who had gained momentum talking, I collapsed onto the counter.

As my consciousness was fading, My last thought was,

—————I won’t go, absolutely—————

(END)



ME-07

# *Continuation: Aria in the Starless Night*

§ Aincrad 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor  
4<sup>th</sup> December 2022



Aincrad's 2nd floor's main town «Urbus» was a town located inside a table mountain that spanned three hundred meters in diameter, which had been dug up and left with only the outer circumference.

Once I had gone through the southern gate, the words [INNER AREA] floated up into my vision, and the slow tempo of the town's BGM started playing. Unlike the music led by string instruments in the town of the first floor, the main theme here was played with a sorrowful oboe tone. The NPCs passing by also had subtle changes in the design of their garments, giving a 『So this is a new floor』 feel.

After walking about ten meters from the gate, I started looking at my surroundings. I couldn't see any green cursor which indicated players at all, but that was only natural. That was because the guardian of the stairs to the second floor, the first floor labyrinth's boss monster «Illfang the Kobold Lord» was just defeated forty minutes previously, and every members of the boss-capturing party aside from me had returned to the base.

In other words, on this vast second floor, the only existing player was just me —— the «Former  $\beta$  tester» and now the «Beater», Kirito.

Although that was the case, this situation wouldn't continue for much longer. That was because exactly two hours after the floor boss' annihilation, the «Transfer Gate» at the center of the main town of the next floor (which was this Urbus) would be automatically [Activated],

connecting it to the main town on the lower floors. At that time, the waiting players would spill over from the gate like a flood.

Conversely, if I wished to, I could spend the remaining hour and twenty minutes monopolizing this town — as I could clear a few [Slaughter] quests, which I normally had to compete with other players for the [POP], two or three times. It was a very attractive idea to a solo player who ultimately advocated self-interest, however, I didn't have enough courage to seriously anger the several hundreds..... or possibly thousands of people who were eagerly awaiting the activation of the gate.

Therefore, I started jogging along Urbus' main street which went straight towards the north, ascended the wide stairs before arriving at the town square, and finally started walking toward the large gate set up in the center.

It was called a gate, but it was actually just an arch made of neatly stacked up stones. Without a door nor any bars, there was nothing to block the view of its other side. However, upon getting closer, I noticed a faint distortion of the empty space in the middle of the arch, as if seeing through a thin film of water.

As I looked around at the surroundings, confirming an escape route, my right hand stretched slowly towards the swaying transparent veil. The fingertip, which was wrapped by a black leather glove, touched the surface of the water, which spread vertically — at that moment,

*Pa*, a dazzling blue light overflowed, and shot into my eyes.

The pulsing light spread in circles within the five-meters-wide arch. Once it had filled the entire space, it would be the opening of the Transfer Gate, the so-called «Town Opening». However, I turned

around without watching this majestic phenomenon. As asserted beforehand, I started a fierce dash to a building, which looked like a church, to the east of the square. After jumping into the entrance and ascending the stairs inside, I put my back at the side of the window on the third floor, and looked down upon the square.

Just then, the inside of the gate shone brightly, and the NPC orchestra stationed at the corner of the square started playing a loud «Opening Fanfare».

After a moment, a rapid stream of numerous players spilled out from the blue light of the gate.

Some people stood inside the square while looking around. Others ran off with a leather map from the information dealer in one hand. And —— there were people who raised their fists and shouting “I’m on the second floor————!!”

During the  $\beta$  Test, there was a total of nine «Town Openings», the scene during those times, of course, was the lines of the raid party members who had defeated the previous floor’s boss being bathed in the generous applause and admiration from the players from the lower floors. However, this time the only person who was the «Opener» had already escaped, so the event didn’t occur. There was a group of people who were restlessly looking for me, but unfortunately, they wouldn’t be able to find my name there.

Why? Several dozen minutes earlier, after defeating the boss, I had made an announcement in front of more than forty raid members that I, «Kirito», wasn’t just a mere  $\beta$  Tester. That, I had reached the highest level among the thousand testers, and had accumulated the most knowledge of the game. And that, I was a «Beater». I didn’t want to act so nasty, but it was partly a reaction to avert the hostility from



the new players to the former testers; and as a result, currently, my infamy had spread among the highest leveled players at an ultra-high-speed. If I went out of my hiding place, far from receiving congratulatory remarks, it wouldn't be strange to hear boos and jeers. Then, I wasn't confident that I would be able to remain calm like a willow in the wind in that situation.

Therefore, I would have to continue hiding on the third floor of the church until the commotion in the square died down. —However,

“.....Huh?”

I murmured quietly after seeing an unusual event at the square down below.

A female player who had just warped out of the Transfer Gate did not stop, but continued dashing towards the western side of the town. If it was just that, it could be seen as hurrying to the weapon shop or the quest starter NPC, but the problem was the two men who came out of the gate right after her. They took a moment to look around, and once they had spotted the girl, they started rushing toward the same direction. From the look of it, it was «Two guys chasing a girl».

Normally I wouldn't poke my head out and get involved, as this place was within the effective area of the Anti-Criminal Code, but since the one being chased was my acquaintance, the story had changed. Because the one with the golden-brown curly hair and plain leather equipment was the information dealer, «Argo the Rat», there was no mistaking it.

'Selling every information that could be sold', there certainly were people who hated this motto of The Rat, but I couldn't be calmly chasing after them in middle of town in this appearance. After hesitating for a moment, I placed my feet on the frame of the church's

window and jumped down onto the roof just below. I quickly dashed with my agility-focused parameter before the players at the square could notice me, and jumped to the roof of the nearby building. I kept going without dropping down to the ground, aiming to the direction Argo and the two guys went. It was possible to do so due to the consistent height of the buildings in Urbus.

I waved my right hand's finger while I was running and called out the main window. After clicking «Tracking» from the skill tab, I selected «Pursuit» on the floated up sub-menu. When I entered the name [Argo] into the input window, pale green illuminated footprints appeared on the road stretching to the right on my lower right vision.

«Pursuit» was a higher skill that could be learned after the proficiency of «Tracking» had increased, this skill which was normally used to raise effectiveness while hunting monsters could also be used to pursue a player whose name is known. However, as my proficiency was still low, the footprints that could be seen were from a minute ago. I hastily chased after the disappearing lines of small shoe soles.

Argo's focus was on speed (AGI), so for her to be unable to shake off the chasing two guys, they must not be ordinary players. Although I didn't see them among the boss raid, their levels should be top-class. In addition, the footprints that went straight along the road toward the west, had exit to the outside through the city gate which was dug out of the outer rim of the crater. These western plains of Urbus was a dangerous map with large buffalo type monsters roaming about. The situation was getting worse. I bit my lips and rushed into the virtual savanna without stopping my feet.

The wasteland beyond this savanna was still quite risky for my current level to enter alone. But fortunately, the footprints engraved on the thicket were getting more vivid (in other words, Argo had already

stopped running), from inside the valley between two small rocky mountains, a familiar voice could be heard.

“.....imes I’ll still be saying the same-daro! Just this information, no matter how much you offer, I won’t sell it-da!”

That coquettish nasal covering the end of the sentence was obviously Argo’s voice, but it had thirty percent more intimidating than usual. It was then followed by a sharp voice of a man.

“You aren’t going to keep it to yourself, but also don’t want to share it to the public. Doesn’t that mean you want to jack up the price-gozaru?”

———*Gozaru?* I frowned as I stopped my feet before climbing up the nearby cliff. In SAO, by using brain and stubbornness, there were many ways to get through the terrain which looked impossible to trespass at first glance. My ambition was, one day, I want to try climbing the outer wall of this floating castle to reach the next floor. But at the moment, the reason I was climbing this mountain to get into their blind spot wasn’t for challenge, but for my own safety.

After climbing up for about five meters and reaching a flat, narrow surface, I continued to crawl forward. The general source of the quarrel was right below at that moment.

“It’s not a problem about price-yo! Didn’t I tell you I don’t want to be blamed after I sold the information-da!!”

The voice of the second man then retorted Argo’s words,

“Why would we blame you!? No matter what price you ask, we’d still be saying gratitudes-gozaru!! So just sell us the information about the quest hidden on this floor —— the acquisition quest for the «Extra Skill» already!!”

.....Huh?

I completely stopped the breath I was suppressing. Those extra skills that wouldn't appear in the skill tree unless some special conditions were met, the so-called «Hidden Skills». The only one I discovered during the  $\beta$  period was «Meditation», a mental concentration skill (the pose looked like so) that increased the rate of HP recovery and reduced the remaining time of negative statuses. However, due to its low efficiency and lame pose, not many players took it. The other was the «Katana» extra skill, which was used by the Kobold Lord and samurai type monsters on the tenth floor, but I still didn't know its prerequisites.

In any case, I was certain that the topic between Argo and the two mysterious gozaru guys wasn't the «Meditation» skill, as the NPC giving this skill was on the sixth floor. That meant, there was a flag quest to unlock an extra skill that I still didn't know of (also equaled to all former  $\beta$  testers not knowing about it) on this second floor, and these gozaru guys were trying to make Argo sell the information — something like that?

Once I had reached that conclusion, the volume of the guys' voice increased.

“Today, we will absolutely pull it off for sure-gozaru!”

“We'll certainly do anything necessary to complete that extra skill-gozaru!”

“You guys just won't understand-na—! No matter what you say, I won't sell that information-goza..... oops, I won't sell it-dayo!!”

*Piri*— the voltage of the tension in the air seemed to have increased a step higher — the moment I thought so, I stood up on

the stone ledge and jumped to the ground five meters below. I landed in the middle between Argo and the two guys. In order to receive no damage for jumping from that height while still lacking in the agility parameter, I bent my knees and took a defensive posture to absorb the impact damage before quickly standing up.

“——Who are you-gozaru!?”

“Spy from another clan!?”

Just when I saw the shape of the gozaru guys, who were shouting at the same time, a corner of my memories was intensely stimulated. Their entire body were in dark grey cloth armor. It seemed they wore light chain mails on their upper bodies. The weapons on their back were small sized scimitars. On their heads were bandana caps and the pirate masks of the same grey color. Overall looking, it was the so-called «Ninja» appearance, which was originality and ingenuity reproduced.

“Hmm, eeh..... you guys are probably, Fu, Fuu.....Food, no, Fooga, but that also doesn’t sound right.....”

“It’s Fūma-gozaru!!”

“We are Kotarou and Isuke from the guild «Fūmaningun»-gozaru!!”

“Oh, that’s it!”

I snapped my right fingers in satisfaction as they had helped supplementing my memory. These two were the members of the ridiculously fastest ninja guild which was feared during the β test period. I should make a note about what was feared first. Every member were just like Argo and focused their parameter on agility, they would open the battle as the front row and used their AGI wall to

confuse the enemy. When it became dangerous, they would use their dashing power to flee, forcing the monster to target nearby parties instead. No matter how I thought about them, they were clearly a group of evil shinobi.

