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ソードアート・オンライン プログレッシブ

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《黒の剣士》と《閃光》のレイピア使い。
後にそう呼ばれ畏怖される名剣士二人の、出会いの物語。

Part 1

Just once, I saw a real shooting star.

It was not during a vacation; it was from the window of my house. For people living in towns with crisp air and actual dark nights, shooting stars are not uncommon. But unfortunately, Kawagoe City of Saitama prefecture, where I have lived all fourteen years of my life, has neither of those qualities. On a clear night, even a second magnitude star can barely be seen with the naked eye.

But, late one midwinter night, when I happened to glance outside my window on a whim, I saw it. On that deep night without many stars, the city lights formed a whitish canopy covering the sky. And in an instant, it was cut by a quick flash of light. My soon-to-be 5th grade self childishly thought, "I must make some kind of wish...". Up to that point was fine, but the wish which appeared in my mind was, "I wish my next monster drop is going to be a rare item." It was the kind of wish no sensible person would make. I suppose it sprang from the fact I was playing an MMORPG I liked at the time. The shooting star I glimpsed that day, I saw it once again three (or was it four) years later—glowing the same color, moving at the same speed.

However, this time, I did not see it with the naked eye, nor was I beneath the dark grey night sky.

I saw it through a Nerve Gear, the world's first full sensory type VR interface, at the bottom of a gloomy, virtual dungeon.

One could describe the fight as bloodcurdling.

The level 6 humanoid monster, «Ruin Kobold Trooper», was swinging an uncouth hand ax, and the person fighting the Kobold was barely able to dodge. I felt a chill run down my back as I watched the battle. But after the player dodged three consecutive strikes, the Kobold completely lost its balance and, instead of using this chance to escape, the person used a sword attack skill at full strength.

The skill was the first rapier skill players learn: the single thrust attack «Linear». This sword skill is activated by holding a sword in front of the body with the main hand, concentrating on it, and then thrusting the sword straight forward; it was a simple, basic skill, but the speed was terrific. Clearly, the speed was not left to the system motion assist alone, but was boosted by the player's own movement commands.

During the beta test, I saw with my own eyes many party members and enemy monsters using this same sword skill many times, but I could not see the rapier itself now, only the trajectory drawn by the sword skill's special light effect. That pure white flash cutting through the darkness of the low light dungeon reminded me of the shooting star of that day.

The rapier user continued dodging the Kobold's three strike combo and then counterattacking with «Linear». After using this attack and defense pattern three more times, the player finished off one of this dungeon's stronger monsters, an armed beastman, without being wounded. Even then, it did not seem to have been an easy battle. After the killing sword skill passed through the center of its chest, the monster collapsed backwards and dispersed into particles. The rapier user wavered as if being pushed by the unsubstantial polygon shards, and leaned back onto the corridor wall, slowly slid down against the wall to sit, and started breathing hard.

The person did not seem to notice me standing about 15 meters away at the corner of an intersection.

Moving far away without saying anything and finding my own prey, was my normal way of doing things. One month ago, on that eventful day, I decided to selfishly live as a solo player. And after that day, I never approached anyone alone. The only exception was if I saw a player in battle who was clearly in danger, however the rapier user's HP gauge was still near full. At the very least, the person did not seem to need the help of some busybody.

Even so...

After about five seconds of deliberation, I left the shadow of the intersection and walked toward the still sitting rapier user. Skinny shape, somewhat slender. The torso was equipped with a dark red leather tunic with a lightweight copper breastplate, while the lower body was dressed in neat leather pants, with boots up to the knees. A hooded cape cloaked the body from head to near-waist, so the face could not be seen. Other than the cape, the equipment seemed to be that of a fencer, very similar to my equipment as a swordsman. My beloved sword «Anneal Blade», a reward from a difficult quest, is very heavy. So, to utilize the sharpness of my skills, I wear very little metal armor—only a small chest guard with a dark-grey leather coat over it.

Hearing my approaching footsteps, the rapier user's shoulder suddenly shook, but did not move beyond that. That I was not a monster should be shown as a green colored cursor in that person's view. With his face buried deep behind raised knees, showing a 'just pass by like that and go somewhere else' feeling very strongly—I stopped about two meters from the rapier user and opened my mouth.

"...That was an extreme overkill."

The small shoulder covered by the thick cloth of the cape moved slightly again. The hood jerked, moved up just about 5cm, from the darkness inside, two pupils sharply shot at me. The only thing I could determine was the light brown iris, the shape of the face could not be seen at all.

The rapier user continued to look with that sharp sight used in the earlier battle for a few seconds, then tilted the head slightly to the right—an 'I don't understand what you mean' kind of gesture.

Seeing that, I thought 'so it was like that'.

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

The «Linear» released by the rapier user was so perfect that I couldn't help but shiver. The pre-motion and post-motion was short, and above all was the speed that did not allow it to be seen. I have never seen such a fearsome and beautiful sword skill before.

So at the start, I was thinking that he must be a similar beta tester. Before this world became a death game; long battle experience must have been gained for this speed.

However, seeing «Linear» a second time, I had doubts about my guess. The skill was perfect, but the battle pace was dangerous. For sure, «Step Defense which uses the smallest movement» has a higher counter attack speed over parry or block, and weapon/armor durability will not decrease. In exchange, when the defense fails, the risk is greatest. At worst, counter damage is applied and a stun could occur. In solo battles, a stun is fatal.

The perfect sword skill and the dangerous defense tactics were unbalanced. For some reason, I wanted to know why, no matter what. That's why I moved closer and inquired. Asking if the repeated use of the tactic was overkill.

However the opponent did not seem to understand the extremely popular net game phrase. That means the rapier user in front of me was not an original beta tester. Not only that, they might not even have been an MMO player before coming here.

I took a short breath, and explained anew.

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

In this world, how many days had it been since I talked so much... how many weeks. While thinking that, I stopped talking.

After listening to my speech, the fruit of my hard work and my poor speaking skills, the rapier user had no reaction for over ten seconds. Just when I thought I did not manage to get through, a small voice finally slipped through the lowered hood.

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

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

Part 2

It was already one month since the official launch of the world's first VRMMORPG «Sword Art Online».

For the average MMO, by this time players reaching the level cap should be about to appear and the world map should have been explored from end to end. However for SAO, the current top class group is barely level 10—I didn't know if this was the cap, but there was no way it could be. The game's stage, the floating castle Aincrad, had only been conquered by a few percent in total.

The reason was, the current SAO was a game but not a game; in a sense, it had become a «Jail». Manual logout was not possible and avatar death was the same as real player death. In these conditions, not many people entered dungeons filled with dangerous monsters and traps.

Also, after the Gamemaster forcefully made the avatars the same gender as the players in this world, females were very rare. I think almost all of them were still staying in the «Starting City», even after one month. In the first huge dungeon, «First Floor Maze», I have seen female players only two or three times, and they were all members of big parties.

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

For a moment, I thought about mumbling an apology and leaving the area. I would not say I was a guy who always talked to any female player he saw; I sincerely would not like to be thought of like that.

On the other hand, if the opponent had said something like, 'It's my choice' or 'Leave me alone,' I would have said 'I see' and left immediately. However, the rapier user's short reply was a question. So, I again gingerly and earnestly answered.

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

"...Return path?"

Again, from deep inside the hood a questioning sound was voiced. The fatigue made it very faint and the intonation was also thin, but even so I thought her voice was beautiful. Of course, I would not say that out loud.

So, I explained once more.

"Yes. It takes about an hour to get from here to the dungeon exit, and from there to the closest town is about 30 minutes even when moving quickly. Exhaustion will increase mistakes. You look like a soloer, and for one person, any small mistake could cost your life."

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

If the situation was reversed, and a upper rank person lectured me like this, I would have said, 'It's my choice, so leave me alone,' or something like that. With my personality and actions not matching, I was about to sweat when the rapier user finally replied.

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

"What? ...Not returning to town? But... replenishing potions, fixing equipment... and sleep..."

After I asked dumbfounded, the rapier user's shoulders shook slightly.

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

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

Safe areas were a few rooms in a dungeon where monsters do not appear. You can recognize one by a special colored torch placed in the four corners on the wall. For hunting and mapping, it's a nice place; but even so it could only be used for about one hour of short rest. The floor was made of cold stone and there was of course no bed, and nearby monster footsteps or growl could be heard frequently. No matter how courageous a player was, deep sleep was absolutely impossible.

But, from what I just heard, this rapier user had been using safe area in lieu of a town inn, in order to remain in the dungeon... is that, what does it mean?

"...How many hours has it been?"

I fearfully inquired.

The rapier user answered after a long breath.

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

With her delicate left hand in a thick leather glove pushing on the wall, she unsteadily stood up.

The slender sword which was still out dipped down heavily like she was holding a two-handed sword one-handed, and the rapier user walked away behind me.

The cape which moved away shuffling was in tatters, showing that a lot of its durability had been lost. No, for cloth equipment which was used for a four-day hunting expedition, just having maintained its shape was a miracle. The earlier 'As long as I don't take damage' comment might not have been an exaggeration...

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

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

The rapier user stopped, leaned her shoulder on the right wall and turned around slowly. From deep within the hood, her hazel-looking eyes shot at me with a thin red background.

"...Everyone will die in the end anyway."

The hoarse, cracked sound made the cool dungeon air colder.

"In just one month, 2000 people died. But still, not even the first floor has been cleared. It is not possible to clear this game. Where and how you die, early... or late, is the only difference..."

The longest, most emotional speech until now fluctuated in the middle and cut off.

In front of me who stepped forward on reaction, the rapier user was hit by an unseen paralyzing attack and slowly sank to the floor.

Part 3

As she was falling to the dungeon floor, she felt a prosaic thought drift by. 'How is it possible to faint in a virtual space?'

Loss of consciousness means the brain's normal blood flow is momentarily stopped. The reason for this could be a malfunction in the heart or blood vessels, anemia or low blood pressure, hyperventilation or many other reasons; but while in a VR world in FullDive, the physical body is resting on a bed or reclining chair. The physical body of the players imprisoned by this death game «SAO» would probably be currently placed in a hospital; their health would obviously be checked and they would be continuously monitored. If necessary, medicine would be used. It's hard to believe loss of consciousness is due to the physical body.

This is what she thought up to that point as her consciousness faded, and at the end she thought, 'Whatever happens is fine with me.'

Yes, whatever happens now is fine by me.

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

Anyway, how could he help? In this world, the maximum weight a single player can carry is strictly limited by the system. In the depths of dungeon, everyone carries medicine and extra equipment to their weight limit, leaving space for monster drops such as gold and items. With all those combined, the act of carrying a whole person is absolutely not possible.

—After thinking up to that point, she finally realized something.

She was hit by a strong sense of vertigo, and what she thought of as she fell to the ground was, 'Finally, I can relax for a long time'. What's under her body should have been the hard stone floor of the dungeon. But, somehow the feeling against her back was strangely fluffy and soft. Her body felt warm, and a light breeze caressed her cheek...

She opened her eyes fast enough to make a sound.

She was no longer in a maze lined by thick walls. There were old trees with golden moss and thorny brushes with small flowers, a clearing in a forest. At the center of a round space of about 7 or 8 meters, there on a soft carpet of grass, she lost consciousness... no, was sleeping.

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

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

At the edge of the clearing, sticking to the root of a majestic tree, was a grey shadow. A somewhat large one hand sword was held in both arms, and its sheath laid under his head. Long black hair covered his face so it could not be seen, but from his equipment and

physique, there was no mistake he was the male player who talked to her before she fainted in the dungeon.

Maybe that man used some sort of method to move her out from the maze to this forest after she had fallen. She looked past the forest. On the left side, about 100 meters away, a huge tower reaching up to the sky—the first floor maze of Aincrad stood there menacingly.

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

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

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

"Unnecessary... effort."

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

At that time, why did she touch a new game machine that was not even hers? Why did she put it on her head, lay on the high back mesh chair, and say the start command?

The dream VR interface that was the cursed killing machine «Nerve Gear», and its huge jail of the soul, the «Sword Art Online» game disc was not bought by Asuna, but by her older brother Koichiro. However for her brother, playing MMORPGs was not something he would normally do. His life was centered around other things and he hadn't played any 'games' since his youth. Born as the first son to the acting president of the huge electronic machine maker «Recto», as his father's successor he received a lot of training in necessary things and was forced to cut out all the unnecessary things while growing up. Why her brother would be interested in Nerve Gear... no, be interested in SAO, was something that even now she did not understand.

