

The Day Before

Translation of the short story written by Kawahara Reki, of Sword Art Online, from the extras in the limited edition DVD/BD sets for the anime, volume 1.

It's recommended to read the first volume at least, before this.

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Aincrad Standard Time, Year 2024, 23rd October, 9 PM.

I, the level 96 swordsman, Kirito, have proposed to the level 94 fencer, Asuna, and she has accepted.

Of course, this happened in a VRMMO known as Sword Art Online—a scene within a RPG. In the real world, Asuna and I have not even seen each other's faces, and in the first place, I'm not even at an age that can legally marry. —Asuna might be just about there in terms of that, though.

I do not know what was the game that first adopted the «Marriage System», but marriage between fellow characters has always been popular in the world of MMOs, even back since twenty years ago. Some sort of advantage is provided to «spouses» characters in most series, so there are many cases where marriage was done for that purpose alone, and of course, with there being players who marry as a part of their earnest roleplaying, it seems there were also some among those where the in-game marriage ended up being an impetus for marriage in the real world. This is merely my own assumption, but I believe that if even all of the MMO players in the entire world were to be asked the question «Do you have any experience of marrying in a game?», it's possible that more than half of them would give an affirmative reply.

However, even if it's regrettable (though I'm not quite if I should describe it as so), I have never ever married anyone, within all of the MMORPGs I have played thus far.

The reason is—well, it's probably due to my weak interpersonal communication skills, but alongside that, I had absolutely no idea on what to make of the concept of an «in-game marriage». If the male character, Kirito, controlled by me, Kirigaya Kazuto, were to marry a female character, Somegirl * (fictional), controlled by a female, or perhaps a male (this is easily possible as well) who exists somewhere in this world, is it okay for me to simply to interpret it as a permanently fixed party with this Somegirl-san? Or would I have to go to the extent of roleplaying my love for that Somegirl-san? Or perhaps—I would even have to be wary of that certain living being behind Somegirl-san...?

To be honest, it's not like I had no experience of receiving the offer, “Wanna get married (〃 ^ ▽ ^ 〃) “, from female characters who were registered as friends or guild members in the games I played before SAO. However, in every single one of those cases, I would freeze in front of the monitor while breaking out in cold sweat and end up giving a reply like “ (' √ ω ; `) “.

I was too cautious, too analytical, too nervous; even I think so myself.

However, to begin with, the reason why I indulged in MMO games was because they were temporary worlds. Behind each and every character, there exist unfamiliar players with unrevealed genders and ages. As a result, it can't be helped but to wonder “Who exactly is this person?”. Everyone aren't quite themselves, myself included.

Despite that, to me, the system, «Marriage», is to collide head-on into that recognition. Even if the marriage was within a game, one can't help but to be conscious when linked to a certain someone through a special relationship.

* Somegirl – Originally “Dareko”, or when transliterated, “who-girl”.

Despite that, to me, the system, «Marriage», is to collide head-on into that recognition. Even if the marriage was within a game, one can't help but to be conscious when linked to a certain someone through a special relationship.

Of that «certain person» moving the mouse and typing on the keyboard in the real world.

As such, I shirked away from becoming permanent partners with people in net games and of course, that shouldn't have changed even in this unnatural death game, Sword Art Online. No, with their avatars and actual appearances being the same, it might provide all the more reason to keep a distance from others.

However, the one who slowly dispersed, shrunk and finally erased my discomfort—or perhaps anxiety, was certainly Asuna.

In the slightly less than two years since the start of the death game, though the situation differs at times, that girl did not ever disappear from my sight. She was first a casual party member of mine, and shortly after that, a comrade within the clearing group even after she joined the guild, Knights of the Blood. There was that time we investigated the strange murder case in the area together and that other time I got her to cook an S-grade food item for me. Through those exchanges with Asuna, I realized it.

That in this world—and definitely in the real world as well, and just maybe in the non-fulldive MMO games I played before SAO as well, what determined whether the people before my eyes really are themselves, was my own self. If I were to leave those doubts and distance aside, they would become lies. If I were to put my trust into them and compromise, they would become real.

Now, right before my eyes, there is a swordswoman named Asuna.

I enjoy the time I spend with her. Asuna fighting, Asuna laughing, even Asuna getting angry, watching each and every one of those moments brings forth strong emotions in my heart.

She was always within reach and it seems clear that she was interested too. When I look at Asuna now, I don't ponder upon what exactly her true self is like anymore, not even in the slightest.

Hence, I proposed to Asuna.

Honestly speaking, it's not that my various doubts are gone. I still do not have the conviction to claim that this emotion of mine that seeks for Asuna to be that so-called «love».

I've always kept a distance from my family in the real world and ever since I've come to this world, I've relentlessly persisted on in my solo playing, making me wonder if I really do have the heart to love someone else.

However, I figured I might be able to find the answer to that final doubt if I'm together with Asuna.

—And, all of that was the «comprehension of marriage in SAO» I have arrived at thus far.

On another topic, as it really is marriage, even if it happened in the world of a game, there are still the customary material aspects to it. To be specific, what to do about getting a new home, so to speak.

We will naturally live together after marriage, but in that case, before even considering my refuge in the back alleys of the main city of Algade on the fiftieth floor, Asuna's mansionette in Salemburg, on the sixty-first floor was already slightly too cramped. Not to mention, putting the issue about the physical area aside, there are circumstances that forces us to be unable to live where we've resided in until now.

The sub-leader of the guild, «Knights of the Blood», Asuna the «Flash», could be said to be the player most highly idolized in Aincrad at the present moment.

She was almost always first in the player popularity polls in the newspapers published by the information brokers, even having several fan clubs, with a major general store chain offering not a CD debut, but a RC (recording crystal) debut, though it seems that she drove them off with thrusts from her rapier.

It feels like ages since her «Little Red Riding Hood» phase at the start of the death game when she kept her hooded cape on the entire time, but anyway, if the public were to know of the marriage of an idol like that, there's no doubt it would get picked up by each and every one of the newspapers, all at once.

Her many fans will lament and moan, and energy might just be formed by that, eventually converting into a curse property attack, causing her partner in marriage, me, to suffer a drop in my real luck—even if you were to leave that aside, being interrogated and the like is no way to spend a newlywed life, so I would like to keep as much of the truth behind the marriage under wraps as I could.

Of course, we did send messages to that girl's many friends, and my few ones, so we didn't expect it to stay a secret for long, but nevertheless, we weren't in any position to stay immersed in our honeymoon mood for too long. It has only been four days since the floor boss of the seventy-fourth floor, «The Gleameyes», has been defeated and it should take some time before the boss room on the seventy-fifth floor, the current front lines, is found, but both Asuna and I have no choice but to participate in that boss battle, even if we can desert the labyrinth tower's mapping.

As such, if we could have ten days... no, two weeks... until that happens, we would have to search for a home where we could pass our time slightly more peacefully.

If we list the items we have accumulated through our gameplay on the newspapers' classified section, converting most of those we have no pressing need for into col, we might just be able to afford a detached house in the area... or in other words, one within the city walls.

However, if we were to set up a new home in a place like that, it would end up being found out by the information brokers on that very day. One that's on a cleared floor unfrequented by players, not to mention built on its edge and having a reasonable amount of space while not being eye-catching—such a house would be ideal.

Those were rather harsh conditions, but in actual fact, I have already had an inkling of a fitting unit before I proposed.

It has already been more than a year and a half since the front lines was stationed at the twenty-second floor of Aincrad.

It was a low floor while being spacious, but nearly all of it was covered in deep forests, grass plains and lakes, possessing a beautiful, yet smooth topography, and furthermore, neither important quests, nor field bosses exist there. The players of the clearing group took a straight route to the labyrinth from the main town, Coral Village, scrambled up the tower with its mild degree of difficulty, defeating its boss in a number of days quite below the average back then. At the present moment, the only players who visit the twenty-second floor would probably be fishermen heading to the assorted sized lakes and woodcrafters gathering wood materials in the forests.

Hence, it would be a place I haven't visited for over a year either, but for some reason, a certain spectacular view it had was fixed in my memory.

It was on the day the twenty-second floor's boss was crushed, when I ran about alone, trying to clear as much of the quests I've left undone ever since I accepted them.

I found a narrow, small path on the bank of the clear, blue lake, one that wouldn't be noticed unless close by.

It seemed unrelated to the quests, but when I tried following the path and climbed the hill, I found a deserted detached log house erected there at the end, surrounded by a thick forest of coniferous trees.

Its log walls were covered in moss here and there, while two or three saplings poked out from the roof, but it didn't give off the sense of rotting away at all. Rather, it blended in with the nature surrounding it, giving off a sense of beauty, as if it was a home owned by one of the Elven race.

I quietly opened the wooden gate (as that was possible, it couldn't have belonged to another player), checked the interior with my Search skill (as it was empty, it wasn't a NPC's home either), and after I approached the terrace at its front, I finally found it. A «FOR SALE» wooden tag that hung from the door knob. Not having made it to even level 40, I could only point at the price listed on the wooden tag while I counted the number of digits, let out a sigh, and left the place behind while stubbornly glancing back over and over again. Whilst holding on the dream that someday, I will get my item storage bursting with enough col to buy this house.

In actual fact, when my level was in its seventies while the fiftieth floor was conquered, there was nothing I couldn't afford if I really wanted it. But as one of the clearing group, I couldn't have a place that requires a twenty minute trip to get to the nearest teleport gate as my base of operation. In the end, I set up a refuge in the main city of the fiftieth floor, Algade, and ended up spending my sleeping time there up till several days ago.

It has actually been a year and a half since I found that house in the forest on the twenty-second floor—

I decided to propose to Asuna and when I thought about what to do about a new home, what immediately came to mind was that log house. I believed there was no better choice.

As my proposal speech, I first revealed information on the aforementioned log house, suggested to move there and finally, I said, "Let's get married".

I do believe that at least a tiny part of the reason behind why Asuna replied "Yes" without even a trace of hesitation was thanks to the divine protection of that house.

And, so.

It's been a night since the proposal, it's the twenty-fourth of October, sometime after 2 PM. Asuna and I visited the twenty-second floor together.

We called upon the Knights of the Blood headquarters in Grandum, on the fifty-fifth floor yesterday and have already settled the request for both of us to temporarily withdraw. Even if it's temporary, we properly left the guild system-wise, with the guild emblem, the red cross, not existing on our color cursors any longer.

We exited the teleport gate at the main town, Coral Village, and as we walked towards the large lake to the southwest, I casually asked Asuna at my side.

"Hey, how long has it been since you joined the KoB, Asuna?"

"Let's see..."

Shaking her chestnut-colored hair, the fencer lightly tilted her head.

"I think the leader invited me in February last year, so... it would be close to a year and a half, I guess. It was right after the boss battle on the twenty-fifth floor ended, so..."

"I see... The KoB was made right after half of the «Force» got annihilated, wasn't it..."

I glanced up at the underside of the floor above.

Three floors above this peaceful one was the twenty-fifth floor of Aincrad that ended up being the next true trial for the players of the clearing group, ever since the first floor.

Abnormally strong mobs, compared to those on the twenty-fourth floor, obstructed our progress immediately after we left the main city and the field's topography was as complex as a maze; its difficulty created multiple casualties even while we were en route towards the next town. There were barely any NPCs we could obtain information from, while on the other hand, there were plenty of pitfall terrain traps which led to poisonous swamps and by the time we somehow managed to reach the labyrinth tower on foot, the clearing group players were at the end of their rope.

We roused ourselves with all the spirit we could muster, and the one who motivated everyone was the player who led the guild, «Aincrad Liberation Squad»—that's right, it wasn't a «Liberation Force» yet, back then—who was named Kibaou. His wanton cursing of everyone in that Kansai dialect got them into the mood through those “You bastard!” lines, empowering them to get back onto their feet.

However. That was how Kibaou, who was unmistakably regarded as the leader of the entire clearing group back then, got hooked onto false information spread by someone with the twenty-fifth floor's boss battle right before him. With only forty or so guild members that couldn't even make up an entire raid group, they rushed into the boss room first. As a result, over half of the Liberation Squad died... and the main force of the clearing group, inclusive of Asuna and me, finally caught up to them at that point, and although we didn't escape without quite a number of casualties as well, we managed to take the monstrous boss down somehow.

But the joy from crossing Aincrad's quarter point was lacking in everyone. The boss room was permeated in the cries of resentment from Kibaou, echoing throughout the place.

That was where he parted from the clearing group, bringing along the comrades who were still alive, he left for the first floor on the distant bottom.

And thus, they merged with the mutual aid organization, «MMO Today», active in the Starting City—it was from that huge congregation, that the «Force» was eventually formed.

“...The entire clearing group certainly was in a state of despair at that point... The ones fighting on the front lines were suddenly reduced to two-thirds of what they were and no one even found out who was to blame for setting up that trap, so I guess that was only to be expected. ...Everyone had sullen expressions on even in the first field boss strategy meeting on the twenty-sixth floor... but, that was when the newly-formed guild, KoB, proudly marched in. All of the members were fortified in customized white and red equipment; that really had an impact, huh...”

As we walked on the lake’s bank, I recollected what had happened back then and spoke about them in halting sentences. However, the one at my side kept awfully quiet, so I turned to take a glance and strangely enough, Asuna was growing red at her cheeks and subtly looking elsewhere. I snickered in my mind and continued on, pretending not to notice.

“...Especially that sub-leader who stood at the head of the group; all of us... putting Klein and I aside, even Agil was mesmerized, you know. An outfit that was the exact opposite of all of those plain ones till then, that pure white sleeveless bodice with that deep red miniskirt and those white knee highs to top things off... in that single moment, how should I say this, the hearts of those clearing group that were becoming divided all came together and...”

Smack! And a blunt-type attack came flying at my left shoulder, stopping just short of causing damage and interrupted my words. When I took a look, that particular sub-leader had her face in a shade of deep red and her right hand clenched into a fist.

“Geez! Honestly, that time was incredibly embarrassing, you know! I thought that the leader would naturally be at the front, but then with his usual composure, he went, ‘I believe we could achieve a much greater effect if Asuna-kun were to stand at the front’, having that serious look on, so I went out there in despair!”

“Ha-Hah... —That reminds me, that equipment really was custom-tailored, right? Who came up with the design?”

“.....All of the other guild members held meetings for the design countless time while keeping it a secret from me. When they first showed it to me, I rejected it with a ‘I can’t wear something like this!’ and was told, ‘The cost of even a single set of this was colossal!’ by Daizen-san with tears in his eyes, so I had no choice but to...”

“...I-I see.”

It seems that even the guild, Knights of the Blood, said to be truly the strongest with their ironclad rules, were up to pretty humorous antics at the start. That said, there was no mistaking how the debut of the KoB increased the morale of the entire clearing group at that time and have always stood at the front lines of this death game ever since then. —Even at this very moment, parties with figures clad in red and white must be carrying out fierce battles on the seventy-fifth floor, opened not so long ago...

I glanced up at the underside of the upper floor once more. It seems Asuna had read my inner thoughts from merely that. While gently holding onto my left hand with her now unclenched right hand, she spoke.

“You defeated the seventy-fourth floor’s boss mostly by yourself, Kirito-kun. You barely had even two or three pixels left in your HP bar. Even if you get away from the clearing for a little while, no one would complain.”

“...If the reason for my break were to be exposed, I’ll probably get complaints from everyone around, though.”

I gave that retort sprinkled with laughter and returned Asuna’s gesture. The sub-leader showed an expression unsure of whether to get angry or embarrassed and I gave a short chuckle.

After going about halfway round a large lake, with a diameter of likely one kilometer, noticeably imposing Japanese cedar—or at least, coniferous trees that looked like them, were sprouting up high. When stared at closely from somewhere near those grand roots, the wide path of the lake shore could be seen splitting into a thin, narrow path heading southwest.

“...You found this path? You sure are just as observant of these sorts of hidden routes as always.”

I took those thoughts as a compliment and puffed out my chest.

“Back then, I didn’t even have «Detection» Mob from the Searching skill, so I found it with only my eyes and instincts. You can see the house right after climbing that hill.”

With that, Asuna’s face beamed with joy in an instant as well, this time.

“I wonder what’s the house like, I’m really looking forward to it! Let’s hurry!”

“.....Hey, Asuna-san, it’s really a log house with nothing unusual, so even if you anticipate it that much, nothing will...”

“Well, it has always been my dream to live in a log house ever since I was small. I would be totally, completely and absolutely satisfied if it just has a Russian stove [*](#) and a rocking chair!”

* A unique type of oven/furnace used for both cooking and heating. Originally “pechika”.

Asuna quickly climbed the hill as she spoke, making me chase after her in a hurry. A rocking chair can just be bought from a furniture store, but really now, I can't possibly be expected to recall if there was a Russian stove.

No, it's not definite that there wasn't one. The reason why I found the log house just ahead a year and a half before was for the sake of this very day. If this is the guidance of fate, there must be a Russian stove there as well.

While praying for the existence of a chimney atop the log house's roof, I ascended the hill several seconds after Asuna. I moved beside Asuna, who was standing still in silence and searched for a chimney with my eyes opened wide.

——However.

It wasn't there.

Not the chimney.

What spanned out before our eyes was a round space covered in verdant undergrowth, without even a single man-made object of any sort... in other words, the house itself did not exist.

This is the wrong place.

That was the most reasonable explanation, so I apologized to Asuna and descended the hill, searching the fields nearby for two hours.

However, not only was there no log house, I wasn't even able to find any other forks leading to a new small path. Climbing up the first hill another time in melancholy, I gazed through the surrounding landscape yet again.

".....It was here, definitely..."

My voice unthinkingly escaped from my mouth.

A broad, lawny garden (merely empty land without a house though), within which a dense forest of coniferous trees stretches out; the towering pillars that support the outer circumference of Aincrad were visible beyond the grove of trees and at the very end was the infinite sky extending forever. This view remained fresh in my memory despite the gap of one and a half year.

But that particular crucial log house did not exist. I doubt it would have any effect, but even after I tried stepping into that blank space and walking to its absolute middle, the house showed no sign of spawning.

As I stood there frozen in a daze, the crunching sound of someone stepping over the undergrowth closed in, stopping right behind me.

I couldn't bear to turn around. Let's move to a log house on the twenty-second floor, just the two of us; those were the words of my proposal. If that house did not exist, wouldn't the marriage proposal itself seem like a sham?

“Asuna... —It’s true. That house really was here.”

It happened when I feebly spoke that line out, with my eyes lowered.

Cutting in right before me, Asuna slapped down onto my shoulders before she held my face within her palms, raising it up. Those hazel eyes were no different from usual, shimmering with a gentle light.

“I do believe you, isn’t that obvious?”

She gave that simple declaration, released her hands, took a few steps back and continued.

“It must have been demolished due to some sort of circumstances with the system. It’s a pity, but still, it’s a very lovely place even without the house, so I’m glad that I got you to bring me here, really.”

She spun around atop the emerald grass, her skirt fluttering. The scene of the afternoon rays of sunlight shining upon her long hair and silver bosom, reflecting off what hung at her waist, the glittering sheath of the rapier, «Lambent Light», was practically beautiful enough to be used for a promotional video for the game without requiring any editing.

—And I doubt she read that thought of mine, but after Asuna stopped to face me, she knocked on the belt pouch at the right side of her waist and spoke.

“Hey, we came all this way, so let’s take some photos to commemorate it. I brought a photo crystal along.”

“Ah, aah... That’s right...”

I responded with a smile, but perhaps sensing something from my voice and expression, there appears to be traces of concern on Asuna’s face.

“Was it that much of a shock? That the house disappeared...”

“Eh, no, not really, it wasn’t really...”

I kept my face and hands as composed as still water, but the anxiety did not leave Asuna’s expression.

If this is how things are, it wouldn’t be possible to simply smooth over my inner thoughts anymore, so I gave up and nodded.

“Well... I thought of various things for today in my own way. But it wouldn’t work out without the house here, so...”

“Oh? Like what?”

It was difficult explaining with those large eyes staring at me so intently, but there was no use in getting embarrassed now after I’ve even proposed to her. After lightly clearing my throat, I tried to first enter the explanation system-wise.

“Let’s see. «Marriage» in SAO is rather simple if you just consider the method. Switching to the Communication tab from the Main Menu, pressing the Marriage button at the bottom of the various invitation options and then target the other party... with that, it’s finished if the other party presses the OK button. There’s no need to even send any documents to the government office...”

“You wouldn’t even have to give your greetings at my home, going, ‘Please let me have your daughter!’, huh.”

As Asuna abruptly interjected with those words, I inadvertently imagined that forced event (not to mention the one who played the father role was somehow the leader of KoB, Heathcliff), making jolts run down my spine, causing me to shiver. Seeing that, the daughter... no, Asuna giggled, so after audibly clearing my throat, I returned to the main topic.

“An-Anyway! It’s because the process of marrying takes only around five seconds that, well, how should I say this, I want to make it so that it’ll remain in Asuna’s memories forever; that’s what I was thinking of. But unfortunately, we are unable to hold a grand marriage ceremony, so at the very least, I hoped to properly buy a new home and figured that it would be best getting married in front of that house, so...”

The latter half more or less ended up as murmurs while I looked downwards, but I somehow managed to finish speaking and exhaled a breath of air.

Immediately following that, I received a high-speed tackle which made me unsteady on my feet. The unexpected impact sent me falling onto my back, onto the grass, but it seemed like Asuna wasn’t planning delivering knuckle attacks after getting in a mounted position on me; she laid on my chest and gave a succinct whisper.

“.....I’m happy.”

“Eh, no, well, that’s just what I was thinking of.”

“Like I said, I’m happy. After all, Kirito-kun thought that far and tried so very hard to search for that house for me.”

When I took a proper look, misty tears were running down Asuna’s eyes as she grinned right before me. In response to this, I pressed my chest against her as well, wrapping her slender frame within my two arms.

We stayed that way, embracing each other for over two minutes on the grassy plains as a gentle breeze blew through, before Asuna’s soft voice reverberated next to my ear.

“This is enough.”

“Eh...?”

“I already feel like I’m blessed right now. So, shall we have the marriage here and head back for today? We can look for a house another time.”

It’s true that the afternoon rays bathing the upper floor’s underside have been gaining quite the yellow tint to it. Nightfall will likely approach in another hour or two.

“I guess... you’re right.”

I rose gently while still hugging onto Asuna and inspected the verdant garden that grew out, as if to encircle the coniferous forest.

If we persist, we would definitely be able to find another player home that fulfils the condition of being «a detached house without monster spawns despite being outside the area, in a place with barely any visitors». It wasn’t like we couldn’t put a request to Argo the information broker either. Even if she’s the «Rat», she wouldn’t sell the coordinates to our new dwelling, probably.

Hence, like what Asuna mentioned, there was no need to get all hung up on that phantasmal log house. This lawny garden was memorable enough by itself; even if SAO were to be cleared, it should remain in Asuna’s—and thus, my memory for a long time to come.

.....However.

That is that, and this is this. Something remained stirring in a corner of my mind, completely unrelated to the marriage. If I have to describe it, I would say it was similar to an uncleared quest, with its solution unfound despite effort put in, festering under the log window.

“.....Kirito-kun?”

My gaze recoiled with a start when my name was called out all of a sudden.

Before I knew it, the thought, «I can tell exactly what you're thinking», showed itself on Asuna's expression right before my sight and my body stiffened up once again.

“Y-Yes?”

“...You were probably thinking, that is that and this and this, or something like that, weren't you.”

Gulp.

A face that suited that particular emotion seemed likely to form, hence I seized the initiative of making a poker face.

“Eh, ju-just what would you be talking about?”

“I understand, you know. About your desire to find out the reason behind the disappearance of the house that was supposed to be here, at least.”

—And so, it appears that I possessed no talent for poker. Denying it any further in this situation would simply deepen the humiliation as I have already learnt, so I acknowledged it with a nod as well.

“Well, that is to say, yes... Y-You see, it's way too strange, having a player home vanish by itself and all. You said that it was due to circumstances in the system earlier, but there aren't any GMs in SAO, so it's impossible for it to have been demolished through the management's instructions. Even if it's said to be the result of a program performing a cleanup, it's not like a house with unlimited durability could rot and neither earthquakes nor volcanoes occur in Aincrad... also, as for any of the other possible causes... let's~see...”

I was about to enter my usual conjecture mode as I spoke, but Asuna's index finger shot forward onto my mouth.

“Alright, pause! ...Well, we’ve been together for a long time. I understand that you aren’t one to leave something like that alone, at least...”

Before she could finish her light sigh, I cancelled our poses.

“Th-Then, I know this is our precious break time, but could I... have just a little time to investigate?”

Asuna softly went on about how she knew it would turn out like this and how it would just change the whole point of us coming, before taking in a deep breath of air and announcing thus.

“You’ll only get until the end of tonight to investigate!”

Among the countless terrain objects distributed over each floor of Aincrad, over ninety-nine percent of them possess the «immortal» attribute. It's applied over those from nature, such as rocks and trees, as well as those man-made, like houses and castle walls, shielding them from purposeful destruction by players.

Depending on the dungeon's design, there could be «destructible walls» inside them every now and then, while «smashable rocks» and «fellable trees» could be found in the field, even if they're rare, but I have never even heard of stories involving «breakable houses». In the first place, on the very day a person were to buy a house that could be broken, a huge hole would be suddenly created while that person sleeps, with those from orange guilds flocking in through there... even such a scenario could occur. It's not like we're in the "Three Little Pigs" here.

And thus, I could hardly imagine that the disappearance of that personal home, that log house I have once found and dreamt of, was due to destruction caused by players.

"...Well, that's what I believe too."

Upon hearing what I had conjectured so far, Asuna nodded once and continued.

"Unless someone discovered an extra skill like «Land Speculation», that is."

"Th-There's no point in doing any of that in a place like this, is there? The lake shore at Salemburg is another story, though."

"Aah, it's true that the lakeside's expensive there. It's going for three times the cost of my room. ...But that's right, if we can't find the house here, having a detached house there as our new home might be nice." "Th-That's kind of... that might be tough with my income..."

It's a joke, a joke, Asuna told me as she laughed at me, who had turned pale, for a short while before her expression tensed up. Half of it switched over to the clearing group's commander mode as she stared at the empty land fixedly.

"In that case, let's eliminate the possibility that someone demolished it. ...Just to confirm, but the exterior and roof of player homes are outside of the range of customization, right?"

"Eh... what do you mean?"

"Look, when you buy a house, you gain control over the Customize Menu exclusive to its owner, don't you? You can install and remove furniture from there, can't you?"

Finally understanding what Asuna was getting at, I nodded.

"I see... the possibility that some other player might have bought the house, then removed the walls, roof and flooring through Customize to make it into an empty lot, huh. Hmm... I haven't lived in anything except those similar to apartments, so I haven't really seen the Customize Menu for a detached house..."

"Actually, I'm the same. ...That's right, I'll try asking Liz."

Asuna opened her Main Menu straight away and skillfully typed out a message to her bosom friend, the blacksmith, Lisbeth.