But I didn't know these guys were still going along the ninja path even after SAO official service turned into a death game, which by itself (so far), I had no complaints. However, two vs one, chasing Argo, a female player, and forcefully getting information from her, was a different story.

I made a gesture for Argo, who was behind me, to step back, and moved my finger to the grip of my beloved sword «Anneal Blade +6» hung on my back, as I said,

“As a secret agent of the government, I can't overlook this misdeed of the Fūma ninja...”

At that moment——

Under the fake ninja cowls, eyes of Kotarou-shi and Isuke-shi shone brightly together.

““You bastard, are you from Iga!?””

“Hah!?”

Apparently, the speech which I thought was appropriate to the mood seemed to have pressed their important switch. Their right hands started to reach, in perfect synchronization, for the ninja katanas on their back (which were actually the small sized scimitars).

*No way —— are they really unsheathing? But here is the «Outside» with no Anti-Criminal Code, where Players can attack other players and HP would decrease for real. At the same time, the color cursor of the*



*attacking side would turn orange, indicating a «Criminal» status, preventing them from entering towns. Even if they were ninja, they wouldn't be able to deceive the eyes of the «Cardinal System» controlling this world.*

*Should I say I'm not Iga but Koga? But would that help avoiding the problem?* As I was seriously pondering these ridiculous thoughts——

The solution to the situation came from an unexpected direction.

A while ago, in order to listen to the conversation between Argo and these ninja, I didn't stop at the entrance of this small valley but instead struggled to climb up the cliff. The reason was, this place wasn't in the middle of the town but a field. If one were to stand still in one place, sooner or later, one thing would surely happen.

As I slowly stepped backward, I said in a low voice,

"Behind you."

""Do you think we will fall for that trick-gozaru!?""

"There's no trick, just look behind you."

Something within my voice seemed to have moved the deep skepticism of the ninja. Kotarou and Isuke, who turned their faces around, made a slight jump at the same time. That was because in front of their eyes and noses, a new intruding person —— no, an intruding cow was standing tall. Its formal name was «Trembling Ox». The height to its shoulders would be about two and a half meters, it was a huge cow type monster, specialty of the second floor. While its toughness and attack power were just as expected from its appearance, what was troublesome was actually its terribly long targeting range and duration, which made it very hard to switch targets mid-fight. Since I had already

retreated to the ledge, there was no doubt that its target would be none other than those guys.

“Bumoo<sub>oo</sub>————!!”

The cow howled,

““Go.....gozaruuuuu!!””

Which followed by the screams of the ninja. Right after that, the two bodies in ninja outfits started running at an amazing speed in the direction of the town. The cow also chased after them with an agility that did not match its huge body. It was only five seconds before the earth's tremor and the screams disappeared into the horizon. From the look of it, the chase would continue until Kotarou and Isuke entered Urbus.

I, who had somehow avoided the outburst of a big battle against those super ninja, let out my breath while looking over my appearance. Up until an hour ago, I have been dressed in a very plain dark grey leather coat over a cotton shirt and black leather pants. But the unique equipment I obtained as a drop from the Kobold Lord, the boss of the first floor, the «Coat of Midnight» which I equipped on the spot, along with my eyes and hair color, had made my whole body look pitch black. I think it was valid that I was given the title «Dirty Beater», but at the same time, I somehow looked ninja-like as well. *From now on, it would be unbearable if the “Kirito is from Iga.” rumour is spread out, should I at least change the inner color?* — was what I thought.

Again, an unexpected event occurred.

Two small arms stretching from behind embraced me tightly. I could feel a soft and warm sense of touch on my back, along with a faint whisper,

“.....You’re pretty cool-yo, Kiri-bou.”

That voice was, of course, from Argo who was staying silent until this moment. However, the tone of her voice was subtly different from the «Rat»’s usual slightly hateful tone——

“But something like that, isn’t it breaking the first rule of Onee-san, the information dealer?”

*.....O-Onee-san? .....The rules of the information dealer?*

Those words provoked my curiosity, but the situation wasn’t something to which I, a second-year middle school gamer who had zero intercommunication skill until a month ago, could make a correct reaction. I desperately thought while I was freezing, and somehow managed to push the words out of my mouth,

“.....You owe me one anyway. I’ll be troubled until you tell me the reason behind your whiskers.”

On the face of the information dealer, Argo the «Rat», there were three lines of whiskers on each cheeks clearly drawn in black makeup. While those were the source of her Rat nickname, no one knew the reason behind why she drew them. And a terrible price tag of hundred thousands of col was attached to that information.

However, in the boss battle earlier, I took a «Beater» label to isolate myself from most of the former β testers, single-handedly taking the hostility from the new players off the former testers including Argo. In order to express her gratitude, Argo sent a message saying that I could «Get any single information for free», to which I replied «Tell me the reason for your whiskers».

To my words that I used as a joke to divert the situation, Argo pressed her face harder on my back as she whispered,

“.....Okay-yo, I’ll tell you-ru. But you need to wait a bit while I take off the makeup-ra.....”

*Eh?*

*Makeup..... does it mean taking those whiskers off? Does she intend to show me the face without makeup which no one had seen before? Does it have some deep implication?*

As my mental burden had increased to the crisis level, Argo exclaimed before she separated her body from me,

“.....Thinking again, I’ll change the information I’m telling! I’ll tell you about the skill hidden on this floor!!”

Argo took her face away from my back and turned in front of me, fortunately — it should be said like that, the whiskers still clearly remained on her cheeks. Just before her face left my back, ‘Kii-bou, you coward,’ I felt like I heard something like that, but it must be my imagination.

The «Rat», who had completely returned to her usual cheeky expression, said while folding her arms,

“I said I’ll tell you any information, so I’ll keep my promise-yo. But, Kii-bou also have to promise me one thing-shiro. Regardless of the outcome, don’t blame me-na!”

“.....Just now, you also said that to those ninja. But, what does that mean? For you to sell the information about an extra skill no one knows, wouldn’t they feel grateful instead of a grudge.....?”

To my question, the Rat showed a broad grin.

“To answer that, I’ll need to take yours as a payment-yo, Kii-bou.”

I leaked out a sigh as I nodded.

“Alright, I promise. I swear to the god..... no, to Cardinal-sama, that no matter what happens, I won’t hold a grudge against you.”

Whether the quest to acquire the extra skill could pose a risk to my life, I would have to judge it by myself. After hearing my oath, Argo gave a deep nod, ‘Now follow me-na,’ before turning around.

For the path we took from there, I felt it would be impossible to travel along without having bought a map beforehand, or having unlimited amounts of curiosity and endurance. We clambered the cliff of the table mountains standing close together on the vast —— the diameter shouldn’t be different from the first floor —— second floor, got into a small cave, and glided along the underground stream like it was a waterslide. We went through three battles, but the enemies weren’t difficult to me, who was leveling to the limit in order to defeat the first floor’s boss. The total time of our traveling was about thirty minutes.

Judging by our position on the whole map, we had arrived at a place near the summit of an exceptionally high towering mountain on the southern edge of the second floor. That place was a small clearing surrounded by cliffs, with a spring and a lone tree, also —— a small hut was built there.

“.....Is it here?”

Argo nodded at my unnecessary question before walking to the hut without hesitation. It seemed there was still no danger at this stage. She then forcefully opened the door.

There was an NPC inside, along with some furniture. It was a big middle-aged man with a well built body, his head was a slick skinhead,

and around his mouth was a thick beard. Over his head was a gold-colored [?] mark, indicating a quest starting point.

To my questioning gaze, Argo gave a nod again.

“This guy is the NPC giving the «Martial Arts» extra skill-yo. The information I can give is up until this point, accepting the quest or not, is Kii-bou’s decision-na.”

“.....M-Martial arts?”

It was a name that I had never heard during the  $\beta$  period. Argo said ‘This is service-yo,’ before adding supplementary information.

“«Martial Arts» is a skill that allows attacking with bare hands..... that is my speculation. It would be effective when the weapon is dropped, or its durability is at the limit-na.”

“O-Oh..... then it would be useful, unlike «Meditation». In that case..... I see, so that’s why you got stuck with those ninja at that place.....”

To Argo, who had ? written on her face, I also gave a ‘This is service,’ preface before giving an explanation.

“When speaking about ninja, normally you would imagine their weapons to be ninja katana and shuriken, but it was a bit different in game industry. Removing the head with a single bare hand attack. That has been the highest peak of ninja gaming style for a long time. So Kotarou and Isume would want that martial arts skill in order to make their ninja being «Complete». ——No, but... wait a sec. They didn’t know this place, then how did they know about the content of the martial arts skill and Argo knowing that information?”



“This is service of the service-yo. Just before the end of the  $\beta$  test, this information was revealed from an NPC on the seventh floor, regarding «The martial arts master on the second floor»-da. But I found it out myself long before that-na. Those ninja should have heard about it from the NPC on the seventh floor during the  $\beta$ -sa. Then, ever since this official server launched, they have kept asking me to sell the information about the extra skill on the second floor-da.”

“T.....Then, why don’t you just say 『I don’t know』 at that time? So they wouldn’t keep haunting you like that.....”

To my expected question, Argo made an awkward face as she said,

“.....That single 『I don’t know』 would destroy my pride as an information dealer.”

“.....So you chose to say 『I know but won’t sell it』, huh. Well..... it’s not like I can’t understand your feelings.....”

As I let out a sigh, I looked at the NPC setup in seated Zen meditation over a tatami-mat in the middle of the hut again.

“.....And, the reason you won’t sell is that the one who bought it would hold a grudge against you. But even saying so, don’t you already have a lot of enemies due to your business.....?”

“People usually forget the grudge from having bought information just after three days-sa! But this guy is different-da! Even if it turns out to be lame, you still have to keep it for your whole life-yo.....”

Watching small body of Argo trembling, I was lost for several seconds before giving a nod.

“I already knew I’d need to experience it by myself anyway. So it’s fine, I promise. No matter what the outcome, I won’t blame Argo.”

I then walked into the hut and stood in front of the old man who was sitting in Zen meditation. The old man in a rugged dōgi looked at me before saying,

“Thou wishes to be a disciple?”

“.....Yes.”

“Even though there be a long and steep road of training?”

“I’m expecting no less.”

After a short conversation, the [?] above the head of the old man changed into [!], the log in my vision indicated that the quest was accepted.

The old man, who became my master, moved outside the hut, toward a huge rock at the edge of the garden, which was surrounded by cliffs. Its height was about two meters, with a diameter of about one and a half meters, the master lightly knocked it and spoke while he was stroking his beard with his left hand,

“Thine training is just one. Splitting this rock using only thy palms. Once thou have succeeded, I shall teach thee all my knowledge.”

“.....W-Wait a bit.”

I tapped lightly on the huge rock, feeling a little nervous about this unexpected development. Since I was accustomed to the game, my sense of touch could tell the degree of the target’s durability. The hardness sensation that was transmitted to my hand was just one step short of «Immortal Object».