However, ironically, Koichiro would not be able to play the first game he bought in his life. On the first day of the game's official service, he was sent on a business trip overseas. On the day before his departure, at the dining table when their faces met, he complained about it jokingly, but she felt that he really had regrets.

Not as extreme as Koichiro, for Asuna who was a 3rd year middle school student, the only experience of a game she played was free games on her cell phone once in a while. She knew about the existence of net games, but with high school entrance exams closing, there was no interest or motivation to play these games—or there was supposed to be none.

So, why on that day one month ago, November 6, 2022, did she visit her brother's empty room, took the fully setup Nerve Gear from the top of his desk and put it on her head, and said «Link Start»? she still did not understand the reason she did those things till this day.

Just from one thing she said, everything changed on that day... no, it ended could be said to.

In the beginning Asuna locked herself in an inn room in the Starting City to wait for the incident to end, but after two weeks with no message from the real world, she gave up hope on being saved from outside. Also at the same time, over one thousand players had died, and she found out that even the first maze had not been broken through, she realized that waiting inside for game clear is useless.

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

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

Instead of huddling in a small dark room fearing for the future, it's better to go outside. Use all her ability to learn, train, and fight. If she ended up dying after using all her strength, at least she would be without trouble for the past and regrets of a lost future.

Run. Charge forward. Then disappear. like a meteor burning up upon entering the atmosphere.

Holding onto that one thought, Asuna left the inn, and stepped out into the wilderness of the MMORPG world that she doesn't know a single common phrase of. She chose her own weapon, and relied on just one skill she learned, reaching the bottom of the maze that no one had been to before.

Then today, Friday, December 2, at four in the morning. Probably due to continuous reckless battle exhaustion, she fainted due to neural reflex, and her path should have ended. In Starting City's «Black Iron Palace», the «Life Monument» close to the left side, the name 'Asuna' should be carved there smoothly in a horizontal line, and everything would have ended—supposed to. And yet.

"Unnecessary..."

Asuna again squeezed out that word, about four meters away the dark hair, single-handed sword user lowered his night color eyes. The impression of his age seem to be a little higher than hers, but that naive gesture made her involuntarily wrinkle her brow.

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

"I did not save you."

A low quiet sound. That sounded like a youth, but something in it camouflaged his age this time too.

"...Then, why did you not leave me there."

"What I saved, was the map data you had. Staying for four days in the front line, meant you should have mapped a lot of the unexplored dungeon. It's a bit too important to disappear along with you."

With logic and efficiency pushed onto her, she took a deep breath. Up to now, how important life is, and how everyone should join force to work together, when people told her those in the city she just pushed them away—of course with words only—she thought of doing it, but could not think of any reasonable response.

"...Then, just take it."

With the low mutter, she opened a window. Navigating the recently, finally familiar tabs, she accessed her map data and copied them all to sheep skin paper item. She made the scroll into an object and tossed it near the man's feet.

"With this, your objective is achieved right. Then, I will be going."

Pushing on the grass with her hand, she stood up but wobbled slightly. From the time display in the window, she calculated that she had slept for seven hours since she fall, but her exhaustion had not fully recovered. However, she still had three prepared rapiers left. She decided earlier on that she would not leave the tower until the last rapier only has half durability.

She had many unexplained questions. The grey coated single hand sword user, what kind of method did he use to move her from the depth of the maze to the forest clearing? Even if moved, why not to a safe area in the maze, instead of the difficulty of moving her to the outside of dungeon?

Even so, she did not think it was something she need to turn around and ask. To return to the dark raised maze, she took a step to the left of the forest—but, before that.

"Wait, Fencer-san."

"..."

She ignored it and took a few steps forward, but the speech after made her involuntarily stop.

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

"...Meeting?"

After muttering that with her back still turned, she heard the swordsman's changed tone carry on the light forest breeze.

"Today in the afternoon, at the town «Tolbana» that is closest to the maze, the first «First floor boss strategy conference» is supposed to be held."

Part 4

Since the floating castle Aincrad was made with a lot of detail, of course the first floor was the widest. The first floor was almost completely circular, with a diameter of 10 kilometers—that is, an area of about 80 square kilometers. For reference, Kawagoe City, Saitama prefecture has an area of 110 square kilometers, and a population of over 300,000 people.

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

On the southern edge, with a diameter of one kilometer surrounded by half circle of walls, was the «Starting City». In the grasslands surrounding the city, mainly boar- and wolf-type animals as well as worm-, beetle-, and wasp-type insect monsters inhabited the area.

Northwest of the grassland was a deep wide forest, and northeast was the lake region. After passing through either of the two there were mountains, valleys, and ruins that contain monsters lying in wait for players to pass by, and on the far northern edge of the floor, was a 300-meter wide, 100-meter tall squat tower. Here, stood the first floor maze.

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

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

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

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

Purple letters [INNER AREA] flowed into my view, showing I had entered a safe town area. At that moment, my shoulders relaxed, and I involuntarily sighed.

I was so exhausted from leaving early in the morning. Turning around, I imagined the rapier user behind me must feel worse, but the feet covered by knee-high boots did not seem to waver. Even with a few hours of sleep, one cannot completely recover from the exhaustion of three continuous days of hunting, so she must still be acting stubborn. When returning to town, the body and mind (for, in the virtual world, those two are essentially the same) should relax. I thought about voicing my thoughts, but the atmosphere seemed too solemn for idle talk.

In exchange, I turned toward the rapier user, and said, business-like.

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

"..."

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

The breeze which blew in the valley town, caused her cape to sway while moving away. I opened my mouth slightly, but not finding anymore to say, closed it again. Thinking about it, I, who had been solo playing hard for three weeks, was not qualified to seek interaction with others. Up until now, I had only been spending days protecting my own life...

"A strange girl."

Suddenly I heard that murmur behind me, and I turned away from the back of the rapier user and looked around.

"...I thought she would soon die, but she did not. No matter how you look at it, she is a net game beginner, but her skill is fearsome. What kind of person is that."

The high pitched voice continued, ending its sentences with a special nasal inflection. This person did not possess a large build and instead was one or more heads shorter than me, but was still a incredible player. The armor, like mine, was full body cloth and leather. The weapon strapped on her left waist was a small claw and, on her right, were throwing nails. These were not weapons regularly used by those who reach the front lines, but this person's greatest weapon was something else.

"What do you know about that fencer?"

I involuntarily inquired, but knowing the opponent's reply, I wrinkled my face. The claw user did not betray my expectations, as she held up five fingers and said.

"I'll sell it cheap. 500 coll."

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

One time in the past, I asked why she used such markings. However, I only received a 'Don't ever ask the reason why a girl puts on makeup' reply, immediately followed by an angry outburst, 'I will tell you for 100,000 coll!' So, I had to hurriedly back down.

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

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

"Nihihi, you have a good heart."

The person who said this at the limit of shamelessness was perhaps Aincrad's first informant; the one known as «Argo the Rat» laughed.

'—If you chat with «Rat» for five minutes, you'll end up paying for 100 coll worth of stories. Be careful.'

That was a warning by someone. However, the actual Argo replied she had not once sold free information for money. When a story was determined to have value, it would always have a price, since it would be hard-to-find «merchandise». Thinking about it, if a false story was sold, then the reliability of informant would drop. For a merchant, information gathering was a different breed of danger and trouble compared to gathering material items in dungeons and selling to NPCs in towns.

I considered asking a gender-based question, 'Why would a female player choose this kind of job'—but after seeing Argo's face, I had second thoughts about asking such a question. Even if I asked, she would ask for another '100,000 coll' for the answer, so instead I asked another question.

"So, today again, too? You aren't here for normal business talk, but as a negotiator for that mysterious person?"

Hearing this, Argo frowned and quickly glanced left and right of the street. She then pointed to a place behind me and we moved toward the nearby alleyway. The «Boss strategy conference» was still two hours away, so there were not many players here yet, but just in case, this was something she thought others should not overhear. The reason was that it was probably related to the mysterious person's reputation.

Argo stopped when we were deep in a small alley, leaned her back against a house—inhabited only by NPCs, of course—and nodded.

"Well, yea. It was raised to 29,800 coll."

"The offer has come to 29.8k coll now, huh."

I smiled wryly, then lowered my shoulders.

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

"I already told the client that the last time."

Argo's main business is as an informant, but by using her very high dexterity stats for movement, she also maintains a side business as a «Messenger». Normally it was just oral messages or delivering a short message on a scroll, but after about one week since negotiations with her client, it was complicated... or rather, it was an annoying client.

He—or she—wanted to buy my one-handed longsword «Anneal Blade +6 (3S3D)».

Part 5

The weapon enhancement system in SAO was simple compared to those of recent MMORPGs. The enhancement parameters were Sharpness, Quickness, Accuracy, Heaviness, and Durability, five bonuses which could be given to a weapon by having NPC or player smiths to work on it. The parameter related material items required and the certain percentage of failure was similar to other MMORPGs.

No matter which parameter was given by enhancement, the item's name in the equipment window would have a +1 or +2 added on. However, that number's «breakdown» could only be seen when the weapon was selected, while its property window was opened. For player-to-player sales, saying an item had 'Accuracy +1, Heaviness +2' and other stats quickly became tedious. Instead, players used a shorter notation: for example, a +4 with a breakdown of Accuracy +1, Heaviness +2 and Durability +1, would be denoted by the phrase «1A2H1D». This style of notation has already become quite commonplace.

This means, my «Anneal Blade +6 (3S3D)» was enhanced by Sharpness +3 and Durability +3. Having an item of this quality on the first floor actually required a lot of patience and luck. Because of this situation, not many players train smithing skills that have no direct relation to survival rate. But, I am uneasy about the skill level of the NPC smith shops, even though the NPC smiths do look dwarfish.

Before I enhanced it, my weapon, the «Anneal Blade», was the reward from a very difficult quest. Considering its current specs, it could well be the most wanted item from the first floor— however, that being said, it's still only a «Beginner's equipment». I could only enhance it a few more times at most and, around the 3rd or 4th floor, I would have to change to new sword anyway, so I didn't need to keep upgrading this one.

For the above reasons, I wondered why Argo's client was willing to pay such a large amount of coll—29.8k—for this sword. If this was a normal face-to-face transaction, I could ask for the reason directly, but that doesn't work when I don't even know the client's name.

"...The hush money the person paid was 1000 coll, right?"

At my inquiry, Argo calmly nodded and said.

"That's right. Are you willing to raise?"

"Hmm... 1k huh... hm—m!"

Hush money was the amount of coll Mr. X, who wanted to buy my sword, paid Argo to keep their name hidden from me. If I decided to pay the 1000 coll, Argo would instantly message her client to inform him that the hush amount was raised to 1200 coll, and ask if they would like to counter it. If YES was the reply, then this time I would be forced to choose whether to pay 1300 coll or not. If I win this raise and counter battle, then I would learn the opponent's name, but I would probably lose money in this «Sword deal», as a result. No matter how you think about it, that'd be idiotic to the extreme.

"...Good grief, you don't have to just sell information, since even when you're not selling something it's a business... that is one impressive merchant's soul..."

While I complained, Argo's whisker cheek relaxed into a snicker.

"That is real joy of trade. When I sell someone information, at that instant the story of «Someone bought such and such information» is born."

"...Tell me when a female player wants my personal information. I will buy her information."

Sighing as I said that, Argo once again gave a jolly laugh, then changed her expression.

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

With a hand wave, she turned around and, with titular «Rat»-like dexterity, left the alley. While I watched the auburn hair disappear into the crowd, I idly thought, 'That person surely won't die'.

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

The difference between life and death of players was separated by some key factors. Some of the defining elements were to carry a massive amount of potions and to know when to stop searching dungeons; but, one key factor between life and death was the unconditional belief in having «their own truth». Putting it another way, it was their «ultimate weapon» for survival.

In Argo's case, it was probably «Information». Dangerous monster locations or, on the other hand, the most efficient hunting locations, this person knows them all. Her belief in knowing created in her calmness, and increased her ability to survive.