Liz was my friend, as well as the benefactor who crafted me my beloved sword, Dark Repulser, so she's in the list of those who'll be informed about the marriage between Asuna and I, one among those few players. We planned to send messages to ten or so people, including Liz, right after we're done with buying a house here and the marriage procedures—but to think it would become a discussion over residential issues instead.

It appears that she received a reply immediately and after Asuna's eyes raced through the words on the window only she could see, she gave a curt nod.

“It looks like that the exterior and roof can’t be removed or moved. Changing the colors or adding objects like bay windows or flower beds seems possible if you fork out a large sum of money, though...”

“...I guess even if you can change its colors, it’s not like you can make the entire house transparent.”

Both Asuna and I have walked all over this empty land since earlier, so it’s confirmed that there weren’t even any sort of traces. If there was a transparent house built here, we should have already knocked our noses into it.

“So... what about the options? Like... some device to hide it underground?”

As Asuna mentioned something like that and poked the ground with the grass at her feet with the tips of her boots, I unintentionally broke into a wry smile.

“Haha, it’s not like it’s the secret base of some evil organization. In the first place, if you were to dig out a hole large enough to bury a house, you’ll fall right into the floor below.”

“Eeh, doesn’t it sound lovely. Like a home belonging to the Hobbits.”

“I do recall that being digging tunnels through hills... Won’t the underground be dwarfs instead? See, there was that humongous underground Dwarven castle stretching tens of storeys, wasn’t there.”

“I hate that place. It’s damp in there and there were so many bug-type monsters appearing... in the first place, wasn’t that really just the insides of a mountain in the field?”

“That’s the problem with Aincrad’s structure, there’s a limit to the thickness of the ground, so a true to form, gigantic, RPG underground labyrinth can’t be made.”

“It’s fine not having something like that! ...Rather, are you fine with this? Chatting and all. I’m enjoying myself, so I don’t mind, though.”

Having it pointed out by Asuna, I turned to look towards the outer circumference with a start. Scattered, wispy clouds gently flowed through a sky of deepening orange. It’ll probably get dark if you give it another two hours.

“Th-That’s right, let me see, if it’s not transparent or some secret base, next would be... a mobile base? Nah, if there was an object like that, it would be a piece of cake to reach the labyrinth from the main town... so I guess an aerial fortress’s out too, huh...”

At my words that drifted from guesses to delusions, Asuna looked up at the skies with a stumped look. On the other hand, I gazed downwards profoundly and continued earnestly pondering over the matter with my arms crossed.

“It doesn’t look like it vanished through the Customize function. To begin with, that would mean that some other player had already bought it... So I guess it’s really a phenomenon unrelated to players...”

“.....Hey.”

“That means... a field boss capable of breaking apart terrain objects...? Nah, even the fifty-sixth floor’s «GeoCrawler» couldn’t break through the village’s gates. If such a ridiculous boss appears on the twenty-second floor, there would have been a rapid call to arms for a subjugation raid...”

“Hey, c’mon, Kirito-kun.”

With Asuna tugging away at my cloak’s sleeve, I broke off my conjectures and looked at her.

“...What is it?”

“.....That.”

Asuna had her right hand, fitted in a long, white glove, raised up, so I trailed the direction her index finger pointed towards with my sight.

It was there, in the space right above a conspicuously large Japanese cedar tree, north of the empty area.

Hovering unsteadily at a height almost touching the underside of the next floor, there was a single detached house— Although nearly nothing but its underside could be seen from the ground due to the angle, there was no mistake that it was the log house I was seeking, judging by its structure that was formed by a number of splendid logs.

Despite the joy in finding the house without much difficulty, the surprise from it floating ninety meters above my head overshadowed that, leaving me muttering in bewilderment.

“.....Wh-Why is... the house flying.....”

“.....Like what you said earlier, Kirito-kun, an option for an aerial fortress... guess that's not it, huh...”

Following what Asuna mentioned, I concentrated on looking through each section of the house, appearing as small as specks from here, but there doesn't seem to be any wings, balloons or propellers attached to it.

On the other hand, I noticed two other new things with my sight enhanced through a skill.

Firstly, there was a shimmering swirl of air much like heat haze underneath the house. That log house was likely airborne by being on something similar to a «tornado fixed in position».

And the other issue.

A face timidly poking out from one of the house's windows facing south and a hand frantically waving at us, who were far away on the distant bottom; there was someone there.

“Th-There’s a person there.”

After I pointed it out, Asuna went “Eh” before she leaned her body forward.

“Y-You’re right. ...We really can’t tell whether it’s a NPC or a player from this distance...”

The only definite difference between a player and a NPC in terms of outward appearance was limited to the color of the «Color Cursor». However, with this much distance in between, the color cursor wouldn’t even show up.

I still had no idea whatsoever as to why the house was flying, but if that figure was not a NPC, but a player, there was no way we could leave that alone. After all, even if it’s a one in a million chance, anyone’s HP would definitely turn to zero if they were to fall from that height.

“Wh-Which is it...”

It happened as Asuna and I held our breaths while gazing upwards—

Suddenly, the hand that the figure was waving about withdrew, before thrusting out once more. The hand released something it held, gleaming as it reflected the rays of the yellow sunlight. It drew a slow arc in the air as it fell towards the empty land we stood on.

“Wo.... wo-woah...”

After I got to its endpoint with four strides to the right and three quick steps forward, I caught the small object with my hands. As Asuna immediately rushed after me, both of us examined it in closer detail.

“A bottle of recovery potion... that has already been used...?”

I nodded at Asuna's remark before turning up to look at the log house floating in the sky once more, and shouted.

“—It's a player!”

An empty potion bottle drained dry of its content will break apart in ten seconds if left alone and vanish. To prevent that and store it as an «Empty Bottle» item, it has to be put away into any sort of bag, or perhaps the item storage at least once. That's not an action taken by NPCs, so the possession of an empty bottle would mean that the one trapped in that flying house is a player.

“W-We have to help...”

I spoke with the small bottle held in my right hand and Asuna instantly pointed out.

“H-How do we!?”

“

That was a truly natural question. In Aincrad, no, in SAO, the means for players to take flight generally do not exist. If there were such a thing, one could ignore the labyrinth tower and head for the next floor... no, they could reach the final goal, the hundredth floor, in just a single flight, after all.

Several months ago, I did go through the experience of grabbing onto a white dragon's tail and flying alongside Lisbeth, the smith that Asuna sent a message to earlier, but we couldn't choose where to go, there aren't any dragons on this floor, and above all, I have no desire to go through that a second time.

“.....F-For now, let's try going directly below the house.”

Asuna flashed a doubtful look at my thoughtless suggestion, but soon nodded.

As we stepped into the forest from the empty space, the forever overlapping branches above blocked the flying house from our view, but I walked straight ahead with a skill not part of the system, «Intuitively Walking Straight». In the forest with no landmarks for my eyes to latch onto, it was unexpectedly difficult. The trick to it is to move your legs as though they're executing an autorun... which was how I explained to Asuna the other time, although she just gave a look wondering what the heck was I going on about.

Our aim was true and after merely two or three minutes since we started moving, a remarkably gigantic Japanese cedar tree came into our sight. This was unmistakably that tree growing directly under the house. Scanning upwards as I approached, I looked through the many overlapping branches, allowing me to confirm the silhouette of a lazily hovering speck.

“...So, what can we do? Even if we climb this cedar, it doesn't look like we can reach the house at all, you know?”

A question from Asuna while she walked with her view in the skies and a reply from me in the same posture.

“I thought a shout might reach if we were to get right below it, but... that doesn't seem possible either...”

“I see, if we could talk, we could receive an explanation for what happened, huh. Maybe we should really climb the tree? Shouting from the treetop might provide enough range.”

“But you see, it's tough climbing coniferous trees like this... Without the «Acrobatics» skill, it might be pretty precarious...”

It happened then, when we got within five meters or so from the huge cedar with our faces pointed upwards.

A mob's howl roared out at point-blank range, catching us unaware and we sprang up.

“Woof, woof woof woof!!”

I instinctively held on to the grip of my beloved sword, Elucidator, hanging on my back, but ceased that motion there. The reason for that was because the originator of that howl was a quadrupedal beast, with a length of approximately forty centimeters... or to be specific, a «dog».

Its relatively long coat was of a pale tawny color, its eyes big and round, with a blue ribbon on its fluffy tail to boot. The color cursor showed yellow—a color for NPCs, the pets of beast tamers, or perhaps a non-active monster that hasn't been aggro-ed.

“Wah, how cute!”

As Asuna showed a reaction befitting a girl of her age, she squatted and tried to reach out with her hand, causing me to restrain her in a panic.

“Ho-Hold on, hold on!”

“Why should I, it's so cute.”

“I-It might be some sort of trap, you know! In the first place, it's strange having a dog in the field. What will you do if it morphs into a Dire Wolf or something the moment you touch it.”

“Geez, it's fine, look, even its tail is wagging so much.”

—And during our exchange, the small dog continued its din, insisting “Hug me, hug me!” as it bounced about and barked in front of Asuna. While I grabbed and held onto Asuna's sword belt when she was about to squat down again, I checked the whelp's cursor once more. The name displayed was «Toto».

“...Toto? That shouldn't be a species name... is it a name unique to this dog...?”

“Wah, the name's cute too! C'mon, come here, Toto!”

“Like I said, you shouldn't...”

While I frantically tried to bring back Asuna, who was at a level of tension as if she was already afflicted with a Charmed negative status, I attempted to see through the whelp's, no, Toto's full, round eyes, searching for any fiendish schemes it might be concealing.

Then, I noticed that, though belated. Floating around two centimeters atop the dog's round head, a small «?» mark.

“Hey... a quest mark!? But why is it in progress...?”

It seems that Asuna noticed the mark too, after my shout, and the vigor she showed earlier dwindled.

“You're right, there's a question mark on it, huh...”

The number of quests given out in each of Aincrad's floors was practically endless. They can generally be received from NPCs with «!» marks floating above them, while NPCs related to a quest in progress have that mark changed to a «?».

In other words, that would mean that this pup was a key person, or rather, a key animal for a quest in progress. But the problem is... I have absolutely no recollection of receiving a quest related to dogs and it's likely the same for Asuna, so...

“Th-That's it!”

I ended up releasing Asuna's belt due to her sudden cry. The rapier-user spun around and continued with an intense gaze on me.

“We always end up having to deal with the clearing of the labyrinth and floor bosses normally, so we don't take up many sub-quests, right? That's why it ended up as a blind spot in our thoughts. If some sort of unexplainable, strange phenomenon happens, the cause is usually a quest. Like... a house flying in the sky, for example!”

“.....I see.”

I nodded as it was a plausible deduction and Asuna twirled about once again, facing the tyke that was still making a din.

“That is to say, if we want to find out what’s behind the flying house... we would definitely have no other path than to go into contact with Toto-chan here! I know you’ll understand, Kirito-kun!”

And, with that speech that wasn’t exactly completely devoid of adventurous spirit and willingness for self-sacrifice depending on how it’s interpreted, Asuna squatted down without giving me a chance to seize her and reached her two hands out to the runt.

“Woof woof woof!”

The small, tawny dog leapt into Asuna’s chest with a delighted yap, licking her face while it rapidly wagged its tail.

“Ahaha, that tickles! Haah, it’s so cute! I’ve always dreamed of keeping a puppy like this!”

—Fortunately, it doesn’t seem that Toto will be transforming into a huge, man-eating wolf all of a sudden.

However, the phenomenon that occurred several seconds later was beyond my expectations by approximately three light years.

Without any warning, a gale blew at our feet as it spiraled around us into a swirl. The tremendous speed the wind travelled at left no opportunity for us to right our stances. Staggering, our feet left the ground—and frighteningly enough, could not reach the ground regardless of how hard we tried.

“Ki-Kirito-kun!”

I instinctively caught onto Asuna’s extended left hand while she was holding onto Toto with her right. And that was how we, two persons and one animal, were whisked away in a constrained tornado.

The surrounding scenery swung by us in dizzying circles while my coat's hem fluttered about prominently along with Asuna's miniskirt (a phenomenon that would never happen with the usual amount of wind in the fields), but the situation certainly didn't allow me the composure to focus on that.

"Wa-Waa-Waaah~", I screamed;

"Kyaaaaa—", Asuna shrieked;

"Woof woof woof!!", the whelp happily barked, and that was when it happened.

We soared upwards, making a beeline for the log house that was suspended up in the air far above.

“...I-It’s completely pointless if you come here too!”

And that was the first line from the player who asked for help in the log house.

Approximately ninety seconds ago—

Asuna, the dog and me were swallowed into the small tornado and flew above the roof of the flying log house, then sucked into an open chimney at its corner, one after another. Beyond the dark, narrow tunnel was a spacious living room with a plain wood finishing and an astounded female player stood alone before us, who landed on our bums.

To re-activate her head that was frozen by the stunning turn of events, I stared intently at the prior visitor while sitting on the floor. Surprisingly, her face was one I was extremely acquainted with, but as I didn’t have the energy to express my shock yet again, I tried saying some greetings.

“Good day. Long time no see.”

And that was how the exclamation from earlier came about.

One way or another, we should first exchange our information.

And that female player agreed and loosened the tension in her shoulders at my suggestion, pointing at the round table set up on the living room’s floor with her right hand. After Asuna, still clutching onto the dog, and I sat down side-by-side, the girl took a seat as well, a large distance away, on the opposite side.

It seems Asuna had finally returned to her usual mode by this time and greeted the female player who was a mutual acquaintance of ours.

“It’s been a while, Argo-san.”

“...Hello, Aa-chan. And you too, Ki-bou.”

Patterns of three whiskers were distinctly painted onto each of the cheeks of this female player who waved her hand nimbly with a delicate expression on. The name of this girl who stuck to this face paint for the roughly two years since the start of the death game, no, adding one month on when including the beta period, was «Argo the Rat». Aincrad’s most resourceful information broker.

She was an associate of Asuna and I since the starting of the game, selling and buying information from us countless times. Aside from that, we have saved and gotten saved by each other on several occasions, but there were clearly no feelings of antagonism between us. Hence, it doesn’t make sense for Argo to display caution towards us like what she was doing now of all times, but let’s just put that aside and get to the main topic.

“——So. Argo, what exactly happened?”

This was a question asked as I waved my right hand around, indicating the entire log house which was radically flying, even now, and the information broker’s two eyes blinked incessantly deep within her golden auburn curly hair.

“What you ask, Ki-bou, if you’ve gotten in ‘t this far, you should’ve gotten ‘t too, right? It’s a quest, a quest!”

“Ah, aah... well...”

When I glanced at the tyke dozing off while held at Asuna’s chest, the ? mark above its head was lit up. In other words, it meant that some sort of quest was in progress, but—

“But rather than receiving a quest, it clearly feels like we’ve been dragged into one, you know...”

I said that and Asuna gave a curt nod as well.

“That’s right. We got blown here merely by me picking up this kid, after all. How should I say this... it’s like I picked up a quest that someone left behind halfway, that’s what it feels... like...”

Her mouth suddenly shut close after saying that and she met my glance. I instantly realized what the girl had figured out.

If «a quest that someone left behind halfway» was what brought around this situation, the one responsible could be no one other than this Argo the Rat right before our eyes.

Argo lowered her head as though she understood what was up when Asuna’s and my sight flicked towards her simultaneously, and spoke.

“.....I’ll start from the beginning.”

—Recently, I got the information that several strange new quests have been occurring on the lower floors of Aincrad. Like a masked ogre that revives over and over again even when defeated, or a jump spinning, fire-breathing tortoise, or a white-clothed female undead creeping out from a cursed message window.

—‘I wouldn’t be possible to publish the «Complete Quest Walkthrough Guide Book» if I didn’t get information on the new quests immediately. That’s why, the day before yesterday, I came to investigate this southwestern area of the twenty-second floor, where there were rumors of a new quest and was fine until I succeeded in finding the quest’s starting point, but there was a slight complication with the quest’s description. When I leapt into this house without bringing along the key character required to proceed with the story, the house was suddenly engulfed in a tornado, totally surprising me!

And that’s why for the two days after that, I was stuck inside this flying house, waiting for someone to reset this quest.

When her explanation reached that point, Argo spread her arms out in exasperation.

«Resetting a quest» was the action of returning a partially-finished quest that has been left alone for a long time to its initial state, through a menu operation. There were quests that couldn't be taken up by other players at the same time in SAO, though few, so such a mechanism was prepared. Of course, you would have to first get close to the NPC who was the starting point, though.

In other words, if we opened the Quest tab in the Main Menu when we noticed that ? mark above the head of that pup, «Toto», below that cedar tree, the reset button—might have been there. However, now that we got on the quest, neither Asuna nor I would be able to reset.

“...Well, I more or less understand the situation now, but... there are still parts I don't get. Argo, what did you mean by the 'complication with the quest's description' earlier?”

When I voiced out the doubt that naturally came to me, the information broker made the aforementioned delicate expression and sneaked glances at Asuna... or to be specific, the small, moving object sleeping into Asuna's arms.

“W-Well, that's... even I have things I'm good at and those that I'm not really...”

“Aah, so that's it. Argo-san, so you're bad with dogs!”

And in that moment, Asuna completely saw through her with a smile on which caused the three whiskers on the information broker's cheeks to narrow.

“I-I can't help, that's just how my base stats were! And Aa-chan, I heard the news that you're bad with Astral-type mobs too!”

“Th-That's because those are ghosts! It's only natural to be scared of ghosts. But puppies are cute, you know? Here, how about you try hugging it?”

“St-Stop ‘t! Just let ‘t continue sleeping there!”

—And leaving aside Argo and Asuna, who were showing their intimacy through their actions, I took some time to ponder.

If Argo was (despite being a «Rat») bad with dogs, the fact that the quest in progress mark atop the dog’s head was lit up means...

“Hahah, I get it. Argo, you managed to start the quest, but with the key character being a dog, you dashed away with all your AGI and after you jumped into this house, the quest continued making you fly up, but got stuck because the dog couldn’t enter the house, getting you trapped here in the sky for two whole days... that’s it, huh. Hahaha, looks like you’ve been through a pretty fun experience, huh. If you put stories of your experiences in a book like, “Argo’s Great Adventures”, in the future, it’ll sell.”

Upon hearing my talk while laughing, the Rat momentarily made a face that said, “Will it really sell?” before she shouted.

““This no laughing matter, Ki-bou! With things this way, both Aa-chan and you are stuck now too, you know!”

“Don’t make such a fuss about it, at the most, we’ll just have to use a teleport crystal to travel to some other city, right?”

It happened just as I was about to start laughing again after replying so—an odd expression appeared on Argo’s and Asuna’s faces at the same time. They exchanged a quick glance and Asuna took the initiative to open her mouth.

“...Hey, Kirito-kun. I don’t think there’s any chance that Argo-san hasn’t tried that out yet.”

“Heh?”

“It depends on the quest, but during these compulsory events, most of them prevent teleporting, don’t they? Right, Argo-san?”

“Of course ‘t does!”

“.....Seriously?”

Seeing me finally breaking out in a cold sweat, Argo replied with a nod and an expression that seemed to show her disappointment.

“Well, as a last resort, there’s always still jumping out from the window and teleporting immediately before crashing into the ground... I don’t quite want to try that, really.”

“I-I don’t want to do it either, really...”

I took a peek out at the sky extending out beyond the window and realized something after all that side-tracking.

In the first place, what exactly happened on this quest. If one were to receive the quest from the dog in the forest and enter the house together, the house will take flight through the tornado? The links between each part of the story make too little sense at this point. The ones in charge of the SAO game servers’ administration should have already been separated from Argus, the developers, so it’s not like the quest’s scenario could have been written by staff from Argus. In that case, exactly who was one who thought up these illogical developments? And at the present moment when the GM Call does not function, how can we escape from this stuck status...?

“.....Wait, hold on, now that I think about it.”

Asuna, who was stroking Toto’s head, and Argo, who was looking in that direction with a wary glance, turned in unison at my words.

“If the reason why this quest got stuck was because the dog... Toto was left behind on the ground, that should have been dealt with already... —So, doesn’t that mean that the quest should have been back in motion...?”

“Ah...!”

Argo snapped her fingers and dashed right beside the window in a breakneck motion. She looked down towards the ground and instantly shouted.

“W-We’re moving! Or rather, it looks we’re nearly going to land!”

“R-Really!? Thank goodness, looks like we’ll be able to go back before it gets dark.”

Asuna spoke, relieved while looking towards the windows as well, but I couldn’t be as optimistic. You could call it a hunch.

Having an introduction of making an entire house take flight was rather major as a quest. A story that starts this flashy was unlikely to end so easily. In all likelihood, it would make us go this way to search for something, go that way to help someone out... I believe such a development would definitely happen. First of all, even if we work hard at clearing the quest, there was no guarantee that this log house will return to its previous status of being on sale. In that case, would Asuna and I really be able to marry...

“Ugh.”

I gave a weak moan and took a look at Argo’s meager frame from behind as she kept a subtle distance away from (the dog within the arms of) Asuna.

She was an old friend of mine, but there was no way I could let her find out about my marriage with Asuna before it happened. If the cat gets out of the bag, an article will end up on the newspaper, «Weekly Argo», with a flourish and I will be cursed to death by everyone in Asuna’s fan clubs.

Hence, it's risky to have her stick around for too long to complete the quest. There's no choice, but to clear it in haste and say "Good work!" before the «Rat's» nose senses something.

At roughly the same time as I got up while making up my mind, a dull sound rang out from the log house, announcing its arrival at a location unknown to us.

“...Now that I think about it, what was the name of this quest?

Argo opened a window at my question and answered.

“«Witch of the West and the Three Treasures», ‘t says.”

“...How common. And the build-up was so surreal too...”

It was the first time stepping onto the ground firmly for Argo in two days, whereas fifteen minutes for Asuna and me, and what stood before the three of us was the next key character shaking about as its body wobbled.

However, once again, it wasn’t a human. Its torso joined into a cross by wooden poles, it was a doll with a round, stuffed head of hemp fiber—namely, a scarecrow. Despite its humorous appearance, it was a splendid monster. These were often placed in horror-type floors, a mob of the «Scarecrow» type.

What came to meet us wasn’t merely the scarecrow. On the left was a hollow set of plate armor, a monster of the «Living Armor» type.

And on the right was a lion head atop a human body, a monster of the «Werelion» type. None of the three showed any will to attack. The color cursor also remained as the non-active yellow status.

Just as I wondered what would happen now, the scarecrow suddenly spoke.

“Oh, we’ve certainly been awaiting you!”

Those words prompted the «!» mark floating above the scarecrow’s head to change into a «?», denoting a quest in progress. At the same time, the mark vanished from the pup’s head.

“Awaiting... you say?”

I gave an appropriate reply in the meantime and the scarecrow launched into a tirade, accompanied by violent swaying of its head. To sum it up, the contents are as follows.

—We, «Scarecrow», «Tin» and «Lion», were out on a journey to become humans, but on our way, a female girl who was our companion got kidnapped by the «Witch of the West». We want to help her out, but the witch stole away what was in Scarecrow’s head, the gem that was a substitute for Tin’s heart and the golden mane that fuelled Lion’s courage, so we are unable to battle. Thus, to enlist a swordsman able to fight the witch with us, we cast a tornado spell onto the dog the girl kept, «Toto», and sent it beyond the wall.

“Ha, hahah... I get it...”

Nodding, I took a glance behind.

According to the map, we were currently still on the twenty-second floor, in the northwest. An area sealed off by a steep cliff, unreachable by foot. The «wall» that Scarecrow referred to was likely that cliff.

I somehow understood the setup of the quest, but that did not change my assessment of the entire story as being weird. In SAO, where magic did not exist, wouldn’t the problem be whether a «witch» or a «tornado spell» was even possible in the first place? And besides, putting Scarecrow and Lion aside, why exactly would the Living Armor’s name be «Tin»?

—And just as I racked my brains over these, as most would agree, pointless doubts, Asuna murmured all of a sudden.

“...I get it. What this quest is supposed to be.”

Continuing on, Argo nodded as well.

“I get ‘t too. No wonder the house went flyinG.”

“Heh? What do you mean?”

I asked as I looked right and left, and Asuna grinned as she voiced out something I didn’t expect at all.

“I think you should have read it when you were a child too, Kirito-kun. Bits and pieces are different if you look at it in detail, but this quest... originated from «The Wizard of Oz»!”

“...Ah, aah, I see, so that’s it!”

And, that was what I shouted out, but to be honest, I couldn’t recall a single thing about that tale. A girl and her pet dog were blown away by a tornado with their house and when they landed, they found themselves in a parallel world, went on adventures here and there alongside a scarecrow, a tin figure and a lion before finally returning to the real world—that was how the story went, probably.

It was now clear why the Living Armor became «Tin», but I still felt anxious about what has yet to come.

“...If that is the case, this quest is going to be horribly long, huh...”

Asuna made a questioning, “Why?”, expression when she heard me voice that out with a sigh, so I shrugged my shoulders and continued.

“Well, you see, if you take a look at how it goes, we’ll have to get Scarecrow’s brain, Tin’s heart and Lion’s mane one after another, right? How long will even one of them take...”

Asuna and Argo exchanged looks at my grumbling and for some reason, smiled complacently.

“Ki-bou, you don’t quite remember how the story went, do you?”

“Ugh... no, well, that’s exactly it though...”

“Fufu, I doubt there’s any need to collect the key items. Let’s skip that and march right into the witch’s castle straight away!”

“E-Eeeh!?”

I must have imagined those three faces that showed the same “Eeeh” emotion on Scarecrow, Tin and Lion, accompanying my yell.

I checked the map once again and saw that golden «!» marks (the next objective) were displayed on three parts of the elliptical quest area, with a single grey «!» mark (the final objective, but with its flag yet to be triggered) aside from those. Thinking about it normally, it would be useless even if you go to the final destination before completing the golden marks at those three places, but there was no sign of hesitation in the steps Asuna and Argo took.

The three monsters who wanted to become human and I chased, with uncertain strides, after those two who briskly proceeded through the road paved with yellow bricks. The tyke held in Asuna’s arms was likely the cause for the slight distance behind Argo kept.

Argo and I had suggested for Toto to be left behind in the log house since it had ceased its role as a key character when the quest mark atop its head vanished. However, Asuna kept hugging onto the dog firmly while uttering a “Uu~” with her eyes upturned, so I couldn’t persist with much more than that. Personally, I don’t care either way, but it seemed a little like a test of emotional strength for Argo who was apparently a dog-hating character.

If she's keeping to it that thoroughly, it must be as the person herself mentioned earlier, not simply a roleplay limited to this world alone. The Argo of the real world was definitely bad with dogs as well. However, if I was in her shoes, I wonder if I could so frankly show off my inner self—my true self. Wouldn't I forcibly keep my feelings in check, putting on a composed appearance in order to retain the image that I had built up and assumed time after time in this world?

Could those feelings for Asuna from a person like that really be called love.....?