*Yeah, it’s impossible.*

I made that judgement and turned to the master to cancel the quest. However, before I could do so——

“Until this rock is split, leaving this mountain is forbidden. And thou hast to demonstrate it in front of me.”

The master who spitted out that line took strange objects from the bosom of his dōgi. On his left hand was a small pot. Then in his right hand was... a thick and elegant —— writing brush.

Bad feeling, a word made up in a 3D font floated over my head as the bad feeling pierced through my entire body.

*E-Err, I want to quit!*

Faster than I could say that, the right hand of the master flashed at an amazing speed. The tip of the brush plunged into the pot, a lot of ink then —— *Zubazubazuba—!* exploded on my face.

At that moment, this made me realize the secret behind Argo’s whiskers.

That girl had discovered the old man from the early stage of the β test and had accepted the quest. Upon accepting it, she was told to split the same rock, and at the same time, the graffiti was written on her face. Those —— three whiskers on each cheek.

“O-Owaaaa!?”

I raised a pathetic scream as I leaned back, and met with the gaze from Argo who was standing slightly further away. The girl showed deep sorrow and sympathy —— but at the same time, the expression on the Rat’s face looked as if she was trying to suppress the urge to burst into laughter.

I hurriedly used both of my hands to wipe my face after the release of the brush attack. However, the ink seemed to be a super-fast drying type, as I couldn't get anything on my hands. The master looked at me like that before nodding, and spitting out the shocking words that I was expecting,

“That «Mark» cannot be removed until thou hath split this rock and finished the training. I believe in thee, my disciple.”

Then, he returned to the hut and disappeared behind the door.

I stood still like that for about ten seconds, before gazing at Argo, who was still wearing a faint expression, and asked,

“I see..... Argo, you accepted this quest during the  $\beta$  period..... and gave up on clearing it, right? That's why you had to continue playing with that drawing on your face until the final day of the test. And as the result, it was the beginning of the «Rat» character, the information dealer, and for your business in the game's official version, you chose to continue using it with makeup..... is that correct?”

“Excellent! That's an excellent reasoning-yo!”

As she clapped her hands, the Rat continued,

“Isn't it great-na, Kii-bou! As a result, you gained the information of both «The reason behind the whiskers» and «The extra skill»-na! For celebration, I'll tell you one more thing-yo. This rock..... it's a demon-dayo!”

“.....I thought so...”

While I was bearing the urge to collapse to the ground, I bet on my small ray of hope as I asked Argo,

“.....Hey. Is the one on my face similar to your whiskers?”

“Hmm, it’s quite different-na—”

“Oh..... h-how does it look!?”

*Maybe it isn’t too noticeable? Or if it’s noticeable but is somewhat cool then I still have a choice of returning to my daily life while carrying this mark.* Argo spent three seconds looking at my face, who didn’t have enough courage to look at my own reflection from the spring, — before saying,

“Oh right-na. I can express it in one word..... it’s «Kiriemon»-na.”

At that point, seeming as she had reached her limit, Argo fell to the ground, both feet wriggled while she rolled her body about, “Nyahahaha! Nya—hahahahaha!!” she continued laughing uncontrollably. Eternally, eternally...

I secluded myself on the mountain for three days and nights, by then, I managed to split the rock after a tremendous amount of struggle. It was fortunate that I had promised not to hold a grudge against Argo.

(END)



ME-08

# *Rondo of the Transient Sword*

*first chapter*

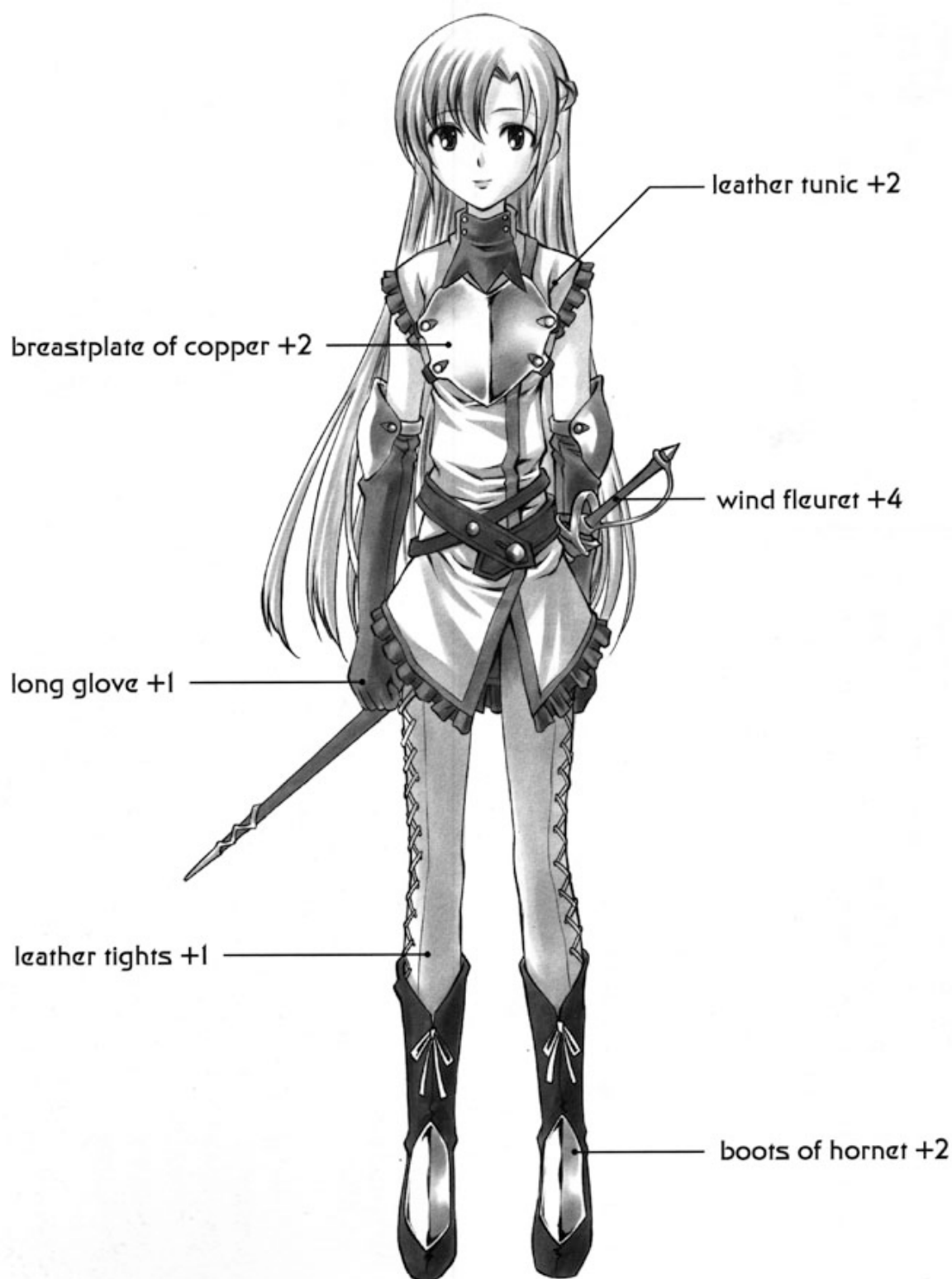
§ Aincrad 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor  
8<sup>th</sup> December 2022





# ソードアートオンライン マテリアルエディション

## 8



“Don’t.....Don’t, don’t joke with me!!”

As a screaming echo resounded in my path, I stopped moving my feet.

As my footsteps went \*su-su-su\*, and I attached myself to the wall of the NPC store behind me, I peeked at the situation in front of me. In front of the road was a wide square, and the commotion seemed to come from that direction.

“Re-Return!! Return it to the original state!! It was a plus 4..... change it back to the original!!”

Once again, the scream resounded. It looked as though it was trouble between two players. However, since we were inside the city’s «crime prevention boundary» — in the middle of Aincrad’s second floor’s main city «Urbus», both players could not actually harm each other, and there was no actual need for me to sneakily hide.

However, although I understood that in my head, I still had no choice but be thirty percent more cautious than usual. This was because, I, the level 13 one-handed sword user Kirito, am now Aincrad’s most despised solo player..... because I am «The first person known as a beater».

8th December 2022, Thursday, thirty two days after the Death Game SAO started.

Four days had quickly passed after the first floor's boss monster «Illfang the Kobold Lord» was defeated, and Urbus' transition gate had been activated.

And in those four days, the events that transpired in the first floor's boss room was spread and exaggerated to every player on the front lines. Knowledge like the Boss monster having Katana Skills not being included in the prior information. The Raid Party's leader, the «Knight» Diabel's death. As well as, the person who had reached floors higher than anyone else in the beta period, and obtained knowledge by defeating the boss there, the person who obtained the last attack bonus, the «Beater».

Fortunately — it could be said like this, although Kirito's name was widely spread, there should only be about forty players who knew what the avatar looked like. And in this SAO, irrelevant information like the names of people who had no relation to you would not show alongside the cursor. Therefore, even if I walk along the street and threw stones at them it would be alright. Well, if I threw stones at them the purple system barrier would probably temporarily block it.

Still, just to be on the safe side, the first floor's boss rare drop «Coat of Midnight» armor was unequipped, then tied a bandana on my forehead, making myself look unimportant. The reason for me to disguise myself in order to sneak into the main district city was not to see someone, but to get potions, food supplies and equipment maintenance that was necessary. About three kilometres southeast from here was the small village of «Marome», but its shops lacked variety in its wares, and furthermore there was no NPC blacksmith.

Due to those concerns, after my storage was first filled with loads of supplies, and I was walking down the street to complete my next errand, when the cry earlier reached my ears — this was the reason.

After I had confirmed that the jeer, “Don’t joke with me”, was not directed at me in any way, I gave off a sigh, relaxed my guard, and continued to walk towards my destination which also happened to be the source of commotion at the eastern square of Urbus.

In less than a minute, I reached a low, circular open space in the shape of a mortar. Although it would normally be crowded at 3 pm. or the so called «Raid time», but as it was only a few days after the opening of the district, there were probably many players from «Starting City» who were touring the place.

These people stopped at the corner of the square, while there was a stammering cry similar to the previous one could be heard on the opposite end. I approached the crowd and slipped through the gaps, stretching my neck in order to know the reason for the commotion.

“W-Wh-Why is it like this!! The property unreasonably decreased!!”

The bright red face of the man who was yelling looked vaguely familiar. It was not a tourist, but a player who should be on the front lines. Although he did not take part in the first floor’s raid battle, his level was reasonably high, based on the metal armor and three large horns on the helmet he wore.

Even more attention grabbing than that, the three horned man’s right hand tightly held an unsheathed one-handed straight sword. Within the boundary it was impossible to hurt someone with that blade, but brandishing it in a crowd was still a little disturbing. However, the man with blood rushing through his head continued to pound the tip of the sword into the stony ground and shouted,

“Why did I get four consecutive failures! Plus zero is unlikely, if it’s like this isn’t an NPC Blacksmith better! Take responsibility, you shitty blacksmith!!”