So then, for me, my «Truth» was the sword on my back. To be more precise, it was when my body and sword become one, that moment of zen. I was not fully in that state all the time, but the single thought of "I want this world to be my own, and I will not die before that" kept me alive till now. The reason Anneal Blade's enhancement was Sharpness +3 and Durability +3, ignoring Quickness and Accuracy, was that the former two were merely simple number spec ups, while the latter were system-assisted enhancements which would change the feel of a sword swing.

However, then that means...

That rapier user I met today at the front lines of the maze. What was her «Truth»? I did move her unconscious body outside the maze (I can't really say how I did it myself). But, on the other hand, even if I was not there, I believed the moment the next kobold appeared, she would involuntarily stand up and use that high speed «Linear» like a shooting star to kill the enemy... I had to think that way.

What made her fight such a bloodcurdling battle, and how had she managed to live until now? It was probably a «Strength» I didn't know about.

"...I should have paid Argo the 500 coll..."

I murmured with a small shake of my head.

The white-painted outer walls of the windmills surrounding Tolbana town were dyed with a slight orange color from the afternoon light. The time should be a bit after 3pm. To prepare for the approaching long boss strategy conference, I should go fill my stomach somewhere.

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

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

For «Argo the Rat» who sells anything that could be sold, there was only one type of information not in her merchandise. That was, who was originally a beta tester. Argo and I were sure that we were both beta testers, but we will never bring up this topic in conversation, no matter how many light years we had to travel.

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

Not by being killed by monsters in dungeons. But while they were walking outside safe areas, new type players could «Execute» you. Because they believed the one responsible for the death count of 2000 people in the first month was under the liability of the original beta testers.

And, for me, I could not totally dodge this bullet.

Part 6

Asuna's selection of food for the past three—or was it four—days consisted of the cheapest black bread from an NPC baker, and a bottle of water from one of the town's fountains.

She did not enjoy eating too much even in the real world, and the food in this virtual world was so empty that it was beyond description. No matter how much you ate, not a single grain of sugar would reach your real body. She thought it would be better if the food system, of hunger and full, did not exist at all. But, when your stomach was empty for a while, this virtual feeling of hunger would not dissipate until you had eaten something.

The time when she was in the dungeon, she could use willpower to stop the empty feeling in her stomach, but after returning to town, she needed to eat. To compensate for her lack of willpower, she bought the cheapest thing on the menu: a dry and rough-black bread. She experienced a strange frustration from the somewhat good taste by chewing on the bread little by little.

At the center of the town of Tolbana, Asuna sat on a simple wood bench beside the fountain and continued to silently chew the piece of bread in her mouth, hidden beneath the cover of her hood. Despite being a relatively large piece of bread, it was only worth 1 coll. She finally finished half of it before—

"That bread looks pretty delicious."

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

The person who stood there was the man she had just left at the town entrance about a couple of minutes ago. The black hair and grey-coated single-handed sword user. He used some kind of method earlier to move her, who had fainted inside the depth of dungeon, outside. This troublesome person was the one that interfered with her supposed 'to be cut' path.

At the moment she realized that, her cheeks grew hot. After she said her ambition was to die, she was seen eating food which was meant for continued living. A strong embarrassment assaulted her whole body, and she did not know what to do at that moment.

While she was frozen, holding the half moon shaped black bread in her two hands, the man coughed, and said in a low whisper.

"May I sit next to you?"

Normally, she would have left the bench without a word, and moved away without turning back in this kind of situation. However, right now, she was assaulted by a type of distraction she rarely experienced in this world, so she could not react. Seeing Asuna's freeze as a sign of approval, the man sat down at the furthest distance possible on her right side, and began searching in his coat pocket. What he took out was a black colored round object—a black bread worth 1 coll.

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

For someone who has the ability to go that deep in the maze, and the level of his full body armor and equipment, this swordsman should have enough money to easily select a course menu in a restaurant. If it's like this, he is either a super thrift person, or—

"...Seriously, you think it is delicious, don't you?"

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

"Of course. After I came to this town, I eat it once a day. ...Well, I add a bit of a twist."

"A twist...?"

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

"Try using it on the bread."

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

By doing so, with a small sound effect, one side of the bread was painted white. A lot, or more like thickly applied, no matter how you look at it—

"...Cream? From where would you get such a thing...?"

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

After giving his serious answer, the swordsman mirrored the gesture to «Use the pot on the bread» as well. It may be because the contents were all used up, but the pot suddenly dispersed with a small sound and light effect. The swordsman opened his mouth wide, and bit into the bread that was now similarly piled mountain high with cream. Hearing the chewing sound effects, Asuna's own stomach which had been feeling an unpleasant pain for a long time, now had a healthy empty stomach feeling.

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

At that moment, the texture of the normally dry and rough bread changed substantially. The taste of a certain rustic cake spread throughout her mouth; the cream was sweet and slippery,

with a refreshingly sour yogurt taste. The inside of her cheeks were hit with jolts of electrifying fulfillment. Asuna dreamily stuffed her mouth with two, three bites.

When she came back to her senses, the bread that was in her hands, just like the word said, was completely gone. When she looked beside her, she seemed to have finished two seconds or so before the swordsman. Again, a strong embarrassment rose within her. She wanted to escape from this place, but having been treated to food, it would have been very bad on courtesy.

After breathing many times and calming down, Asuna said in a faint voice.

"...Thank you for the food."

"You're welcome."

The swordsman finished his own food, clapped the crumbs off his glove fingers, then continued.

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

"..."

To be honest, her heart was moved. With that yogurt cream, even the 1 coll black bread could become a magnificent feast. It was a fake fulfillment from the taste recreation engine, but to taste it once more... no, if possible, I want to eat it everyday, she thought.

However—

Asuna lowered her eyes, and shook her head within the hood.

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

"Hum. Then, for what purpose?"

The swordsman's sound, could not be said to be a beautiful voice, but there is not a single part of it that was displeasing to the ear: it echoed like the voice of a youth. Maybe because of that, the emotions hidden deep in her heart—the one she never told anyone after coming to this world—slipped out without her consciously noticing it.

"I... want to prove that I exist. At first, I locked myself in a room of the city inn. But I decided, if I was going to slowly rot away, then I wanted to be myself up to the last moment. Even if I lose to a monster and die, this game... this world, I do not want to lose too. No matter what."

Asuna - Yuuki Asuna's 15 years of life, were a continuous battle. It began with the kindergarten entrance exam, then with many small and big tests after; Asuna overcame them all. It was set so that even one failure would make her a worthless person, so she continued to repel that weight.

A new challenge came upon her after 15 years of fighting: «Sword Art Online». However, she probably could not win against this test. Fighting against the unknown, with different rules and cultures, this was a type of battle a single person's strength could not do anything about.

This was the given winning condition: reach the top of the 100 floor floating castle, and kill the final enemy. However, one month after the game started, about one-fifth of the players retired—furthermore, most of them were experienced veterans. The remaining fighting force was small, and the path ahead was long...

After all that, the flood of words from Asuna's heart weakened and strengthened, as she spoke in trickles. The broken end portions were inconsistent monologues which the black-haired swordsman listened to in silence—eventually Asuna's voice was cut by the evening breeze, and then he quietly whispered one small word.

"...Sorry."

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

She met this swordsman for the first time today, there should be no reason for him to apologize. She glanced under her hood at the person beside her; the grey coat man was sitting lightly on the bench, leaning forward and resting both elbows on his knees. His lips moved slightly, and she heard his voice again.

"Sorry...—The current situation right now... or, in other words, what pushed you this far, in a sense, it might be my..."

However, she could not hear what was ahead. Standing tall at the center of the town, upon a huge windmill, a wind-powered clock sounded high and loud.

It was 4pm in the afternoon. The time the «Meeting» started. Looking around, Asuna saw that players had gathered at a nearby fountain, unknown since when.

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

As Asuna remarked that and stood up, the swordsman nodded, and then slowly got up. What was he going to say—she probably was not going to talk to him again anyway, so it did not matter. But within that feeling, a thorn-like prickle of emotion existed.

I wanted to know. I didn't want to know. Which choice was on top, even Asuna herself did not understand.

Part 7

44 people.

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

Compared to my predictions—that was, my expectations, all I could say was this was far too low. In SAO, the maximum size of a party was 6 people, and eight times that, for a total of 48 people made up a raid group. In order to have zero deaths while killing a floor boss, it would be difficult without at least two raid groups to switch between while fighting, but these numbers could not even fill up one raid party.

I breathed in air to sigh, but I lost my chance to breathe out.

"...This many..."

From behind me to my left, the rapier user in a hooded cape whispered. I involuntarily turned around and asked.

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

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

"...I see."

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

For about five or six people, I knew their name and level, and vice versa. Those included «Argo the Rat», who was leaning against a high wall on the other side of the clearing. Additionally, around fifteen of these people I had previously seen near the front line towns and dungeons. As for the remaining 20 plus people, I saw most of them for the first time. Of course, the male and female ratio was very extreme. For female players, by a quick glance, were probably only the rapier user and Argo, those two probably.

Indeed, no one had seen—that was, for this Aincrad—the first floor boss' challenge. Up until now on this floor, the chance of an HP gauge falling to zero—of risking death—was definitely the highest in this large-scale battle. As the rapier user said, everyone gathered at the plaza was prepared for their own death, and being here accepted becoming a stepping stone for players to come... that was what it meant, however...

"...No, not really..."

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

"I cannot say this for everyone, but instead of «Showing the spirit of self-sacrifice», a lot of people should have come here with «Uneasiness about being left behind», too. Which it is for me, probably the latter..."

"...Left behind? From what?"

"From the front line. Total annihilation is scary, but being overcome by an unknown boss is scary, too."

The cloth hood tilt slightly. Since she was a complete net game beginner, she would be hard put to understand what I just said - was what I had thought.

"...That is like, not wanting to fall below the tenth place rank in your school year, or wanting to keep a z-score [11](#) of 2. That kind of similar motivation?"

"..."

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

"Yea... well, probably... Maybe it's like that..."

Then—

Seen from under the hood, her nicely shaped lips slightly twisted upward. Fu, fu—a faint sound could be heard. Laughing... was that what it was? From the ultra perfect «Linear» skill user which had called my actions an "Unnecessary effort" when I moved her out of the maze?

I unconsciously wanted to look directly into her hood, but fortunately the situation changed before that. With a *Pan, Pan* hand-clapping sound, a well carried shouting voice passed throughout the plaza.

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

The owner of the actually majestic voice was a tall, single-handed sword user with shiny metallic armor for each of his body parts. With a running start, he jumped onto the plaza fountain's edge. Jumping that high with his armor, he must have had very high strength and dexterity.

When they saw the back-turned swordsman, several people of the forty made a commotion. I understood what they were feeling. I, too, wondered: that man standing on the edge of the fountain, how was he so handsome, to a point which should not be possible in a VRMMO? In addition, his long hair flowing down in waves on either side of his face was dyed a brilliant blue. Since hair dying items were not sold in shops on the first floor, he must have hunted for a rare monster drop or bought it.

If he went to all that trouble to customize hair style and color for this gathering, with only two female players—although one of them was in a hooded cape so no one could not tell

from the outside, while the other was «Rat»—I think he must have felt some reluctance, but the man completely deflected my suspicion with a refreshing smile and said.

"Today, thank you for coming to my call! Some people here know me, but I will again introduce myself! I am «Diabel», and my profession is «Knight»!"

With that, the people around the fountain gushed out whistles and clapping, mixed with 'You really wanted to say «Hero» right!' kind of calls came flying out.

For SAO, the job class did not exist in the system. Each player was given a number of «Skill Slots», and could freely select from different skills and set them for training. For example, people with manufacturing or trade type skills as their main could be called a «Smith», «Seamstress», «Cook», or other such job titles—however, I have limited knowledge about the «Knight» and «Hero» classes, having not heard of them before.

But, no matter what kind of class a person called himself, it was his own freedom. Saying so, the man named Diabel was wearing bronze armor on chest, shoulders, arms and shins, with a large longsword on his left waist, and a kite shield on his back. You could say that was the right kind of equipment for a Knight.

That gallant appearance... while I stared at him from the back of the crowd, I searched through the index in my brain. His equipment and hair style was different so it was hard to connect, but this one month I remembered seeing him many times in the front line villages and towns. And then, how about before that—the «Another Aincrad», how about there. At least, I don't remember hearing his name before...