“.....What do you think?”

I asked of one of the quest NPCs who walked at my side, the lion male who had his «courage» stolen from him, in an extremely soft voice.

Most NPCs among the countless number set in Aincrad possess an algorithm that did no more than to cycle through pre-set patterns of replies, making it impossible for them to properly hold a conversation with a player. So I wasn't exactly hoping for an answer, but,

“...Was something taken from you as well?”

And the lion male gave a subdued response, so I was slightly... no, rather surprised.

“Hmm... well, that might be the case, huh. After all, I don't remember ever loving anyone for real until I came here.”

When I got carried away and answered that way, the Werelion male, who looked significantly more dispirited in comparison to those it was based on, the Werelion race that appeared near the fortieth floor, nodded with a distinctively sorrowful expression.

“I see. Honestly, I don’t have confidence either. In whether I really had «courage» before the witch stole my mane from me.”

The lion male lowered his head with a sigh, exposing the sorry state that a portion of the mane behind his head was in, with much of it gone now as though someone went through it with a pair of clippers.

When approaching it from that angle, there were stitches at the back of Scarecrow’s head, as if there was once a tear in the crudely patched up cloth, while he bounced step after step at the lion male’s side and a large hole closed up by an adhesive bandage could be seen on Tin’s breastplate too, as he walked ahead. Each of those was probably a relic from the time that «Witch of the West» person stole the items important to the three of them.

Of course, I have no recollection of my «heart to love others» being stolen by the witch. If I had lost that somewhere, it would be my own fault, keeping a distance away from those around me from young... even from my own family.

In that case, I wonder where I would have to search to retrieve that heart. Would I find it if I marry Asuna and live together with her? But as the lion male had said, what if it was something I didn’t have from the start as a human...?

And, at that moment, as if she sensed my unease, Asuna turned back to face me from several meters in front. She tilted her head slightly to the side before showing me a smile, one no different from the usual ones she gave me. She pointed her raised right hand forward and shouted out cheerfully.

“Look, Kirito-kun, you can see it now!”

Argo clapped together the metal claws equipped on her hands without a moment’s delay.

“If I didn’t know about this quest, ‘t has to be an unexplored dungeon! There’s going to be plenty of untouched treasure chests!”

“...Hey now, even if you say that, this is the twenty-second floor, so it’s obvious there won’t be anything amazing.”

Cutting off the observation that was unlike me, I sped up to chase after those two while gazing up at the castle that appeared beyond a grove of trees. It had an excessive number of long, narrow towers reaching up, with its walls in a shade of grey close to black. Its towering visage with the skies blotched in a deepening red as a backdrop gave off an atmosphere fit for a «witch’s castle».

This quest should be cleared if the witch who resides deep inside there was defeated, but we can’t even get in the castle right now, can we? Ordinarily, if the sub-quests at each location weren’t finished and Scarecrow, Tin and Lion have not gotten their mind, heart and spirit back yet, the door to the final dungeon wouldn’t open or the boss wouldn’t spawn. No, rather than all that, wouldn’t it be a little pitiful to just ignore what those three are searching for...

Even as I pondered that issue, Asuna and Argo continued walking rapidly with that delicate distance from each other maintained, and the eerie castle gate just minutes away on our route. The black cast iron gates reaching five meters high were cleanly closed, with no sign of opening as expected—

Crack, crack, clank.

And following that distinct unlocking sound, the gates automatically opened to the sides, causing my mouth to open as well. The tyke held by Asuna was woofing away, but I doubt that was the cause of it opening.

The two female players nodded to each other as if they predicted it, but I personally didn’t get it at all. Exchanging looks with Scarecrow and company, who got their brain, heart or mane stolen, I shrugged my shoulders and stepped through the gateway.

At that moment, a ferocious howl rang out and four monsters spawned within the front yard of the castle. A black panther head atop a bulky torso, they were from the Werepanther race. Witches make use of black cats, so there was no need to say that it was an appropriate choice for guards... perhaps.

“Gyaooooo!”

The panthers roared once again and the moment they unsheathed their scimitars with jagged edges, Scarecrow and the other two screamed out a shameful “Eek” and cowered down. It wasn’t certain whether they were afflicted with the «Fear» negative status, or simply truly scared; I didn’t expect much battle potential out of them, but if they’re going to be like this from the start, I worry for them when we get to the boss battle.

I lightly shook my head and drew my beloved sword, Elucidator, from my back and concurrently targeted the two Werepanthers rushing in from my right. I activated the offensive single-hit, area of effect sword skill, «Serration Wave», of which not many exist for one-handed swords.

The sword that was brought down onto the ground vibrated at a high frequency and a light effect similar to a saw blade spread out in a radial pattern. Two of the panther males were swallowed by that and stumbled forward. It was a technique meant to impede movement to begin with, dealing barely any damage, but they were monsters appearing in a quest on the twenty-second floor, after all. Before they could right their postures, their HP got shaved away and the panthers split apart before dissipating away in succession.

The remaining two were killed by Asuna with her left hand still holding onto the tyke, and Argo who was actually pretty strong in an one-on-one situation, ending the battle in an instant. One of the panther males dropped a key with a quest item mark on it, so we used that to open a small door at the corner of the castle.

I peered at the sky another time before passing through the door; violet had started to mingle into the scarlet. It was around an hour before nightfall, huh. The castle was of quite a formidable size, so it seemed like it would be hard to clear it before sunset.

—As though reading my mind once again, Asuna pat my back and spoke.

“Don’t worry, I’ve brought plenty of food.”

No, I wasn’t exactly worrying about dinner, but whether I would be able to marry you within today, Asuna.

I couldn’t answer with that, so I simply nodded in an odd angle and Argo flippantly spoke out.

“I’m looking forward to that! I’ve totally caught those rumors that say Aa-chan succeeded in producing soy sauce!”

It has been merely ten minutes since we’ve infiltrated the castle belonging to the «Witch of the West».

Asuna, Argo, Scarecrow, Tin, Lion, that dog and me; our party of six people + one animal have reached a large door that presumably leads to the boss room in no time at all.

It’s due to our battle ability level being far higher than the one suitable for the quest, but what could be considered even more unreasonable was Argo’s mobility. She jumped onto balconies that really should require a detour as it was too high, or onto footholds narrow enough for even me to hesitate, with ease, taking short-cuts throughout the route. Thanks to that, there were still tinges of red in the sky from what I could see through a small window.

“...Shall we have the food after the boss battle?”

Asuna asked, seemingly rather amazed, and Argo calmly nodded with a “Guess so”. The monster trio had the usual is-this-really-alright faces on, but their representative, Scarecrow, bounced forward and the single stitch on its cloth head that served as its mouth moved.

“...The «Witch of the West» uses various terrifying spells. If only my head wasn’t quite so empty, I could remember how those spells went...”

...As I thought, we really should have dealt with it in sequence through each sub-quest. That was what I thought, but Asuna pat Scarecrow’s shoulder (or at least, the pole that served as it), showing no sign of worry.

“It’s alright, if the three of you put your strength together, we’ll definitely be able to save Do... that girl who’s your friend. Now, let’s go.”

Finishing her speech, she turned a gallant arc towards the front and steadfastly pushed the large door open.

Inside was a rectangular, spacious area that truly gave off the feel of a boss room. The moment we stepped in, creepy green candles on the chandelier attached to the high ceiling lit up. Our viewpoints gradually grew brighter, allowing us to spot a big cage placed near the wall on the other side.

The captured young girl collapsed in the cage—beside her, a black-clothed hag stirred away at an enormous, simmering pot with a long ladle.

“Ooh... that’s a witchy witch...”

My thoughts unintentionally escaped. Offensive magic generally do not exist in SAO, thus there was the belief that magicians do not exist as well, so that would make a monster with a design like that remarkably rare.

Now then, what kind of attack would that granny use? Just as I was in the midst of wondering that—Scarecrow gave a sudden shout.

“Oh, Dorothy-san! Dorothy-san will turn into soup at this rate!”

Continuing on was the noise from each parts of Tin’s clattery armor.

“Dorothy, danger, let’s help, hurry!”

Finally, Lion tried his best to bristle a part of his closely-cropped mane.

“Hold on, Dorothy! We’ll immediately... we’ll....”

But at that point, Lion’s mane shriveled, Tin’s armor muted, and Scarecrow’s shaft bent.

Replacing the trio who sunk into silence, Asuna, Argo and I stepped forward. Looking at the witch who continued stirring the big pot from her side, we approached with caution.

The black-robed witch raised her face and looked this way. Her eyes thinning into a complacent expression as they shone yellow, she muttered in a high-pitched voice.

“Wouldn’t the lot of you drink the soup this kid makes? One mouth will return your youth, two will endow you with power; it’s such a delicious, delicious soup, you know? Yii-hi-hi-hi.”

If we were to carelessly answer “Yes” here, we might just proceed straight to a forced event where the girl who seems to be called Dorothy ends up simmering in the pot, so I yelled a reply back.

“No! We’re here to help that child!”

“I see, I see, what a pity. In that case...”

That was when the witch scooped out some of what was in the pot with the ladle before vigorously exhaling.

“...I’ll make the whole lot of you soup too! Yiii~hi-hi~~~!”

Along with that shriek, she splattered the contents of the pot towards us. That converted into a mist dyed a venomous-looking purple, enveloping all of us.

At the moment, a green-framed debuff icon lit up below my HP bar at the top-left of my sight. Paralysis.

“Geh...”

Without even the time to moan, Asuna, Argo, Scarecrow and the rest collapsed onto the ground with me. For all three high levels to be unable to resist, this must be a forced paralysis event, but that doesn’t change the peril of this situation. I rushed to retrieve a cure potion from my pouch, but somehow, even my right hand, which should normally be able to move when paralyzed, was numb.

“Hi-hi-hi... no~ow then, who shall be the first one to be boiled...”

While waving around the ladle that served as a replacement for a magic wand, the witch approached in a dance-like motion. This might actually be pretty bad, I thought, desperately trying to stand, but my body was utterly incapable of movement.

“Yihihi, it’s no use, it’s no use. Nothing can break this spell aside from a lion’s roar.”

—Oh, I see.

I shifted my vision at that terribly obvious hint, somehow managing to take a look behind. Scarecrow and Tin certainly were paralyzed like us, but Lion alone did not have a debuff icon. If he were to go “gao” and roar just once, the paralysis for all of us should be cured.

It should, but.

Great. Lion was cowering down and trembling with his arms hugging his head, his mane laid completely flat. Hey hey, I retorted in my mind before finally realizing.

This was inevitable. His «courage» was still with the witch. This wouldn't have been acceptable if we've finished that sub-quest, reclaiming the golden mane that was the source of his courage, but there was no way he could rise up in the current circumstances. It was a predictable outcome, so why exactly did both Asuna and Argo think that there was no need to go about doing the three sub-quests—

“Woof, woof woof woof!”

And, the energetic tyke's barks rang out, interrupting my thoughts.

That wasn't all that stopped. Lion's shivering made a sudden stop as well, and its mane that would lose to no other at shriveling up was gradually swelling up, wasn't it. Why. His courage should have been lost.

Lying on the ground, I opened my eyes and watched as Lion picked himself up slowly. He had his usual droopy face, but a light definitely shone within those two eyes of his.

“I... I am here to help Dorothy!”

He strongly shouted that out and sucked in the air, inhaling his chest to a large extent—Lion went “garooo!”, letting out a rousing roar. As though it was blown away by that lion's roar, my paralysis icon vanished.

The witch tried her paralyzing attack for the second time, but Tin went next after Lion and even Scarecrow stood up after that, dispelling her charms. Perhaps having exhausted her supply of spells, the witch swung her ladle about as she ferociously charged towards us.

The black-robed witch with a pointy hat on didn't look capable of weapon skills no matter how you looked at her, but the long ladle she brandished above her glowed red, slightly surprising me. As expected of a resident of this world, it seems she could command sword skills of the Poleax type.

“Kukeeeee—!”

She swung down the ladle with that shriek, but I easily took it on with my «Vertical Arc». I countered, driving her attack back, and Asuna turned towards the knocked back witch before switching in with a leap.

I do wonder if she really had to continue holding onto that tyke with her left arm even in this situation, but still, as expected of her, she succeeded in invoking a sword skill. Receiving five merciless stabs, one after another, the witch got blasted away even further. It was now Argo's turn, charging in without even giving her the time to land. With a dash that would exceed even Asuna's, she went under the witch and burst straight in with skills of the Wild Dance type, using the metal claws on her two hands.

As expected of a quest boss, the witch survived with barely any of her HP bar left over after suffering a skill combo from three high levels. She fell onto the floor with a thump, but stood straight up without getting stunned and ran back to the big pot deep within the hall. We were about to chase after her the moment our skill delay ended, in anticipation of her casting another spell with that mysterious soup—but it happened before we even could.

The tyke, no, Toto suddenly jumped out of Asuna's arms and shot after the witch with the intensity of a bullet, biting onto her black high heels. Her leg snagged, the witch pitched forward and tumbled over with great force, plunging head first into the big, boiling pot with a splash.

Seconds later, a grand monster death effect sprouted up from the inside of that soup.

Having let out from the cage, the girl, Dorothy, expressed her gratitude to us repeatedly while embracing her pet dog, Toto. It seems that the girl will be continuing her travels with Scarecrow and the rest to search for «Emerald City» somewhere in this world.

After seeing off Dorothy and her party at that log house from earlier, I clapped the backs of a reluctant Asuna (probably due to parting with the dog) and a relieved Argo (this was due to the dog too) at the same time. The final «!» mark of the quest was floating within the log house. We should definitely be able to return to our original position if we enter the house and close the door.

“Now then, let’s get back.”

I watched the sky to the west while saying that line; the setting sun was just about to sink below the sea of clouds.

The scarecrow, tin figure and lion sought for a brain, a heart and courage, respectively, even in the original “The Wizard of Oz” — that was what Asuna taught me on the way back through the skies.

However, they did not get them in the end. The Wizard of Oz said this at the end of the tale. That in saving Dorothy, who was kidnapped by the witch, Scarecrow used his wisdom, Tin expressed emotions, and Lion exhibited courage. Hence, all of you already have what you’ve wanted—

“...So that’s it, huh. That’s why both Argo and you knew that Lion and the rest would stand up even without clearing the sub-quests?”

I spoke with a bitter smile and just as the female team were about to nod in pride, the house landed with a scraping sound.

Upon exiting, I confirmed that this was the empty land in the forest where I found the log house long ago. Without waiting for Asuna and me as we stood still, Argo briskly cut through the lawn and spoke with a satisfied smile on.

“Thanks for today, both of you. In return, I’ll keep that bit of information a secret and not sell ‘t.”

“Hah? That bit of information... what are you referring to?”

“You know, don’t you!”

She gave me a quick wink—

“I wish both of you the best, Ki-bou, Aa-chan!”

Leaving us both frozen in shock, Argo disappeared from our sight with the stealth of a ninja.

Seconds later, Asuna started giggling, prompting me to follow along and loosen the tension in my face. As we laughed together, I felt that final thorn, that was embedded deep within my chest, vanish, leaving not a single trace behind.

—What I wished for, was already within my grasp the moment I stepped forth, wanting it.

I asked for Asuna to always be together with me and proposed. Hence, I have already found what I had lost then. The emotion of loving another.

“.....Asuna.”

Upon calling her name, Asuna stared at me with a smile still on her face.

I looked straight into those hazel eyes, glistening beautifully in the afterglow visible beyond the roof of the log house, and opened the Main Menu. Moving through two tabs, I softly pressed my finger against the button I was looking for.

I pressed down on the word, «Marriage», and touched the name, «Asuna», next.

Asuna's eyes shifted, noticing the small window appearing before her. Raising her right hand, her slender finger gently caressed the window—

“.....Kirito-kun.”

Asuna whispered that single word with her eyes unwaveringly on mine and pressed down on the «YES» button.

We found out the name of the autonomous control system that regulated this world, «Cardinal» a mere few days later.

As for the extraordinary «Automatic Quest Generation Function» that Cardinal was installed with, we were informed about that much, much later in the future.

(End)



A Spot of Sunshine in the Winter

(冬の陽だまり)

Translation of the short story written by Kawahara Reki, of Sword Art Online, in his newest doujinshi, Silica Edition: A Spot of Sunshine in Winter (冬の陽だまり)
It's recommended to read the first 4 volumes at least, before this.

A Spot of Sunshine in Winter

New Aincrad 22nd Floor

31st December 2025

When fulldiving while wearing an AmuSphere, it seems that people feel either a falling or a floating sensation.

Keiko belonged to the latter group. Lying down on her bed in comfortable attire, she would call out the «Link Start» voice command and her consciousness, now separated from her body, would be immersed in a sensation as though she was floating straight upwards.

An image of infinitely rising through a pure, white expanse, with eternal prisms of rainbow light cascading downwards.

Previously, when she considered a credible view she found on the net, that “the type of people who experience floating sensations feel that reality is harsh and wish to escape into the virtual world”, she had ended up brooding over it, despite getting indignant over how baseless it was. She didn't feel that reality was bleak in the slightest—or so she had thought.

After all, she had been imprisoned in a virtual world for a period of two years when she was twelve years of age, before finally being released slightly less than a year ago.

In comparison to that heartless, severe place, where her remaining hit points had been connected with her real life, reality was such a tranquil place. From April, she had even started attending the school set up for SAO survivors who were still minors in terms of age and had made many friends there.

It does get a little awkward back home, but she's welcomed by her reserved father, her mother who's skilled at cooking and loves to sing, and her Munchkin breed cat, Pina, that she keeps. Here, she could read the continuation of the manga she likes (not to mention the two years worth of back issues!) and even get to eat actual cheesecakes. Hence, she had no reason to feel that reality was harsh whatsoever.

She shouldn't... but still.

While entrusting her body to the transient floating sensation, Keiko recalled the argument she had with her parents tens of minutes ago. To be specific, this was the first quarrel she had, since returning from SAO.

It was the thirty-first of December, 2025. New Year's Eve. The three members of the Ayano family, Keiko, along with her father and mother, had arranged to visit the home belonging to her father's parents in the Yamanashi prefecture, with the cat joining them as well. It was something that had been decided a month ago and at the time Keiko had obediently nodded as well when she first heard about it.

However right before departing, in the garage at home, she had ended up saying it. That she didn't want to go no matter what.

Her parents tried gently persuading her by saying how her grandfather, grandmother and her male cousins were all looking forward to meeting her, but as Keiko stuck to her obstinate behavior for tens of minutes, their words gradually grew harsher, resulting in her father uttering "Then just do as you like" before leaving in the car.

Left alone at home, Keiko locked up the entranceway, returned to her room on the second floor and put on the AmuSphere after slumping onto her bed.

That's why this one and only particular dive might be a form of escape. Even so, that didn't matter. At the very least, crying in the virtual world rather than the real world would end without the need to worry about swollen eyes later on.

After turning into her Cait Sith character Silica, the place Keiko emerged was on a porch leading to a log house built on the shore of a large lake, on the twenty-second floor of the new Aincrad which orbited through the skies of Alfheim. It appears to be early in the afternoon in the abode of the fairies, with plentiful warm sunlight beaming down upon the garden's lawn.

This wasn't a player home that belonged to her, but since she was able to get herself registered on the sub-owner list, she could freely log in and out anywhere within the premises of the homestead. That said, she takes the original two owners into consideration, making sure not to start off indoors, just in case.

Shortly after Silica's dive, a light blue glimmer appeared in the space right beside her which coalesced, before changing into the shape of a small dragon.

Though defined as small, that's only when compared to the larger versions of the dragon race mobs, with its wingspan stretching close to over a meter. However, with its entire body was covered in a downy fur in a shade of light blue that matched its two round, ruby eyes, there was no sign of ferocity in its outward appearance.

"Here, Pina."

The moment Silica reached out with her two hands, the small dragon, which had the same name as her pet cat, dove into her arms after letting out a single coo, "kururu!". She tightly hugged its fluffy body and it started licking her right cheek with its tiny tongue.

Pina, with an AI at the level of familiars, or in other words, «tamed monsters», was not terribly smart, but at times, it reacted as though it could read Silica's mind. This was one such time, and while it licked Silica's face, it continuously let out a "kuru... ruru..." from its throat, as if it was showing its concern.

"...Thank you, I'm alright now. I'm fine now, after meeting you, Pina."

While whispering that, she placed Pina who was unexpectedly light for its size onto her head. Its feathery wings tickled those cat ears unique to the race of Cait Sith and its long tail wrapped around her neck, much like a muffler.

Enveloped in a warmth that seemed impossible for a moving object in a virtual world, Silica felt herself slowly perking up from the chagrin of the dispute she had with her parents, as she strode to the door of the log house.

Upon touching the doorknob, a crisp click rang out, representing the door unlocking. Gently pulling it open, she headed in and called out, "Good afternoon". As expected, there was no reply. She could open up the Friend List from her Main Menu to check on their login status, but she could believe that there wouldn't be anyone here without needing to resort to that. After all, it was New Year's Eve...

However, just in case, Silica minded her manners and said her greetings for intruding before she entered. Closing the door, she headed for the main room on the left side of the hallway.

The moment she stepped into the living room, with a breadth impossible for a detached house in reality, or at least, for an average one in Tokyo's special wards, Pina slowly flew off from her head. The reasons for a familiar to leave its master without orders should be either due to detecting monsters closing in, or having its intimacy value drop from not being fed enough and changing to a defiant status; that said, there was a possible third reason when considering this room in this house.

Conscious of her virtual heart now beating harder, Silica chased Pina as it flew, flapping its wings. She went around a huge log that was used as a pillar and cast her eyes towards the south facing window.

Placed in a spot with lemon-yellow sunshine falling onto it, was a solitary rocking chair. Atop that chair which was moving constantly and rather gently without making any noise lay a Spriggan with black hair, clothed in black, with his eyes closed. His sleeping expression was far from the one that he shows in battle, here showing signs of boyish innocence.

Pina, who had flown off Silica's head, circled once above the Spriggan before it landed near his stomach. Folding its wings, it coiled up its head and tail before finally falling asleep. No, it's a familiar, so that ought to be merely «looking as though it's asleep», but the “kyururu, kyururu” sounds of it breathing in its sleep was no illusion.

“...Geez, Pina.”

After muttering that under her breath, Silica continued to stand as she gazed at the sleeping poses of that person and that animal. Her beating heart gently slowed down from the somewhat quick rate it had been and a calm tranquility soon spread within Silica as well. For a short while, the spice of grief sprinkled onto her while she took shelter in the warmth.

This went on for close to thirty seconds before she regained her wits and looked around her. If he, the owner of this house, was logged in, it was likely that either the other owner, an Undine healer, or his real life little sister, a Sylphid magic swordswoman, was around as well, but she could find no traces of other players.

Cait Sith were the race bestowed with the highest level of perception ability among the nine races, so she should know if there was anyone else in the house. Of course, it's different if hiding spells or skills were used, but there should be no reason to hide inside the house in that manner.

—Having decided that, Silica was still at a loss for several seconds before carrying a single chair from the dining table to the side of the rocking chair. She softly sat down after aligning them.

She sprawled her body towards the left and stared hard at the profile of the sleeping Spriggan's face right in front of her.

In mere seconds, Silica could feel her eyelids weighing down as well. Having that boy sound asleep in this room releases a sort of magical power that causes sleepiness in the surrounding players—or at least, that was the accepted conclusion among her friends. However, she must not allow herself to succumb to this magic. Silica had the «Automatically Disconnect When Asleep Function» set to fifteen minutes, so if she fell asleep she would soon be logged out. Going through the connection sequence once again was certainly a bother, but her main reason was to not waste this precious time available. The chance she could be alone with that sleeping boy—generally were no longer possible, not since the night of the day that they met in a certain different floating castle.

Come to think of it, that had happened nearly two years ago.

She had lost her familiar, Pina, and even her own life had been like a candle flickering in the wind when Silica was saved by the black-clothed swordsman, Kirito.

He didn't just protect Silica, but was even willing to help revive the once-killed Pina. She still remembers that single day of adventure, when they went to retrieve the item that could resurrect a familiar down, to its very last detail. The gigantic flower monsters with tentacles sprouting out from them and the orange players that assaulted them on the way back were extremely scary, but those memories were all important to her.

—No, it wasn't just that day.

With her hands raised to her chest while tightly grasping each other, Silica began to ponder while sitting on the chair.

All the days they had adventured and played together since she first met Pina gave off a special sparkle within her memories. That radiance was so vivid that it could cause the entire time she spent in the real world to pale in comparison. Of course, she could meet up with Pina whenever she wanted if she dived into ALO, and she was conscious of the fact of that already being a blessing by itself—after all, Pina really should have disappeared when SAO was cleared—but at times, she wondered about something.

About how it would be nice if this side was the true reality instead.

A thought that couldn't be told to anyone, one that definitely couldn't be released from her lips. A thought that would betray her parents who were worried to death over her for those two years when she was trapped in that death game and enthusiastically celebrated her return. But. But still—

The teardrops that gathered in her lower eyelashes without her noticing faintly pattered onto the chair's armrest.

Perhaps due to that noise which could barely be called one, the black-haired Spriggan—Kirito languidly opened his eyes. Silica frantically turned back to face forward before blinking countless times to dissipate the remaining tears effect. She stayed frozen in that position for several seconds before she heard his voice.

“...Huh, Silica? When did you get here?”

She timidly turned to the left and was met with the sleepy-looking face of Kirito's right before her own.

“Go-Good afternoon, Kirito-san. Erm, fift... five minutes earlier or so, I think.”

“Woah, you should have just woke me up.”

Getting up with a flustered expression, Kirito seemed to have finally noticed Pina on top of him. With a gentle smile, he lightly caressed the area near the base of its neck with his fingertips.

The small dragon rolled over while still asleep, showing its belly that was of a shade slightly more pale than its back and shook its tail to plead for more rubbing.

Silica exchanged another look with Kirito before they both broke into soft laughter.

Upon settling down, words flowed from between her lips, almost as though it was only natural.

“...Earlier, I had a fight with my parents.”

Kirito raised his eyebrows slightly before calmly asking.

“Despite it being New Year’s Eve? Or maybe because it’s New Year’s Eve?”

“Because it’s New Year’s Eve... I believe. Actually, I was supposed to go over to my grandfather’s place in Yamanashi today, but just when we were leaving, I went ahead and said that I didn’t want to go... ah, i-it’s not like I thought that the popular hunting areas in ALO might be empty on New Year’s Eve, I didn’t do it for anything like that.”

“Haha, you would be let down if that “was” your true reason. It seems that there were loads of players with the same thought, so it’s practically no more empty than usual.”

“...So you’ve checked it out already, huh. Or rather, Kirito-san, that was what you were here for...?”

Silica looked up at him for a brief moment and the Spriggan shook his head with a ruffled expression.

“Th-That’s totally not it. I could have been wanting to test out the sharpness of «Excaliber» that I got the other day, or maybe showing it off to Eugene, so that’s definitely not-”

“I didn’t ask about all that, geez.”