—— Being furiously scolded for a few minutes, despite giving a troubled expression, standing upright and remaining silent, was a plain brown leather apron wearing male player with a small stature.

A corner of the square was covered in a grey carpet, and placed above, on the narrow empty space was a chair and an anvil, and also a display shelf. That carpet was called a «Vendor’s Carpet», and was by no means cheap, as it was a necessary item to put on a streets of the city to make a simple player’s shop, essential for a novice merchant player. Of course, even without the carpet one could sell items, but the durability of the items left alone would decrease bit by bit, and you had to be wary of your wares being stolen. During the beta test period, the main streets of the main district city of each layer was bustling with merchants with various wares spread out on the carpets, but this was the first time I saw a carpet like this in the official service of SAO which had turned into a death game. No, even more than that, it was the first time I saw a blacksmith which was not an NPC but a player.

Based on this situation, I finally realized the reason for the commotion.

The sword that was being pounded into the ground while the man shouted had probably been «Enhanced» by the downcast blacksmith. In general, a player’s success rate was higher than that of an NPC at the same level, the related skill’s mastery had to be raised solidly, but this could only be seen to some degree based on the appearance of the objects. Production based skills required tools —— for a blacksmith, the «Blacksmith’s Hammer» series was needed —— which determined the equipment depending on the proficiency, but

the set requirements were very subtle. At this moment, atop the anvil in front of the depressed blacksmith a few meters from me was the «Iron Hammer» which had a higher skill requirement than this city's blacksmith NPC used the «Bronze Hammer».

In other words, that Blacksmith's success rate of enhancing should be higher than that of the NPC's, if it were otherwise his business would not be feasible, which was probably why the three horned man had entrusted him with his beloved sword.

—— However. Unfortunately, in SAO, unless the proficiency of skill was greater than the margin, the chances of enhancing the weapon was not a hundred percent. For example, if it had a thirty percent chance of failure, then the chances of two consecutive failures would be nine percent, and three consecutive failures would be three percent, and finally the tragic four consecutive failures would be possible at 0.8 percent probability.

The surprising thing in the world of online games was, this degree of numbers was assuredly an «Event that would occasionally occur». In a title I had played previously, items with a drop rate set to 0.01 percent that made you want to cry “That’s ridiculous” existed, but there were some really lucky players that actually got the item. I could not help but wish that this kind of devilish rarity does not appear in SAO, but surely it did exist, and I would then live in a dungeon seeking it.....

“.....What’s all this commotion about”

A sudden whisper came from my right, beside me, surprising me as I looked at the source.

Standing there was a fine slender body of a Rapier User, wearing a white leather tunic, pale green leather tights, with a silver colored



breast plate covering her chest. A player might mistake her for an elf which should not exist in Aincrad, although her clean and clear outfit's impression was ruined by an unfashionable gray wool cape from her head to her waist. Although this could not be helped. If she took off the cape, her glossy long chestnut hair, as well as that elf like appearance would be revealed, and the surrounding tourists would not leave her alone.

I took a very deep breath to calm my mind, one of the few people in this world.....in fact, there were only five people whom I could call «friend», and told her.

“It looks like, that three horned-kun's sword enhancing had.....”

As my mouth uttered those words, I remembered that I was disguised, similar to the girl beside me. My black coat was replaced with a rustic leather armor, and my head was covered by a yellow and blue striped bandanna, disguising my body thoroughly, and I did not want to think that it was easily seen through. If that is the case, then for now I should respond under the guise of a first meeting.

“.....ah, that, umm.....Have I seen you somewhere before?”

As soon as I had said that, from within the grey hood, two rapier sharp eyes attacked me with a horizontal penetrating look, directly piercing the area between my eyebrows.

“Instead of merely having met, I remember that we had a meal together and had even teamed up as a party.”

“.....ah, I remembered. Now I remembered. I even remembered that I lent you the bath at my place.”

\*Gash\*. The long boots —— named «Boots of Hornet» had its sharp heels embedded in my right foot and exploded, and some of my memories were lost.

I coughed \*ehem\* and cleared my throat, and pinched the edges of the rapier user's hood with my fingertips, and dragged her to a place a few meters away where there was no one around, before greeting her again.

“Y-Yo, Asuna. Long time no see.....not really, two days no see.”

“Good afternoon, Kirito-kun.”

In any case, I had told her when we met two days ago to drop the «-kun» honorific since this was an avatar. However, it seems the VR game beginner still did not give up using it for some reason. If that was the case, then I should use «Asuna-san» to address her, but when I attempted it she replied with “It’s too troublesome, so don’t bother”, it’s really hard to understand a girl’s heart.

In any case, I somehow managed to peacefully greet her, and waved to draw her attention toward the commotion at the blacksmith’s stall which was still in full swing, and gave a brief description.

“That commotion is apparently, the three horned helmet’s sword was given to the blacksmith to be enhanced, and it failed four times in a row, so it became plus zero, which made his blood rush to his head. Well.....I understand his feelings though.....four consecutive failures.”

Then, the person I knew to be Aincrad’s fastest and calmest (I wanted to add the most beautiful here, but omitted it to prevent conflict with the harassment code) player, the rapier user Asuna, shrugged and commented.

“If there is a possibility of failure, this person should be informed. That blacksmith-san, didn’t he already put up a list of the success rate for each type of weapon in his store. Furthermore, if the enhancing failed he only has to bear the costs of the item materials, and not the reforging fee.”

“Eh, really? That’s really honest of him.....”

The earnest blacksmith player continued to look down, and I remembered what he had muttered. Indeed, although forty percent of me sympathised with that three horned man, after hearing these words and numbers it dropped to twenty percent.

“.....Perhaps, at the first failure, his blood rushed to his head, and he asked for it to be enhanced once more. That hotness and sadness always comes together with gambling.....”

“That was a comment filled with feeling.”

“N-No, It’s merely a general assessment.”

Here, the seventh floor during the beta test period had a monster arena which gave all properties satisfaction, but if I talked openly about the experience it might not only **not** increase her impression of me, but decrease it instead, so based on this intuition, I looked away. Asuna gave a look of suspicion for a few seconds, fortunately she returned to the topic.

“.....Well, even I don’t think it is not pitiful, but there’s no need for such excitement.....as long as he saves money for the materials, he can try again, right.”

“Emm.....no, trying again is not possible.”

“Why is that?”

As Asuna tilted her head, I thumbed at my beloved sword «Anneal Blade +6» hanging on my back as I commented.

“That three horn’s sword is the same «Anneal Blade» as mine. Surely, he had also cleared the difficult quest on the first floor. Then, he brought it to a blacksmith NPC to enhance it to a +4. Well, up to that point success is really simple. However at +5 the probability of success would significantly drop, and the player blacksmith was requested to do it. However, the first attempt failed, so the number decreased to +3. Then he was asked to enhance it again to regain what was lost, but once again it failed and dropped to +2. That process repeated. After three, four times of failures, it finally became +0.....that is why.”

“.....But, from that point it can no longer decrease, so he can try for a +5 again.....”

As those words left her mouth, Asuna seemed to realize the point that I was trying to get across, as her hazel eyes deep within the hood widened.

“I see..... «Maximum attempts at enhancing» huh. The upper limit of Anneal Blade, should be.....”

“Eight times. In other words, four successes and four failures would use it up. So that sword can no longer be enhanced any more.”

So —— This is SAO, where the weapon enhancing system was terrible.

In this world, the number of times an equipment could be enhanced, «Maximum attempts at enhancing» property has been set. This was not «Maximum possible value of enhancing». That value determined how many times you could attempt enhancing it. For example, my initial equipment «Small Sword» had a limit of one, so if

we attempted to enhance it and failed, that sword could never be a +1 after that.

What was worse was, the success rate of enhancing, could be manipulated to some extent by the owner's efforts. Of course, that includes finding a skilled blacksmith (ultimately one could master their own forging skills and do it themselves, but this was unrealistic at the present time), and if the necessary material items needed for enhancing gathered were of extravagant and of high quality and quantity, this would further increase the chances of success.

Typically, blacksmith players would set the success rate of enhancing to around seventy percent for their requested fee. If the requester wanted more, they would have to pay an additional fee for a larger quantity of items, or hunt the items themselves.

Therefore, if there was a point to blame the three-horned man, it would be his hotheadedness in continuing to request enhancing the failed items. If he had taken some time to calm down with a deep breath after the first failure, he should have paid more or come back later. That way, the valuable Anneal Blade would have avoided the tragedy of becoming +0 while using up all the attempts.

".....That's right. Well..... Indeed, I understood a little bit of that frantic feeling. Just a little."

I nodded as I agreed with Asuna's comment, and gave a moment of silence for that pitiful sword. The voice of the man who was still continuing to yell as usual was interrupted. It seems two of his friends had apparently rushed in. They each placed a hand on his shoulders, and tried hard to calm him down.

".....There, there, It'll be fine, Ryufior. I'll help you do the Anneal Blade quest again today."

“If we can work hard for it for a week, let’s aim for a +8 this time.”

*.....Oh, now it takes a week for three people to do it. Fortunately I did it early.*

So, with this realistic thought,

*.....You, cherish those friends of yours. And next time, don’t gamble at enhancing recklessly.*

I looked at them with an emotional feeling, the three horned renamed to Ryufior-shi also regained his composure, and left the square as he walked away with slumped shoulders.

Behind him, the blacksmith who had endured the scolding quietly all this while timidly said something.

“That.....I’m really, really sorry for that. Next time, I will really, really try my best.....ah, again, you can ask me to do it again although you might hate me.....”

Ryufior, who was walking, stopped and turned to face the blacksmith, and said in a suddenly changed voice.

“.....It’s not your fault.....I said various things aloud, that was bad of me.”

“No..... that is also within my job scope.....”

With his hands clasped in front of his leather apron, the blacksmith lowered his head, he looked as though he was very youthful, in his teens. With thin, drooping eyes coupled with casual hair that was separated down the middle, like that, he gave off a legitimate «Production Character» impression. If he had a smaller and stouter build, he would look like a member of the «Dwarf» race.....No, since he has no beard it would probably be a «Gnome».



While I thought about this and looked at their interaction, the blacksmith stepped forward and bowed deeply again, and said.

“Um, although I don’t think it is a good apology.....that, +0 end Anneal blade which was my fault, if it’s alright with you, perhaps you could let me buy it for eight thousand col.....”

\*Zuwa\*..... the surrounding onlookers caused a stir, and from my throat “ooh” leaked out.

At the current market rate, the obtainable through quest reward only clean Anneal Blade +0 is worth sixteen thousand col. Eight thousand col was half that much, and although Ryufior’s blade had the same stats, the number of attempts had been exhausted and it was now an «End Product». It was now worth less than half the market value, perhaps about four thousand col. It was an exceptional offer for an apology.

Ryufi-shi and his two friends were stunned and looked at each other, then all three nodded at the same time.