"Well then, about the reason I gathered you top players who are active on the very front lines, I don't think I need to say it..."

As Diabel's speech continued, I stopped my thoughts and concentrated on him. The blue-haired knight raised his right hand, pointed to the huge tower vaguely seen rising above the town skyline—the first floor maze—and continued.

"...Today, my party found the stairs going to the top most floor of that tower. That is, tomorrow—or, at the latest, the day after tomorrow—we will reach it: the first floor's... boss room!"

The players made a large commotion. I was a little surprised, too. The first floor maze had 20 floors; I (and the rapier user beside me), went to the 18th floor today, around the 19th floor stair area. I did not know that the 19th floor was already mapped so thoroughly.

"One month. Coming this far took one month... Even so, we have to set an example. Kill the boss, and reach the 2nd floor! We have to show that this death game can be cleared to everyone waiting at the Starting City. That is the obligation of us top players here! Isn't that right, everyone!"

Again, cheers. This time, there were people clapping who were not Diabel's friends. Actually what was being said was honorable and nothing was hidden. No, it's strange to even think

about anything hidden in those words. Right now, I should be like the once-divided players on the front lines and buy the Knight's story, giving him applause—

"Wait a minute, Knight-san."

At that moment, a low voice flowed out.

The cheering immediately stopped, and the front of the crowd split into two. At the center of the emptied space was a somewhat short and stockily built man. From my position, I could only see a somewhat large single-handed sword on his back, and some kind of pointed, cactus-styled brown hair.

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

"Before that, there is one thing that must be cleared up; otherwise I cannot join you."

Diabel's eyes became small for an instant, but soon returned to full smiles and said while beckoning.

"Opinions are certainly very welcome. But, if you are going to speak, you should tell us your name."

"...Hum."

Cactus head gave a huge snort, then stepped forward. When he reached the fountain, he turned around to face us.

"I am «Kibaou»."



The cactus head swordsman who introduced himself with a somewhat daring character name looked at all the players in the plaza with his small but sharp, bright eyes.

His horizontally moving look stopped for just an instant on my face—or I thought he did. I didn't remember his name, nor where we could have met before. After taking plenty of time to look at everyone once, Kibaou eventually said in a threatening tone of voice.

"In there, about 5 or 10 people need to apologize."

"Apology? To whom?"

The knight that was still standing behind him on the fountain edge, Diabel, raised both hands in question. Without looking at him, Kibaou spit out in hatred.

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

At that moment, the low buzzing in the forty people audience cut short; all went silent. What Kibaou wanted to say, everyone finally understood. Me included, of course.

In the oppressive silence, only the evening BGM from the NPC orchestra played quietly. No one said anything. If anything was said, then at that moment you might be labeled as one of «those guys»—such a fear was probably there. No, not probably. At the very least, I was clearly caught by that fear...

"—Kibaou-san. Your «those guys» are... the original beta testers, right?"

Diabel with his arms crossed, showed the most stern look up till now as he asked for confirmation.

"Obviously."

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

"Those beta testers, on the day this shitty game started, dashed from the Starting City and disappeared. They left behind over 9000 people who didn't know left from right. They monopolized good hunting grounds and profitable quests, got stronger without a care for those behind. ...There should be some in this group, hiding their beta status, some sly people thinking of joining the boss fight. I want them to kneel down once, to the party members their lives depend on. That's what I want to say!"

Like his name^[2], he cut off his condemnation with a bite of his teeth. Still, no one said anything. As a member of the original beta tester group, I ground my teeth, held my breath, and continued to keep silent.

It was not that I didn't want to shout back a retort such as, 'The original beta testers, do you think that none of them died?'

About one week earlier, I bought information from Argo—to be exact, I asked her to check on something. To find out the death count for the original beta testers.

The SAO closed beta which was conducted during summer vacation only accepted 1000 people. Everyone was given the right to buy the official release first, but since login time was near testing period, my guess was that not all 1000 testers moved to the official service. Probably, 700 or 800 people—that, was the total number of original beta testers at the start of the game.

However, finding out «Who is an original beta tester» was not that simple. If the player color cursor had a [β] mark, then of course it would be easy—having said that, it could be called fortunate that such a mark did not exist. As for our avatar's appearance, the GM Kayaba Akihiko had set everyone's appearance to be the same as in reality. The only thing we can go with was name, but many probably were changed from the beta to official release. Incidentally, the reason Argo and I are sure each other was an original beta tester was related to how we first met, but that was another story.

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

About 300 people. That, was Argo's estimate of the original beta tester deaths.

If that number was correct, that means, within the current death count of 2000, 1700 are new participants. As a percent, new player death rate was about 18%. On the other hand, original tester death rate was - close to 40%.

Prior knowledge and experience did not always mean safety. Conversely, they could be a trap. For me, who accepted a quest on the first day of the death game, I almost died. Also, there are external factors. In this SAO official service, the geography, monsters, and items are mostly the same as in the beta test, but once in a while, just a slight difference, like a small deadly poisonous needle...

"May I speak?"

At that time, a rich and forceful baritone resounded in the evening plaza. I returned from my thoughts and raised my head. From the left side of the crowd, a silhouette moved forward.

Huge. His height was easily over 180cm, probably. An avatar's size was said not to have any effect on his stats, but the two-handed battle-axe slung over his back actually seemed light weight to him.

His appearance, too, was impressive and did not lose to his weapon. A fully bald head, and chocolate-colored skin. However, the chiseled face was so fitting you might think it was customized. Not Japanese... instead of saying that, maybe he was not even human.

The muscular giant moved forward to the fountain, lightly bowed to the other players, and then turned to the dramatically different in height Kibaou.

"My name is Egil. Kibaou-san, what you wanted to say is that many beginners died because original beta testers did not take care of them, and you want them to accept that responsibility and apologize, isn't that right?"

"Th...That's right."

Kibaou, momentarily overwhelmed, took a step back, but then soon moved back forward. With his shiny, small eyes glaring at the axe user called Egil, he shouted.

"If they did not leave us behind, 2000 people would not have died! However, they are not just any 2000 people, most of them were other MMO top ranks or veterans! If those shitty testers properly shared information, items and money, then there would have been 10 times the people here... no, by now we would have broken through the 2nd or 3rd floor!!"

—300 of that 2000, are what you called 'shitty testers'!

I desperately kept myself from shouting that. I could not yet show a basis for the number 300, and it was scary to be hung; such trivial reasons held me back. However, before that, I didn't think it would be wise to show my original tester status in my objection in this situation.

Right now, about four to five hundred remaining original testers were mixed dangerously with new participants. Level and equipment-wise, they no longer could be said to stand out. In this situation, if I showed myself as original tester, a dangerous thing like witch hunt might happen instead of improving contact between players. At worst, the front line players, new beginners, and original testers might split up and start a war. That had to be avoided no matter what. The reason was, for SAO, player attacks were allowed in fields and dungeons, such as the «Outer Area»...

"That is what you said, Kibaou-san. I don't know about money and items, but I think there is information."

While I lowered my eyes miserably, Egil the axe warrior again responded in wonderful baritone. From the huge pouch on his muscled, leather armor-covered waist, he took out a simple sheepskin-bound book item. The cover had round ears and three whiskers stylized with a «Rat Mark».

"This guidebook, you got it too right. Freely distributed from the item shop in Horunka and Medai."

"...Fr-Freely distributed?"

I involuntarily leaked that small voice. That, from the cover marking, was Argo the Rat's merchandise, the «Strategy Guide by Area». It had detailed information on areas about monster appearance, drop items, and even quest-related explanations. On the bottom of the cover was written, [It's fine. This is Argo's strategy guide.] That kind of catch-phrase was not an exaggeration. A bit embarrassing but I bought the whole set to supplement my memory—then, if I remember right, each book should be 500 coll, a pretty respectable price...

"...I got it too."

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

"There's a commission to the item shop owner, but since the price is 0 coll, everyone got it. It became useful very quickly."

"Wh...What's going on..."

That «Rat»—she was such a devil merchant that she would sell her own stats if that would make money. But, freely distribute information? It wasn't possible! I shifted my gaze; the stone wall Argo was quietly sitting on a few minutes earlier was empty. The next time I met her, I wanted to ask for the reason why, but somehow I could already see her answer: "That information is 1000 coll".

"—Got it. What about it?"

Kibaou's sharp voice interrupted my thought process. Egil put his strategy guide back in his pouch, and said with arms crossed.

"This guide, whenever I reach a new village or town, is always found in the item shop. It's the same for you right. The information is too fast, don't you think?"

"So, what about too early or whatever!"

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

All the players went abuzz. Kibaou closed his mouth sharply, and the knight Diabel behind him nodded in a 'I see' way.

When looks were directed on Egil, he said with his well carrying baritone.

"You see, there is information. Still, a lot of players died. That reason is because they are veteran MMO players, I think. They measured the similarity of SAO to other games, and missed the point of difference. But, right now is not the time to be going after who is responsible. That we become those or not, and how that influences this meeting, is what I think."

Part 9

The two-handed axe user Egil possessed a very imposing attitude, and his argument was also extremely blunt, such that Kibaou could only stand in the shadows in silence. If anyone else other than Egil claimed the same thing, then Kibaou would probably counter with 'Saying that means you are a original beta tester', I think. But, right now, all he could do was glare at the giant in hatred.

Behind the two confronting each other in silence, Diabel, still standing on the fountain's edge, his long hair dyed purple from the evening sun, waved as he nodded once more.

"Kibaou-san, I can understand your point. I too went into unknown fields, and finally arrived here after many near deaths. But, like this Egil-san said, isn't it time to look forward right now? Even original beta testers... no, especially original testers, we need their fighting strength for this boss strategy. If we remove them, and that resulted in the attack failing, what would be the point?"

This truly was a self proclaimed knight, I remembered; he too had given a refreshing speech. Many in the audience deeply nodded. I felt the atmosphere change from 'Convicting original testers,' and I involuntarily breathed out a sigh of relief. I realized it was shameful of me, but then listened to Diabel's continuing speech.

"Everyone, you each have what your own preferences, but right now I would like you to work together to break through the first floor. If there are people who will not fight with original testers no matter what, then it is unfortunate, but you are free to leave. For a boss fight, teamwork is the most important."

The knight's look swept through everyone, and finally stopped at Kibaou. The cactus head swordsman made a huge snort then spit out words.

"...Fine, I will listen to you for now. But, after the boss fight is finished, I want it to be clear black and white."

With his scale mail clinking, Kibaou retreated from the group's front. The axe user Egil too, spread his arms showing that he had nothing more to say, and returned to where he was before.

Ultimately, that was the highlight of this first meeting. Because, even if we wanted to discuss the details of boss strategy, we had only arrived at the top floor of the maze. In a situation where no one had seen the boss' face, a strategy could not be made...

—No, the truth was a little different. Because I know that Aincrad's first floor boss was a super sized Kobold, its weapon was a huge Talwar, and once engaged 12 heavy armor royal guards would spawn.

On one hand, if I showed my original tester status and provided information on the boss, our chance of success might increase by a bit. However, then they would ask 'Why did you stay silent until now,' and a chance that the 'hanging original testers' atmosphere reappear.

Also, my knowledge was from the old Aincrad. When official service began, the chance that boss might be completely, or just in some small detail, changed. If we based our strategy on information from beta, when we actually fight the boss, if its appearance or attack pattern was different... or other things happened, then the raiders would be annihilated by too much confusion. What it comes down to was, until the boss room door is opened and its owner appeared, nothing could start.

Half of my reasoning was to convince myself, as I continue to keep my mouth closed.

At the end of the meeting, the knight Diabel raised his straight forward voice, and let out a huge roar to the participants. I just raised my right hand for show. As for the rapier user beside me, let's not talk about shouting; she did not even move her hand from the cape. Before the word "Dismissed" even disappeared, she had already turned around. Before she left, only I heard her low whisper.

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

To the back disappearing into the dim road, I answered without a sound.

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

Though the meeting was without any actual discussion, even so it seemed to have boosted the players moral, and the 20th floor of first floor maze was mapped in a never before seen speed. The afternoon of the day after the meeting—Saturday, December 3rd—the first party (this time too was Diabel's party of six), discovered huge double doors deep within the maze. Their cheers reached me who was solo fighting nearby.