“I-I see. Wait, that’s not it, we were talking about your home visit, Silica.”

Kirito casually cleared his throat, returned to a serious expression and stared straight at Silica.

His avatar was the only one among her friends from the past SAO period with a different face and figure. However, those jet black eyes deep enough to suck you in remained the same. She could not tear her eyes away and they continued looking at each other, before Kirito finally spoke in a whisper.

“...You don’t want to... meet with someone?”

“That’s right.”

She nodded at her innermost thoughts, hidden from even her parents, being seen through without any sign of surprise.

“It’s not just one person though, but multiple. I don’t want to meet my male cousins. ...I went back for the Bon Festival the other time, that was when I met them for the first time in three years, but... that night, when all of us children were left alone, everyone wanted to hear about it...”

“About what happened in SAO, huh...”

“Yes. ...I understand they didn’t have any bad intentions. If our positions were reversed, I might have asked about this and that as well. But... I didn’t want to. I really didn’t want to talk about that world.”

“That’s because... those memories were awful? Or maybe...”

He cut his words off then, and Silica looked back at his face, this time with a trifling amount of surprise.

“Kirito-san, there are times when you’re extremely dense, and times when you’re extremely sharp, huh.”

“R-Really?”

“Really. ...As you guessed, the reason why I didn’t want to talk about it is because those memories are really important to me. But I didn’t want my parents to know that was how I thought... so I told my cousins about how scary that world was and how glad I was when I escaped from it; those were all I talked about. But as I continued speaking, it was like I was sullying something precious to me... So, at that time, I decided that I wouldn’t talk about SAO again. But if I go to my grandfather’s place, I would definitely meet them again, so... I...”

When Silica spoke no further, her lips trembling, Kirito took the action of extending his right hand in exchange for words. Poof, he placed his palm onto Silica’s head, gently stroking the base of her cat ears akin to how he did earlier to Pina.

The triangular ears and long tail unique to the Cait Sith race were able to feel through some sort of mechanism. Especially the tail which produces a jolting stimulus flowing down the spine alongside the utmost «sense of oddity» when strongly gripped; but on the other hand, caressing the ears definitely did not bring about an unpleasant feeling.

It seems that her tension eased off little by little as she immersed herself in the strange sense of pleasure not found in reality. Faced with Silica who was loosening the stiffness in her shoulders with her eyes half-closed, Kirito asked about an unexpected matter.

“Silica, you were twelve back when SAO started, weren’t you?”

“...Yes, that’s right. I was in the second term of my sixth year in primary school.”

“I see. Did the Nerve Gear belong to you? Or perhaps, your father...?”

“It was mine. That said, it’s not like I bought it myself or got my parents to buy it for me; I got it as a prize from a magazine.

Along with the software for SAO. It was the first and last time I won something that expensive.”

“Oh! Those must have been amazing odds... perhaps even more lucky than me when I was chosen for the beta test. Ah, no, I’m not sure if you could call that lucky, though...”

Silica unintentionally giggled at those faltering words that he had added on.

“If that was supposed to be unlucky, it would be the punishment for lying about my age when I applied. ...At least, that was what I often thought right after I got trapped in SAO. That it would be nice if I hadn’t won the Nerve Gear; that it would be nice if it was some other software; things like that...”

“I see... —But if that was the case, you sure were amazing, being able to leave the Beginning City. And almost all of the kids around your age lived together without leaving the city too.”

“No, that actually might... be the reason why I left the city. After all, while I was cursing my fate at an inn there, in the Beginning City, winning the Nerve Gear could become the worst misfortune I have had in my life... so I made the decision to definitely find something that would make me glad to have come to this world, and that’s why I left the city. It was considerably much later than Kirito-san and Asuna-san though.”

Upon hearing that, Kirito returned his glance back to himself while rubbing Silica’s cat ears. On top of his black shirt, the small, light blue dragon was sound asleep with its face up as always.

“...I’m glad you found it.”

He murmured, and Silica nodded with a smile on her face.

“Yes. Meeting Pina was... and that’s not all. Meeting Kirito-san, Asuna-san, Liz-san and the rest, and becoming friends with all of you too. That’s why, to me... those memories from that world are simply irreplaceable.”

The topic made a full circle back to the start, but she remained calm. Soaking in the sensation of those virtual appendages being stroked, Silica slowly contemplated the problem she faced and opened her mouth.

“That said, it’s not like I didn’t want to return back to reality. It’s all thanks to Kirito-san and everyone else trying their best to clear SAO that I am able to live in peace like this now, and I’m really glad about that. But... somehow... I feel like something is different. Something in this real world... feels just a little... different. My cousins who wanted to hear about SAO too... Papa and Mama who always look at me with worrying eyes... even my cat, Pina, is somehow different... from the past...”

After expressing all of that, Silica became aware of what caused the biggest sense of discomfort for the first time. And that was herself. The one who have already turned fifteen this year, Ayano Keiko of the real world. Compared to the avatar that was taken verbatim from the SAO era, her real body had grown quite a bit and her figure had changed.

I see, she thought. It’s only natural to feel that something is different. After all, I must be afraid of these various changes deep down in my heart. Afraid of the time in reality constantly flowing past at such a forceful speed. Afraid of what is yet to come.

“...I’m... scared. Of things changing, things disappearing... that someday, a time might come when I can’t meet Kirito-san, everyone else, or Pina in this world anymore... If that’s the case, I would rather just, once again.....”

Be trapped here. Forever. And for time to stop.

But that wish was not one that could exit her mouth. The black-haired swordsman reflected in her eyes cleared SAO with his life on the line and freed over six thousand players, inclusive of Silica. There was no way she could say that she would like to be taken prisoner again by the virtual world in front of him.

Silica cast her eyes downwards and bit her lips hard.

The fingers rubbing her ears came to a sudden stop. His hand did not leave but rather, snugly enveloped her right ear with his palm. The core of her mind felt as if it went numb and the moment Silica loosened the tension in her entire body once more in response to that, she heard his voice.

“...I’m happy that I was able to meet you here and now today, Silica. The next time too, and the time after that too; that’s definitely what I’ll believe. That’s why... thank you, Silica. For staying alive until that time we met in the «Forest of Wandering», two years ago.”

“Eh.....”

As she glanced upwards at those unanticipated words, Kirito’s smiling face was right before hers.

The meaning behind that gratitude belatedly sank in.

Though she hasn’t even actually tried to think about it, Kirito should also be suffering from difficulties and hardships of his own in these days. Perhaps he might have recalled that memory during his bleak moments as well. Of that girl, who he met and saved the life of, deep in the forest consumed by night. That the girl was alive, living on peacefully in the real world.

That time was still flowing for her, second after second—

Silica raised both of her hands up, took Kirito’s right hand which was covering her triangular ear and brought it before her face.

The dark tone of his skin, characteristic to Spriggans, was different from that of the Kirito from the SAO era. However, the warmth remained exactly the same. The hand that covered Silica’s shoulders as she cried at the end of the adventures on that day was exactly the same.

In actual fact, many things will change, even in the virtual world. Thinking about it, it was because she left the Beginning City, demanding change, that Silica was able to meet Pina, and thus, Kirito. However, there certainly are things that don't change there. Important things will definitely not leave her behind.

That probably applies to the real world as well. The way her male cousins and parents treated Silica was different from before. However, their feelings were... their feelings for Silica remain unchanged within all of them. And thus, an unchanging self inside of Ayano Keiko definitely exists, with time flowing through her one day at a time.

With Kirito's right hand wrapped within her two palms, Silica took a long, deep breath. She brought them up to her sight and then asked of the slightly embarrassed-looking Spriggan.

"Kirito-san, are you free today?"

"Mo-More or less... I'm free enough to take a nap in a place like this, after all. Dad's coming back from America late at night, but I should be free until then..."

"Then please have a New Year's Eve date with me."

It was a line she would normally never manage to say, even if she were to try with all her might, but perhaps backed by the thought of "I'm not a kid anymore", it came out without any difficulty. Upon hearing that, Kirito let his sight wander for a moment, but soon nodded with a smile.

"Sure, if someone like me will do. Well, shall we go to the main city of the twenty-fifth floor, then? Or the lower world? It should be right around the Undine territory at the moment..."

"No, let's have it at Ikebukuro, one hour from now!"

"Alright, then Ikebuku... eh, eeh!? In the real world!?"

"I won't allow you take those words back now."

Silica tightly gripped Kirito's hand before letting it go and spoke while grinning.

"I'll go to Yamanashi by train after that. Papa and the rest must be worried, after all."

Against that, Kirito blinked countless times before he nodded with a smile as well.

"I see. Then I'll send you off until the Shinjuku station."

"Ah, you didn't actually think that would be enough, did you! That's only four stops on the Yamanote Line, isn't it!"

"It's only one if you go by the Saikyou Line."

"You're horrible! You can't call that a date!"

Perhaps due to the intensifying commotion from the exchange, Pina awoke on top of Kirito and let out a big yawn. An iridescent bubble shot out from its mouth and flitted through the southern window, flying far, far away into the skies as it brilliantly shimmered in the sunlight.

Story Pencil Board (Dengeki Bunko vol. 30)

Translation of the (really) short story written by Kawahara Reki, of Sword Art Online, from the story pencil board given as a free gift with Dengeki Bunko vol. 30.

There were two things that Asuna, the rapier-wielder who was the sub-leader of the guild, Knights of the Blood, and nicknamed «The Flash», poured her passion into, even though they had no direct benefits for the clearing of the death game, SAO.

One was «cooking». Raising its proficiency level was extremely troublesome and it wasn't like being able to make delicious dishes increased your survivability in dungeons—there are food that gave a temporary boost to one's status or resistance, however—which resulted in Asuna not knowing of any other players among the swordsman classes who completed their cooking skill.

And the other was not a skill. It wasn't an item or a quest either. It was the moment of utmost bliss when she could soak in hot water, up to her shoulders, and let loose her body and heart, or in other words, «a bath».

Her home in the main city of the sixty-first floor, Salemburg, had a bathroom with a bathtub, even if it was small, and she had an exhaustive list of sleeping quarters that included large bath-houses on every floor, for times when she felt the desire for a bigger bath.

And that was how Asuna was, but she couldn't help but to have second thoughts when she bought newly discovered bath-related information from the information broker, Argo, the other day. She wanted to go. She absolutely wanted to go. However, her rationality threw the brakes on that this particular time. That was because that bath existed outside the area of the Anti-Criminal Code and to make things worse, it didn't even have any solid walls surrounding it, a so-called «open-air bath».

There was no point in not removing all equipment when entering a bath. But the fact that it was outside the area meant that attacks from monsters were a given, with the possibility of orange players as well. Weapons, at the very least, could be placed right beside the bathtub for immediate response, but it was necessary to manipulate various windows to equip armor. Above all else, there was no way she could enter the bath and relax while on the guard against attacks.

—And Asuna grumbled so to her close friend, Lisbeth, a blacksmith, on the afternoon of 1st October, 2024.

While putting Asuna's beloved sword, Lambent Light, against the sharpening wheel, Lisbeth thought for a bit, but submitted a proposal with a smug smile before long.

".....Hahhhh... this is the best....."

And Lisbeth let out a comment that couldn't possibly be more lethargic, something Asuna thoroughly agreed with.

"Certainly, this must be the second best I've entered in Aincrad."

"That's kind of contradictory. Where was the best?"

She replied Lisbeth, who turned around with a splash, while smiling.

"I guess it really must have been on the first floor, the time I first entered a bath."

"Aah, I know, right! I didn't know Aincrad had baths at the start."

"Hehe, me too."

Nodding, the slightly cloudy, hot water dripped down from between her fingers.

The open-air bath, which was at the exact coordinates the information described, was far more authentic than Asuna expected.

The bathtub surrounded by rocks was slightly inclined and a lavish stream of hot water gushed out from uphill, flowing down without moderation. Beyond the plain wooden fence surrounding the bathtub was the foliage of trees turning bright-red and an unobstructed blue sky, as the outer circumference was nearby. It was practically the same as a free-flowing natural hot spring.

Asuna's rapier and Lisbeth's mace were placed on the nearby rocks as a minimum level of protection, but the pair was fully unequipped aside from that. Thinking about it, it was the first time she entered a bath with someone else—or in the first place, it was the first time she was seeing another's avatar stark naked. Lisbeth turned her body up the moment she realized that, so Asuna unconsciously stared at her.

Noticing her gaze, Lisbeth grinned with a slight blush.

"What's with that perverted gaze, Asuna?"

"Eh, th-that's not it, I didn't mean it that way, erm... I just thought you looked pretty and..."

"What, is that supposed to be sarcasm!? Sure, you have a slender waist, but still!"

Squeezed by the two hands that suddenly reached out and caught hold of her waist, Asuna twisted her body.

"Ahaha, h-hey, that tickles!"

"That would be because I'm tickling you!"

They made a ruckus with the water splashing around for a while, before fully stretching out their arms and legs once again, next to each other. Over half of the bathtub was still free, even with those two as they were.

According to the information Asuna bought, this open-air bath was a key spot of a certain quest and it seems that that would be an assault from a mysterious ninja squad here by proceeding onwards with the story. Of course, she wasn't concerned over that at the moment, but the possibility of monsters, unrelated to the quest, or players attacking still remained, like she fretted over at the start.

However, Asuna, and probably Lisbeth as well, couldn't be any more relaxed with their entire bodies in the hot bath. That was because they were protected by something more reliable than any sort of weapon or armor.

A gentle autumn breeze brushed against the water surface, the steam lightly hung over it.

In that moment, a terrific sneeze could be heard beyond the wooden door heading out. Following that, a miserable voice.

"Erm~, do you think it would be possible for us to switch in just a little more~~?"

Meeting Lisbeth's glance, they both giggled before Asuna called back to the one she believed to be the strongest among the clearing group—which would make him the strongest among all of the players—that black-haired, one-handed sword user.

"Another ten minutes, please!"

Without missing a beat, Lisbeth added on.

"No, make that twenty!"



ソードアート・オンライン
SWORD ART ONLINE
イラスト/abec

The Celeste Fairy (チェレステの妖精)

Translation of the short story written by Kawahara Reki, of Sword Art Online, from the Marugoto Issatsu appendix given with Dengeki Bunko vol. 31.

celeste. Celeste.

It is a word unfamiliar to likely half... no, seventy percent, or perhaps even over ninety percent of all Japanese.

Its meanings include «celestial» or «blue skies». And derived from those would be «a blue in the color of the skies». The image of *sky blue* would usually be invoked when asked to describe this color of the skies, but people of a certain hobby would immediately picture a pale turquoise blue at the word, celeste. Various shades of turquoise do exist, but the mint portion of choco-mint ice cream is somewhat close.

That said, that «certain hobby» naturally did not refer to wandering about to sample ice cream. The oldest bicycle-making company in the world, Bianchi, from Italy, associates itself with the color celeste. Asuna commented “Ooh, so it’s like *tiffany blue*, isn’t it?” after I told her about it, but well, is it... really like that?

At any rate, I believe with near certainty that anyone in Japan, who is reminded of the color of mint ice cream when they hear “celeste”, has an interest in bicycles.

It was mainly due to the abovementioned reason that I could shout out “Woah, it’s a Bianchi!” immediately upon laying my eyes on the bicycle that appeared in the evening of that Friday, 10th April 2025^{*}, without even confirming its manufacturer’s logo.

* “Friday, 10th April 2025” – This is actually a Thursday. Yeah

The moment I hung the blazer-type uniform I couldn't get used to wearing onto the wall in my room and opened the southern window, a yell at maximum volume flew at me.

“Oni—cha—n!!”

After getting startled back with a “woah”, I looked down at the garden from the window. When I did so, Suguha in a jersey, who apparently got back home before me, was there waving her two hands to and fro.

“Come out here for a moment, c'mon, hurry up!!”

“H... hey, everyone in the neighborhood can hear that voice of yours, even if they have a girl around your age...”

Although I did try warning her in my position as her brother, I was suppressed with a single “Who cares about that!” line from her. Reluctantly raising my right hand to signal my acknowledgement, I went down the stairs with a still half-untied necktie dangling off me.

I got down to the garden through the living room and there, I finally noticed a large object beside Suguha. As a white cloth covered it from the top, nothing could be seen but an angular silhouette, long and narrow.

“What is it... what's that?”

After cheerfully smiling away while looking upon my face, as I inclined my head, for nearly whole five seconds, Suguha gripped onto the white cloth with both hands. Must have been tough finding a cloth that big; wait, that's a bed sheet, isn't it; mother's going to get mad at you later on... such thoughts came to me as I-

“Ta-da!”

Producing a sound effect like that with her mouth, Suguha tore off the sheets that immediately made them blow away.

What appeared from beneath the cloth was a high-quality sports bicycle, shining a vivid celeste blue even under the sunset... commonly known as a *road bicycle*.

Woah, it's a Bianchi; what are you planning to do with this; don't tell me you bought it; it must have been ridiculously expensive... after suppressing my onslaught of questions once again, with her right palm, Suguha replied with a broad grin.

"Of course I bought it, but it wasn't that expensive. It's secondhand and there was some kind of reason behind it, so the mister at Rinrindou* gave me a huge discount on it."

Rinrindou referred to a nearby bicycle shop that Suguha and I frequented since kindergarten. The MTB I ride nowadays was bought from there as well, so there was no way that uncle in particular would try and force the sale of those bicycles with truly suspicious origins, like those involved in accidents or thief, but still—

"Even with a discount... this has a carbon frame and the parts are good too, so I'm sure it would normally fetch two hundred thousand* even when secondhand, though..."

"Eeh, really? Wow, I got it at an amazing bargain price..."

Just how far did you beat the price down; I scanned over the bicycle another time with that thought in my mind and finally noticed something.

"No, wait a moment, doesn't the size not suit you, Sugu? Try getting on, it's probably too big."

Suguha opened her eyes wide this time round after I said so, then slapped my left arm without warning.

* Rinrindou – Literally, Bell Wheel-dou. Companies just like to attach -dou (temple, shrine) to their names, I'm not too sure, but it's probably something about prestige

* Two hundred thousand – Approximately [Around 2000 USD](#). at the time of writing.

“What are you saying! There’s no way I would ride something like this. It’s yours, oniichan, yours, to celebrate your enrollment!”

“Heh? Mine?”

After replying with a “goes without sayin’, you idiot” in a tone similar to Klein’s, Suguha finally gave an explanation from the start.

Apparently, Suguha and my parents had been discussing on a gift to celebrate my one-year-late enrollment into high school—or to be specific, a vocational school targeted at SAO survivors. As a result of their numerous discussions, they took reference from a serious road bicycle I once took an interest in and seemed to have given nothing but their budget to the Rinrindou uncle, entrusting him with the make and size.

“...So that’s the reason behind him telling me my MTB riding position was off and measuring my height and leg length when I dropped in the other day...”

“Ahaha, looks like the cat didn’t get out of the bag though the mister said ‘he might have noticed when I did the sizing’.”

“It didn’t occur to me at all...”

After shaking my head, I gently tried rubbing the bicycle’s frame, painted both celeste and black, while it maintained its position using a simple stand. Suguha said it was secondhand, but it seemed the previous owner took great care riding it as there were no obvious signs of damage, the metallic parts were polished carefully, and the bar tape and tires were swapped with new ones. After staring at the machine, that was so beautiful it nearly made me gasp, for a whole ten seconds, I turned and spoke to Suguha.

“Thanks a lot, Sugu. I’ll take good care of it... it feels like a waste to actually ride it...”

With that, my little sister replied with a somewhat embarrassed smile.

“Ehehe... but it'll be sad for the bicycle if you don't ride it. Keep yourself safe and ride it a lot!”

And, through that course of events—

Ten in the morning on a Sunday, two days later on the 12th of April, I was on the footpath in front of my home in the process of preparing for the assault, equipped with a helmet, sunglasses, gloves, and shoes for biking.

The Bianchi stood against the adjacent gatepost, gleaming as it bathed in the spring sunlight. Yesterday, I thought to ask for the details on the «particular reason» while receiving fine tuning at Rinrindou, but it allegedly wasn't due to some severe problem like cracks on the frame, just that a part called the bottom bracket was stuck and couldn't be removed.

‘Iron would have been fine, but it's carbon, you see; it's pretty darn scary trying to force it out... well, not like it'll give you any trouble riding it, Kazu.’

And that was how he spoke. The BB was the spindle for the crank (the rod stuck to the pedal), so it does wear out the bearing inside, but my mileage of ten or twenty thousand kilometers of relaxed cycling with my lack of leg strength wouldn't have any substantial effect on it.

After adding on other necessities such as a drink bottle, a saddlebag, and LED lights, I mounted my oft-used portable terminal onto the handlebars. Of course, data loggers specialized for bicycles exist as well, but there was a reason why I didn't use one.

Finished with some simple warm-up exercises, I straddled the saddle that was quite a bit higher than my MTB's and began cycling with caution even while nervous over my overtly forward-bent posture, feeling absolutely no resistance as the slender high pressure tires rolled over the road and the speed accelerating after putting just a little strength into my feet on the pedals.

Just as I was about to exit the local road into the wide main road, I whispered into the small microphone attached to my sportswear's collar.

"Yui, you can come out now."

With that, the screen of the portable terminal mounted on the handlebars faintly glowed and a small girl jumped out. Her height was slightly less than ten centimeters, her limbs thinner than the shift cables right beside her. Of course, she didn't exist in reality. I could look at her as though she was real thanks to the see-through display built into my sunglasses, she was a so-called 'AR image'.

Having landed onto the portable terminal display that went black once again, the girl's long, black hair and white one piece fluttered in the travelling breeze as she grinned.

'Good morning, Papa!'

The girl's name is Yui. I, Kirito / Kirigaya Kazuto, met her, an AI, at the Floating Castle Aincrad that no longer exists.

Yui's main program now resides on the desktop PC in my room, after getting released from SAO. We mainly meet in the virtual world, but it's still possible to have a conversation through a portable terminal, or to look at her by using sunglasses with built-in see-through displays like this in the real world. The sunglasses are still rather crude, so it's tough wearing them the whole time, but it doesn't feel strange doing so when riding a road bicycle.

'Wah, the cherry blossoms are pretty, aren't they?'

Looking up at the fully bloomed cherry blossoms stretching a branch out from the sidewalk, Yui spoke in a happy voice. However, her field of vision was restricted to the internal camera in the portable terminal fixed onto the handlebars, so the resolution was poor and the angle couldn't be adjusted either. Something like a small dome camera that Yui could rotate at will would be ideal, but as expected, such a handy item couldn't be found both on the internet and at Akihabara.

I felt like appreciating the cherry blossoms overhead as well, but this road bicycle I was riding for the first time had a quicker than expected response rate, hardly giving me the chance to look away while riding. Focused on the front, I gave a command to Yui.

“Well then, start the system check, please.”

‘Yes, Papa!’

Yui sprightly replied and her expression vanished with her long eyebrows slightly raised. A voice that sounded more mechanical flowed out from the bone conduction speakers built into the sunglasses’ arms.

‘Speed sensor connection... *OK*. Cadence sensor connection... *OK*. Heart rate sensor connection... *OK*. Atmospheric temperature, body temperature, altitude sensors... *OK*. GPS connection... *OK*. Back eye camera connection... *OK*. *System, all green. Navigation and data logging, standby.*’

“Ooh, that’s amazing, Yui. You’re like the real thing.”

A puzzled expression appeared on the petite fairy who raised her face at my opinion.

‘Real thing... in comparison to what, exactly?’

“Ah, nah, that’d be...”

Answering honestly with a “giant humanoid robot” here would likely cause problems in my beloved daughter’s education, so-

“You see, it seems there have been AIs loaded onto car navigation systems recently. That said, of course, you have way more functions than them, Yui!”

And I dodged the problem. My mouth loosened at Yui, slapping her two hands onto her waist and sticking her chest out with a “That goes without saying!”, before I gave another command.

“Well then, start the data logging, please. Also, display the route until Destination A.”

‘Understood!’

The instant Yui replied, the travelling speed, direction and speed of the wind, heart rate, temperature, and such data, along with an image of the rear from the back eye camera and even an arrow pointing out the route to take were displayed. I got scared at how it might become difficult to cycle with my vision in a jumble, but I felt a VRMMO’s user interface would contain more information through my senses.

“Dim the data display, please. Also, move the back monitor just a little down and to the right... *OK*. Well then, let’s get going!”

‘Let’s go!’

Yui sat back down facing the front and I stepped down on the pedals as hard as I could, taking her tiny right hand thrusting forward as my cue. The spring breeze that outstripped my bicycle scattered a few cherry blossom petals into my path.

Cycling 5 kilometers east through prefectural route 51 from Kawagoe, Saitama, where my home is, I entered the Arakawa Cycling Road. The destination I set beforehand was the park 13 kilometers to the south, so a round trip from home would make it a 36 kilometer course. That was a distance that someone cycling seriously could do while humming away, but it was a ride far too long for me, having returned to the real world for merely half a year.

Being a Sunday, the course seemed congested, but the falling sunlight felt pleasant and the thought, “The real world’s pretty nice too”, came into my mind unconsciously at the vivid blue skies and green earth. The slight headwind was a minus, but I insisted to myself that it would make trip back all the more relaxing as I turned the cranks.

It happened after I nonchalantly cycled for around twenty minutes with the able-bodied flying past my right. Yui, sitting on the handlebars with her body swaying, went ‘Huh?’ in a small voice.

“Something happened?”

When I whispered at a volume inaudible to the passing cyclists, Yui looked up at me and said something outside of my expectations.

‘I have been receiving electromagnetic waves of the ANT+ protocol since five seconds ago. The transmission source is... Papa’s bicycle, I believe.’

“Whut? From this bicycle...?”

I looked down at the frame in between my legs in a fluster, but I didn’t recall loading on any wireless devices aside from the sensors already connected to the portable terminal. It might have been the Bianchi’s previous owner in that case, but the Rinrindou uncle should have noticed if there was something there.

I instructed Yui after around five seconds of hesitation.

“Try pairing up with it, please.”

‘Understood.’

Yui closed her eyes and her lovely eyebrows drew together slightly—and her eyes flicked open.

“Wh-What is it? Did you find out what kind of device it is?”

‘Yes. I will visualize it now.’

...Visualization? Of what?

And with a blink of a eyes.

Pale blue beads of light formed atop the extinguished portable terminal screen on Yui's immediate left, coalesced, and brought forth the form of a small object... no, a girl.

"Wah!"

I ended up jerking the handlebars from overwhelming surprise and after stabilizing the reeling bicycle frame in a panic, I fixed my eyes upon the girl standing atop the terminal (though she was actually on the sunglasses' see-through display) once again.

She was the exact same size as Yui. She had short hair and was clothed in a fitting futuristic leotard, both colored light turquoise—the same celeste blue as the bicycle.

The mysterious girl slowly lifted her face, modeled slightly more matured than Yui's, with her eyelids raising at the same time. Her eyes that seemed to shine aquamarine stared at me and her lips moved.