After the series of events ended, the three people, along with the onlookers, dispersed from the square, kan, kan, the rhythmic sound of a hammer began to start. The stall’s dwarf..... I mean, blacksmith, began forging something on the anvil.

Asuna and I sat down on a bench on the opposite side of the circular square, vaguely listening to that sound.

Originally, I wasn’t planning to stay so long in this square, I would have quickly finished my errands by now and escape from Urbus. There were two reasons my plans had changed. Because I encountered one of the few people in Aincrad’s who did not call me a «Filthy

Beater», allowing me to practice the use of the Japanese language. The other —— was my original errand, which was, to enhance the Anneal Blade +6 that was on my back.

I overheard yesterday, while I was in Marome Village, that a reasonably skilled blacksmith player had appeared in Urbus' eastern square. I thought, that it was a good time to challenge +7, so I had carried the material items needed for enhancing it, then disguised myself and came back to Urbus, but this unexpected event had occurred first.

Actually, I could stand up from the bench and walked up to the blacksmith and say "Excuse me, I would like to enhance something," right now. As it was my first meeting with the Dwa.....no, young man, he certainly wouldn't say "I will not forge a beater's sword with my hammer."

However, earlier events had somewhat put pressure on me. The same Anneal Blade, had a set success rate of seventy percent, but +4 became +0. Statistically, it was possible, but it was no doubt a first class tragedy. If the same thing happened to me, I wouldn't go on a rampage, but would probably not leave my room for three days.

If I requested for enhancement in this mental state, how to put it..... It was rude towards Ryufior-shi's declining fortunes, and it felt like my sword would probably fail and become a +5. Then, I will go "Awawawawa" and challenge it again without any additional material, so it would fail once again and become +4. Naturally, there was no logical proof to that reasoning, «Net Game's Enhancement Gamble» could not be predicted by logic.....

".....So?"

I gazed blankly at the sudden voice next to me.

“Huh? What?”

“.....Don't 'what' at me. Weren't you the one who asked me to sit here?”

Asuna glared at me.

“Eh, ah, tha-that's true. Sorry, I was thinking about something.....”

“Thinking about something..... Kirito-kun, you came for that blacksmith's enhancement, didn't you?”

“Eh, ho-how did you know?”

As I was startled backwards, the rapier user gave an amazed look and said.

“When we met yesterday at Marome, you said you were going to the east of the rocky mountain area to hunt «Red Spotted Beetle». If so, you must have decided to collect material to enhance your one handed sword.”

“O.....Oh.”

I unintentionally gave out that sound.

“.....What is with that reaction?”

“It's nothing.....it just doesn't seem like the words of a person who did not even know where the party member's name was displayed just four days ago.....ah, it-it isn't irony. I was just impressed.”

“.....”

My sincere words probably made her understand, as Asuna's facial expression subtly softened somewhat.

“It's because I've been learning various things lately.”

She murmured. I was happy for some reason, and I nodded continuously as I talked.

“I see, um, that’s a good thing. In the MMO world, without knowledge the results would be very different. If you want to know anything don’t hesitate to ask, because I am a former tester, I know everything up to the tenth floor, from the product’s lineup to the mob’s call.....”

As I was carried away and talked up to this point, I realized that I committed a large mistake.

As I had said, I was a former tester, and at the same time, currently among the «Amassing and hoarding vast knowledge for their self interest, an evil Beater». On the first floor’s boss raid battle, starting with the knight Diabel’s friends, the high levelled players who hated and detested me were not few. Although I had disguised myself with leather armor and a bandanna, anyone who looked closely at my face would recognize me as Kirito, and the person talking and sitting on the same bench as me was Asuna, which would condemn her as a beater’s friend. Chatting so unconcernedly in this busy place, was too careless of me.....

“Ah.....So-Sorry. I have something urgent to do, I just remembered.”

As I tried to stand up with that lame excuse, my shoulders ——

The rapier user suddenly used the tip of her supple index finger to closely control me, and in a very small volume whispered to me.

“.....You bear all the resentment and hate against all former testers by yourself, I think that’s too excessive for you..... but because that is your decision, I did not say anything. But, you should respect my

choice too. I don't care what other people think. I'll be your acqua.....friend then even if you don't like the appearance, I would not let you have said anything from the start anyway."

".....I lost. Everything.... had been predicted, huh."

Muttering, I lowered myself onto the bench once more.

My motive for becoming a beater in the first floor's boss room, and the reason for my attempt to escape a few seconds ago, had been guessed with zero percent error, making me emit a \*gu\* sound. Giving up, I raised my hands in surrender. Asuna gave a small smile from deep within the hood, and said.

"If you are Aincrad's pro, I am a girls school bred pro at psychological warfare. I can read you as easy as pie based on your avatar's expression."

"Th.....That is really easy to overlook....."

"Therefore, I think it's about time you taught me, the reason why you are hesitant to enhance your weapon. Actually, I came here today to ask that blacksmith-san to enhance my sword too."

"Eh....."

At her unexpected words, I gazed at the weapon which was suspended at Asuna's waist. Kept in an ivory sheath, the name of the rapier with the dark green guard was «Wind Fleuret». When we formed a party for the first floor's boss raid, she replaced her equipment, so her initial sword was replaced by this monster drop. It was actually a pretty rare item, if it was properly enhanced it had the potential to be used all the way to the third floor.

"That, should be +4 only?"

Asuna nodded at my question.

“You brought your own enhancement material? What type did you bring?”

“Let’s see.....four «plank of steel», twelve «Needle of Wind Wasp»”

“Heh, you worked hard..... but.....”

I mentally calculated the success rate, and groaned.

“Um, with this the success rate to get a +5 is around eighty percent.”

“Is the risk not low enough?”

“Well, normally it would be so..... but after that show just now.....”

I turned to glance at the opposite end of the square, where, rhythmically hammering away, was the dwarf.....-like blacksmith player. Asuna turned to look as well, then gave a light shrug.

“The probability of a thrown coin landing on any face, regardless of any previous outcome, is always fifty percent. The person just now tried and had a few failures in a row, and our attempts at enhancing our weapons should be unrelated, right?”

“That.....should be true.....”

As I mumbled trying to enunciate a bad word that rolled around in my mouth, I gave it some thought. The rapier user Asuna is a person who used science and logic, while I was trying to convince her about “a gamble flow”. Even for me, using my left brain’s feeling of a «Bad Flow» wasn’t a basis for an argument.

On the other hand, my right brain felt something. Whether it was my Anneal Blade or Asuna’s Wind Fleuret, if we asked the blacksmith



to enhance it here and now, even if we used materials to boost its probability of success, it would fail. Ignoring my intuition was not good, this was my personal rule, based on my experience of playing net games for many years.

“Hey, Asuna”

I turned my body to the right to face Asuna directly, using my most serious voice and expression and said.

“Wha.....What is it?”

“You’d like the success rate at ninety percent compared to eighty, right?”

“.....That is true, of course”

“Compared to ninety percent, you’d like ninety five percent, right?”

“.....That is true too, of course”

“Then, I think compromising is not good. Since there is a way to collect the material anyway, why not do our best to aim for ninety five percent.”

“.....”

The rapier user looked at me for a few seconds with a suspicious expression, then, as if she suddenly felt something, she slowly blinked with her long eyelashes, before saying.

“Yes, It is true that I don’t like compromises. But I don’t like people who move their mouths but not their hands just as much.”

“.....Eh?”

“Since you can talk up to this point, you must help me pursue perfection, Kirito-kun. Incidentally, the Wind Wasp’s needle’s drop rate is eight percent.”

“.....Eh?”

“Once you have decided, let’s go to the hunting grounds. With two people, we should be able to hunt a hundred or so before dark.”

“.....Eh?”

While I gave off a dull face, Asuna slapped me on my shoulders, and stood up, before raising her eyebrows a little as she delivered the final blow.

“And, if you want to hunt with me as a combination, please remove that flashy bandanna. I’m really sorry, but it does not suit you at all.”

(To be continued)

## Afterword

Hello Everyone, I am Kunori Fumio/Kawahara Reki. Thanks for buying this book.

Isn't this incomplete!!!

I think anyone who read till this point would probably say this. I'm really sorry for not finishing.....orz. This «Rondo of the transient sword first chapter» is, as its name suggests, the first chapter, and will continue through the raid of the second floor to its completion.

Originally, I had planned for this story to be serialized on my homepage on new year's eve, and while making a book for COMITIA98, I couldn't think of a story until the end, and only could use the familiar Aincrad to escape. For this reason, I would like to offer two kinds of apologies for those who bought this book. This book's "first chapter" is scheduled to be published on my personal home page at the end of this year. I am really sorry.

This story, «~Rondo» is the direct sequel to my web serialization «Aria in the Starless night» this summer. Although it is merely a concept, I'm still thinking of writing the events of Asuna and Kirito's adventure, but as I thought to this point, If I had to write floor by floor,

it would take a few years, no, tens of years to be able to finish writing it.....(Laughs). Before writing one must be prepared! But now that I've already started, thinking like that is useless, so I can only go for it. As long as everyone can endure it, I will definitely keep you company.



ME-09

# Monochrome Concerto

*first chapter*

§ Aincrad 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor  
14<sup>th</sup> December 2022



# ソードアートオンライン マテリアルエディション

## 9



**SWORD ART ONLINE : MATERIAL EDITION 9**



## Part 1

On the first floor of Aincrad, there was no theme, If we really had to say it, it would be «Everything is included». Grasslands, forests, the wilderness, the valley was rich in its variety of terrain. Outside of the main City, there were many small villages, the fantasy RPG had many exciting atmospheres to greet the players that arrived — but, under the conditions of a «Death Game», only a few people leisurely enjoyed this scenery.

Then came the second floor, which broke out of the fantasy kitchen sink and formed a theme. The entire floor was changed to a green grass covered layered mountains. The monsters that appeared were now animal based. Perhaps it was because the first floor was difficult, as the difficulty of the second floor did not increase, instead giving off a relaxed feeling, like that of a pasture. But a majority of players called it the «Cow's Floor». There should be no need to explain the reason for this.

And now — was the untainted, third floor.

As I climbed up the spiral staircase which linked the second floor's boss area to the third floor's main city, I talked to myself while clenching my right fist.

“In one sense, this can be considered where SAO really starts.....”

Although this was just a line to set my mood, a voice whispered in return.

“Really? Why would you say that?”

Right after this question was asked, I scratched my head, and answered.

“Well..... from the third floor on, true humanoid mobs would start to appear. The first floor’s Kobold and Taurus were only of the half human, «Demi-Human» class, capable of using simple sword skills, but its external appearance is that of a monster, right? However, from here on, there will be a lot of enemies whose external appearance is no different from a human’s. If not for the color cursor, it would be completely impossible to distinguish them. Of course, they are able to hold conversations like NPCs, and their sword skills are also at a very high level. In other words.....”

I turned my head, and looked over my shoulder to face the rapier user Asuna, and said.