Diabel's group bravely opened the boss room door, and saw the inhabitant's face. On the evening of that day, at another meeting in Tolbana's fountain plaza, the blue hair knight reported back.

The boss was a huge Kobold, 20 meters in height. Its name was «Illfang the Kobold Lord», and its weapon was of the scimitar category. When engaged, three metallic armor, halberd wielding «Ruin Kobold Sentinels» appeared—

The information up until there was exactly the same as in beta. If I remembered correctly, the «Sentinels» would reappear when the boss lost one of its four HP bars, with 12 in total which must be killed, but as usual I do not have the courage to say that in the meeting. Anyway, the actual fight would not occur too soon, with many scouting fights this will soon be known information—that's what I wanted to say to myself, but something which made my worries worthless was discovered in the middle of the meeting.

Somehow, at the open air NPC stall shop near the plaza, «That thing» was for sale since who knows when. Made up of three bound sheep skin, instead of a book, it was just a pamphlet. Argo's Strategy Guide: First Floor Boss edition—it said. Price was 0 coll from the start.

Of course the meeting was paused for a while as everyone bought (or more like got) the guide from the NPC, and started reading.

Same as usual, there was an impressive amount of information. From the recently known boss name to its estimated HP, main weapon of Talwar and its sword speed, damage amount, to sword skills, this information filled up three pages. The fourth page explained the fact about the «Sentinels»; there, it was clearly written that it will pop four times, up to a total of 12.

And also, on the cover of the guide, a line that did not exist on «Argo Strategy Guide» until now, in bright red font, said—

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

When I saw that, I raised my head in reaction, and looked around the plaza for Argo. However, I could not find the «Rat» in dull leather armor. I lowered my head again, and murmured.

"...Invaded..."

This red warning line might have destroyed Argo's current status—«Just an informant selling information obtained from beta testers no one knew». Almost everyone reading this, would begin to wonder whether Argo herself was a original tester or not. Of course there was no

proof, but later, if the feud between new players and original testers expanded more than it was now, there was no doubt the danger of her being hung would increase.

On the other hand, this strategy guide, would surely avoid some troublesome and dangerous scouting battles. The forty people who read that, as if to let their leader decide how to react, looked at the blue hair knight standing on the fountain's edge like yesterday.

Diabel seemed to lower his head in deep thought for tens of seconds, and then eventually stood up straight and shouted.

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

The audience was washed in a buzz. That speech, instead of confrontation with original testers, chose reconciliation. I thought Kibaou would again jump out growling, but the brown cactus head near the front of the crowd was standing still now.

"Aside from the source, but thanks to this guide, we can skip two of three days of scouting battles. Actually, this is very thankful, I think. Because, the most deaths probably will be from scouting battles."

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

"...If this is true, the boss' numerical stats are not all that bad. If SAO was a normal MMO, then everyone with an average of three... no, under level five would be plenty to kill it, I think. So, if we polish our tactics correctly, bring a lot of POTS^[3] to the fight, it's possible we can kill it without any deaths. No, sorry, not that. Absolutely zero deaths. That, I promise you in the name of the knight!"

'Yo, knight-sama!' and other sounds came flying, loud clapping continued. Diabel was someone with good leadership, even the soloist me has to accept. Guilds could not be made until the third floor, but at that time an impressive conquest guild would probably be made...

I was feeling various degrees of admiration, but with the knight's continuing speech, I choked slightly.

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

...What did he say?

With a freeze which remind me of elementary school gym classes, I hurriedly calculated in my head. In SAO, one party was 6 people, there are 44 people here so... 7 parties plus 2 people left over. If the aim was to be even, then four 6-person parties, and four 5-person parties might be best? But in that case, without the leader's order it's not that easy...

For my round and about high speed thought, the result made it useless. Because, in under one minute after Diabel's directive, seven 6-person parties were quickly formed. They understood the knight wanted to make 6 person parties. The no-matter-how-you-look-he-is-a lone wolf

Kibaou, and the lofty-looking giant Egil too soon found 5 friends. Maybe the only person who did not say 'Let's fight together' was me only—

No, that was not right.

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

"...You got left out too?"

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

"...Not left out. The people around me seemed to be friends, so I refrained."

That was what left out meant—

I wanted to correct her, but was wise with prudence, and instead just nodded seriously and said.

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

It seemed going about it in a systematic way was correct, as the rapier user seemed to hesitate for a moment, then snorted and said.

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

Here, she gave me a 'you asked first so you invite' kind of childish expression, which I graduated from the previous month. So, I nodded and touched her color cursor in my view to send the party invitation. The rapier user pushed OK with a curt gesture, and then in the left side of my view, a second small HP gauge appeared.

Under it displayed a short combination of letters, which I gazed at.

[ASUNA]. That, was the name of the mysterious fencer who possessed the godly fast «Linear».

Part 10

The knight Diabel's command ability, not just speech, was also pretty good in particle aspect too.

He checked over the seven 6 person party, and with the smallest number of switches, made seven parties with different purpose. Two heavy armor Tank parties. Three high movement and high attack Attacker parties. Two long weapon equipped Support parties.

The two tank parties will maintain and exchange being the boss' target. Two attacker parties concentrate on the boss, the other one kill the guards first. The support parties mostly using long weapons will use Delay skill as main, if possible interrupt the boss or guards' attacks.

Simple, but this way not many holes, I think it's a good tactic. While I was in admiration, the knight at last went to the good-for-nothing two person party (of course, that's me and the rapier user) front, after thinking for a while, he said refreshingly.

"You two, make sure none of the Kobold guards remain, please support the E group."

Put it another way, 'Don't interfere with the boss fight and stay quietly at the back', I felt that it could mean this. When I noticed the the rapier user «Asuna» beside me was going to give an unfriendly response, I stopped her with one hand and replied.

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

"Yes, I am counting on you."

With a white flash of his front teeth, the knight returned to the fountain. At that moment, close to my left ear, a sharp sounding voice is heard.

"...What important duty. It would end without a single attack on the boss."

"We can't do anything about it, we only have two people. There is not enough time for Switch and Pot^[3] rotation."

"...Switch? Pot...?"

Hearing that questioning whisper, I once again thought. This rapier user, really left the Starting City as a beginner without any knowledge, and came all the way here by herself. Probably with five non-enhanced rapiers bought from shop, and relying on just one sword skill «Linear»—

"...Later, I will explain in detail. If we talk here it will never end."

'Don't need', I guessed it would be over 50% this kind of response, after the rapier user was silence for a few seconds, she lightly nodded.

The second boss strategy conference was over after a short talk between group leaders assigned letters A to G, and setting up how to share boss drop coll and items. The axe user giant Egil was Tank group B leader, and Kibaou who had burning enmity towards original beta testers is Attacker group E leader. Since group E is for killing guard Kobolds, the rapier user and I, the left over combination, will be helping Kibaou. To tell the truth, that is an opponent I didn't want to be too close to, but he did not know that I am original tester—supposedly. Just to add, the «Rat» was not in the raid. Of course, I did not mean to blame her. With that «Strategy Guide», her task is plenty completed.

For drop sharing, coll will be automatically divided evenly between the 44 raid members, items will belong to the person who gets it, that kind of simple rule was used. In recent MMO, normally a system whereas a person who wants an item will dice roll for it, but somehow SAO used the previous era's method like randomly dropping the item in a player's storage, without anyone else knowing too. That means if a «Boss drop item will be dice roll» kind of rule was set, then the person with the actual item have to report it. I have experienced this many times in beta test, that is a big test of willpower. In actuality, after a boss fight no one will say anything (that is someone kept the drop), there were many very awkward raid disbands.

Diabel, probably to prevent that kind of development, used the «Drop to person» rule. That is a very observant knight.

At 5:30pm in the afternoon, the similar to yesterday 'Let's work hard!' and 'Yea—!' messages completed the meeting, and groups split into threes and fives disappeared inside bars and restaurants. While moving my tense shoulders, I wonder if this stiffness is an illusion, or if the real body is actually tense, it would not matter—

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

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

"Ah, ah... I am fine with anywhere. How about that bar?"

"...No. I don't want to be seen."

That speech almost stabbed into me, then I supplemented it as instead of not «together with me», it was not «together with any male player» and revived my spirit, I somehow managed to calmly nod.

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

"Of course."

A dagger like cutting voice, this time I sustained a light piercing damage. Since this is a virtual world, I could somehow manage to talk to female players, but up till one month ago, I was a 2nd year middle school student whose interpersonal skill was so low that I even had difficulty communicating with my sister. Anyway, out of all solo players, how did only I end up in this kind of situation. That was because nothing could be done without joining the boss

fighting group, thinking about it, all other seven parties are male groups, if I had went into those it would be over without so much concern...

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

"...Anyway, the private room at inns in this world, most could not even be called a room. A space under 6mat with a bed and table only, that takes 100 coll a night. Eating does not really matter, but I want sleep to be real, and to sleep in a bit better room."

"Eh... Re-Really?"

I extended my neck without thinking.

"If you look for it, you can find better conditions right? That, will cost a bit more though..."

"Even if you say search, there are only three inns in this town. The rooms are similar everywhere."

Hearing that reply, I finally understood.

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

"Since... INN means inn."

"That is true, at lower floors in this world, it means a place that is the cheapest you can sleep in. Rooms that you can rent with coll, there are a lot of them other than at inns."

After I said to that point, the rapier user's lips became round.

"Wh... You should have said that earlier..."

After finally getting this kind of retort, I grin and started boasting about the room I am renting now.

"What I rented in this town is, a farmer's 2nd floor costing 120 coll a night, but it has two rooms with all the milk you can drink, the bed is large and view is nice, above that there is also bathroom attached..."

I got carried away and said up to that point, at that moment...

The rapier user's right hand that moved that godly speed «Linear» I saw in the dungeon, grabbed my grey coat's collar with a force that almost activated the violation prevention code. Next, a low husky voice, sounded with lots of force.

"...What did you say?"

Part 11

The following words were all once said by herself: Regarding all of the events of this world, there is only one that is true, and that is "sleep".

And this is what Asuna thought.

Everything else was virtual – walking, running, talking, eating, and fighting, it would not be a lie to say that all these actions were nothing but numbers spewed out from Sword Art Online's algorithms. No matter what the virtual body did, the real world's body that was lying down somewhere would not move an inch. The only exception was, when the virtual body laid down on a bed and entered the world of dreams, the real body's brain probably did the same. So when sleeping at the inns of the street area, it was necessary to let the self fall into a state of sleep, but this could sometimes be a difficult task.

In areas with monsters or the dungeon areas, mind and body would be caught in the heat of battle, so there would be no time at all to sit back and reflect. But the moment she returned to the street area and laid down on the bed of an inn's rented single room, everything that happened during the month would replay itself in her mind. Why is it that at that time, she would produce such painful thoughts in her mind? Why was it, that she was not satisfied after touching the Nerve Gear? Why did she have to take the GEAR helmet and place it over her head, saying "Link Start"—

Taking this kind of regret with her into sleep is no doubt a recipe for nightmares. At a time when her classmates would half-joke about the importance of the winter of third year in junior high, she who had been ever running forward was suddenly stopped by a game. In the next several years, her relatives would pity this girl that retreated from the race of life. And—staring at her sleeping body in some hospital, with expressions that she could not see, were her parents.

With a trembling body, she suddenly sat up, looking at the time displayed in the lower left corner of her vision. Even though a long time had passed, the actual amount of time she had slept was only about three hours. After that, though she had kept her eyes shut, she simply could not fall asleep. Then again, if she didn't sleep so little every night, there would have been no way for her to fiercely fight continuously for three days in the dungeons.

Because of all this, Asuna had always wanted to spend the money she saved up on a high-class bedroom with a comfortable bed. Speaking of the rooms in inns, they were all narrow and dark, with beds made out of unknown materials that were too hard to sleep on. If it was high resilience high-tech urethane foam made in Italy...or even plain old cotton, sleep time should be increased from three hours to four. Another point was, there ought to be at least a shower in the room. Even though bathing is nothing more than a virtual experience and the real world's body would have been kept hygienic by the hospitals, this was a matter of mood. Having nearly died of losing consciousness while fighting solo on the lowest floor, even if it was would only be virtual, she really wanted to dip her feet into some warm water...