'Good morning, *Master*. It has been nine hundred and seven days since the last ride.'

She was likely a personified interface that was at the level of those commercially sold, not to mention several years old, with her intonation clumsy and her expression practically static. Before my eyes, looking down at her in a daze, the girl continued her bland speech.

'Connection could not be established with the GPS and all other sensors. Remaining battery is below ten percent. Currently being charged from the internal dynamo.'

"I-Internal dynamo, she says?"

I gazed at the frame again.

Dynamo referred to a power generator and one for headlights was often embedded in the front wheel axle for casual bicycles, like the one Suguha rides, or mamachari, but one couldn't possibly be placed in the lightweight wheels used for road bicycles. Listing down the other places that spin, there would be the rear wheel hub and... also, the bottom bracket.

“Ah... don't tell me there's a dynamo built into the bottom bracket shell... and that the BB got stuck due to forcing that modification...”

The frame beside the BB probably stored the device containing the celeste-colored girl as well. The empty battery got charged to the minimum level of electrical energy thanks to me turning the cranks all the way here from home and thus, the device started up.

The modification of inserting a dynamo into the BB that would increase its resistance, even if only slightly, must be an act of utmost heresy to the orthodox faction of cyclists, but it wasn't unimaginable for the brave being who embedded such a personified interface and even made it call him or her «Master». And it definitely wasn't a topic I, «Papa», could say anything about.

Having stopped my bicycle in the parking lot at the Cycling Road's side to gather my thoughts together for the moment, I gulped down water from the bottle and firmly stretched out. Although my back and waist had already started complaining due to the aimlessly hard saddle and the forward-bent posture unfamiliar to me, it definitely wasn't an unpleasant pain.

‘Good job, Papa. The distance traveled so far is 12.7 kilometers and the estimated time of arrival at the destination is around 11:20.’

Beside Yui who fluently delivered the report while sitting on the handlebars, the light blue-clothed girl was standing still without speaking a word.

Yui went to the effort of making her, an avatar meant to be displayed on a data logger's small monitor originally, into a three-dimensional object to show me, so it was only natural for her to not move much, but I couldn't help but to feel a tinge of forlornness from the figure of the girl awaiting a command.

I did discover the reason behind the fixed BB, but that simply raised fresh doubts. Why did the previous Bianchi owner not extract the embedded device? Even if it couldn't be removed due to it being fixed there, why wasn't the memory deleted? The more I thought about it, the more confident I grew of one particular answer. That is, this Bianchi (and the celeste blue girl) left the previous owner's possession without deliberate intent—

There was no way the Rinrindou uncle would let a stolen bicycle be traded in. But road bicycles are seldom registered for security and he could have not known its origin after it got passed around multiple owners and shops, citing the defective BB as the reason. If this Bianchi was a stolen bicycle, the original owner must be still earnest searching, even now, after performing this much customization on it.

The current owner, me, is a so-called, «bona fide purchaser», and the celeste girl said 'It has been nine hundred and seven days since the last ride' earlier—that meant it had been over two years had passed since the theft and I had no obligation to return it for legal reasons. In addition, this was a congratulatory gift for my enrollment from Suguha and my parents, so I have no idea how much of a shock Suguha would receive if it turned out that I returned it due to it being a stolen bicycle.

Still, nevertheless, I do not believe that feigning ignorance and continuing to ride it like this was the right choice to take. Furthermore, I have an idea to locate where the owner stays.

“Hey, Yui. This girl doesn't respond to voice commands, does she?”

When I asked with the bottle still in my hand, Yui gave a curt nod.

‘That’s correct, Papa. It seems she only reacts to input from a touchscreen monitor. But I can convert your voice commands and pass it on to her, Papa.’

“I see. Then... first of all, what’s her name?”

Hearing my question, Yui turned her eyes to her side and the girl quickly lifted her face and answered.

‘I am «Cel».’

“Cel... huh.”

Naturally, that name was probably taken from *celeste*. Nodding, I continued with my queries.

“Cel, do you have means of contacting your master?”

‘Corresponding data cannot be found in storage.’

Well, that was only normal. People usually wouldn’t register their phone numbers or mail addresses in a bicycle data logger. Having expected the answer, I voiced out my next instruction.

“Then, display the previous traveling route, please.”

‘Yes, Master.’

After around two seconds of lag, a map of southern Saitama was displayed in my vision. Upon zooming in to the outskirts of Arakawa, a light blue line faded into existence. The previous owner normally went through this Cycling Road too. While feeling relieved it wasn’t some distant location, I focused on the route displayed.

A one-way trip was approximately 30 kilometers and the departure point was—Fujimi, Saitama. Naturally enough, that would be the previous owner’s home.

The park I set as my destination was a sheer 2 kilometers or so away, so that meant I could return this Bianchi today as well. As long as the owner didn't move away, that is.

Aside from that, my resolution.

"...Cel. I'm not your master. Do you want to return to your real master?"

Having heard the question, Yui gently shook her head with her eyelashes lowered.

'I'm sorry, Papa. I am unable to convert that question.'

"Aah... I see, that's only to be expected. Sorry about that."

Of course, Cel didn't show any sort of response, but my heart had already decided. There wasn't any chance she didn't want to return, was there?

"Yui, reset the destination to the departure point in the data received from Cel."

'...Yes, Papa. The re-routing is completed.'

"Alright... let's go, then!"

Locking my right foot back onto the clipless pedal, I began cycling the Bianchi against the south wind once more.

Cel's specifications should have been incomparably lower than Yui, but she concealed an unexpected ability within.

Having obtained GPS data via Yui, Cel began conveying the Cycling Road's essential points in detail. Blind spots caused by either barriers preventing entry of four-wheeled vehicles or obstacles, and on top of that, even gaps of various sizes, were accurately pointed out by her, so my ride felt much more reassuring. Of course, that did not cover obstacles that weren't there two and a half years ago, but she seemed to be aggregating that data automatically.

Standing atop the portable terminal and giving my instructions such as ‘The road surface is in bad condition, fifty meters in front’ or ‘There is a difference of twenty centimeters in level, please slow down’, Cel seemed just like a fairy dwelling within the bicycle. Thanks to her, I reached the initial destination, the spark, ninety minutes after leaving my home without meeting any trouble along the way. I had planned to turn back here but continued onwards instead, after replenishing my drink bottle. Crossing the bridge south of the park and entering Fujimi, I cycled for around five minutes through the residential district before the navigation arrow disappeared in the blink of an eye.

‘Papa, we have arrived at the destination.’

I listened to Yui speak while scanning through my surroundings.

To the right of the road was a children’s playpark. To the left was the gate to a detached house. Thus, this house could certainly be considered to be the previous owner’s residence. After that went through my head, I finally realized how I would have given up if it was an apartment or a condominium at the destination, but I suppose everything turned out for the best in the end.

Gotten down from the Bianchi, I peeked into the building through the black fence. A white minivan laid under the carport on the lawn and three bicycles, mamachari, were parked by the entryway. Getting reported by those living in the neighborhood seemed probable if I peeked any longer, so I steeled my resolve and extended my hand towards the intercom.

A dragged-out ‘yes’ immediately came back, so I named myself and briefly gave the purpose of my visit. Namely, that I brought back a bicycle that might have been stolen from this house.

The one who came out from the entranceway was a woman who appeared to be her mid-twenties. She crossed the front yard in a half run, her sandals going pitter-patter, and opened the gate, taken aback the moment she saw me—no, the bicycle.

Although I was around eighty percent prepared for the Bianchi to have been a stolen bicycle by this point in time, I still explained the circumstances in detail. How the bicycle was bought secondhand from a bicycle shop in Kawagoe. How I found it strange that a data logger was left behind and how I got here through the travel route records. And lastly, how I would return it if the owner desired so—

“I see... so that’s how it was. I’m sorry for making you go so far out of your way for this.”

The woman who lowered her head, her tied-up hair swaying behind, assumed a somewhat complicated expression and continued.

“This bicycle belongs to my little brother, a university student... or it used to. But it wasn’t stolen or anything.”

“Eeh... was it a trade-in? If that was the case, why would the data still...”

When I asked back, surprised that it wasn’t stolen, the woman made an expression that seemed at a loss on how to answer. Putting her two hands away into the front pocket of her deep-blue parka, she looked up at the second story of the house. One of the windows across the veranda had its curtains shut tight, without any gaps, despite it being daytime.

Returning her eyes towards me after a short while, the woman slowly began to talk.

“...My little brother was denied from riding bicycles due to certain circumstances in the autumn three years ago. It wasn’t exactly an injury, disease, or anything of that sort... it’s just that until last autumn, for a length of over two years, how do I say this... he got bedridden...”

Right when I heard her get to that part, I drew a sharp breath and opened my two eyes wide.

Started three years ago, that would make it the autumn of 2022; ended last year, that would be the autumn of 2024; bedridden due to a reason besides injury or disease. If that was the case, to put it specifically, those «circumstances» the woman spoke of would be...

Facing the mute me, the woman continued talking with her eyes lowered.

“His body had thoroughly weakened when he regained consciousness... although he was able to walk again after rehabilitation, he shut himself up in his room ever since returning home. He won’t go to university and of course, he won’t even give bicycles a single glance... he just keeps on playing VR games the entire time. And when he didn’t stop even after the year changed, Father got rid of the bicycle in his anger without caring about the consequences. It was supposed to be a present for him getting into university too...”

Getting to that point in her story, the woman raised her face with a start and awkwardly laughed.

“Dear me, I’m very sorry about making you listen to all of that despite it having nothing to do with you. That’s why that bicycle isn’t a stolen one. I’m sure my brother won’t be riding it anymore, so I believe the bicycle will be more happy if you ride it.”

“.....I see, so that’s how it was...”

I murmured and dropped my sight towards the Bianchi.

Having understood the conversation with the woman, Yui showed a worried face on top the handlebars, but Cel’s expression remained constant as she stood atop the portable terminal. Awaiting the next command from «Master» without the slight movement.

“...Was your little brother in the faculty of science?”

The woman blinked once, then smiled and nodded at my query.

“Yes, he attended a rather advanced university for science and technology in Tokyo. Why?”

“There are modifications on this bicycle that are on a level that’s a little impossible for an amateur. It’s thanks to those that I managed to come all the way here, though...”

“I see... Kirigaya-kun... was it? Thank you very much, I mean it. I’ll tell my little brother that you came by. And that this bicycle is still going strong, even now.”

“.....Okay.”

I couldn’t do anything but to lower my head as I answered so.

I am around ninety percent certain that the Bianchi’s previous owner, the little brother of this woman in front of me, was an «SAO survivor» like myself. I, too, experienced how much the body weakens over a comatose period of two years with my own. Especially so for a cyclist, it must be difficult to cope with the sense of loss that came with the decline of his painstakingly trained leg muscles. It wasn’t strange for him to never want to ride a bicycle ever again.

However. I want to believe. That at the very least, the woman’s little brother still has feelings for «Cel»... the personified interface he poured his love into, the love he had to build a dynamo into the BB to change his leg strength into electricity and pump it into a battery.

“Erm... could I ask your little brother a question? Wouldn’t he take the data logger at least?”

I said, and the woman tilted her head a little, but answered with an “okay” and took out a portable terminal from her parka pocket. She didn’t start a voice call but sent a mail instead and looked back up at the second story of the house.

Fortunately, perhaps he wasn't in full dive at the moment as the window curtains moved slightly—or so it seemed. A ringtone played from the woman's terminal after a while.

“Erm... the *po*... ‘the *post* should be taken out first, then you can remove the *data logger* if you pull on the *ring* inside the *seat tube*’ ... hey, Kirigaya-kun, you understood that?”

“I do.”

I nodded with a smile and loosened the seatpost clamp of the Bianchi leaning against the gatepost. Pulling off the entire saddle from the frame and peeking into the tube, I could certainly see a small ring. Seeing as he didn't notice this, the Rinrindou uncle probably didn't try taking the post out.

Inserting my fingertip into the ring and gently putting strength into it, I could feel the sensation of something coming out. The end of the carefully pulled out ring had a smallish data terminal attached. Removing the cord that probably came with the dynamo, I handed the terminal over to the woman.

A thought then flashed into my mind and I looked at the handlebars; Cel's figure was still there. Perhaps because the terminal had been charged to a certain level, but it seems the connection to Yui was still being maintained. However, ANT+ was a super-short range wireless communication protocol, so the connection should be severed when the woman returns to the house.

“...Thank you. I'll be passing it on to my little brother, then.”

The woman who received the data logger lowered her head and spoke as though that particular thought had just occurred to her.

“That's right, Kirigaya-kun, if it's okay with you, could you tell me your contact details? I'll get my little brother to go over to Kawagoe to thank you if he ever gets in the mood to go out and buy a new bicycle.”

“Eh, no, you don’t have...”

I accepted the woman’s terminal despite trying to be courteous and typed in my name and mail address before returning it. She told me her name as well, then gave another deep bow.

“Truly, thanks a lot. Please take good care of that bicycle.”

Taking my eyes off the woman who went back into the house, I looked at the Bianchi’s handlebars.

The connection severed and the celeste fairy standing atop the portable terminal vanished; immediately before that—

She sweetly grinned, or so it seemed.

The spring wind was fickle and by the time I turned to return to Kawagoe, it changed from south to north. In other words, my trip home would be against the wind as well.

Sometime after I started riding against adversity on the Cycling Road, Yui shouted out while pointing ahead at the road.

‘Papa, there’s a dent thirty meters ahead!’

“Huh, weren’t we cycling on the opposite side earlier?”

Yui smugly puffed out her chest at the surprised me.

‘I received data on the road surface from Cel-san! We talked about lots of other stuff too!’

“Talked... about...”

—Cel can’t talk like you, can she; holding back those words, I simply said, “I see”, and smiled. Human language is nothing more than one communication protocol among many to Yui.

Sitting down on the handlebars and swaying her body right and left as she reported on the road surface’s condition, Yui suddenly turned about and spoke.

‘Papa. We’ll get to meet Cel-san again, won’t we?’

“Yeah, we’ll meet her, I’m sure of that.”

Nodding, I shifted up a gear, then stepped down onto the pedal with all I had.

Author Afterword

Kawahara here.

I've just ended up writing what's marked as an SAO short story despite the complete lack of gaming in it and fully exposing my personal hobbies for the first time there.

The plotline I thought up at first was something like «Kirito giving the ladies squadron chocolate as an expression of gratitude», but as for why I didn't write that, it's because an express delivery parcel came from the editorial department in mid-February, labeled «Contents: Foodstuff», so I thought, 'This must be chocolate for me from the readers!', and opened it up in anticipation before seeing that its contents were samples of «AW x SAO White-Black Manjuu», causing me to crumble onto my knees. Nah, those manjuu actually were tasty though. I received chocolates on a later day too. Thank you very much.

And so, this short story became 'A tale of Kirito riding a bicycle', but it's a story I wanted to write since the past as well, so I would be glad if you enjoyed it. I'll write a story that involves playing games next time.

The Day After

Translation of the short story written by Kawahara Reki, of Sword Art Online, from the extras in the limited edition DVD/BD sets for the anime, volume 9.

It's recommended to read the first four volumes at least, before this.

1

“Have you gotten used to that avatar yet?”

Asuna raised her face from the window displaying the English homework at the sudden question.

She answered while pinching the blue hair unique to undines, flowing onto her own right shoulder, between her fingertips.

“Hmm... a little longer, maybe? It's odd, isn't it... my face and body are exactly the same as they were in Aincrad, with nothing different aside from the color of my hair and eyes, but it feels off on occasions. Kind of like my body isn't properly linked to my consciousness...”

“Fmm...”

The one frowning in worry was a spriggan boy with his jet-black hair standing straight up. Asuna couldn't help but to feel that he was a boy, even though the male inside was merely a year younger than herself, turning eighteen this year, due to his avatar appearing more mischievous than his looks in the real world.

The spriggan, sitting by her side on the sofa, pushed away the holo-keyboard in front of himself, then stuck his elbows onto the table and stared hard at Asuna.

“That might be a different issue from being used to it... You mention there wasn't any problem with the AmuSphere's input level or response, didn't you?”

“Yeah. Both were at their average values or higher.”

“I see...”

He nodded once, then stretched out his left hand and held onto Asuna’s right hand without warning.

“Eh, wh-what?”

She asked back, her heart beating hard at the ambush, but the other party kept his solemn face on and pried open Asuna’s palm. He drew his own index finger closer towards there and stopped upon faintly making contact.

The subtle ticklish sensation originating from the middle of her palm spread all the way to the back of her avatar and Asuna involuntarily let a soft “Nn...” slip. But the spriggan spoke, his gaze absorbed on the palm, without losing his contemplative expression.

“My sense of touch is currently reacting on my side, but you can sense that you’re being touched too, right?”

“Yeah... I feel it.”

Asuna nodded and the spriggan continued with his solemn expression.

“Good, then I’ll slowly move it away, so please tell me when the sensation’s gone. ...How about it, still feeling it?”

The finger against the palm slid bit by bit, the sensation that turned exceedingly faint stimulating her virtual nervous system. She whispered as her avatar trembled.

“Yeah... I still, feel... it.”

“I see... then, what about this?”

“Nn... I... can feel, it...”

“Fmm... looks like the I/O signals really are functioning at a normal level...”

“Ah... I, can...”

And there, Asuna finally noticed the fact that her response could quite possibly invite a certain sort of misunderstanding.

An intense fever swept over her entire face in an instant. She rapidly yanked her right hand back, tightly grasping it. Turning to the spriggan with a blank expression on, she shouted out at full volume.

“What are you making me say! Ki... Kirito-kun, you idiot———!!”

Although her explosive straight right definitely caused no damage as they were located at an inn in the neutral city, it smoothly blew the short spriggan into the inner wall from the sofa.

21th June 2025, Saturday, 8:30 PM.

Asuna—Yuuki Asuna was tackling homework from school with Kirito—Kirigaya Kazuto in a room of an inn on the outskirts of «Yggdrasil City», a city in the VRMMO-RPG, «ALfheim Online».

The venture company, «Ymir», that succeeded management over ALO from the now-dissolved company, Recto Progress, had brought about several changes to the game, but one of them was the granting a limited connection to external networks from inside ALfheim. By launching the browser from the menu, various sites could be viewed and homework files saved on online storage could also be accessed, like on a PC or portable terminal in the real world. Even in the off-chance of players with malicious intent launching suspicious programs, they would be immediately detected by the «Cardinal System», so there wouldn't be any harm to public security for the home of fairies either.

Her mother frowned when Asuna began using full dive machines again and repeatedly told her, “Do your homework yourself, at least”, but Asuna considered both her body in the real world and her avatar in the virtual world as «herself».

The functionality to open as many windows around herself as she wanted (to be accurate, there is a maximum limit) made it more effective to study in the virtual world and there weren't issues such as her eyes getting tired or her shoulders getting stiff either. And above all else, Asuna could study, shoulder-to-shoulder, with Kirito who lives in Kawagoe City, Saitama Prefecture, far away from her home in Miyasaka, Setagaya City... no, this might not be the purest motive she had, however.

At any rate, they were wholeheartedly typing away on their holo-keyboards this night in their fairy forms when Kirito started an impromptu check on Asuna's sense of touch—that was what just occurred.

The spriggan roused his body while moaning and Asuna, who stood up as well from the sofa, snapped her hands to her waist and spoke.

"Look here, if you're checking the signals for my sense of touch, there are other methods, aren't there!"

"...That was the easiest way... In the first place, you're the one who reacted in a perv... weird way, Asuna..."

She fixed an even sharper glare onto Kirito, mumbling an unintelligible rebuttal.

"Perv... what? What were you going to say? I won't get mad, so how about telling me?"

"Th-That's definitely a lie! Or rather, you're already getting mad..."

"I am not! If Yui-chan hadn't gone out, I might have gotten angry for real, though!"

Asuna's words made Kirito shiver as he stiffly stood upright.

Yui, an advanced top-down AI, the pair's daughter, and also a «navigation pixie» in ALO, was absent as she accompanied some of their friends, including Klein and Lisbeth, on their hunt.

The thought of their beloved daughter catching sight of the earlier scene made her face burn up again, and with Kirito immediately forming a smile and making a comment—

“Asuna, your face’s bright red.”

In a cheerful tone, she couldn’t help but to clench her fist once more.

Crap; that thought appeared on Kirito’s expression as she turned towards him and she took several steps forward when that happened.

“.....Ah...”

Asuna stood still with a soft murmur.

That sensation had assailed her once again. An odd sensation where her spirit leaves her avatar for a sheer instant. One that left her at a loss on where her hands and feet were and how to move them... one that left her where she wasn’t.

Likely having sensed the abnormality, Kirito approached at a speed equal to teleportation and supported Asuna’s body. He looked into Asuna’s eyes with his serious expression and whispered.

“Feeling okay?”

“Yea... yeah, I’m fine. I’m feeling okay already.”

Even as she answered so, Asuna leaned her weight onto Kirito’s hands and continued murmuring.

“It’s just a little... just a little sense of discomfort. It’s not that I lose complete control of the avatar and I could simply ignore it when it comes, but... no, it might really just be me, but.....”

“No... it’s best to do a proper check. You haven’t felt this back in Aincrad, have you?”

“Yeah. Not even once... I think...”

Kirito gently held Asuna up and guided her to the bedroom next door as she nodded. The rented room was a suite of the highest grade, so an unobstructed view of Ygg City’s gorgeous night scenery and the vast land of Alfheim far below was visible through the window of the spacious room. However, Kirito had no eyes for that scene, laying Asuna onto the large bed and sitting himself down by the side. Reaching out with his hand once again, he softly stroked the light blue hair as he opened his mouth.

“...Asuna, you probably don’t want to recall this, but...”

Asuna understood what Kirito left unsaid from his hesitating tone. She lightly shook her head with a faint smile.

“It’s alright. ...I haven’t felt this even once when I was «Titania». So I don’t think it’s due to the change of worlds.”

“I see.....”

Nodding, Kirito finally shifted his sight outside of the window then.

It was on 7th November 2024 that he cleared the death game, «Sword Art Online», and freed the six thousand, one hundred and forty-nine players who stayed alive from the Floating Castle Aincrad.

However, roughly three hundred players, including Asuna, could not return to the real world. A man named Sugou Nobuyuki who held an important post in the general electronics company, Recto, abducted the consciousness of three hundred people into a virtual research facility established within ALO with illegal human experiments as his objective.

Asuna wasn’t treated as an experimental subject, but got imprisoned within a gigantic birdcage dangling off a branch of the world tree, Yggdrasil, instead. Sugou, who went by the name, «Fairy King Oberon», in this world, gave her the name, «Titania».

Her anguish as a captive continued until Kirito rescued her on 22nd January 2025. Those two months felt as long as two years spent in Aincrad, but still, she wasn't aware of any abnormalities in her sense of touch even once in that period.

"...I think, the first time this... this «separation sensation» thing happened was probably around a month ago..."

After she murmured in a soft voice, Kirito's eyes flicked wide open.

"You remember the first time?"

"Yeah. Because it was during the fight with the boss monster on the first floor of New Aincrad."

Those black eyes blinked two, three times at Asuna's reply.

"It was then, huh. —Now that you mention it, there was that one time you fumbled your magic, don't tell me..."

"You sure can remember."

While breaking into a wry smile at her partner's unusual memory, Asuna nodded.

"I felt myself slipping far away while chanting an incantation and unconsciously stopped moving my mouth. I went back to normal straight away and that only happened once during the battle, so I did think it might have just been my imagination, but... it started occurring every now and then since that time..."

"...In that case, it really isn't a matter of getting used to your avatar. I mean, over three weeks had already passed since you first dived into ALO before the first floor boss fight, right, Asuna? If the cause is lack of experience with your avatar, it would have happened more frequently when you were getting started."

"I guess... you're right. But then, what exactly has been..."

She tilted her head while lying on the bed and Kirito put on a pensive face for a while before he spoke.

“Does that phenomenon not occur when you’re in any VR space aside from ALO?”

“Erm... that’s right. I don’t full dive anywhere aside from here much, but I don’t recall feeling «separated» anywhere else.”

“Then it’s not due to the differences between the Nerve Gear and AmuSphere either. Next would be... hmm... —I doubt it, but maybe the same phenomenon is happening in the real world...”

“No, it didn’t. It would be a real out-of-body experience if it did, wouldn’t it?”

After saying so herself, she became a little scared and checked through her memories again, but fortunately, nothing similar came to mind. But in that case, the cause behind the mysterious «separation phenomenon» ended up unknown. She tried gathering information from the internet, but she couldn’t find any AmuSphere users who reported that same defect and the symptoms were much too vague for relying on support from Recto or Ymir.

The phenomenon lasts for a sheer instant and it would be the end of everything if she simply ignored it, so it probably wouldn’t pose very much of a hindrance in gameplay, but—after thinking over it for this long, it was rather difficult to let the issue pass by ignored.

His side profile visible to Asuna as he sat down, Kirito let out a groan again, but soon spoke up, apparently having steeled his resolution.

“I guess all that’s left would be to discuss it over with Yui.”

“...Yeah...”

Asuna had thought about that as well, after the fourth or fifth «separation» occurred, but she kept hesitating until today.

After all, Yui would likely be extremely worried if she knew of Asuna's abnormal condition and in the case where the problem couldn't be solved even through Yui's abilities, it would probably place a huge burden on the girl's heart.

Yui was an AI prototyped to support SAO players with their mental issues. However, her various authorities were frozen upon it turning into a death game and she was left unable to do anything but monitor the negative emotions of at least several thousand players. Her core program eventually broke down from the unusual burden placed upon it and she could hardly speak by the time she met with Asuna and Kirito.

As such, Asuna made up her mind to never worry Yui and to protect her tiny heart from even the slightest harm.

However, Kirito nodded once as though he saw through that feeling, and then reached his hand out towards Asuna's head again. While stroking her hair with a gentle yet steadfast strength—there were hardly any avatars with a level of control this delicate—he spoke.

"I understand how you feel, Asuna. But... if Yui finds out how you wouldn't discuss it over with her, that would sadden her all the same, wouldn't it, Asuna?"

"But... honestly, it's not that major of an issue. I'm sure I'll probably get used to this phenomenon sooner or later and not get bothered over it anymore."

"I wonder... Asuna, you're really sensitive, after all..."

And there, Kirito left his mouth agape and continued while shaking his head in a fluster.

"Ah, no, I didn't mean that in any weird way."

"Geez, I know that much. ...So?"

“So... erm, I don’t think a sensitive player would be able to ignore a tiny flaw in their senses. All the more so during combat. I want Asuna to fully enjoy this world... that isn’t a death game, but a normal VRMMO. I want to remove any obstacle to achieve that, regardless of how slight it may be... this may entirely be a selfish wish of mine in the end, but...”

Turning to Kirito, who ended off in a murmur and appeared slightly depressed, Asuna stretched her right hand out.