“..... From this point on, is where the prologue of Sword Art Online ends. The man who locked us in here, Kayaba Akihito, had said in a SAO special edition magazine interview, ‘«Sword Art Online» is where swords and sword skills intertwine together, writing a melody of light and sound, a Concerto of life and death’.....”

“.....Oh.....”

Even though she was listening to this sentence which had made me excited a year ago, Asuna didn’t even look touched. She used her regular pace to climb the staircase, and gently shrugged, and said something I didn’t expect.

“..... Since that interview, Kayaba had already planned this crime.....”

“Ei.....aa, maaa, of course..... this should be the case.”

On a day a month and a week ago, in front of the ten thousand players forced to gather in the central plaza, Kayaba had said this,

“To create and watch this world is the only reason I have created the Nerve Gear and SAO. And now, everything has been realized.”

Supposing those words were true, even before Kayaba Akihito had planned SAO, before even outlining the Nerve Gear, he had planned this monstrous crime. Able to impress my young (more accurately, a year ago) heart, in the few interviews he gave, his words had two meanings. Facing me, who had just learnt that fact, Asuna said softly.

“A Concerto of.....life and death. Does this truly only refer to players crossing their swords and sword skills against humanoid monsters?”

“Eh..... What do you mean.....?”

I shrank my neck. Maintaining my posture of looking backward, as I climbed up the ‘stairs between the the labyrinth area and the upper floor’. Because the design of this stairs were mostly the same, including during the beta test, I have climbed up these stairs around ten times. Only the relief on the black walls were different, which, upon closer inspection, implied the theme and landscape of the next floor, but I was too busy focusing on Asuna’s body at the moment.

The rapier user’s expression became more serious, and spoke to herself in a quiet voice.

“Perhaps I’m overthinking it..... This Concerto, is not actually music created by a pair of musical instruments. If it is played in pairs, the ‘Duet’ is more appropriate.”

“Then..... the Concerto’s, real meaning is.....?”

“As time passed by the meaning changed little by little, but basically it is the music of an orchestra, or many instruments accompanying the lead, a lone musical instrument.....In other words, it isn't one on one, but one against many, or should I say it's the music from a small group against a large one.”

“One against.....many.....”

I repeated the phrase I was pondering quietly, considering saying, “If it's like this, then isn't it comparable to a player against a group mob?” — But, as I opened my mouth to say it, I closed it again.

In this world, a player against many, the scene of being in combat with, for example, ten or more monsters, was impossible. This is because, there was no destructive area of effect magic, and a ranged sword skill could only attack within the weapon's range, therefore, in SAO, being surrounded by monsters meant instant death.

Of course, the game design mirrored this fact, as most of the mobs were on their own, or at most two or three would appear at once. Unless they were intentionally brought together, or the player accidentally stepped on a trap, a situation where one player fought against many would never happen..... what's more, even if they did, they would be attempting to escape with all their might.

“.....If this is the case, a Concerto like battle would never occur in this world. If you want to insist on it, it would be limited to the boss battle..... but, that would be a boss battle, meant for a raid group.”

As Asuna looked at me who shrugged and gave a forced smile, she looked as though she wanted to say something, but did not open her mouth. After a beat, she broke out into a smile and nodded.

“Yes, maybe I’m overthinking it.....we shouldn’t raise this topic right, Kirito-kun?”

“Eh? What?”

“.....Nothing, it’s already over.”

After listening to this, my head which was still facing backwards, hit the top of the thick stone door.

“Ouch.....”

Making a noise which people wouldn’t think I was the type to make it, I waved my arms at the same time to prevent falling down due to a misstep, as I had climbed a stair that wasn’t there. However, I did not regain my balance, and at this moment, rather than falling forward and hitting Asuna, why not fall backward?

At that moment, as I tried to lean on the door which had been unknowingly opened, I cried “Waaaa” as I went out of the large door, and beautifully fell down on the moss covered rock floor on my butt. This became the untainted floor’s memorable first imprint.

Aincrad, Third Floor.

This floor’s designed theme was «Forest». However, unlike the first floor’s Horunka village’s surroundings, and the southern region of the second floor’s forest, the scale was completely different. This was because even the smallest tree had a trunk diameter of one meter and the shortest trees were thirty metres tall. Using large trees to describe them were inappropriate, as the ancient trees could be seen to stretch out to the skies without limits. The golden rays coming from between

the overlapping leaves and branches illuminated the land, looking like a land of fantasy.

“Woah.....!”

Beside me, enduring the pain in my tailbone, Asuna cheered in a happy tone and rushed out of the door. I turned eighty degrees while still on the ground, as my eyes followed her figure. Asuna stopped in a place not too far away, and spun round and round under the slender rays of the sun, looking as though she was extremely fond of the scenery of this forest that seemed to extend out forever.

“This is great.....Just seeing this scenery makes me feel as though the hard work of climbing up here is not wasted.”

The rapier user normally equipped with a hooded cape had her hood down, so the rays of the sun were reflected dazzlingly off her beautiful, glossy, long, smooth, thin, chestnut hair into my eyes. Her slim build, in addition to her cool beauty, made players think that she wasn't a player, but a fairy of the forest.

“.....It truly is not wasted.”

After quietly saying these words, I stood up. Taking off my leather coat, I lazily stretched. I have no idea whether it was an illusion or not, but the air was filled with a sweet scent. The essence of large numbers of plants.....perhaps this was the cause.

Glancing behind me, circled by the roots of a gigantic tree, was a stone structure. We had just climbed out of its black opening. The others raiders would probably come up here in about ten minutes.

“.....Next.....”



Although we were on the third floor —— our actions from here on have yet to be determined. Of course, on a new floor we would still do things we did in the previous floor, which was to go to the main city to shop for items, get quests, and fight to increase our level. However, before that, I had a matter to confirm.

After deciding that, I moved to Asuna's side, and since she was still enjoying the scenery, gave off an initial light cough to alert her to my presence, and opened my mouth.

“Hey, I'm sorry to disturb your mood,.....”

“.....? What?”

The rapier user gave me a rare smile, so I raised my right hand and extended my forefinger to guide her line of sight toward the north. Extending from the stone structure behind us was an ancient road, which had a Y junction in the middle of the path about twenty meters away.

“Going along the road to the right will quickly lead you to the main city. Going along the left is a forest that, after some time, will lead to this floor's first labyrinth.”

“.....Um”

“Generally speaking, we should head for the main city to activate the transition gate, but let's leave that task to Lynd's and Kibaou's group who are hot on our heels.”

“.....Um.”

“The reason is, I don't want to meet them, as well as I have a quest I must complete in the forest to the left. However, both of these are personal reasons.....”

At this point, the rapier user's smile gradually faded. Inversely, her pupils gave off a ray of dangerous light. From this point on, if I said the wrong thing, Asuna's mood would sour, and even though I could perceive this, I still couldn't work out a theory to avoid it.

".....So?"

At the urging of this grim voice, I continued while facing downward in fear and trepidation.

"...That... We probably need to resupply and maintain our weapons, if Asuna wants to aim for the main city, I think we can disband our party..... Of course, if you are willing to come with me to finish what I need to do in the forest, I don't.....mind....."

"Don't-wan-na, I didn't have the intention of not disbanding the party anyway. You and I are both solo players, right?"

"Y-Yes."

"However, the thing you just mentioned, should be «The one who finishes first gets an advantage» right? Then, I'll go with you, as I hate low efficiency. Of course, if you want to disband the party and throw me aside, monopolizing all the benefits for yourself, I can only agree with you."

"I-I wouldn't dare, I never thought of monopolizing, not even a little. In fact, more people would be more efficient."

"In that case let's hurry along. It won't matter if we resupply and maintain our equipment later."

"Yes, ok."

The rapier user turned, and made a patapata sound as she started to walk, I followed to catch up to her back, feeling in my heart a

mysterious «Barely passed» feeling . I didn't even understand the requirements to «Pass»

Really, If I knew this would happen, I would have had more interaction with the girls in my class..... as I thought until this point, I snorted in denial. If I had such an ability during middle school, I would not have snuck into SAO five seconds after the game's official launch. In other words, this kind of situation, walking together with a temperamental rapier user, would not occur, I reasoned.

—— Having said that, I suddenly had this thought.

Thinking back about the past month being imprisoned in this game, In order to survive.....that is, to continuously rush and strengthen myself, have I ever regretted being in this VRMMO called SAO?

Most people would regret it, not regretting it was an abnormal ability. However, no matter how I searched my past own feelings, although I easily found fear and homesickness, I couldn't find regret.

Perhaps I was an abnormal person, or perhaps I was in so grim a situation that there was no time for remorse. If the latter was the case, the cause of this state was without a doubt the valiant rapier user walking three meters in front of me. It was because this sword user always made a racket that I am able to feel regret, as all the other negative emotions were pushed to the back of my mind.....

—— No-no-no, even in my mind I wouldn't thank her.

Having determined this resolutely, I increased my pace to catch up to my party member, and walked by her side.

## Part 2

Based on my beta testing experience, after players defeated the floor boss, going up the stairs onto a new floor and into a new district, within the thirty minutes for activating the transition gate, the monster POP was controlled to a low value.

It was probably like this in order for the players who had come up to the new floor just after being worn out from fighting the boss to not be exterminated by small fry mobs, but unfortunately this grace was only limited to the nearby surroundings of the city.

Just after walking along the forest trail for five minutes, we had to increase our pace in order to keep up with our enemies' searching ability. I could feel the changes to the surrounding air. The happifying and beautiful fantasy forest, step by step changed into a cold and hostile «outsider» feeling.

“Asuna, the enemy spawning here has strength similar to those guys on the second floor labyrinth. Because a majority of them are animal and plant based monsters, they will not use sword skills.”

After listening to my words, the rapier user silently nodded.

“However, based on the mobs general prewritten battle movements, they will unceasingly bring us deeper into the forest. Once the monsters spot any mistakes we make, they will launch ambushes, and even if we defeat it successfully, we may end up lost.”

“However, as long as we look at the map, we should be able to find our way out, right?”

“About that.....”

I swung my right hand forward, and quickly opened the map window, hastily inputting commands to switch it to public viewing mode, and then showed it to Asuna.

“Ah.....The color is very faint.”

Exactly as she said, the majority of the map appeared like misty ash, and according to the general situation, the places which we have explored would emerge in a 3D view, however, because the map for this place was extremely faded, even if we were very attentive we could not see the path.

“This region is called the «Misty Forest», the map colour becomes faint in addition to the strong fog, which will really cause people to get lost. Therefore, even if we’re in the middle of battle you absolutely must not leave your party or the path. This point is very important.”

“Understood. ....Then you should quickly show me a demonstration.”

“Eh?”

“What, just look clearly. Right behind you.”

At the end of her words, I gingerly looked behind, and just a little off the forest’s stone path..... Lets just say a withered tree grew there. Its pale yellow trunk had a diameter of fifteen centimeters, and it was only two meters high, much smaller than the trees which surrounded it. However, situated at the side of the three trunk were two holes close together, emitting a light like that of eyes. To its left and right were claw like branches swaying constantly.