—It should be because of these desires gaining intensity, that Asuna would say the following words to the black hair one-handed sword user.

".....What did you say?"

Asuna asked with a hoarse voice, while subconsciously grabbing the other party's collar. What she heard just now couldn't just be an auditory hallucination, right? The swordsman really said...

"Th—There's milk for drinking.....?"

"After that."

"Fr—From the bed, you can see the beautiful landscape.....?"

"After that still!"

"Th—There's a bathroom.....?"

—*Seems like it was not just an auditory hallucination after all.* Asuna let go of his collar, hurriedly asking:

"You said that your room, to stay one night is 120 coll?"

"Yes...Yes I did say that."

"That room, how many of those are still available? What's the location? I want to rent one too, please show me the way to it."

The swordsman finally realized the situation. He coughed once, put on a solemn face, and said:

"Just now, didn't I just say that I rented the second floor of a farmer's house?"

".....You did say that."

"I meant that I rented out the entire second floor. There is no unused room. Incidentally, there are no rooms for rent on the first floor."

"Wha—....."

In that moment, her knees became weak and she was just barely able to stand.

".....that, that room....."

Though she only said that, the other party was probably aware of what was omitted. His black eyes flitted about, and with an apologetic expression he said:

"About that, actually, I am already very satisfied with my week living in that room, so I would not mind giving it to you....In fact, I have already paid the rental system for the maximum number of days...ten days' worth of rent. So, there's no way to cancel it."

"..."

Asuna struggled to stay upright, seemingly conflicted about what to do.

In addition to the inns, there are other places to rent a room, and even luxurious rooms too. That is what the swordsman had just told her. If it's like that, then as long as she put in the effort to search, maybe there were still available rooms in Tolbana village that she could find. But within this single village, dozens of top players had already gathered here to party up for clearing the floor. Good rooms were probably all taken, and that's exactly why this black hair swordsman had paid rent for the maximum number of days.

If it's like that, then what if she just went to the previous village? But, after sunset there would be aggressive and strong monsters roaming about, and tomorrow morning she had to meet with the clearing group on time at the fountain square. Even though she had little interest in this boss clearing group, it was simply not in her character to disregard her duty and arrive late—for so trivial a reason, no less.

So then, there was only one option left.

For a few seconds, Asuna felt her heart tangling itself up. If this were the real world, even if the sky and earth turned upside down she would not do such a thing. But, this was merely a virtual world made of numbers and data, and her body was also no different. Besides, the person in front of her eyes could not be considered a complete stranger anymore. They had eaten bread together, and partied together for the boss fight, and, that's right, this man had also promised to instruct her about that quest. If she wanted to listen to him, then that should be a proper excuse...she definitely could. Probably.

She looked at the swordsman who had remained anxiously attentive, then suddenly lowered her head—using a voice that could only be heard by his ears, and said:

".....let me go to where you live. And your bathroom, let me borrow it."

The farmer's house that the black hair swordsman had rented was near a small pasture in the eastern part of Tolbana. It was larger than she had expected. If she included the section for the ox-carts in her calculations, the place would be about as big as Asuna's house in the real world.

Hidden beside the residence was a beautiful stream, and it would flow through the waterwheel making *pitter-patter* sounds. Arriving at the porch of the main two-story building, which the NPC farmer family was living on the first floor, at the hallway Asuna was greeted by the smiling face of the mistress. The old woman who was sleeping as she sat on a rocking chair near the fireplace then suddenly raised her head. A gold «!» symbol —— A quest starting mark indication —— floated overhead, but she ignored it for now.

Asuna followed the swordsman up to the second floor, where there was but one door at the end of the short corridor. The swordsman touched the door and, automatically, there was a sound of a lock opening. Had it been Asuna who touched it, this door would definitely not have unlocked. It was impossible to unlock rooms rented out to players even if someone had the «Lock Picking» skill.

".....W..Well, please come in."

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

".....Thanks."

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

"W..What is this? So large..... T..This and my room is only twenty coll difference!?
I..Isn't it too cheap.....?"

"Being able to find the room like this quickly is an important skill not included in the system.Well, for my situation....."

Asuna glanced at the swordsman who unnaturally cut off his words before slightly shaking his head. She then looked inside the room again and let out a big sigh.

The room was at least twenty-tatami.^[4] The door to the bedroom could be seen on the east wall, that room was certainly about the same size. Then the western wall had the door with a [Bathroom] plate on it. Asuna could feel a magic force of attraction from those eccentric typefaced alphabets. Taking advantage of the relaxed atmosphere, the swordsman quickly unequipped his sword, gloves, and boots, and submerged his body into the soft looking sofa.

After watching Asuna, who was lost in thought for a while, the swordsman cleared this throat and said,

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

"Ah..... o-okay."

Asuna couldn't believe that she would suddenly rush into the bathroom right after entering someone else's room, but now was not the time to be reserved either. "Well, then...", she muttered while she moved to the door, and the swordsman's voice followed,

"Oh yes, I need to tell you just in case, it won't be the same as bathing in the real world. Nerve Gear seems weak at recreating a liquid environment..... So, don't set your expectations too high."

".....Just hot water is sufficient, I don't expect any more than that."

Responding with her true feelings, Asuna opened the bathroom door.

Part 12

.....Aside from the hot water, another thing that concerned her was the lock of the bathroom.

As she stared at the closed door, although she wanted to rely on herself to feel at ease, this was impossible. She could not find things like a notch or a button in the vicinity of the door knob. Since this room was not rented by Asuna, the menu to operate the room could not be called.

That said, the absence of a single key was extremely trivial in this situation. Why? Having rushed into the room belonging to a man she just met yesterday, because he said he'd lend a bath to her. The dark haired one-handed swordsman — come to think of it, she still doesn't know his name — his age and character were also unknown, but he shouldn't be the type to break into the bathroom, probably. Well, even if he rushed in, as this was within the «City boundary», the «Crime prevention code» would activate, so he won't be able to do anything anyway.

Thinking up until this point, Asuna turned away from the door, and faced the southern side.

".....Aah....."

She unintentionally let out a low voice.

This room is too spacious. The northern half is the place to remove clothes. The floor was covered by a thick carpet. Fixed to the wall was a solid shelf made of wood. Half of the southern side was covered in polished stone tiles, while the majority was occupied by a boat-like white bathtub.

On top of the western brick wall, a hot water outlet that looked like a monster's head was inlaid, which spewed out large quantities of transparent liquid out of its mouth. The bath tub slowly filled with water and white steam, until the water reached the edge and overflowed, and drained off in a corner tile.

—*based on common sense, the architectural model of this house should be from Medieval Europe. Otherwise, the hot water supplying equipment would not be this large.* But Asuna did not have the mood to complain about incomplete research in the virtual world. She brought up the Main Menu window and moved to the display on right side of the screen's «equipment figure» and pressed the button to unequip all her armor and weapons.

The hooded cloak she was wearing now, copper armor covering her chest, both her long gloves and long boots, and the rapier hanging by her waist, all disappeared. Straight long chestnut hair flowed behind her body. The only clothes that remained were the three-quarter sleeved cotton wool top and tight leather pants. The button just now became «Remove all clothes», and she pressed that button again. The tunic and pants disappeared, leaving only two simple pieces of cotton underwear.

Asuna looked at the door again, then pressed the button that had become «Remove all underwear». With these three operations, the virtual body became completely naked. A virtual sense of cold brushed across her skin. In the oddly named Aincrad, the seasonal

changes synchronised with reality, and because the real world was currently in early December, it was pretty cold indoors.

Hurriedly rushing across the bathroom, she reached the ceramic bathtub, and submerged her left leg into the hot water, causing complicated sensory signals to be generated in her brain. Enduring the urge to splash her whole body with water, she first put her head to shower from the mouth of the monster's head, and as the warm sensation covered her body, and the temperature difference between her body and the atmosphere was reduced——

Splash.

Her entire back was submerged.

".....Uaaa....."

Asuna could not help but issue that sound again.

Indeed, just like the black haired swordsman had said, the bathroom in the real world could not be reproduced. The feeling of hot water against the skin, the water pressure against the body, the light reflecting off the surface of the water, everything subtly left a feeling of strangeness.

To some extent, eating was the same, the default «bathing experience» program operation, as long as you closed your eyes and stretched out your arms and feet, the subtle feeling above could no longer be felt. This is a bath. Moreover, the wasted hot water still flowed out of the nearly two meter long Deluxe edition bathtub.

With her eyes closed, mouth immersed in water, and whole body relaxed, she started thinking.

———*Right now, it's fine even if I die. I have no more regrets.*

A thought had remained on her mind since she left the Starting City two weeks ago. Clearing this death game was an impossible task, all of the ten thousand people imprisoned would eventually die. It was just a matter sooner or later, so everything in this false virtual world was meaningless. Better yet, rather than continually pressing forward, it would be better to just stop and die.

Looking back at the «strategy meeting» that was held yesterday and today, Asuna became disinterested. She didn't care who the beta testers (which she still didn't know the meaning of) were or how the items were to be distributed. Tomorrow was Sunday, the day they were going to challenge the greatest obstacle, the floor which had swallowed two thousand people, Aincrad's first floor. Such a thing, relying on only forty experienced people, should not be possible, and there was a high chance of annihilation, so defeat was inevitable.

Asuna let go of her normal behaviour, allowing the bath to soak it all up. Because of the «Let's do it once before I die» feeling, now that this desire has come true, even if she disappeared in the boss battle tomorrow, she would have no regrets.....

———*That, cream covered black bread.*

—————*Before death, I want to eat it once more.*

This desire that rose in her chest, made Asuna confused again. She opened her eyes, and moved her body in the hot water.

The taste was indeed pretty good. But it had an outright virtual feel to it. The appearance was of polygons. The taste signals were also preset. For that matter, this bath was the same. What appeared to be hot water, was no more than a boundary made of mathematical formula which set its transmittance and reflectance. The surrounding temperature enveloping the body were also merely electronic signals emitted from the Nerve Gear.

But....., but.

One month ago when she lived in the real world, did she have such a strong appetite? Did the past her also have a strong urge to take baths?

Clearly not wanting to eat, yet putting the course menu made of organic ingredients to her mouth mechanically in front of her parents, compared to the virtual cream bread that made her salivate, which one should be considered «Real».....?

The current Asuna, thinking of this matter which she considered very important, inhaled deeply.

I didn't know trying hard not to look at the door to the bathroom required such a high Will saving throw^[5].

As my body sank deep into the sofa, I exerted all my mental energy to continue to look at «Argo's strategy guide: First Floor Boss edition» which I obtained today. However, despite reading the words written in a simple font a few times, the content in it didn't reach my brain.

——*Well, at least, this proves we are not in the real world.*

If, for example, by some chance, this was in my home in Kawagoe, Saitama Prefecture, with my mother and sister away, but there is a female classmate in the bathroom of my house. What would I do if that happens? Of course, I would exit the room quietly. Then ride my beloved MTB^[6] on the prefectural road no.51 towards Arawaka at full speed.

Fortunately, this is the second floor of a two story building in the outskirts of Tolbana on the first floor of the floating castle Aincrad, and I'm not a high school student who is a net game maniac, but the one-handed swordsman Kirito. As an avatar in a virtual world, nothing would happen even if I saw the female fencer Asuna walk out of the bathroom. No, this might be an elaborate trap. If I went into the bathroom, she might check out my room, and then everything in my chests would disappear. However, the built in chest in the room only held low level monster drops, and I have no reason to go to the bathroom. I'll wait for her to come out, then say "Let's work hard tomorrow" and send her back. That's all.

As I repeatedly nodded, while putting the guidebook on the low table, at that moment,

The door —— not the bathroom one, the one leading to the corridor outside —— made a tap, tap-tap-tap noise.

The sound of knocking. But the one who knocked was not the landlady. This rhythm was a signal that had been agreed between me and a certain person.

Surprised, I trembled while getting up, and fearfully turned around, facing the thick oak door —— standing on the other side, should be Argo the rat.

Part 13

Quickly escaping out of the southern window to the front yard, jumping onto a donkey that was tied to the stable, and going straight down the path in the forest in order to reach the labyrinth zone.