Laying the hand on the edge of the tight black shirt’s collar, she pulled it towards her with all she had. His balance broken by that high strength parameter inherited from the days in SAO, the slender spriggan shouted out a “Wah” while falling atop Asuna’s chest as she lay down.

Holding onto him with both arms without a moment’s delay, Asuna put her strength into hugging him tight as she whispered.

“Thank you, Kirito-kun. ...I’m really enjoying myself right now. I’m having a lot of fun going about the various lands in ALfheim and the many cities on the reborn Aincrad, sightseeing, shopping, and adventuring together with you, Yui-chan, and the rest. I want to continue traveling across this world with everyone from now on too, forever and ever.”

Kirito ceased his struggling in her arms as Asuna talked on at a gentle pace. Before long, she timidly placed her hands around his back.

Now that she thought about it, this might be the first time cuddling with Kirito like this ever since in SAO. She had been continuing her rehabilitation since she was freed from the birdcage of the virtual world from January to the end of April and after that, adapting to the real world after two years, including her new school, took everything out of her, so she couldn’t afford to spend time peacefully with Kirito in either world.

The only reason for today was also just because no one aside from the couple happened to receive a large pile of homework, with there being more people at the usual study meetings.

However, Asuna was currently incubating a single plan... or perhaps, a promise to herself, deep in her heart.

She didn't know how soon it would be, but when the twenty-first floor and above are unlocked on the new Aincrad, that only got to the tenth floor thus far, she would reach the twenty-second floor before anyone else and purchase that small log house built deep in the dense forest. That player home she once spent a short yet blissful time with Kirito in.

Of course, there were sparse differences between the new and old Aincrads, not only in monster locations and item spawns but also the topography, so that particular house might not exist in that particular spot. However, Asuna believed it will. She believed that log house will definitely wait for the two of them. She wasn't sure if the «flying house» quest needed to be cleared once again before they buy it, though.

“...Perhaps...”

Maybe Asuna's quiet murmur had reached his ears, but Kirito slightly tilted his head in her arms. After whispering, “No, it's nothing”, Asuna continued without voicing it out.

Perhaps this mysterious separation phenomenon had been caused by her heart seeking far too strongly for that house. Her consciousness might have left her avatar for a sheer instant, soaring to the forest on the twenty-second floor...

Kirito's voice reached Asuna's ears as she pondered about that.

“...Let's discuss it with Yui tomorrow. Even if there was some malfunction that we missed, Yui should definitely find it.”

“Yeah... that's right.”

Blinking, Asuna slowly released him from the embrace.

The touching cheeks parted and the pair's eyes met at point-blank range. A faint foreboding flowed through Asuna's chest, but Kirito exchanged glances with her, then brought his body up and sat down at the side of the bed once again, before he turned his head and spoke.

"Now then... what do you want to do now? Shall we meet up with Klein and the rest?"

Asuna gave a bitter smile, then shook her head sideways.

"No way. We haven't gotten anywhere near finishing our homework, have we?"

"Ah... th-that's right..."

"It would probably be nearly ten when we finish up everything, so we'll go hunting tomorrow. Agil-san and Leafa-chan said they will be coming too, I'm sure it'll be more fun with more of us around."

"Alriiiiight."

After replying in a childish manner, his head slumped over and he muttered to himself.

"Ah-ah... and ten o'clock was when the real hunting starts back in SAO too..."

"Don't reminisce about such weird things! In the first place, you weren't much for the «night shift», were you? And you still kept on levelling up despite that, so that got treated as part of the clearing group's seven mysteries."

Asuna said so, lifting her upper body off the bed, and Kirito voiced out a question while assuming a somewhat complicated expression.

"...What are the other six mysteries on that?"

“Let’s see... there’s the «Legend of the Black Swordsman, One-handed Sword With No Shield»... or the «Legend of the Black Swordsman, Getting Too Many Last Attacks»...”

“Wa-Wait, wait. Aren’t those all stories about me?”

“It’s fine, the seventh was the «Legend of the KoB Leader, Way Too Thick». ...But that particular one turned out to be not so mysterious, though...”

Asuna recollected the memories from eight months ago as she mumbled and the black-haired swordsman who saw through the «mystery» behind the leader—Heathcliff, also known as Kayaba Akihiko, plopped his outstretched hand onto her head.

“It’s not like there were any actual mysteries around me either. I only managed to maintain my level somehow, thanks to the encouragement and help from various people... of course, that includes you, Asuna.”

After rubbing her head twice or thrice, Kirito stood up from the bed and stretched in an exaggerated motion.

“Now then, let’s hurry up and get our homework done. ...While we’re on that topic, I would like to request for just a little help this time as well...”

“I suppose I got no choice.”

Getting off onto the floor with a bounce in her actions, Asuna then added on with a broad grin.

“When we’re done, make sure you treat me to something at the restaurant on the first floor!”

What she first felt when she returned to the real world from the virtual world, was the weight of her physical body.

Or to rephrase that, it could also be the magnitude of actual gravity. Since she persisted in a build focused on speed as a fencer in the old SAO, her perception of her avatar's weight became proportionally lighter. Galloping across the fields as though she was a gale, day after day, she leapt over obstacles like a foal. That agility didn't change even in ALO, where her status data got brought over. No, she might have felt significantly lesser gravity, now with wings on her back.

Consequently, her breathing felt practically choked from the weight placed upon her entire body in that instant she opened her eyes atop the bed in her own dimly-lit room. Despite how it was the «log out» she craved so much when trapped in that death game, she simply couldn't derive any joy from the sensation. She would likely get used to this shock someday, all the same.

After bracing herself for a whole ten seconds, Asuna gently brought her body up.

She removed the full dive machine shockingly more slim than the Nerve Gear—the AmuSphere from her head. The sensor on the ceiling detected her actions and automatically increased the indirect lighting's brightness.

Lowering her two feet to the floor, she cautiously stood up but as expected, still suffered from a faint giddiness. It slightly resembled the mysterious «separation phenomenon» afflicting the virtual world's Asuna slightly, but compared to there, where it felt like her consciousness took off into the sky, the real world's giddiness felt as though she was pulled towards the ground. The degree of discomfort was far worse.

Lightly shaking her head and shaking off the giddiness, she then passed her feet through her slippers and walked until the southern window.

She gazed at the residential area, submerged in the heavy and humid night air, through the gap in the curtains for a while.

Perhaps there was a light drizzle, as white umbrellas formed around the street lamps, vaguely bringing to mind light effects of the virtual world.

“.....?”

Feeling an abrupt stimulus in a part of her memories, Asuna frowned.

A street at night. Illumination blotted by the night fog. A waterway, murmuring as it flowed through. Hugging her knees, crouched, by its side. Feeling helpless, wanting to run away, but lacking all routes of escape...

She couldn't recall when or where she saw that scene at all. She tried to get a firm grasp on the indistinct image, but it vanished as abruptly as it came.

Feeling an inexplicable desolation lingering deep in her chest, Asuna remained overlooking the night scenery of the real world for that short while.

Sunny, 22nd June, Sunday, 4:30 PM.

Asuna was at the top floor in the eighth floor's dungeon of the gigantic floating castle swirling about ALfheim's skies—the so-called «boss room».

There was only one thing to be done in this room. Naturally, to fight the boss monster.

Kyurururu! That shrill warning came from a small dragon with light blue feather grown over its entire body, «Pina». Silica, the Caith player who owned it, called out without a moment's delay.

“Asuna-san, the minion summoning's coming!”

“Got it! Everyone, gather!”

Asuna raised the staff in her right hand and signalled to the party member, then rapidly began chanting a spell.

“Ek ^{Appear, holy fount, and drown} kalla hreinn brunnr, andask.”

As she loudly recited the final syllable, she strongly thrust the staff onto the black marble floor. Faint blue light rippled outwards and much water gushed out as though to chase that, creating a water surface with a diameter close to ten meters before long.

“Thanks, Asuna!”

“Thank you very much!”

The leprechaun gripping a mace, Lisbeth, and Silica, with Pina riding atop her head, ran onto the water surface first, with the comrades also from her SAO days, the gnomish axe warrior, Agil, and the katana-using salamander, Klein, following them.

Slightly lagging behind, the completely black spriggan, Kirito, and a Sylph magic swordswoman who is his little sister in the real world, Leafa, returned from the front lines together.

The seven of them made up the maximum limit of a party, but Asuna and the rest weren't the only ones fighting in the boss room. They formed a raid with four other parties, so there should be thirty-five players in the vast, circular space, but it didn't give off the impression of being cramped, likely due to the boss room itself receiving quite an enlargement from the Aincrad of old.

Jumping onto the water surface that had a HP recovery effect, along with poison and fire resistance, a pixie, Yui, waved her small hands at Asuna from Kirito's shoulder as he took in sharp breath.

"Mama, you've gotten used to chanting spells, haven't you!"

"A-Ahaha... thank you, Yui-chan."

The moment Asuna replied so, a great number of fire pillars erupted around the water surface. Those immediately created swirls like tornados, stretching into a humanoid flame at their hearts, and changing into small fire elementals with a height of around one meter.

One wasn't much of an opponent on its own, but there were many of them. There were likely over thirty of them spawning across the whole vast boss room. In addition, the elementals were only the minion mobs, with the lord of the spacious area covered with black marble—and the entire eighth floor of the floating castle, the boss monster, attacking at the same time.

The boss's name was «Wadjet the Flaming Serpent».

From some research done after the initial battle, *Wadjet* was apparently a snake god of fire that appears in Egyptian mythology. It resembled that on the outside too, with an appearance like the hood portion of a cobra fused with a four-armed goddess.

Its black-themed gigantic body enveloped in flames and approaching it without protection causes ^{damage over time} DoT.

Asuna's party wasn't involved in dealing with the boss at the present moment, with two other parties taking on that role. They had to hurry up and take care of the minions while those fourteen still retain their HP.

With the staff in her right hand still thrust atop the floor, Asuna quickly took note of the status of her surroundings.

Wadjet and the two parties were engaged in a fierce battle on the opposite side of the spacious boss room. Among the two parties, one led by a female salamander had backed off to a surface created by an undine mage like Asuna, but the other appeared to not have any players capable of using this «Purified Surface» spell. Asuna raised her left hand, turned towards them, and shouted out.

“Please lure as many of the minions as you can and come in the water over here!”

The male sylph leader waved back as though to respond in the affirmative.

Her six comrades nearby turned the fire elementals squirming their way there into cinders, one after another, even during their exchange. They may be the boss's minions, but they were still strong foes who negated half of all physical damage when fought normally, but they were severely weakened the moment they entered the magical water surface, so even this party, with its lack of mages, could take care of them without any problem.

By the time they took care of all the nearby elementals, the other party had dove into the water surface with a long train of enemies. It was rather cramped as expected, with fourteen in the circle with a diameter of ten meters, but Kirito and Klein pulled half of the additional elementals towards themselves right away, fighting while using the entire area of the water surface.

Asuna wanted to swap her staff for her rapier upon seeing those incessant metallic glints flashing around herself, but the staff needed to remain onto the ground to maintain the magical water surface. Asuna was playing as a mage, inclined towards being a healer, in ALO because she thought support classes could be interesting too, but another reason was how the party was already full of physical attack classes when she joined in belatedly.

Perhaps guessing at the itch in Asuna's heart, Leafa spoke apologetically after getting right next to her.

"Sorry, Asuna-san, for making you be the support all the time."

"No, it's fine, I'm definitely not doing it against my will. It's fun chanting spells and all."

"I know, right! Onii... Kirito-kun's still shy over chanting even now, you know. Please tell him off next time, Asuna-san."

Immediately stiffening the smile that momentarily appeared, Leafa raised her left hand.

^{Heal them, holy water, and war}
"Peir fylla heilagr austr, brot."

The chant for the evoked healing spell was grand as expected. After chanting the spell words smoothly, blue drops of water poured down around her from her left hand, healing the damage on the warriors not covered by the water surface's ^{heal over time} HOT effect.

All of the elementals have been defeated after continuing on for a little longer, so Asuna lifted up the staff in her right hand. The magical water surface with its blue splashes of water vanished and the numerous buff icons lined up under her HP bar reduced by one.

Shifting her vision, she could see the other party fighting on the right were also about to make a clean sweep of their surrounding elementals. Having confirmed all of the minions have been dealt

with, Klein turned towards the fourteen fighting the boss and shouted.

“Iright, that’s the end of the minions! We can switch anytime!”

A hefty imp that seemed to be the leader of the other side immediately shouted back.

“Understood! Please switch in on the next break!”

The boss in the form of a snake swiftly raised its head up high. The black goddess fused onto the spread head portion of the cobra swung the wide sword gripped in one of its four arms.

With that, purple lightning ran through the space around the boss, with humongous, half-transparent swords materializing once after another. The players concentrated in front of the boss broke up, with those holding onto shields or those specialized in two-handed weapons raising their respective pieces of equipment.

“Shagyuaaaa!!”

Along with its bizarre scream, the boss—Wadjet the Flaming Serpent swung down its sword. In response to that motion, the phantasmal, huge swords roared as they struck the players.

Four succeeded in defending while the remaining four were sent flying a great distance with their shields or weapons. However, the flames enveloping Wadjet faded due to its use of a major skill and without letting that chance escape, the mages in the rear let loose the spells to impede movement that they finished chanting.

Most boss monsters possess high resistance to debuffs, but their movement could still be sealed for ten seconds or so with the right timing. The instant the spider webs, silver chains, gooey fluids, and such created by the spells entangled Wadjet, the imp leader vigorously waved his hand around.

“Retreaaat!”

Uooh, the players started running as one as they yelled. The four blown away by the phantasmal swords managed to stand somehow and screamed lines such as “Don’t leave me behind!” as they joined their retreating comrades.

“Got it, it’s our turn!”

Klein leapt out in front with his sword brandished and Kirito and Agil immediately chased after him.

A thought suddenly came to Asuna while they ran together.

—Everyone really are enjoying themselves.

That included Kirito, Lisbeth, and the rest, but she felt it all the more strongly when she saw the other four parties.

She had met the majority of those twenty-eight players for the first time today. Invited by them who were recruiting for participants in a boss clearing raid at the gate plaza in the eighth floor’s main city, «Friben», they went to the dungeon after exchanging brief self-introductions and jumped into the boss room with the same vigor they used in dashing up the tower. Such a charge would have been utterly unthinkable back in the days of the old Aincrad.

In the past, before the battle to clear the boss, there were scouts and meetings, sent and had time after time, evaluating all risks, and gathering as much combat ability as possible, only after which they challenged it for real. Asuna understood the circumstances for ALO were completely different from SAO, where they had that absolute condition of not getting even a single causality, but still, she couldn’t help but to think “Are we really starting like this?” right before the boss battle today. New Aincrad’s eighth floor was the current front line, which meant its boss, Wadjet the Flaming Serpent, had never been defeated yet. Wouldn’t it be only appropriate to have a little strategy meeting or to confirm their positions if they were taking on such a mighty opponent, she wondered.

However, she finally felt like she understands now, after nearly thirty minutes had passed since the battle started.

What truly mattered was not the deed of defeating the boss but enjoying the process of doing so.

Even if the boss were to be defeated, that did not happen due to the one-sided command of an overbearing leading group—like the «Knights of the Blood» once led by Asuna as its sub-leader. All of the players' hearts beat as one, thinking together, fighting together, cheering... or perhaps, grieving together. That was the true charm of an online RPG; it would be fun even if it ended in defeat, if she had a taste of that excitement.

The male imp player at the tail of the two retreating parties brought his left hand up as she passed by Asuna and shouted.

“We'll fix ourselves up in three minutes, take care of it until then!”

While spiritedly slapping his palm, Asuna replied.

“We got this! We'll be counting on you for the minions!”

After the group left with their armor creaking, she heard lines like “Why are you getting all friendly!” and “It's not like that, idiot!”, and Lisbeth who ran at her side burst out into laughter.

“Same as always, huh, Asuna.”

“Wh-What do you mean?”

“It was the same back in the last Aincrad, every now and then when we walked together...”

“So-Something like that doesn't matter right now! Look, the boss's attack is coming!”

Immediately after her somewhat flustered response, Wadjet began moving once more after breaking through the debuffs.

When compared to the evil god class of monsters swaging about the vast land of ice under ALfheim, Jotunheimr, the boss monsters of the renewed Aincrad were smaller in terms of size but possessing much more power than them, apparently. That was proven by the fact that merely seven floors had been cleared out of the ten floors implemented in the floating castle, even after over an month had passed. She heard that the eighth floor's boss, Wadjet, too, had been making strong warriors from all races in full raids, seven parties of seven players, flee without exception since a week ago.

With that in mind, an intense feeling of tension assailed her simply by looking up at the boss monster with the face of a human and the body of a snake that nearly reached the ceiling with its raised head, but she forced a smile and shook it off. What mattered wasn't to win, but to enjoy herself. She shouldn't be afraid of fleeing and fight with all she had—

“Jyarua!!”

Letting loose its bizarre voice, Wadjet brandished the crosier held in its lower-left arm.

In response to that motion, the circular pillars standing in a row on the outer part of the hall rumbled as they spun, revealing large mirrors hidden on their opposite sides. The two parties that had just retreated earlier instantly split up without waiting for their leaders' command, clinging to the mirrors totaling eight.

Wadjet's crosier shot out a ray of light that possessed enough might capable of instantly killing from the crystal ball at its end. That made it a terrifying weapon in its own right, but what made it more of a nuisance was how the light ray would be reflected in complex patterns off the surrounding mirrors, making it impossible to predict its trajectory.

It seemed those mirrors caused total annihilation whenever they appeared at the boss clearing had just begun.

They apparently could be broken after hitting them countless times with weapons, but their durability were excessively high and the light ray would be shot before all eight were dealt with, causing several casualties.

However, now, a week after, a method to cope with them more efficiently than breaking them had been devised.

The players sticking to the eight mirrors forcibly changed the mirrors' angles from the front and immediately fell back. Immediately after, a dusky green light ray surged out from Wadjet's raised crosier.

The light ray that hit the mirror on the west side of the room originally should have bounced off towards another mirror at once, instantly killing the players in its path. However, the mirror that had its angle adjusted by players reflected the light ray near perpendicularly—which meant to say, towards Wadjet. Struck by the light it personally shot, the boss monster shrieked shrilly and squirmed, reducing much its even bars of HP. That said, they were only on the second with half of it decreased, but the number of deceased still numbered zero. They could have been thought as fighting relatively well for an impromptu squad lacking two parties to form a full raid.

It appeared Klein, serving as the party leader this time, thought so too, as he energetically shouted while he brandish his katana.

“lright man, we can do this! Everyone, charge!!”

Agil, wielding a two-handed axe, and Kirito, holding a one-handed sword, leapt out right away with Leafa and Lisbeth following behind. Crowding around the boss's length torso, they all slashed, bashed, and stabbed as one.

Asuna didn't wait in the rear either this time. That said, she didn't exactly hit it with her staff but with magical attacks.

Composing a spell with her skillful high speed chanting, she waved her staff at Wadjet's upper body and countless sharp spears of ice poured down, stabbing into its black scales. Its flame aura had dissipated for the moment due to the self-inflicted damage from the instant-kill light ray, so ice-elemental magic that it was weak against pierced right through it, noticeably shaving off its HP gauge alongside the physical attacks from Kirito and the rest.

Squirming with a severe wound, Wadjet began to coil its long snake body round and round like a spring. Having noticed that movement from a distance away, Asuna loudly shouted.

"The tail attack's coming! Everyone, prepare to jump!"

The attackers grappling with the boss strongly jumped back in that instant and braced themselves. If it were to be classified, Wadjet would gravitate towards being an elemental attack type of boss, but its physical attacks were mighty as well, with the failure to dodge the first hit of a skill, where it coils its tail three times a hair's breadth from the ground, resulting in the person falling down and taking in the second and third hit too.

Asuna also lightly bent her knees and estimated the timing at the same time as her comrades. Finished winding up its tail, the goddess's eyes gleamed a deep crimson. Now... jump!

However, it happened in that instant.

Slightly before her avatar jumped, Asuna felt her consciousness pulled upwards by itself. The usual «separation phenomenon».

At a time like this—! She gulped while awaiting the recovery of her senses. Despite how the phenomenon was supposed to last for a sheer instant, it felt agonizingly long in such a situation. The power accumulated within the boss's humongous body was unleashed, its tail roaring as it drew closer. It's hopeless... there's not enough time.

A conversation she had before the boss fight replayed in her mind on the verge of her two legs getting mowed down by the thick whip.

An hour earlier than the appointment with Leafa, Klein, and the rest, Kirito and Asuna logged into the same inn as yesterday and called Yui over for consultation on those circumstances.

Returned to her original white one piece appearance from the small navigation pixie, Yui listened intently to Asuna's words from between the pair, but murmured a single phrase after the explanation.

"Your consciousness... gets separated..."

Asuna nodded at Yui, demurely sitting on the sofa with her two eyes opened wide.

"That's right. It's difficult expressing it in words, but... I believe there is definitely some sort of problem in the connection with my avatar."

"How could such a malfunction happen... I apologize, Mama, if only I noticed earlier..."

"No, it's not your fault, Yui-chan."

She wrapped the crestfallen girl's cheeks between her two hands.

"I'm the one who should be sorry for not discussing it over with you earlier. I thought it could have been due to not being used to the avatar at the start. But the possibility of many other causes came up while talking with Kirito yesterday..."

There, Kirito opened his mouth while sitting on Yui's other side.

"How is it, Yui... did you hit upon any possible causes...?"

"Let's see..."

The AI girl knitted her long eyebrows between Asuna's hands and appeared to be pondering. She lifted her face after a mere three seconds or so, but her expression remained overcast.

"I am unfortunately unable to single out a cause for the malfunction solely through the information you gave earlier, Mama... Also, I am unable to directly check the packets exchanged between your AmuSphere and the ALO server with my current rights. I might be able to gain some sort of data if I am nearby when the phenomenon occurs, however..."

"I see... that's understandable. I'm sorry, Yui-chan, for asking so much from you..."

Yui tightly gripped Asuna's two hands, when she tried to apologize, from the outside with her own. Taking them off her cheeks, she brought them in between, and put strength into it.

"But I am still able to offer a guess to a certain extent."

"Eh... really?"

"Yes. Firstly, we can assume the cause of the separation phenomenon does not lie with your AmuSphere or you yourself, Mama. In that case, my first thought would be a malfunction on the server's side, but the Cardinal System hadn't detected any errors for the time being and not a single user had reported a malfunction of the same kind."

Asuna stared hard at the girl, who began talking lucidly while holding onto her two hands, with mute, strong emotions.

Yesterday, Kirito and Asuna worried whether this discussion would place a large burden on Yui. However, it seemed that anxiety was misplaced. Not only did Yui immediately admit she couldn't solve the problem, but she even tried her best to handle it. The girl, too, was maturing day by day.

“Hence, I conclude the problem in question is on ALO’s server... in other words, something existing within ALfheim is causing irregular interference towards Mama. I am still unable to judge whether that is a player or an object, intentional or not, at the present moment, though.”

“Irregular... interference...”

Asuna repeated Yui’s words this time.

Even if it was a player that induced Asuna’s separation phenomenon, that couldn’t possibly be an ordinary player. No such magic or item was capable of that, so it definitely had to be one with a higher authority... it would be the act of a cracker, or maybe a game master.

What came into Asuna’s mind upon getting to that point in her thoughts was the fact of a particular man. The one who confined Asuna within a birdcage for over two months, Fairy King Oberon—Sugou Nobuyuki.

However, that man was still in custody at Tokyo Detention House and couldn’t possibly be interfering with the ALO server or anything of that sort. Kirito likely thought the same, as his face hardened for a moment but immediately lightly shook his head. Looking into Yui’s eyes with his usual expression, he asked.

“Hey, Yui. You mentioned it might have been an object that had been interfering with Asuna, didn’t you? What’s that... supposed to mean, exactly? Could something like a particular item or land formation actually surpass the system boundaries and exert an influence on players...?”

With that, the young girl slightly tilted her head, as though wondering about how to explain it, then began talking at a slow pace.

“Papa and Mama, you may already be aware of this, but I was originally developed as a prototype version of the «Mental Health Counselling Program» that takes care of SAO players’ mental states. In other words, that meant the Nerve Gear had the ability to read not only the sensation and motion signals of the ones wearing it but also their emotions. The Cardinal System in the old SAO monitored all of the players’ mental states and compiled that data...”

Asuna had already known of everything up until that point. When they first met, Yui spoke as if she was an infant of only two or three years old because the inability to treat the enormous amount of negative emotions from players damaged her core program.

After looking at each of their faces in turn, Yui continued in a firm voice.

“However, the parsing of signals representing emotions was delayed compared to those of sensation or motion. Only the hefty amount of accumulated data of negative emotions such as «anger», «sorrow», «fear», and «despair» could be distinguished from the rest, denying Cardinal... and also its subprogram, me, from parsing those other emotions at that time. Then, whenever there was input of a unique yet intense emotional pattern, Cardinal would save its raw data along with the surrounding environment. Among the data recorded was the player ID that transmitted the signals, naturally enough, and beyond that were the time, location, and even possessed items.”

“.....!”

Asuna drew a short breath of air while she exchanged glances with Kirito.

This was her first time hearing of this. Yui’s explanation was somewhat difficult to understand, but the gist was as followed.

During times when players strongly possessed peculiar emotions, the Cardinal System that managed the old SAO server recorded not the compressed data from parsing the pattern but the raw data... that is to say, the «emotion itself». However, wouldn't that be an act equivalent to copying a player's soul—even if it was merely a thin layer of it—in a certain sense?

The moment she wondered if such a thing was possible with current fulldive technology, Asuna recalled. That she might have caught sight of an actual example of that phenomenon alongside Kirito.

“...That's right... Kirito-kun, do you remember...? Long ago, when we investigated the murder case in the area...”

Perhaps having thought of the exact, same thing, Kirito immediately nodded at that.

“Aah. We definitely saw that on top of the hill in the nineteenth floor's field after the case was solved. The murdered Griselda-san standing right beside the grave. That... wasn't an illusion, it was Griselda-san's heart, saved and linked to the grave... no, the ring always buried under the grave... was that it...?”

They had no means of verifying it after all this time. Yui didn't make a single comment regarding that matter either. Kirito eventually brushed Yui's tiny back gently with his left hand as she remained silent. In a calm voice, he asked again.

“What you're telling us, Yui, is that whenever players display strong emotions in the old SAO, that data would be saved, attached together with the landscape and items... is that how it is?”

Kirito asked the petite, nodding fairy once more.

“In that case, what you said earlier about an object causing the separation phenomenon was referring to that, Yui? To put it another way... a player's heart, lodged in some item, is interfering with Asuna or something like that...?”

Yui didn't reply immediately either this time. However, rather than a silence for picking the proper words, Asuna felt like it was caused by her getting stumped at the reasoning she voiced out herself.

"...I cannot answer with a *yes* at the current stage..."

After muttering so in a reserved voice, Yui lifted her face and spoke in a distinct tone.