Although the dead tree and I only crossed eyes for a split second, its roots on its right side began emitting a creaking sound, as it left the floor, taking a step forward. It was followed by the roots on its left. As it moved forward swaying unstably, it suddenly changed into a sprint. A third hole opened beneath the other two, and from it a “Moroooooooo!” roar was issued.

The withered tree changed into the plant type mob «Treant Sapling», possessing many special abilities, one of which was, while embedded in the ground, a player’s enemy searching ability would not get a reaction from it. It looks like the Treant had walked next to me while I was lost in thought giving the explanation.

Must not be careless! I told myself, at the same time my right hand reached to the back and pulled out my «Anneal Blade+7», making a loud sound.

As the branches to the left and right were cut, and its opened mouth was drilled by Asuna’s «Wind Fleuret+5», the Treant gave a “Morooooo!” sorrowful cry as it turned into powder. The battle only lasted three minutes.

Asuna and I gently bumped our left fists to celebrate our victory, sheathing our swords at the same time. Although we were careful, the Treant’s «Changing the body’s front and back direction» skill was meant to confuse us, and we had moved five meters away from the path of the forest. At this degree it was still easy to go back to the path. In heavier mist, leaving ten meters from the path would be trouble.

While moving along the trail, Asuna said.

“I keep getting..... an extremely evil feeling”



“Eh?”

“Because, that ghost tree just now, it was a still growing sapling, right? Chopping it down makes me feel not environmentally friendly”

“This, like this, well, this is so.....but, I think if anyone who has seen the «Elder Treant» monster, will think “Must destroy it while it is in the sapling stage”.”

“.....There is no need to talk like that. One Kibaou is enough.”

As we were joking away, we returned to the path, and heaved a long sigh. The golden rays that came from the roof of our heads came down at a greatly changed angle, it looks like night was falling soon.

“.....Continue. What did we come to this area to do.....”

“To do.....I say, that. It’s what Kirito-kun said earlier, “I have a quest I must complete.”.”

“It’s that. That said, It was only possible for a quest..... the quest starting NPC is in a random place. Asuna, are you confident in your ears?”

As I said this, I calmly looked away, as if nothing happened in the past, and saw the rapier user cover her cherry red ears with her hands and retreating a step back for some reason..

“.....Kirito-kun, do you have an interest in that aspect? Do you have an ear fetish?”

“Ce-ce-certainly not! In this situation, I am obviously not talking about the shape, but the hearing ability.....”

“I’m just joking. Besides, it doesn’t matter how good our hearing is. We are not even listening to the sound using the vibration of the membranes, its just the stimulation of the brain.”

“.....I see, it’s like this. Then let’s look for it together. If we rely on our hearing ability it will be a lot easier.....”

I straightened my back, despite knowing that it made little sense, I still put my hands behind my ear, and Asuna imitated me, saying,

“Looking together is fine, but what kind of sound is it? Don’t tell me it’s the sound of leaves dropping.”

“Of course I won’t. It’s not a natural sound, but a metallic noise.....More specifically, the sound of swords colliding with each other.”

At these words, Asuna gave a dubious look, but quickly said “understood”.

Standing in the center of the path, Asuna and I put our backs together, using a total of four ears to launch an all around search. Generally speaking, the community would miss it, but because this was the virtual reality, there were various skills in existence to detect various noises in the surroundings. The chirping of the wind, the leaves rubbing together, an animal’s footsteps behind us, the call of the birds..... I took all these noises and filtered them out of my mind, looking for the stiff quality of a man made noise.....

“.....!”

Asuna and I who were leaning on each other, trembled at the same time. I faced right, while Asuna turned to the left, to look in the same direction.....the south-west direction. Although it was quite subtle, there were indeed sounds of sword skills coming from that direction.

“Let’s go.”

Asuna pulled on my coat as I walked a step forward.

“But, I thought we shouldn’t go into the forest?”

“No problems, as long as you accept the quest you can return to the road.”

“.....And if you don’t accept?”

“It’s really not a problem, camping equipments are already laid out! Let’s hurry!”

Advancing toward our target within the forest at a high speed, I heard a “Yaa.....!” reminiscing sound, but it was quickly covered by the footsteps behind me.

Leaving the stone path, I ignored the moss covering the earth surface which gave off a relaxing sensation to the soles of my feet. Avoiding the gigantic trees’ dry branches, we dashed towards the source of the noise. If we encountered a mob it would be very troublesome, so I took advantage of my mob searching ability to look for color cursors. Finding a Treant growing out of the ground was difficult, but fortunately I didn’t encounter one.

After five minutes, the steel sounds became louder, and accompanying the fencing sounds at the same time were yells. In the center of our view, two NPC cursors appeared, and then I saw the reflected light effect off a tree trunk.

Going around that tree would allow us to reach the battlefield we were aiming for —— at this time I stopped my feet, and stretched out my right hand to stop Asuna. I made a gesture with my index finger to

tell her to be quiet, then the two of us hid together behind a tree trunk, sneaking peeks past the edge of the tree, at the battlefield.

In a slightly larger clearing, two silhouettes were in a fierce battle.

One of them was a tall male with shining gold and green armor. In his right hand was a long sword, while his left held a round shield, and at a glance you would know that they were high grade goods. The hair on his head was a beautiful platinum, and his external appearance made one think of a handsome Scandinavian actor from Hollywood.

The other person, had armor which was in a contrast to the first, as it was purple and black. The somewhat curved saber and small kite shield used were both of a gloomy dark colour, but their quality was just as good as the first person's. The short dark purple hair, and dark skinned face appeared to possess a high level of good looks. Beautiful red lips and a slightly bulging bosom indicated that that this black swordsman was female.

“Haa!”

The platinum haired male gave a fierce roar, at the same time swinging down the sword in his right hand.

“Yaa!”

The purple haired female countered with her saber. \*Clang\* a crisp metallic sound resounded, and created a bright light that illuminated the dark forest.

“.....Are, are these really NPCs.....?”

Underneath me, Asuna did not dare to believe those words. I understood her feelings. Their bodies' movements and vivid

expressions completely did not look as though they were controlled by a system, like a soulless virtual body. However ——

“Look at their ears.”

“Ei.....Ah! Both of them .....sharp. This is.....”

“The male is a «Forest Elf», while the female is a «Dark Elf». One more thing, look at the top of their heads.”

At his words, Asuna’s line of sight was drawn slightly upward. She once again gave off an “ah” sound.

Both of the fiercely battling warriors had a «!» sign above their heads. It was the proof that they were the starting point of an NPC quest. Normally, if you get close to them and speak, the quest would start immediately. However ——

“Both of them have a quest, and they are both still fighting, what is the problem here?”

“To put it briefly, you can only accept one quest. —— I leave this important decision to you, Asuna.”

At my words, the rapier user’s line of sight left the Elves, as she raised her head to look at me.

“Decision.....?”

“Yup. The quest they give, is not a single nor consecutive type of quest. It is the first of a large scale mission-type quest. It will start from this floor until the ninth floor”

“Ninth.....”

Ninth Floor!? Asuna quickly covered her mouth before saying these words, but her hazel eyes were enlarged in surprise. Looking at

her like this, I became very happy, and added even more astonishing information.

“In addition to that, if you made a mistake you are not allowed to restart. Of course, you can’t take the opposite route either. The route chosen here, must be continued until the ninth floor.”

“I say.....you should have told me of this matter earlier.....”

The angry expression Asuna had, suddenly gave way to a suspicious one.

“.....Opposing routes? In other words, those two Elves.....”

“I see. Who to help, and who to fight. Black or white, which do you choose?”

Listening to the question I raised, for some reason Asuna stared at me.

“.....This, there’s no alternative option right? It’s fine in an ordinary game, but we are currently in SAO. It’s not like you can’t go along the route you went along as a beta tester. That .....I, have complete confidence in whatever your choice is.”

Uuu. It was my turn to fall silent. Asuna’s eyes became indifferent, and she used a resolute tone to assert.

“——The lady Dark Elf. Didn’t you?”

“Y-Yes, I do.....But, but not because she was a girl, but because she was dark skinned.”

——An excuse like that should not have worked, and I only saw Asuna standing still, her head was turned to a side.



“Maa, this is fine. I didn’t want to join the male to cut down the female one anyway. Let’s join the black elf and defeat the white one. Let’s go.”

After speaking these words very quickly, Asuna got ready to get out of her hiding spot, and I quickly held on to her hood.

“Wait, wait. There is another important thing.”

“Which is?”

“That is.... How to say, even if you chose to aid the black side, we can’t defeat the white Elf, regretfully.”

“Eh.....Eeeeh!?”

In order to keep the wide eyed Asuna calm, I rested my hand on her slender shoulders before continuing.

“I can see from their valiant equipment, the white Elf is a Forest Elf, the black Elf is a Dark Elf, and they are originally from the seventh floor, and are in fact the elite mob there. No matter what methods to ensure our safety while we fight, they are not opponents that people like us who just came to the third floor can handle.”

“Th-Then.....What should we do? After all.....If we die.....”

“Relax, even if we lose we don’t die. When our HP gauge is reduced to half, we can join her party and she will use powerful skills, that will be the time we can overpower the opponent. What we have to do is, don’t panic as we defend as much as possible, and wait for assistance. The greatest danger is if we panic and escape, as the other monsters would be drawn out and cause trouble.”

“.....I understand.”

“Good.”

I pat Asuna on her back, then removed my hand.

“Then, dash out when I count to three. The quest will start by itself once we are close, so you just need to stay beside me.”

The rapier user nodded as she walked to my side, and when I counted down starting from three, in my heart I gave a brief apology.

Actually, I had left out some information which I didn't tell Asuna. Which was, the one we were preparing to assist .....the Dark Elf lady named «Kizmer», in order to help us to suppress the Forest Elf, after using her forbidden skill, she would sacrifice herself to take down her enemy along with her. Even if we took the other path, which was to join the Forest Elf to fight the Dark Elf, the end result was the same. No matter which path we chose, these two Elves would die here, and will soon be followed by a long military campaign.....No, it was a story about to unfold.

“.....Two, One, Zero!”

As I finished counting down aloud, Asuna and I flew out to the open space. The two elves in battle both looked at us at the same time, and fiercely jumped back to put some distance between them. At the same time, the «!» sign on both of their heads turned into «?».

“What are you humans doing in this forest?” the Forest Elf said.

“Don't come here and disturb us! leave us immediately!” These words were said by miss Dark Elf.

Of course, we could also leave at this time. But then the quest would not begin. Asuna and I exchanged glances, then unsheathed our swords together — and pointed the tip at the shiny breastplate belonging to the Forest Elf.

The handsome face gradually grew fierce. The NPC's yellow cursor, began to flicker and was on the verge of becoming red.

"You're incredibly stupid..... you want to join the Dark Elves, so you want to become the rust on my blade?"

"Yes....."

"Yes, but the one to disappear is this DV guy!"