This choice suddenly popped up without me thinking. But, managing to ride an animal skill «mount» is not extremely difficult in SAO. If you practiced riding the horse, then you could become progressively skilled. Although I've heard of this, I did not have any excess skill slots to put in this interest at the moment.

Therefore, I got off the sofa and quickly stood up. I took a glance at the bathroom to check the situation. Currently, on the other side of the door, the rapier user Asuna-san must be praising the bath. If Argo found out, she would grab her notebook and add «Kirito is the type of man who would pull a woman he met for the first time into his room» to it. If this information was distributed, my reputation as a solo player would be completely ruined.

Fortunately —— It could be said that all the doors in this world were perfectly soundproofed. As far as I know, the only three sounds that could be transmitted past the door were ① A loud call «shout», ② knocks, ③ the sound of combat. For sounds like normal speech and the water in the bath, you would not be able to hear it even if you pressed your ear against the door.

Therefore, even if I let her in, she should not notice that the bathroom was occupied by Asuna. If, when Argo comes in, the rapier user walks out —— I will immediately jump out of the window, and leave on a donkey.

After completely fighting with my thoughts speedily, I reached the door, and resolutely opened it. Once I saw the face of the person opposite, I called,

"How rare, for you to visit my room."

The phrase I had prepared in my mind earlier exited my mouth. Information seller «Argo the Rat», her trademark whiskers on her face twitched in a manner showing suspicion, but she immediately shrugged and replied,

"Yes. The client wants to hear your reply today."

Just like that, Argo walked into the room nonchalantly and sat down on the sofa I had just left. I seriously endured looking at the bathroom, and walked to the wagon in a corner of the room, picked up the jar of fresh milk and poured out two cups, and brought it toward the sofa set, placing it on the low table. The «Rat» raised an eyebrow, then laughed.

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

".....That kind of thing would break the principles of most players, right? Besides, I cannot do anything while you are asleep within the town boundary anyway."

Hearing me say this, Argo clapped her hands and said "That's true.", nodding. Lifting the glass cup, she drained the contents in one gulp.

"Thanks for the meal. This unlimited drink sure has a good taste. Why don't you bottle it up to sell to other players?"

"Unfortunately, after removing it from the farmhouse it will only last five minutes, and the remaining liquid becomes a gunky mess instead of disappearing..."

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

.....As she was talking, my heart was saying, *"Hurry up and get to the point". If she finds out this room's secret I won't know what to do.* I put on an innocent expression, picked up «Argo's strategy guide: First Floor Boss edition», and lightly knocked it.

"Speaking of free, reminds me of this, this. I'm always troubling you, but I've always used five hundred coll to buy these..... and at yesterday's meeting, I heard the axe user Egil say, these books are distributed free of charge? "

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

"This, the one I sold to Ki-bou and all the other front runners is the published first edition. The second edition is distributed for free. But don't worry, only the published version has Argo-sama's autograph."

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

——*This means, the free version, was Argo's own method of taking responsibility as a beta tester.* Although I wanted to hear more about that, but the word **beta** would never escape our lips as it was was taboo between us. No, as I did not contribute earlier as a tester, I have no right to raise the subject.

The atmosphere became heavy, Argo swung her golden brown curly hair and switched the topic.

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

Go ahead-go ahead-go ahead! Screaming that in silence, I nodded gently.

"Maa, This time the client is feeling lucky and thoughtful, the subject is Ki-bou's sword.....If you want to sell it today, the client will buy it for thirty nine thousand and eight hundred coll."

".....Th....."

Three nine eight? I almost yelled out. After taking a breath, and considering a few seconds, I opened my mouth,

".....I do not say this to insult you....., but, isn't that a scam or something? The sword is by no means worth forty thousand coll. After all, the market price of an original «Anneal Blade» should be around fifteen thousand coll, right? Adding another twenty thousand coll to that, you can basically buy the materials and enhance +6 to it safely. Although it might take some time, thirty five thousand can be used to make a sword similar to mine."

"I too, have already told the client that thrice"

Argo's face, covered by hands spread open, had a rare "I don't understand" expression on it.

I crossed my arms and, with the sofa at my back, the troubling matters surrounding the bathroom et cetera all left my mind for a moment. In this matter, I'm absolutely against reducing my money. But, leaving the question alone felt more disgusting. I had decided, so I faced Aincrad's best information provider.

".....Argo, I want to know the name of your client for one thousand five hundred coll. Has the price increased, or do you need to check with the client?"

".....I understand."

The rat nodded, opened her window, and typed at a very high speed before sending the instant message.

After a minute, a side of her eyebrows twitched reflexively as she read the reply, then she shrugged.

"I don't mind."

"....."

I no longer cared, opening my window in that mental state, and one thousand five hundred coll materialized. I put the six coins that represented it in front of Argo.

Pinching them casually with her fingertips, the rat put the coins one by one into her own inventory playfully. "Indeed", she said while nodding.

".....Ki-bou, you already know his name. It's the guy that stood forward during the havoc at the meeting yesterday"

".....Could it be..... Kibaou? "

Hearing my whisper, the mouse nodded.

——*Kibaou. The person who started hostilities against beta testers in that meeting. That guy, wants to buy my sword with forty thousand coll?*

Indeed, that guy had a weapon similar to mine on his back, also using the «One-Handed Longsword». But yesterday should be the first time we met. However, Argo said the deal was initially offered a week ago.....

Using fifteen hundred coll to find out his identity, merely made me more confused. Argo, on the sofa, faced me while I was thinking hard, and reminded,

".....This time, the deal with the sword seems to be off?"

"Emm....."

Of course, I didn't want to sell my beloved sword regardless of the price in the first place. I half nodded, and the rat quietly stood up.

"Well then, excuse me for bothering you. I hope that strategy guide will be useful to you."

"Emm....."

"Before I leave, I'd like to borrow the next room. I want to equip my night clothes."

"Emm....."

——*Considering that, in yesterday's meeting, I had the feeling that Kibaou was inspecting everyone, and his eyes had lingered on me for a moment. So, his gaze yesterday was not to because he doubted I was a beta tester, but to look at my sword.....maybe? No, maybe both.....*

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

Thinking about Kibaou had completely taken eighty percent my mind, I looked up blankly.

In the corner of my eyes, I saw Argo turning the doorknob. And it was neither the door leading to the corridor outside, nor the door in the east, my bedroom —— hanging from the door was a plate depicting the bathroom.

I watched stunned in from the corner of my eyes, as the rat's petite figure slipped into the bathroom and disappeared.

Three seconds later——

"Woaa!?"

A surprised voice,

".....Kyaaaaaaaaaaaa!!"

An ear splitting scream that shook the entire room. Subsequently, flying out from that room, was not the player named Argo.

I have no memory of what happened after that.

Part 14

Fourth December, Sunday, 10 a.m.

This Death Game started at one o'clock in the afternoon on a Sunday, on the sixth of November. In three hours, it would be exactly four weeks since it started.

The first time I discovered the Logout button missing, I thought it was the fault of the system, and thought that if I waited long enough, I would be able to log out. Then, the faceless GM Kayaba Akihiko revealed the conditions in order to log out, which was to clear all hundred floors of Aincrad. I had expected that we would be imprisoned for roughly a hundred days, based on the calculation that we could clear an average of a floor per day.

But until now —— It has been four weeks since then, and we haven't even reached the second floor.

I could only laugh at myself for being too naive, but based on today's assault against the boss, we could estimate the time until our release. Forty-four players were now gathered at the Fountain Square in Tolbana. It could be considered to be the strongest fighting force we could have hoped for at this point. If by some chance, this raid party was wiped out, no, even with its partial destruction, rumor would quickly spread to the Starting City. The resignation that «SAO is impossible to clear» would spread throughout the first floor. Reorganizing a second force would take an impossibly long time —— or, it might be impossible to face the boss a second time. Even if we wanted to increase our level in order to challenge the boss again, we had already reached the upper limit of efficiency to gain experience from the monsters of the the first floor.

Everything depended on whether the Boss Monster «Illfang the Kobold Lord»'s strength had changed from the Beta Test version. The Kobold King in my memories could easily be defeated by this number of people, with their skill, level and equipment, with zero deaths. After that would be, as the circumstances involves our lives, can we remain calm until the end.....

While thinking until my brain overheated, I suddenly noticed the player beside me, who took a short breath, and gave a bitter smile.

Rapier user «Asuna», her profile hidden by her hood, looked exactly like when I first met her at the labyrinth area yesterday morning. Fleeting as a shooting star and as sharp as steel. Compared to her, I looked extremely restless.

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

".....What are you looking at?"

This faint, but forceful whisper, caused me to shake my head. The reason for her bad mood since morning was, according to her, drinking a bucket of spoilt milk which was offered to her, but I couldn't recall it on my own.

"N-nothing"

I immediately answered without thinking, Asuna was once again eyeing me as sharply as the tip of her rapier, before she turned her back to me. I wonder if today's strategy will be all right, then again the two of us were in a party together, merely because we were the extras, and while I was thinking such things——

"Hey."

A voice that could not be considered friendly came from behind, so I turned around to face it.

Standing there, was a player with some kind of pointed, cactus styled, short brown hair. I could not help but recoil. Today, despite being the day many players gathered, his was the one face I wanted to see the least —— It was Kibaou.

In front of the stunned me, Kibaou leered at me dangerously while he stood on lower ground, and said in a low voice,

"Listen here, today you should stay in the back. You guys are merely here as support."

"....."

I may not be a smooth person, but knew that I should not react to him here. Just yesterday, I had rejected his forty thousand coll offer, which was a lot of money. In addition, he had attempted to hide his name, so this situation was quite awkward to anyone with common sense. If the situation was reversed, I would not want to approach him within a twenty meter radius.

Even so, Kibaou's attitude was so unpleasant that it withered my intention to say "of course". Those loathsome distorted cheeks protruded forward, then he spat.

"Be obedient, you guys can take on the small fry kobold mob that slips past my party as your enemy."

Kibaou spat out some more virtual spit onto the ground for emphasis, before turning around and leaving. I watched his back as he returned to the other members of the Group E party. I continued to look stunned as usual, but was taken aback by a voice from right beside me.

".....What, was that?"

Of course, the «you guys» that was mentioned also included Asuna. To me, her look gave off about 30 percent more terror than the leer just now.

"W-well Maybe he wants Solo players to not be so cocky....."

I spoke without thinking too deeply, but suddenly a thought came, and I said to myself.

——*Alternately, don't get too cocky, original beta testers, perhaps.*

If that was true, then based on his attitude, Kibaou had already determined that I was a beta tester. But —— what is the basis of this accusation? Even Argo the Rat would not sell any

information on whether another player was an original tester. And up until now, I have never ever mentioned the word Beta to anyone.

Once again being tormented by that unpleasant feeling similar to yesterday's, I kept my eyes on Kibaou's back.

".....Eeh.....?"

Then, I noticed something, which made me leak out a sound.

Yesterday, that man offered me forty thousand coll, a large amount of money, to buy my Anneal Blade +6. This is a fact. Of course, it was intended for use in this boss battle today. Enhanced by three extra points in «Durability», which increased the weight of the sword. Leaving aside the matter of how he could suddenly be able to wave such a heavy sword all of a sudden, he obviously wanted to get a powerful weapon on the battlefield in order to improve his influence and leadership abilities. This motive was unsurprising.

However, if this is so, then by now, he should have spent his forty thousand coll on upgrading his equipment.

That should be so, but the scale mail Kibaou was wearing, and the one handed sword on his back, were the same ones that he had yesterday. It's not exactly bad, but with forty thousand coll, it should be possible to upgrade it to a more powerful equipment, since there was enough time. In fact, the rapier at the waist of Asuna beside me, on my suggestion yesterday night, was upgraded from her «Iron rapier» which was bought from the shop to «Wind fleuret +4» which she had got as a drop. After all, today we may all die, so what's the point of keeping forty thousand coll.....

——But, my thoughts only reached this point.

Before I had realized it, the green haired knight Diabel stood in front of at the edge of the fountain, raising the familiar beautiful voice of his and said,

"Everyone, although it may be sudden —— Thank you all, I am really grateful that all forty-four of the party members have gathered, without a single missing person."

After talking, a loud cheer of *OH* shook up the entire square. It was followed by a waterfall-like applause. I stopped guessing and raised my hands to clap.