"But I learnt this after talking and exploring with many people, like Lisbeth-san, Silica-san, Leafa-san, Klein-san, Agil-san, everyone else, and of course, you too, Papa and Mama. That the human heart and the fulldive system hold far more potential than what I can currently understand. Hence, I cannot say *no* to your question either, Papa. As I've mentioned at the start, I believe that such a conjecture is plausible."

Some unknown player.

Alternatively, a player's «heart fragment» lodged in an item or perhaps a terrain object. Either of those was the cause of the mysterious separation phenomenon—

It was nothing more than a guess, but that's what Yui said before the boss fight. The time to meet up came then, so they couldn't go further in-depth, but Asuna made her own interpretation of Yui's words while on the move to New Aincrad.

In other words, couldn't that be someone calling for her? Someone playing ALO in the present... or perhaps someone who once played SAO was calling for Asuna. Due to that, her soul would be tugged towards that person, practically pulled out from her avatar, so to speak. If that was the truth, she was sure that the person didn't have any specific malicious intent, be it male or female. That person just couldn't choose the time or place, hence interfering with Asuna's gameplay. Like at this very moment.

As the delusory floating sensation came upon her, the scenery surrounding her changed with it.

The black marble boss room gradually faded and a completely different room was vaguely projected before her.

A wall formed from a random arrangement of pale-brown blocks and a floor of the same color. The surroundings were buried in a huge amount of monsters... mineral elementals, blackened rock carved into the shape of a human, and dark dwarves, short and stout with a weapon that appeared to be a pickaxe in hand.

Despite how she could certainly felt she had seen this spectacle that shimmered like a heat haze somewhere before, she couldn't recall the time or place. It was exactly the same as that queer sensation that descended upon her last night as she looked at the night scenery outside the window.

In other words, this memory did not belong to Asuna but whoever was calling for her...?

She saw the phantasmal room and monsters for a brief instant. As they vanished, her consciousness returned to her avatar as well. Her two eyes that opened with a start caught sight of Wadjet the Flaming Serpent's tenacious tail flying towards her in the same manner as a grass sickle, almost touching the floor.

Her comrades within the attack's range jumped vertically all at once. However, Asuna was the only one to kick off the floor at a slightly—yet fatally slow timing. It's over, I won't make it.....

“Asunaa!”

Along with that abrupt shout, an impact came from not from her front but her flank. Her body was rapidly carried up and Wadjet's tail grazed the tip of her boots immediately after. Forgetting to even check her own HP gauge, Asuna looked into the face of the black-clothed spriggan embracing her firmly.

“Ki-Kirito-kun, why...”

Why did you know the timing for the «separation»; Kirito quickly whispered in reply to the single word with that implication.

“Yui detected it right before.”

Continuing on, the pixie sitting on Kirito’s shoulder remarked in a serious face.

“Eight seconds ago, some sort of signal was targeted at Mama. The analysis took a little time.”

“...So, there really is, someone who’s...”

Murmuring in a daze, Asuna finally noticed she had been suspended in the air for several seconds. Upon a closer look, she could see dim phosphorescence emitting from the gray wings extruding from Kirito’s back.

The nine races of fairies in ALfheim are all furnished with the ability of flight without exception, even the gnomes and leprechauns who seem mismatched with the skies. The flight time restriction that existed during the Recto Progress era, too, was abolished in the May update, so now, one could fly for hours on straight if one desired to, but exceptions do exist. The icy underground world, Jotunheimr, and the dungeons of various lands. Of course, the dungeon towers of the renewed Aincrad were also included in the list of areas that restricted flight.

However, there was yet another exception for this. Only the spriggans who excelled at treasure hunting possessed an unique advanced skill to temporarily fly, even when underground. It depended on the proficiency level, but the duration was short and Kirito made use of this hidden hand, used only in times like this, to save Asuna.

“...Thanks, Kirito-kun...”

I’m sorry; the words Asuna tried to continue with were intercepted with a shake of his head from Kirito.

Close to twenty players continuously jumped in coordination to dodge the second and third tail attacks on the ground.

As Wadjet's area physical attack ended, Kirito descended to the ground while embracing Asuna. The skill's duration expired and his grey wings vanished without a sound. If she wasn't wrong, this ability should have a cooldown time stretching over five or six hundred seconds, so it would be a while until he could fly again. She wouldn't receive any help if the separation phenomenon struck once more before then.

Perhaps guessing at Asuna's inner thoughts, Yui flew from Kirito's left shoulder to Asuna's right shoulder with a bounce. Putting her mouth near Asuna's ear, she whispered.

"Mama, I saved the rough pattern for the signal, so I'll be able to warn you quicker next time."

"Okay, please do, Yui-chan."

After replying in a small voice, Asuna turned to her comrades and shouted.

"Sorry, I stumbled for a bit! I'll make sure to evade it next time!"

Lisbeth raised her left hand with a "Don't worry!" without hesitation. During which Kirito left Asuna's side and ran towards Wadjet who was in a delayed state.

Looking at Kirito's back as he mutely swung his sword together with Klein who was shouting "Uoryaa!", Asuna suddenly frowned.

Somehow, she felt Kirito kept more quiet throughout this boss battle than usual. No, he might have already started speaking less around the time he entrusted Klein the position of the party leader. She thought of confirming it with Yui on her right shoulder, but immediately closed her the mouth she just opened. She had to focus on the battle right now.

Wadjet's seven-staged HP gauge was thrust into the red zone on its second with the simultaneous attacks from the attackers who evaded the tail attack without harm.

The goddess with the body of a snake let out an angry scream as it swung up the bronze torch held in its lower-right arm.

“Minion summoning, incoming!!”

Asuna had already retreated a little and begun chanting the «Purified Surface» spell slightly before Klein shouted that. The two parties who backed off to the rear would not be capable of dealing with the fire elementals spawning over the entire vast space on their own. Asuna’s party should leave the boss to the salamander-led and sylph-led parties while they deal with the minions.

Klein probably made that judgement as well. He thought to give a sign to Asuna and turned around, then noticed she was already chanting a spell and grinned.

“Alright, let’s get back and deal with the fire-eles... wait, hey, Kiritard!”

Upon shifting her vision at Klein’s flustered voice, she saw Kirito mixing in with the other two parties and charging a distance away. Perhaps having noticed Klein’s voice after running a few steps, he came to a standstill.

Asuna continued her chanting while staring fixedly at Kirito’s face as he returned with his left hand raised as if to say sorry. The usual him would never make such a mistake in the midst of a boss fight.

Did his concentration get shaved away due to worrying too much over Asuna’s phenomenon? Or—was there some other cause...?

Pondering on that in a corner of her head even while she finished chanting the spell at a high speed, Asuna thrust the staff in her right hand onto the ground with a shrill noise. Feeling the chill from the sacred water gushing up through her boots, she couldn’t help but to whisper to Yui on her right shoulder. One way or another, she couldn’t do anything while maintaining this magic.

“Hey, Yui-chan, Kirito-kun’s been...”

With that, the pixie nodded as though she had been waiting for those words the whole time.

“Yes, Papa is a little different from always.”

“He is, isn’t he... I wonder what’s wrong...”

“I don’t know either...”

Yui, who amassed much more information on the human known as Kirito than Asuna in a certain sense, was the one saying it, so he was truly acting «different from always» today. It certainly seemed unthinkable that the reason for that was unrelated to Asuna’s separation phenomenon.

—When this battle ends, I’ll have a proper talk with Kirito-kun again. About everything, including those mysterious scenes I saw last night and earlier.

Deciding so in her heart, Asuna firmly gripped her staff and focused her consciousness on the battle in her vision.

Approximately thirty minutes later—

Apparently having endured until the very end by the two of themselves, Kirito and Klein were transferred to the save point on the first floor of the dungeon. The instant their avatars materialized, the katana user clenched both fists and yelled.

“Kuwaaaah— we were so close——! And there was just one of those gauges left all by itself too——!”

With that, Agil, who «returned from death» at the same time as Asuna and the rest, retorted with a bitter smile.

“That single gauge’s the tough part, though. I heard that Wadjet’s attack patterns changes when on its last gauge just like the bosses below.”

“I know, I know, but don’t ‘cha think we could have done something through spirit alone if we got to that last one?”

“No way you could! Or rather, you really didn’t when you actually got there!”

Lisbeth and Leafa weren’t the only ones who burst into laughter at the dialogue that resembled a comedy skit, the four parties that formed up the raid did too.

The «separation phenomenon» hadn’t occurred since then and Asuna spent all she had into the fight, but the challenge to clear the eighth floor boss ended in total annihilation. However, everyone had cheery faces on. The one who recruited for the raid, the Sylph leader, approached as his steel greaves rang out and called out to Klein with a smile still on his face.

“No, I honestly do think we were pretty close to something, you know. Don’t you think we could have beaten it with a full raid?”

“Ooh, I know, right! Our cooperation was something else too, if only the spawn rate for those fire-eles didn’t get jacked up weirdly back there...”

“Well, we would have been annihilated by the laser before that if you guys weren’t here. Seriously, you guys move great.”

Klein laughed with a “Hehe” while gripping the sylph’s extended right hand with passion.

After releasing his hand, the raid leader put on a slightly pensive face before turning his sight towards Agil, Lisbeth, and the rest as he spoke.

“Hey, if you’re fine with it, wouldn’t you re-challenge it with us after a trip back to the city? We might be able to find another two parties at this time.”

“Oh, of ‘cos we don’t mind! What about you, mister?”

The target of Klein's question, Agil, answered in English with a "*Why not*" and the four members of the girl squad expressed their assent when the pair turned towards them.

The katana user clad in red samurai armor grinned and started to cry out "Alright, then it's..." before one of his eyebrows twitched upwards under his bandana. He noticed the one who should have immediately agreed with him usually had been staying silent. Turning his eyes towards Kirito, standing a short distance away, he called out with a puzzled expression still on his face.

"Heeey, you're coming too, right, Kiritard?"

The black-clothed spriggan's face jolted up at that. As though the earlier conversation had gotten through to him, he showed a smile—though that, too, appeared somewhat stiff in Asuna's eyes—and spoke.

"Ah, aah, of course....."

But in that moment, his sight lingered at the blank air. His weakly pursed lips moved gingerly before long.

".....No... I have a little something on after this. Sorry for pouring the cold water on the plan, but I'll be taking my leave here."

"O... oh, sure, it's not like I got a problem with that, but..."

Klein thought to say something else after that, but rubbed his stubbled chin instead, as though to hold it back. He broke into a grin once again and nodded.

"Alright, leave the rest to me! I'll be sure to send a photo over when I get to the ninth floor!"

Picking up from there, Agil, too, voiced out a line that seemed somewhat familiar.

“I’ll write you an essay of eight hundred words or less on my thoughts of the treasures we get from Wadjet too.”*

“I’ll be looking forward to that.”

Kirito gave a short, wry smile and curtly bowed at the sylph leader before turning his body. His eyes momentarily met with Asuna’s, but left only what appeared to an apologetic blink as he began walking towards the tower’s exit in the south at a quick pace.

She felt Yui, sitting on her right shoulder, stiffen up tightly. Asuna, too, raised a foot forward without thinking in that instant but halted her step. Asuna was the only mage in the party. She couldn’t possibly leave...

“Asuna-san, please go after him.”

Suddenly, she heard that. Asuna didn’t know when, but Leafa was right behind her when she looked back in surprise, who then lifted her right hand with a slight smile and pressed on her back with a pat.

“I’ll ask for another two, so it’s alright. I’ll be counting on you for onii-chan.”

“.....But...”

After she muttered so while moving her face left and right, Lisbeth, Silica, even Agil and Klein, too, nodded in turn with smiles on their faces.

Taking in a big breath and steeling her heart, Asuna deeply lowered her head. Raising her upper body, she shouted at her comrades and the raid members.

* Of course, that was Kiritos line back then when he acquired the Ragout Rabbit in Aincrad

“I’m sorry! Please allow me to take my leave here as well!”

“Thanks!”, “Let’s meet again!”, “I don’t quite get what’s going on, but good luck!”, several voices flew over from the tens of people who watched over the exchange after that. She gave another bow, then strongly turned back.

Kirito’s presence was already gone from path continuing tens of meters towards the south from the safe room. However, Yui clearly reported from her shoulder.

“Papa is currently flying towards the southern edge!”

“Thanks, Yui-chan.”

Whispering in return, Asuna stowed away the staff in her right hand into a window she swiftly opened and began running with the dungeon’s exit as her goal.

Dusk engulfed the field without her notice.

Alfheim goes through a cycle of day and night in sixteen hours, so it wasn't synchronized with the real world. It was past 5 PM at the moment, so the skies should still be blue in this season when the summer solstice had just passed, but even the afterglow had been extinguished in the home of fairies.

Aincrad's eighth floor is a floor of forests. The third floor had woods as its motif as well, but compared to there, where there were more than a few grasslands and rocky surfaces, the eighth floor was abundant in its forests. After all, nothing that would be thought as ground existed there. A fathomless water covered the floor's surface, rendering it unwalkable, and players had to use the suspended paths that acted as substitutes for that, the outrageously humongous trees (of course, far smaller than the World Tree, Yggdrasil, however) spreading their thick branches in all directions or the man-made suspension bridges also built everywhere, to get around.

In the old SAO, carelessly falling down meant searching for a tree with a ladder and going right and left through the water, but there was no longer any need to worry about that. Asuna ran out from the burnt-black, huge tree that served as the vessel for the dungeon, then ignoring the spiral staircase furnished on the tree right next to her, she strongly quivered the wings on her back.

The dungeon wasn't the only one burnt charcoal-black; the surrounding trees were too, due to the handiwork of the new floor boss, Wadjet the snake goddess of flames—or so the story went. The boss from old times was an utterly different being and thus, the trees around this area were verdant-green as well, so the map designers in the new managing company, Ymir, probably worked hard to burn them.

Ascending around fifty meters nearly straight up, she flew forth horizontally when the view widened to a certain extent. The tips of the towering, giant trees of this floor touch the ninth floor's underside, so she wouldn't get over the forest even if she ascended another fifty meters. In other words, this was one of the few floors where it was possible to touch the bottom of the next floor directly, if one worked hard at tree climbing, but of course, digging a hole through was beyond anyone's means.

Weaving past a trunk that likely had a diameter of ten meters as she flew, Asuna asked Yui who moved from her shoulder to her chest.

"Which way is Kirito-kun in?"

"He will reach the outer circumference soon. I will be unable to detect him if the gap widens a little more!"

"Got it! He really is fast, isn't he, geez!"

Drawing her two arms close to her body, she accelerated with all she had. She familiarized herself with the flight system unique to ALO right away and stopped using the auxiliary controller in two, three days as well, but she was still no match against Kirito and Leafa in flying if they got serious. Relying on the light let out from the lanterns of the suspended bridges laid from trunk to trunk, she flew while evading obstacles by a hairbreadth.

Eventually, a blue light shone in from the front. Moonlight—she'll reach the outer circumference soon. Kirito was probably outside the floating castle already. In the instant she thought that, Yui cried out again.

"Papa is ascending parallel to Aincrad's outer wall!"

"Eh..."

Asuna gently opened her eyes wide. Kirito mentioned that he "had something on after", so she figured he was heading towards Yggdrasil City at the World Tree to log out.

However, now that she thought about it, the inns at the various towns of the eighth floor would suffice for an emergency log out and even if he was going to Ygg City, he could now teleport there directly from the teleport gate at the first floor, Starting City.

In other words, Kirito's objective was somewhere at ALO's... no, Aincrad's upper floors.

However, this eighth floor was Aincrad's front line in the present day, 22nd June. The ninth floor onwards had their outer circumferences completely sealed up, rendering it impossible to invade from outside. In the past, Asuna did accompany Kirito, Lisbeth, and the rest in a bid to fly to the «Ruby Palace» that should be on the hundredth floor, but they reached the maximum flight altitude as quickly as the fiftieth floor and their sightseeing was limited to the steel wall endlessly stretching on.

Kirito should also be aware that he couldn't enter the higher floors. Where exactly did he plan to go despite that...?

While pondering over that, Asuna soared out into the limitless skies from the southern opening of the eighth floor.

The sight that welcomed her if she took a look up was that of the enormous full moon lying in the middle of the sky. Illuminating the outer wall of the sealed floating castle bluish-white. A tiny silhouette ascended at the edge of that wall. As though it was trying to approach the fiftieth floor area as fast as it could. Feeling a sort of tension from that straight flight, Asuna hesitated for a moment on whether she really should chase after it.

“Kirito-kun...”

Her undeliberately calling out to him coincided with Yui murmuring “Papa...”, with her face popped out from the collar of her short robes. Asuna steeled her heart the instant she heard that fragile voice. Bending her two legs, she kicked the air with all her strength. Stretching her body straight, she sped upwards as a blue arrow.

The distance from Kirito was equivalent to seven of Aincrad's floors—in other words, seven hundred meters. In the old SAO, seven floors above was practically a different world altogether, but that, too, was in the past. Asuna now possessed these four wings, gleaming light-blue.

While flying desperately after her beloved one, Asuna felt a premonition. She didn't know where Kirito was headed towards yet, but she was confident there lay the answer needed to solve the mystery of the «separation phenomenon». He probably hit upon some hypothesis that used the conversation with Yui as its impetus and was now trying to prove that.

Tearing through the virtual atmosphere as he flew in the skies far above, Kirito made no attempt to slacken his speed even after passing the twentieth floor. He didn't stop even where the couple's «forest home» supposedly waited, the twenty-second floor; he passed through where the gigantic guild, «Aincrad Liberation Force», was devastated, the twenty-five floor. Where exactly is he heading... the moment right after she thought that, the black shadow decided to loop around in a steep turn. His entire body plunged towards the towering steel outer wall at his immediate side.

“Ah...!”

A stuttered cry escaped from her, expecting a collision, but Kirito spread out his wings right before the wall and sharply decelerated. He didn't slam into it with enough power to reduce his HP gauge, but the impact his two hands dealt to the wall reached even Asuna far below.

That place was... the twenty-seventh floor.

If she wasn't wrong, the main city was named «Ronbaru». Cragged, rocky mountains filled the whole floor, with the town and dungeon carved out from them. Ore items could be gotten in abundance, so it was a floor popular among artisan-class players back in SAO, but it hardly left much of an impression in Asuna.

The metallic elemental-type boss monster put up a reasonable amount of resistance, but she recalled staying on the floor for merely a few days.

Those circumstances should be no different for Kirito who was also part of the clearing group. Why did he aim for the twenty-seventh floor despite that?

The black silhouette kept his two hands pressed onto the steel outer wall without moving before Asuna, staring with all her heart. As though he thought the wall could actually open up if he prayed hard enough.

However, naturally, that had no effect on the immortal wall. Asuna lowered her speed around the time she reached the twenty-sixth floor, arriving right behind Kirito at a speed akin to entrusting her body to the upwards momentum in the end.

She didn't call out. Yui at her chest, too, kept the silence. Flying-type monsters rarely showed up at these altitudes too, so all that existed around the trio was the moonlight incessantly raining down, the night wind blowing past, and lastly, the floating castle of steel.

Before long, Kirito's two hands left the outer wall of the twenty-seventh floor. Leisurely lowering his hands, his wings spun around with the slightest vibration.

"...Asuna. Yui."

A fleeting smile appeared as he called the pair's names. She hardly caught sight of that expression even throughout their relationship of over two years and eight months.

"Kirito-kun..."

Whispering to him, Asuna closed up the distance by merely a slight bit. However, she hesitated to go any nearer. There were much she wanted to ask, but she knew not where to begin.

Taking his sight off Asuna, floating in mid-air, Kirito scanned their surroundings and pointed down, towards the right.

“Let’s talk over there.”

Upon taking a look, there was something like bridge protruding out from the floating castle’s outer wall. Its length was only around three meters, but it sufficed as a replacement for a bench. Nodding, Asuna moved with Kirito and slowly sat down on the steel beam.

Sitting next to her on the right, Kirito raised his right hand and gently stroked Yui’s head with his fingertips as she peeked out only her face from Asuna’s collar. While showing a delicate smile as though he held some sort of pain in his heart, he began talking in a calm tone.

“...Sorry, Yui. You too, Asuna... I made you worry, didn’t I?”

As a substitute for a reply, Yui came out from Asuna’s clothes, then curtly sat down on Kirito’s right shoulder. Her round, black eyes shifted straight towards Asuna. Go on, Mama; they seemed to urge.

Replying with a nod, Asuna resolved herself and asked.

“Kirito-kun. ...Was there... something here, at the twenty-seventh floor?”

Her mouth closed for a moment, but restated a latter half after a little thought.

“.....Did, something happen... long ago, on the twenty-seventh floor...?”

Instantly—

Her own words formed a key that opened up a door in her memories and Asuna opened both of her eyes wide.

Something did. On this floor. Asuna had once heard that story from Kirito's lips. The specific floor number hadn't been mentioned, but it was clear enough now. This floor was definitely... the spark that caused Kirito to reject guilds and parties, continuing his fight as the clearing group's only solo player, that incident's.....

"Aah... that's right."

Likely guessed at Asuna's inner thoughts from her expression, Kirito faintly acknowledged it and spoke.

"It was in the dungeon of this twenty-seventh floor where... the guild I first entered, «Black Cats of the Moonlit Night», got completely annihilated..."

Kirito had told Asuna about the tragedy of the Black Cats, that he had always held in his heart, two days before they married in front of their forest home. In other words, that was 22nd October, 2024.

They first met Yui in the forest on the twenty-second floor a sheer week after that, but even she knew at least an outline of that incident now. Kirito didn't talk about the past in length again and began a story of the present in a soft voice.

"...Today, when I learnt that strong emotions from players could be saved on the SAO server by being lodged in the landscape or items from Yui... I thought of this. That the feelings of everyone from the Black Cats might still remain in that case... that fear and despair from the instant they were killed by mineral elementals and dark dwarves in the hidden room in the twenty-seventh floor's dungeon..."

That vision that descended upon Asuna during the fight against Wadjet distinctly revived in her mind in the instant she heard those words.

That design, resembling stacked blocks of sandstone, was unmistakably from the twenty-seventh floor's dungeon of the old Aincrad. And the huge amount of elementals and dwarves that covered that cramped room. It was the exact same scene Kirito described, wasn't it?

".....Kirito-kun."

Asuna forced that feeble voice through her throat somehow. She somehow explained that explicable phenomenon to Kirito who raised his downcast face. The scene she saw during the boss fight, of the Black Cats of the Moonlit Night's annihilation with the hidden room serving as the backdrop—and that scene she saw from her own room last night after she logged out, of the night streets. The murmuring, flowing waterway and the street lights shrouded by the night fog...

"....."

It apparently also astonished Kirito as expected, making him speechless for several seconds, but he slowly nodded before long.

"...I doubt there's any mistake. Those night streets are... probably the memories from the only female player in the Black Cats... So that means... that girl was the one who caused the «separation phenomenon» in Asuna..."

He temporarily cut off his words there, continuing in a voice more hushed than before.

"—I wonder if Sachi was calling out, to me... —But why, not to me... but to Asuna...?"

The one who answered his dazed mutters, that seemed partially targeted towards himself, was Yui who remained silent watching over them thus far.

"That would be... because Papa is currently using a different avatar from your time in SAO... I think."

“.....!”

Kirito's upper body jerked up in that instant and he looked down at his two hands, covered in black leather gloves. Asuna knew the shapes of those palms and fingers were just the tiniest bit different from when he was in SAO.

In order to start a normal game life in ALfheim Online, not treating it as a death game, Lisbeth, Silica, Klein, Agil, the many other survivors, and obviously, Asuna as well, transferred the avatars and account data from their SAO days to ALO with barely anything changed. However, Kirito was the only one to start anew with a spriggan that had a somewhat mischievous appearance, to rescue Asuna from that birdcage, and continued with that.

If Kirito had revived his old avatar, those feelings from that girl known as Sachi—that might have been stored somewhere on the twenty-seventh floor of New Aincrad would have probably called out to Kirito instead of Asuna. In that case, she guessed Kirito would have been the one with the «separation phenomenon».

But instead of Kirito, why did Sachi choose Asuna, no, why could Sachi choose Asuna?

The girl should have been deceased for over a year before Asuna married Kirito. In those days, Asuna pushed forward with nothing but the strengthening her guild and clearing the floors, as the sub-leader of the newly-created guild, «Knights of the Blood». She merely exchanged glances with Kirito at strategy meetings or boss clearing battles and knew nothing of him joining the «Black Cats of the Moonlit Night» or that the guild was utterly annihilated aside from him, its only survivor. To put it in reverse, Sachi of the Black Cats should also know nothing of Asuna, not even her name.

The one who answered her doubts was Yui this time as well.

“The avatar Mama is currently using is... technically speaking, still in a married state to Papa’s old avatar right now. It’s not display on your status as ALO presently do not have a marriage system, but... your character data is still connected to the old Papa.”

“Is... is that true!?”

The state of affairs should have gotten her used to it already, but the surprise still led Asuna to end up shouting.

Kirito, too, opened his eyes wide, but muttered “So that’s it...” after a little while.”

“...I was there too... when Sachi died. Sachi’s emotions on the verge of death must have been saved, linked to my old avatar, rather than that place on the twenty-seventh floor’s dungeon. But I ended up changing my avatar... that’s why the signals sent from Sachi’s emotions headed towards Asuna who was still linked to my old self... so that’s how it is...?”

She could somehow understand up to that point. However, she still had an unsolved question.

“...But why would it be «now»...?”

Turning her sight towards the outer wall of the towering floating castle right to his left, she continued.

“The separation phenomenon first occurred over three weeks after I first dived into ALO. Besides, the frequency had been increasing lately. The blending in of memories, that never happened before, also began happening...”

“.....That’s...”

Kirito voiced out a single word, then suddenly pulled out a window. He stared at the time display for a while, but took in a deep breath and mentioned in a slightly tense voice.

“...Sachi died on the twenty-second of June, 2023... today, two years ago. The time was... 5:45 PM. In another, three minutes...”

“.....!!”

Asuna instinctively swallowed her breath. Yui, sitting on Kirito's shoulder, had her black eyes wide open as well.

Removing the window and looking up at the night sky that was completely filled up with gleaming stars without anyone's notice, Kirito began to talk softly.

“.....I... had witnessed many players dying in SAO. Some who even had their lives severed by my own sword. That's why... I planned to stop thinking of the deaths of the Black Cats and Sachi as a unique case. When I was in the last Aincrad, I treated a tree growing at the inn home to the Black Cats as a replacement for a grave and visited it every now and then, but... now I can't access both the eleventh floor where that inn was and the twenty-seventh floor where everyone died... I thought of ending it like that... But after listening to Yui talk... I realized the cause of your separation phenomenon might be Sachi's emotions, saved on the server, and could only think about confirming it no matter what the cost was, Asuna...”

Placing his two arms onto his lap, he firmly gripped both hands into fists. With his head deeply hung, he articulated the continuation in a stifled voice.