After saying out his resolute lines, in front of me, who did not know why he referred to me as DV, the Forest Elf's cursor changed. From light yellow —— it became a bright red. Woah real strong, and at this moment, a beautiful and ruthless smile emerged on his handsome face.

"All right, then I shall destroy you, human."

Shalaa! I concentrated to position my long sword, and at the same time told Asuna,

"That's good, focus on defence."

—— Although this was the case, we still needed to hold out for three minutes. I added in my heart, from the side of Asuna's face, I saw a certain expression, and the disturbing feeling vanished. Because this expression —— only the rapier user Asuna in a serious mode would come up with it, I found this out after having went adventuring with her a few times.

"That, defence..... focus....."

"I got it."

She whispered this, but her actions were the opposite, the rapier in the rapier user's right hand suddenly gave off a fierce ray of light.

Twenty minutes later

“H.....How is this possible.....”

Leaving this words, the Forest Elf fell with a \*pa\* on the floor, and as I continued to look at the situation before my eyes, I said the same thing.

“H.....How is this possible.....”

No matter how many times we checked the enemy's HP gauge, it was truly at zero. Opposite him, Asuna and I had both lost half our HP, entering the yellow zone. During the beta period, a four man party including me fought the Forest Elf, but we were defeated in two minutes.

“.....What, as long as you put your mind to it, you can do it!”

At these words I turned my head, and an extremely tired looking yet straight backed and hands aloft Asuna's eyes finally met mine. Then our eyes shifted about a meter to the left. Standing there and holding a black saber, was the Black Elf looking at the floor.

Miss, isn't it time you died, this unclear line came to my mind. Looking at the Dark Elf knight Kizmer, I saw her slowly raise her head, looking at me.

Her agate eyes was full of surprise and doubt, the expression in her eyes seemed as though it was asking me, “What am I supposed to do now?”. However, this should be my imagination.

I hope that it is my imagination.

(To be continued)

## Afterword

Good day everyone, I am Kunori Fumio. Thanks for reading «Material Edition 9».

This doujinshi contains the first chapter of «Sword Art Online Third floor raid». However.....in January 2012, the first part of «Second floor raid chapters» had ended, and the second floor's boss name did not even appear.....(sweat). regarding those reading the serialized series, you might feel there is an error with regards to the timing, but you can read this story independently. If this thin and small less than thirty pages book is able to bring joy to all of you, then I am really honoured.

This year there is an important matter, which is «Sword Art Online» and «Accel world» is going to be animated and shown on television. I will put great effort in every aspect (of course including my colleagues), so I hope that everyone can support these two works as well!

# ソードアート・オンライン マテリアル・エディション 10



WordGear

## ME 10: 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 NerveGear, but the common opinion was that internal senses like the heart rate and breathing were probably real.

In other words, that meant my physical body lying down on a bed in some hospital in the real world, too, had the heart energetically pulsing away.

I wondered if Asuna was the same, but I wouldn't know just from her outward appearance. The few seconds that felt like an eternity passed and finally, Asuna's right hand moved.

Light shone off the silver studs attached to the white leather long glove moving up towards the window. The extended index finger paused above one of the two buttons.

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

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

“.....Kirito-kun.”

I wonder if I had truly heard that whisper, or if my brain had simply dreamed it up from how Asuna’s lips moved.

Time froze once more and that slender index finger slowly touched down on that window in this sunset world enveloped in complete silence.

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

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

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

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

Our hearts, pounding like alarms, soon synchronized as they slowed down to a gentle tempo.

The perpetual beating, once each second, brought a mysterious calm to my heart. The nervousness that froze my breathing when I proposed yesterday was gone.

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

## 2

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

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

The many lamps we have bought scattered bright light into the log house’s living room where the afterglow from the window had almost faded.

However, we had only started customizing these three rooms; with nothing much more than a dining room set and a sofa set for this room; a set of cooking utensils for the kitchen; and a bed for the bedroom. However, the wooden floor and walls were warm and a real (as real as it got in this world) flame flickered in the built-in Russian stove as it crackled.

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

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

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

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

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

“.....I see.”

I nodded as well while reaching my hand out towards my tea cup. Even if we had a marriage ceremony, Agil, Klein, Lisbeth, Silica, and some others would probably happily attend—I couldn’t claim to be certain that Argo the information dealer wouldn’t abandon her work for this—but the most important factor was Asuna’s feelings.

I will give my all for what Asuna truly wants from this day onwards. She had always been supporting, encouraging, and guiding me this entire time, regardless of whether she was at my side or not.

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

“I’m already happy enough being able to stay with you alone in this lovely house, Kirito-kun.

...I don’t know how long this will last... but this is the happiest moment I had in these two years I’ve lived in Aincrad.”

“.....Yeah. The same goes for me.”

Saying that out in a murmur took everything from me. After all, I felt it in Asuna’s words.

That living on the twenty-second floor like this would be our one and only short respite in the sun.

That we would have to return to the frontlines one day and throw ourselves back into days of battles.

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

“Then, erm. Let’s have a marriage ceremony when the hundredth floor’s cleared and the fighting’s all over. We’ll call Klein and the rest, along with a whole lot of the others, when the time comes. Like Kains 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! \* I hope for your support for the next book too!

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\* The title, although denied by Kawahara Reki, is actually a play on the name of an author's doujin story, namely 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



## ME 11: 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 fulfillment, 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 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.

## *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



## ME 12: 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 hear faint humming from beyond the door leading into the bath, going “Nn, nn, nn, fufuu, fuu, funn ♪”. And in addition to that, the soft sound of water.

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

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

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

"E-Excuse mee...."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Like that?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Hauuoo...”



My voice naturally leaked out from my mouth. In terms of passion of baths, I probably only had a thirtieth of what Asuna had, but I certainly didn't dislike it. The sublime warmth, moderate pressure, and the feeling as hot water soaked into every single one of the cells that made up.....

“Houfhhhbbbbb...”

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

“Bbbb.... bhh?”

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.”

“Bhbh? 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>1</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.

"...!"

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.

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<sup>1</sup> "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*.

## 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>2</sup>.

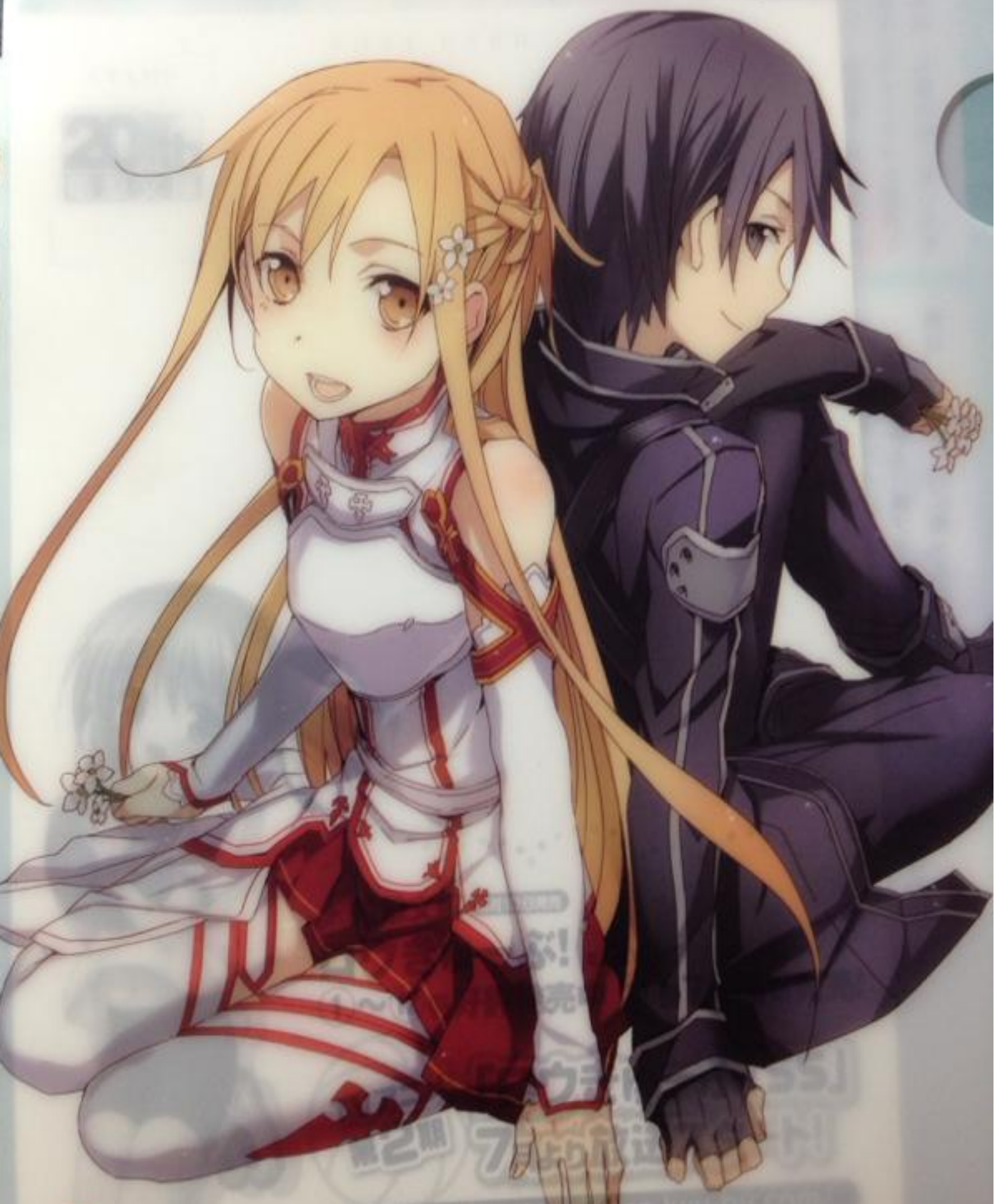
Eh, it finished right after they entered the bath... It seems next time, some sort of incident will happen or the day will change! I hope for your support for ME13!

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<sup>2</sup> “placing this here” – The afterword is on the back cover of the book. He really wrote to the limit of the pages.

SWORD ART ONLINE  
ソードアート・オンライン

電撃文庫  
FIGHTING  
フェア



## ME 13: Chapter 16.8.5

“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.



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.



## ME 14: 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, «<sup>ka</sup>fiction<sup>kuu</sup>» \* apparently meant a «<sup>ka</sup>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 <sup>ka kuu sen</sup> cables». I remembered since the term sounded strange. Though aerial cables are disappearing in Japan in the real world... still, I like them even if they obstruct the view. I think about how they connect the whole world.”

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

Lowering my sight from the skies above, I muttered.

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

“Ehehe... I’m glad you think so.”

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

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

I gently sealed the mouth that flustered shout came from.

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

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

(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...!



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## Credits:

Translation:

Pryun

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Tap

**Thanks!**

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Baka-Tsuki (Sorry, I don't know who created SSC)

Mamue (Recompiled)