“.....If Sachi's emotions in that moment... her fear, despair, and sadness were saved onto the server and they're trying to make themselves known to someone now... that would be my duty as the one and only survivor. But I changed my avatar and cut my ties to the past... it's my fault that Sachi's emotions lost their way and... towards Asuna.....”

“.....Kirito-kun.”

Asuna shook her head endlessly as she called out the name of the one precious to her. There were so much that she wanted to tell him that the words wouldn't come out. It was when even breathing started to hurt from the overwhelming irritation.

“That's wrong, Papa!”

The one who decisively shouted that out was Yui. Flying up from Kirito's shoulder, she moved right before his face, then earnestly talked with her two small hands gripped tight.

“The Cardinal System records only special emotions that it cannot decipher the patterns of. It might not be nice to say it this way, but the fear and despair players possessed on deathbed in SAO are nothing special. The raw data for despair would cease to be preserved through the system's operations merely two weeks after. So, if Sachi had left some kind of emotion on the server... that should have been neither despair nor fear!!”

Kirito lifted his face just a little at Yui's frantic cries and muttered in a hoarse voice.

“.....Then..... the emotion that Sachi left behind.....”

Asuna couldn't hear those words to their very end.

22nd June, 5:45:13 PM.

The greatest «separation phenomenon» thus far occurred.

The hardness of the steel beam she sat upon, the coldness of the air blowing past at high altitudes, the texture of her cloth equipment suited for mages, all of that went somewhere far away. An overpowering floating sensation enveloped her entire body and the weight of her virtual body vanished.

And thus, Asuna's consciousness finally left her avatar completely. A white light painted over the gigantic form of the deep-black floating castle and the skies filled entirely by stars.

Her soul was sucked into the hallway of light, guided somewhere else...

She was standing in an unfamiliar room when she regained her awareness.

It wasn't terribly spacious. A simple bed and a wooden desk was all it had for furniture. Streets that brought to mind Europe's rural villages could be seen through the one and only window present. A lid of stone and iron stretched out in the skies' place. This wasn't the real world... it was a street somewhere in Aincrad. The roof and walls of each house seemed familiar. This was probably the main city around the eleventh or twelfth floor. A floor that shouldn't have been released yet at the present moment.

It was night, but the illumination from the single lamp on the wall made it dim. It was probably not a player home but a inn. Asuna went around the bed, approached the door, and gave the knob a spin, but her hand slipped through without being able to grip it. Upon taking a look at her own body, she was no longer an undine mage, surprisingly enough. A bodice for knights based around white and red. Long gloves and long boots in the same colors. There wasn't a rapier on her waist, but this was unmistakably her garb from her days in the guild, Knights of the Blood. However, her whole body was translucent like a phantom.

What exactly is going on; it happened when she raised her face with that thought.

The space atop the bed flickered and a hazy shadow appeared.

A female player with a slender body. Turning her back to Asuna, she was sitting down on the white sheets. She worn a light-blue tunic and mini-skirt. Without any armor.

The hair, neatly snipped short slightly above her shoulders, was black with a mere tinge of blue. She could tell the girl was from the same generation from that back view alone.

The girl appeared to be swaying her upper body left and right. The instant she thought that the girl was likely singing, a mellow singing voice reached her ears. A famous Christmas song. She continued singing with love, slowly, gently, phrase by phrase.

Multiple beads of light began to waver in Asuna's vision as she listened. Tears had gathered in her two eyes without her notice. The strong emotions gripped her chest. The girl's emotions flowed in with the melody as their medium. Not a single fragment of fear or despair was there. Filled with warmth, like basking in sunlight on a spring day, those feelings were nothing but pure...

A tear overflowed from Asuna right's eye and fell as the song ended.

The girl stood up and mutely spun about, then faced Asuna with the bed between them.

The light brimming in her two eyes denied her from getting a good look at her face. She somehow managed to catch sight of those lips that showed a modest smile moving gently.

She heard a voice.

Tell him for me.
That I was happy.

The pure white light enveloped Asuna once again. The girl, the room, the streets, all of it went far away.

Entrusting her body to the floating sensation, Asuna understood. That this would be the final «separation».

Slowly, her eyelids lifted.

A limitless number of stars glistening in the sky faintly dyed a bluish-indigo. The steel castle that towered over all else and a large full moon visible at its edge.

She shifted her sight a little, and there Kirito and Yui were, peeking at her with worried faces. Kirito's right hand was supporting Asuna's body.

"...Thank you, I'm alright now."

Whispering, she took a glance at her attire while rousing her body, but of course, it had returned to the original blue short robes.

"Asuna....."

Approached by a concerned, questioning voice, she took another look at Kirito. She felt a little lost at where and how her explanation should start, but immediately realized. What she should be telling him was already in her heart.

"Sachi-san was smiling."

Asuna said so, and Kirito opened his two eyes wide.

Peeking straight into those black eyes, that increasingly reflected the light from the myriad of stars, little by little, Asuna delivered the words she was entrusted with, with all her heart.

She sang that Christmas song, just like Sachi.



The day after «that day»—23rd June, Monday, nine o'clock at night.

Asuna was, once again, at the main city of New Aincrad's eight floor, «Friben».

The second battle to clear the boss without Kirito and Asuna yesterday had apparently ended in failure, regrettably. However, they got a look at how to fight when it came down to the last HP gauge, so everyone who made up the raid seemed to have sworn to challenge it once again on the next day.

This time, aside from Asuna and Kirito who were obviously participating, General Eugene and Lord Sakuya also joined in, leading one party of their salamander or sylph elites respectively, covering the gathering place, the teleport gate plaza, in several times the enthusiasm of the previous day.

“But still, I'm seriously getting scared...”

That one who called out to Klein with that was the sylph swordsman serving as the leader of the entire raid once again this time. He seemed to have gotten cold feet from taking up the commander position without consulting the races' lords, but there were hardly anyone—among the men, at least—that could refuse when told “We'll be in your care” by Sakuya herself with a sidelong glance.

“What exactly are you, to get called out by both Sakuya-san and General Eugene at the same time?”

When Asuna looked on at the scene of Klein smiling with a “Nah, it's not like I'm that important, nahaha”, while questioned by the sylph leader, before getting retorted with a “But you aren't the one they're interested in” by Agil, with weariness and heard Kirito's and Yui's voices from right behind her.

“E-Eeh? My hairstyle?”

“That’s right!”

Turning around, she asked the pair.

“What’s the matter, Kirito-kun, Yui-chan?”

“Nah, that’s, well...”

The spriggan pinched a tuft of his spiky, black hair as he spoke with a troubled expression.

“Yui’s been telling me to change my hairstyle because it’s hard to sit on it... Changing hairstyles doesn’t come cheap, you know...”

With that, Yui, standing on Kirito’s shoulder, placed her two hands on her waist and objected.

“I think you should spend your money on more than equipment and the casino every once in a while! Besides, my information gathering efficiency increases when I’m somewhere high up!”

“Hold on a moment, Yui-chan. Earlier, after equipment, you mentioned...”

“I-I got it! I got it already! I’ll change it right after the boss fight ends today!”

Perhaps having changed his mind rather abruptly, Kirito shouted that, but Yui shook her head once again.

“There’s ten more minutes until we assemble! You can change your hairstyle at the barbershop over there with that much time!”

“Alright, alright... —Well then, Asuna, sorry, but I’ll be off for a while, so I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“Y-Yeah. Take care.”

Waving the pair off, a thought suddenly came to Asuna.

His current spriggan avatar might have a different face and hairstyle from his avatar in SAO, but he were to flatten his spiky hair, wouldn't he give off the same presence as the old him, unexpectedly?

It wasn't like she wanted him to return to his appearance back in SAO, but still, Asuna still felt some sort of anticipation and waved her hand at Lisbeth, Silica, and Leafa who just appeared from the teleport gate.

"Everyone, hurry, hurry!"

"What, what is it?"

While beckoning over Lisbeth and the rest, who had puzzled faces on, Asuna cried out with a smile.

"Well, you see, Kirito-kun's going to..."

(End)

Warmth of the Heart (extract, web novel)

Translation of a part of the web novel of Sword Art Online that was changed when published by Dengeki Bunko.

Mainly the part near the end of Part 2 and the start of Part 3 of Volume 2, Chapter 2.

This was from the web novel, so it's technically non-canon for the light novel series.

The chapter itself is fine for all ages (I guess).

Although the Warmth of the Body fanfic takes its base from here, it was **not** part of this chapter in the web novel.

“This... feels weird. Like it's not actually happening...”

As I drank the soup, I murmured with a sigh.

“Coming... to a place like this for the first time, having a meal with someone I just met and all...”

“Is that so... You're a craftsman class after all, huh. When going through dungeons, it's pretty common to make offhand parties and camp with players passing by.”

“Hmm, I see. ...Let me hear some. Those stories of dungeons and such.”

“Eh, al-alright. I don't think it'll be all that interesting though... Oh, before that...”

Kirito took back the two now-empty cups and threw them into the window along with the pan. Continuing on, he took out two large bundles of cloth.

When unfolded, they turned out to be sleeping bags for camping. They were like their real world's counterparts, but rather large.

“These are high-end, you know. The heat retention's perfect, and it even comes with a hiding effect against aggressive monsters.”

He threw one over with a grin. Catching it, I unfolded it onto the snow, and it seemed like it could fit three people of my size. Amazed yet again, I spoke.

“To think you’re carrying something like this around. Not to mention two of them...”

“Gotta make use of my inventory space somehow.”

Kirito easily took his equipment off, and crawled into his sleeping bag after laying his sword beside it. Following him, I removed my mantle and mace, slipping into the gap made by the bag-shaped cloth.

Worthy of the boasts earlier, the insides were certainly warm. And significantly more fluffy and soft than it looks, on top of that.

With the lantern in between, we laid down separated by a distance of around a metre and a half. Somehow—this was unusually embarrassing.

So as to distract myself from that, I spoke.

“Hey, tell me more about that earlier.”

“Aah, sure...”

Kirito put his arms under his head and slowly started talking.

A tale about getting caught in a trap by a MPK—the vicious criminals who lure monsters for the purpose of assaulting other players—in the labyrinth. A tale of battling a boss monster with unknown weaknesses for an entire two days. A tale of a rock-scissors-paper tournament with a hundred players for the distribution of rare items.

Each and every story was thrilling, enjoyable, and with a humourous bit somewhere. And all those stories made it clear. — That Kirito was in clearing group, one of those keeping up the fight at the front-lines.

But—if that was so— The fate of forty thousand players lies on the shoulders of this person.

It shouldn't be fair for him, risking his life for the sake of merely someone like me—

I shifted my body and looked at Kirito's face. Those black eyes that reflected the light from the lantern threw a fleeting glance at me.

"Hey... Kirito. May I ask something...?"

"—What is it, being all stiff."

A somewhat awkward-looking smile appeared on him.

"Why did you help me at that time...? It wasn't even a sure thing that you would succeed. No... the chances of you dying as well were much higher. But still... why..."

The smile came off Kirito for a moment. Before long, he murmured in an intensely calm voice.

"...Rather than letting someone die, I would prefer to die alongside that person. And if that's a girl like you, Liz, all the more so.

"...You're really an idiot. There can't be anyone else like you around."

That may have come out from me, but—I couldn't help but feel like tearing up. I felt something tighten up within my chest, and I tried my hardest to hold it down.

This was the first time I've heard words this naively honest, straightforward and warm since I've come to this world.

No—I haven't heard such words in the real world either.

The longing for companionship and the ache of loneliness over these few months formed a huge wave within me, jolting through me. I felt the desire for Kirito's warmth to get closer, enough for my heart to experience it directly—

In my daze, several words slipped out from my lips.

“Hey... can I... go over there...?”

Kirito widened his eyes for a moment, and before long, his cheeks became dyed in a pale shade of red; I then finally understood what I’ve just said.

“We... Well...”

My face instantly flared up. My heart started ringing out vehemently. I struggled to move my frozen lips, verbalising a string of disjointed words.

“It-It’s cold. ...And so...”

—But, just as I was about to continue with how I could endure it, Kirito moved. Shifting his body to the further edge of the sleeping bag, and he muttered shortly with his eyes cast downwards.

“...Alright.”

Kirito’s side—looked remarkably warm. The urge to touch, to embrace his being begun to wash away my dishevelled and interweaved thoughts.

I pulled my upper body up, with my mind in a hazy fever-like state. Crawling out from the sleeping bag, I moved close to Kirito’s pillow.

Though Kirito, with his face red, did not meet my gaze, he softly raised the cloth with his right hand.

As I silently prepared to enter that narrow gap, I thought about how bothersome the long skirt and apron made of a stiff material were. There was no point in getting embarrassed at this point—or so I faintly thought in a corner of my mind, and opened the window, quickly removing my equipment. Ending up in a pale blue camisole, I slipped into the clot, starting from the tips of my feet.

Upon doing that, a soft, gentle warmth wrapped about my entire body; that alone created a sense of comfort that could make my mind fade away. More—I want to feel this more. I shifted my body, moving closer to Kirito. Clinging onto his upper torso, our forms entwined from our ankles downwards.

Kirito started to put his arms around my body, with what appears to be apprehension. With my face pressed onto his shoulders, I whispered weakly.

“More... Hug me, harder...”

More strength was brought into his arms as they hugged me tightly, sending shocks that numbed the core of my mind.

“Haa...”

Unable to hold it back, I leaked out a deep, long breath.

This is truly human warmth.

I finally felt like I understood what I had always yearned for, that desire lingering in a corner of my heart ever since I came to this world.

That this is a virtual world—with my real body left behind far away, somewhere beyond my reach no matter how hard I try; recognising that scared me and I continued to set goals one after another, desperately devoting myself to my work. Forging swords, expanding my shop; I convinced myself this was my reality.

But—I have always thought this deep down. That it was all fake. That it was merely data. I thirst for it. For true human warmth—

Of course, even Kirito’s body was formed from data. This warmth engulfing me now was nothing more than one fabricated by electric signals sent into my brain.

However, I finally noticed. That it didn't matter. Whatever my heart could feel—regardless of whether it's in the real world or this virtual world, that would be my single reality.

I started to fade away in the heat given off by Kirito's heart. I couldn't feel where my body ended, with only the aching of my heart guiding my consciousness.

I knew of the option to turn the Ethics Code off. I believe I would have accepted if Kirito were to ask for it. But, there was already no need for that. The electronic pulse fluctuating between the two of us rendered our hearts' gap to zero—

“More—touch me more...”

Each time Kirito's hand stirred, sparks made my mind convulse. The fever enveloping my being steadily intensified.

“.....!!”

Without warning, the back of my eyelids which should have been tightly closed turned white. My consciousness severed in an instant. I fell without any sign of stopping within the glossy darkness—

Even the answer to whether I fell into slumber, or blacked out, eluded me.

* * *

A refreshing scent wafted by, tickling my nose, and I slowly opened my eyes.

The world was immersed in a white brilliance. It appears that the dawn had arrived without me noticing. The morning light bounced incessantly off the walls of ice, causing the pile of snow at the bottom of the pit to glitter.

Shifting my view, I saw a pot atop the lantern, vapour wavering above it. That appeared to be the source of the aroma. In front of the lantern sat a black-clothed person, whose face I could see only from the side. It seemed that simply by looking at that figure, a small flame burst to life within my chest.

Kirito turned to face this way and spoke with a slight smile.

“Good morning.”

“...Morning.”

I replied. As I stirred to get up, Kirito looked away with a flustered expression. What’s with that, as I wondered that in a daze, I happened to look down at my body, on which nothing was worn aside from that simple camisole.

“Hyaa!”

I slipped back into the covers in a panic, finally recalling what occurred last night. I see—I entered this sleeping bag of Kirito... we hugged each other... and then...

My face burned up as though it was aflame. Burying even my head under the cloth, I earnestly waited for these waves of embarrassment to dissipate.

Having calmed my heart down somehow, I stuck out my face and peeked at how Kirito was doing; he too, was looking away with a red blush on his cheeks. Slightly cheered up by that sight, I managed to speak after several attempts.

“Well... Well, last night was...”

I faltered at that point. I didn’t think it would be possible to express that experience in words. Hence-

“...No, it’s nothing... I saw a dream. A lovely dream.”

-was what I said.

“I see... Me too.”

Kirito gave a short reply, pouring the contents of the pot he picked up into a cup, before offering it to me.

“Ah, one moment.”

I opened a window, quickly getting my clothes on and got out from the sleeping bag. Sitting to the right of Kirito, I accepted the cup.

It had a floral, minty aroma; a kind of tea I haven't drunk before. I slowly drank it one sip at a time. My heart snugly warmed up.

I shifted my body, moving right beside Kirito. Looking towards him, our eyes met for an instant, but we both averted our glances. For that short while, nothing but the sounds of us two sipping tea reverberated within the area.

(Continued in Volume 2, Chapter 2)

Chapter 15 (extract, web novel)

Translation of a part of the web novel of Sword Art Online that was changed when published by Dengeki Bunko.

An extract from the end of [chapter 15](#).

The anime equivalent is in episode 10, so do watch that first to avoid spoilers.

This was from the web novel, so it's technically non-canon for the light novel series.

“Why did someone like you join KoB? A criminal guild would have suited you way more.”

“Heh, isn't it obvious? It's that girl.”

Kuradeel spoke in a hoarse voice as he licked his lips with his pointed tongue. I felt my entire body flare up upon realising he was referring to Asuna.

“You bastard...!”

“Don't glare at me like that. It's just a game, isn't it... Don't worry, I'll be sure to take properly care of that precious sub-leader of yours. There are plenty of useful items to choose from, after all.”

Picking up the bottle of poisoned water from his side, Kuradeel shook it, causing the sound of it sloshing about to ring out.

“Now then...”

He stood up in a motion resembling that of a machine.

“That's it for our little chat, with the poison wearing off soon. Shall we proceed on to the climax? I've been seeing this every night in my dreams... this very moment...”

Flames, ignited by his delusions, burned within those eyes opened so wide that they appeared to be almost perfect circles as he flamboyantly raised his sword overhead while standing on tiptoe, a long tongue dangling from that mouth that had its two corners curled upwards.

Right before he moved, I tossed the throwing pick grasped within my right hand, using nothing but my wrist. I targeted his face where the damage would be greatest, but the penalty from the paralysis threw off my aim, and the steel pick embedded itself into Kuradeel's left arm. His HP bar fell by a despairingly meagre amount.

“...That hurt...”

Kuradeel scrunched up his face and lifted his lips before driving the tip of his sword into my right arm. From that, he twisted it twice or thrice.

“...!”

There was no pain. However, the strong numbness alongside the unpleasant sensation of having my nerves stimulated directly ran through my body. Each time the sword dug into my arm, my HP decreased slowly, but steadily.

Not yet... the poison isn't gone yet...? I waited for the time my body regains its freedom as I gritted my teeth, withstanding the blows. It does depend on the strength of the poison, but the usual paralysing poisons should wear off in five minutes.

Kuradeel pulled out his sword and stabbed it down into my left foot this time. The numbing shocks ran through my nerves once again, the damage accumulating mercilessly.

“Well... how is it...? How does it feel to know you're about to die...? Tell me... would you...?”

Kuradeel said that in a whisper while staring at my face.

“Say something, kid... how about you try crying, if you don't want to die...?”

My HP finally dropped below half, changing to a shade of yellow.

I have yet to recover from the paralysis. Coldness gradually enveloped my body. The possibility of death, enshrouded in a chill, crawled up from my feet.

I have witnessed the death of countless players within SAO up until now. All of them had the same expression on as they scattered into an immeasurable number of glittering fragments. Am I really going to die this way? That expression asked that simple question.

That's right, we must have all doubted the rule that served as the basis of this game, how we would really die if we die within the game, somewhere in our hearts. Perhaps we would really return to the real world safe and sound when we vanished as our HP reached zero—that was the hope we held. There was no way to find out aside from actually dying. If one were to go down that path of thought, death within the game might just be one of the methods to escape the game—

“Hey, hey, say something. You're really dying here, you know?”

Kuradeel's sword was pried from my leg and then stabbed into my stomach. My HP fell heavily and went into the critical red area, but that too, seemed as though it was unrelated to me, happening in some other faraway world. As the sword tortured my body, my thoughts meandered through a dark path, deprived of light. My consciousness began to drown in a thick, heavy veil.

But— An absurd fear gripped my heart all of a sudden. Asuna. Asuna being left behind when I disappear from this world. Asuna falling into Kuradeel's hands, suffering the same pain I did. The unbearable pain brought by that possibility shook my consciousness awake.

“Kuoo!!”

My eyes opened and I gripped the blade of that sword pierced into my stomach with my right hand. Mustering my strength, I slowly pulled it out from my body. My HP had a mere one-tenth remaining. Kuradeel shouted in surprise.

“Oh... oh? What, so you really are scared of dying, huh?”

“That’s right... I can’t... die yet...”

“Heh!! Haha!! I see, that’s more like it!!”

As laughter like that of an eerie bird escaped out from Kuradeel, he shifted his entire weight onto the sword. I frantically held that back with my right hand. This was merely a clash between numerals. One done through complex calculations of our strength parameters.

The result—although slow, the end of the sword steadily sank downwards. Dread and despair surrounded me. Is this the end...? Am I going to die...leaving Asuna behind... all by herself in this twisted world...? I desperately resisted. Gritting my teeth, I opposed the sword drawing closer.

“Die—!! Dieeee—!!”

Kuradeel screamed out in a shrill pitch.

The killing intent that assumed the form of dark-grey metal descended a centimetre at a time. The sword tip came into contact with my body—and sank slightly in—...

At that moment, a turbulent gust of wind blew.

A wind dyed in shades of white and red. Its advance threw Kuradeel high into the sky along with his sword. I silently stared at the figure that had swooped down before me.

“...I made it... I really made it... Thank god... I made it...”

Those hushed murmurs were beautiful beyond even the sounds of an angel’s flapping wings.

Kneeling as though she was about to collapse, Asuna stared at me with her eyes widely opened, her lips trembling.

“Alive... you’re still alive, aren’t you, Kirito-kun...”

“...Aah... I’m still alive...”

The fragility of my voice surprised even myself. Asuna nodded heavily, fetching a pink crystal out from her pocket with her right hand, shouting out “Heal!” with her left hand on my chest. The crystal broke apart and my entire HP bar recovered in an instant. Upon acknowledging that,

“...Wait for a bit. It’ll be over right away...”

Asuna whispered and stood upright. Drawing her rapier in an elegant motion, she started walking.

It appears that Kuradeel had finally gotten up on the other side. Recognising the approaching shadow, his two eyes stared in bewilderment.

“A-Asuna-sama... why do... N-No, this is, practice, yes, during practice, something...”

He jumped to his feet like a spring, retaliating with words spoken in a rasping voice, but he didn’t manage to finish. That was because Asuna’s right hand flashed, the sword tip tearing into Kuradeel’s mouth.

“Puaa!!”

He threw his head back with a hand holding onto his mouth. Ceasing motion for a moment, that familiar expression saturated with hatred creaked back onto his face.

“You bitch... don’t you get carried away... Keh, fine, I’d have to take care of you sooner or...”

But that line was forcibly interrupted as well.

Asuna began her ferocious attacks as soon as she adjusted her rapier.

“Oh... kuoo...!”

Kuradeel desperately fought back with his two-handed sword. However, that was no match. As the tip of Asuna’s sword drew countless streaks of light in the air, it tore at Kuradeel repeatedly with dreadful speed, piercing right through. Those trajectories were practically invisible to even me who should have been several levels above her. Before the visage of that white angel thrusting her sword almost as if she was dancing, I merely stared in fascination.

Beautiful. With her chestnut-coloured long hair flowing, the figure of Asuna emotionlessly driving back her enemy while enshrouded in flames of animosity was unbelievably beautiful.

“Nuu! Kuaaaa!”

The wildly swung about sword of Kuradeel, half-submerged in fear, did not even graze her. His HP bar quickly decreased. As it finally burst into the critical red area from yellow, Kuradeel threw down his sword and shouted with his hands up in the air.

“I-I got it!! I got it!! I’m the one at fault!!”

And he cowered onto the ground.

“I-I’ll quit the guild! I’ll never appear in front of you guys again!! So—”

Asuna ceased her movement at that moment and listened to Kuradeel’s words in silence. She had a gaze as if she was looking at a mere scrap of object data. I was taken aback.

“S... stop it, Asuna... you mustn’t... do that... you mustn’t...”

But, that voice was simply too feeble.

Atop Kuradeel's head, as he knelt at her feet, screaming pleads for his life with his forehead scraping the ground, Asuna precisely tapped the pointed end of her rapier—

And stabbed it through without a hint of hesitation. Kuradeel's entire frame shivered in jolts.

Asuna drew out the sword tip and Kuradeel raised his face with a blank expression.

“Ah...? Hey, what did—”

At that moment, his HP bar soundlessly extinguished. All of the data making up Kuradeel's flesh broke into small fragments and scattered away. A grating sound effect, like that of glass being crushed. The fine objects that scattered everywhere started to vanish all at once, as though they were dissolving—before I noticed it, nothing remained there.

The rapier fell from Asuna's right hand as she stood stock still, rolling over as it made a dry sound off the rocky ground.

Asuna approached unsteadily with her eyes cast downwards and fell to her knees before me, like a puppet with its strings cut. She softly stretched out her right hand, but jolted it back on the verge of touching me.

“...Sorry... it's... all my fault...”

She struggled to get that line out with her face showing grief. Tears flowed out from her large eyes, trickling down one after another as they glittered like gems.

“Asuna...”

“I'm sorry... I... wo... won't... meet Kirito-kun... a... again...”

I forced my body up, with the paralysing poison finally worn off. An unpleasant numbness remained from all that damage dealt to me, but I took no notice of that, stretching my two arms and embraced Asuna's form. With that, I pressed against her beautiful, cherry-coloured lips with mine.

“...!”

Asuna's entire body stiffened and tried to push me away with her hands. I ignored that, holding onto her forcibly, the tip of my tongue intruding onto her lips. That was an act that definitely went against the harassment prevention code. A system message prompted by the code should have been displayed in Asuna's vision right now and should the girl touch the OK button, I would be instantly teleported to the prison area of the Black Iron Palace. However, that was of no concern to me.

I pushed apart Asuna's lips, sliding my tongue in, stretching the system's feedback simulation to its limits through various deeds before our faces finally parted.

“I won't forgive you if you do that.”

I spoke while staring into Asuna's eyes, her face flushed deep red.

“My life is yours, Asuna. So I'll use it for you. I'll be with you till the very end.”

Asuna nodded countless times while warm breaths escaped from her, with cloudy eyes set upon an enraptured expression.

“Yes... yes...”

This time, she reached out with her arms on her own volition and I embraced Asuna tightly as her face approached.

I felt the core of my body, frozen in the depths of death, starting to thaw gently from the fervour of Asuna's life.

(Continued in Volume 1, Chapter 16)

Credits

- Translation – Tap
- Editing – Baka-Tsuki
- Compiled – Mamue