After smiling at everyone, the knight pumped his right fist, and continued shouting loudly,

"Now I will say, I was actually thinking of aborting this mission if a single person didn't turn up! But..... this kind of worry, is an insult to everyone. I'm very happy that..... the best raid party..... well, even if the number of people is not enough!"

A few people laughed and whistled, and some people pumped their right hands mimicking to him.

I did not want to find fault with Diabel's leadership. But, from my point of view, there was too much excitement. Excessive tension could lead to a fear-like poison, but over-excitement could also have bad effects, like being careless. During the beta testing period, being defeated for being over enthusiastic was like a joke, but here, failure could lead to the death of a player. In this situation, it would be a good thing for the players to be less excessively excited.

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

As everyone yelled about, Diabel raised both hands to suppress the cheering.

"Everyone..... What I want to say now is this!"

His right hand moved to his left hip, and he pulled out his silvery sword with a loud sound——

".....Let's win!!"

A loud cry rang out, It reminded me of four weeks ago, in the central square of the Starting City, when ten thousand players screamed.

Part 15

The large group of people walked from the town of Tolbana to the labyrinth tower, and this scene seemed to trigger something in Asuna's memories. After a few minutes of thinking, she finally recalled it.

It was the school trip that she had went for in January this year. The destination was Queensland, Australia. The tension of the students who moved from Tokyo in mid winter to the Gold Coast at the height of summer was through the roof, it was like a festival no matter where she went.

Just about everything in this situation was similar to the point there was almost no difference, the atmosphere of walking under the foliage with forty or so people, was similar to walking alongside her classmates at that time. The endless chatting and frequent outbursts of laughter. The only difference was, monsters occasionally attacked them from the forest. However, all the monsters that came close were instantly slain by the skills that everyone were boasting about.

Asuna, bringing up the rear alongside a swordsman, forgot all about last night's incident and began talking.

".....Hey, you, before coming here, did you play other M..... MMO games? Is that what it is called?"

"Emm..... ah, yes, yes it is."

The swordsman still looked quite timid, as his black hair swayed up and down.

"In other games, are there normally times with this kind of feeling? How should I put it..... like going on a field trip....."

".....Ha ha, a field trip would be nice"

Giving a short laugh, the swordsman then shrugged.

"Unfortunately, the other games that I play don't have this kind of feeling. After all, those are games that don't use the FullDive technology, so we need to use the mouse and keyboard in order to control the avatar's movements, so there is not a lot of time to check the chat window."

"...Ah, I see....."

"Well, there are other games that include voice chat, but I've yet to play those games."

"Hmm."

As a silent dash game character continued on the the monitor's screen in her imagination, Asuna said softly,

".....The real things, how does it feel?"

"Eh? Re-real things?"

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

"Like I said..... this kind of fantasy world... being in a group with swordsmen and magicians, on our way to fight the terrible chief of monsters. Along the way, what would we talk about..... or would they walk along silently. This kind of topic."

"....."

The swordsman remained oddly silent, and when she glanced at him looking like this, Asuna felt conscious that she had asked a childish question. Just as she reflexively turned away, and was about to say "I guess it doesn't matter,"

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

The quiet words reached her right ear.

"If we were compared to people living a normal life... probably, it would be like going to a restaurant for dinner. If there is something to talk about I will talk, otherwise I will keep quiet. I think this boss raid will eventually turn out like that. If possible, I hope we can challenge the boss daily."

"..... hu hu, hu"

The swordsman's straightforward words were funny to Asuna, who gave off a small laugh. She explained immediately, almost as an excuse.

"I'm sorry for laughing, but..... this is really strange. This world is an ultimate form of non-daily life, but you want this activity to be our daily routine."

"Ha ha..... I guess that's true."

The swordsman laughed in the same way, then quietly said,

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

Those words would have caused great shock and despair to the old Asuna. But now, she realized that it was just like dry wind blowing out of her chest.

".....How strong. If it were me, I can't think like that. Thinking about living in this world for years..... dying in today's battle would be less scary to me."

The swordsman glanced at her for a moment after listening to her, then put his hands in his grey jacket pocket, and said in a subdued voice,

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

".....Re-really?"

She involuntarily responded, then realized what she just said. Feeling ashamed, she said in a low voice,

".....Remember this. Or you'll really end up drinking a barrel of spoiled milk."

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

After making that comment, the swordsman grinned and laughed.

11.00 a.m, we moved to the labyrinth.

12.30 p.m, we walked to the top floor.

So far, there were no deaths. I secretly pat myself on the chest. After all, a near forty-eight people «Full Raid» party marched, and for a majority of the people here this was their first experience. In this world, «First» was an action that had the risk of an accident and was dangerous, with no exceptions.

In fact, there were three situations which were really scary. The people wielding long weapons such as «Spear» and «Halberd», mostly in the Group F and G, were ambushed by the melee type Kobolds along the road. In SAO, melee weapons will not harm players if they are swung by accident (of course, this is not equal to a criminal act), and sword skills that come into contact with an obstacle are also stopped. Ranged weapons were already at high risk from this, and the melee ambush made the situation even worse.

In such a situation, the knight Diabel showed his ability to command precisely. As a leader of the forces, he made bold decisions, like staying to fight while getting others to retreat, using heavy amounts of sword skills to knock back the monsters, and switching between long and melee weapon equipped members. These decisions could only be made if he was familiar with being a leader.

Because of these things, before departing as a solo player I had said "It's not too exciting" and was concerned about looking too arrogant. Diabel had his own philosophy about his leadership, *trusting him fully is every raid member's duty* was the reason everyone reached this point.

——After recognizing this, two huge doors stood in front of our eyes, and those in the rear had to stand on tiptoe to look up at them.

On the surface of the grey stone, was a relief of a terrifying beast-headed monster. Speaking of Kobolds, in most other MMO games these mobs were usually the weakest of the weak, but in SAO this «Demi-Human» class of humanoid beings were formidable foes. It had the ability to wield weapons such as swords and axes, and could even use sword skills. Compared to a normal attack, it had much higher speed, power, and even had hit correction properties. If a player was caught in a defenseless position, even its elementary skill could cause a critical hit, and reduce the HP gauge drastically. The rapier user Asuna beside me, reached the deepest part of the labyrinth using only «Linear», which proved the strength and horror of sword skills...

".....Can you listen for a while?"

I moved closer to Asuna, and whispered.

"Today, our opponents are the «Ruin Kobold Sentinels», and even though they are not the boss, they are still strong enemies that spawn around it. I mentioned yesterday that a large portion of their head and body is covered and protected by metal armor, your «Linear» will not be enough."

After listening, her gaze sharp under the hood, the fencer nodded.

"I understand. Just aim for the throat, right."

"Exactly. Just like they did after using «Pole Axe»'s sword skills, we must immediately switch positions after I attack them to leave them open."

Nod, Asuna nodded before facing the gigantic doors, and I continued to look at her for a few more seconds.

Where and how you die, early or late is the only difference.

When we first met, she had told me that. I obviously couldn't let those words come true. Asuna's «Linear» demonstrated talent that she herself was not aware of. Of all the shooting stars, hers was one that did not burn up in the atmosphere, withstanding the flames until it hit the ground.

If she can survive today's battle, Asuna would most definitely be known as one of the fastest and most beautiful swordsmen in Aincrad. She will definitely be an illuminating shooting star, brightly guiding other players who are in fear and despair. I'm very convinced of this point. This responsibility, is a role an original beta tester like me could never perform due to the stigma involved.

Once I confirmed my determination and swallowed, I faced the large door. In front of us, Diabel had finished preparing the lineup of the seven parties.

None of the knight dared to shout "Let's win!" in this place. This was because humanoid monsters would react to loud noises here.

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

His green long hair fluttered as he turned around, the knight placed his left hand in the middle of the large doors——

"————Let's go!"

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

Part 16

Was it this wide?

Looking at the boss room of the first floor for the first time in around four months, this was the first impression that I had.

The room was very deep. Its width from the left to the right wall was about twenty meters. Plus it was quite rectangular. There was a distance of about one hundred meters from the entrance to the back. The size of floor was roughly the same as the other 20 floors, and the room was the last one to be mapped. Therefore, its area could be estimated from the blank area on the map. However, seeing it with our eyes made it feel deeper than it actually was.

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

In Aincrad's boss room, the doors would not close even during battle against the boss. Therefore, even if the events took a turn for the worse and we were in danger of being annihilated, we had the option to retreat. However, if we turned and fled and the enemy's long ranged sword skill hit us, it might slow us down, «delay», or prevent us from moving, «stun». So, we would have to retreat while facing the boss, but in that situation, the critical hundred meters needed to escape would feel infinitely long. Instantaneous teleportation was possible using «Teleport Crystal», however it was expensive and obtainable only in the higher floors, which would make retreating from bosses on higher floors easier, but because it was so expensive, after the retreat, the player could be left with a near-empty wallet.

While I was contemplating such thoughts, the boss room sank into almost complete darkness. On the walls to the left and right of the room, *ping* *ping*, from the front of the room to its back, «torches» were lit one by one. The crude torches noisily blazed.

With the sources of light generated, the «Gamma»^[7] also increased. The stone floor and walls were filled with cracks. Large and small skulls were variously placed to decorate the place. In the deepest part of the room stood a huge throne, and a rough silhouette of something large sat on it.

The knight, Diabel, raised his long sword, and swung it down in front of him...

At his signal, the forty-four members of the boss monster hunting forces raised a battle cry while rushing into the room like an avalanche.

The front row rushed in first, led by Group A's leader equipped with an iron heater shield^[8], with his «Hammer» lifted up high. They were followed by Group B to its left, led by the Axe warrior Egil, and to its right, Diabel and his five friends' Group C. Group D's leader was a tall man wielding a Two-handed Long Sword, and behind these three, were Group E led by Kibaou, the long stick «Polearm» equipped Group F and Group G, running in parallel.

And even further behind them, were two extra people——

When the distance between Group A and the throne was about 20 meters, the gigantic silhouette which had not moved initially suddenly jumped. In the air, it spun around once, before landing on the ground, causing the earth to rumble. After that, it opened its wolf-like jaws, and howled.

"Gurururaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!"

The demi-human King, «Illfang the Kobold Lord», looked exactly as I remembered. Its muscular body over two meters tall, covered in blue-gray fur. Its bloodthirsty eyes flashed a golden red. Its right hand wielded an axe made of bone, while its left had a Leather Buckler equipped. Behind its waist, a meter and half long «Talwar»^[9] stuck out.

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

As if that sound was a signal, out of various holes located high up on the side walls, three heavily armed monsters jumped down. These were the guards, «Ruin Kobold Sentinel». Group E led by Kibaou, and the supporting Group G, quickly moved towards the three, locking onto their target. Asuna and I looked at each other and dashed to the nearest Sentinel.

Just like this, on the fourth of December at 2.40p.m, the first boss battle finally started.

«Illfang»'s HP gauge had four bars. During the first three bars, it would hold its Bone Axe in its right hand and its Leather Buckler in its left, but on the fourth, it would discard them and remove the Talwar off its waist. Its attack patterns would change completely, was what Argo's strategy guide had described. After its weapons changed from the Bone Axe to the Talwar, our sword skills and tactics had to change accordingly, just as we had discussed in the meeting yesterday.

While I fought against the «Sentinel» that slipped through Group E and Group G, I looked out of the corner of my eyes at the front line, there was no sign of the line or tactics collapsing. The «Tank» forces and the «Attacker» forces calmly switched places for 'pot' rotation. The left edge of my sight displayed a small window of raid party's average HP gauge, and it remained stable above 80 percent for all the parties.

I'll leave it up to them, just like that ——, and just like that the battle went on.

It's not like that when playing solo, but now I prayed with all my strength for their success.

Being able to rescue her from the labyrinth tower, while she had fainted (although she didn't understand how it happened), she thought the black-haired swordsman should be quite an influential person.

However, after seeing his way of fighting, Asuna could tell that her assessment fell short.

—*Strong.*

No, the word strong was not enough to describe the feeling while he was in battle. His power and speed felt as though it was beyond existing scales, and it felt like he was in «Another dimension».

To Asuna, a beginner who has never played a net game or been in a FullDive environment before, she had difficulty putting the feeling that she had into words. If she tried to express it, it was a feeling that everything was optimized. All of his actions did not have excess movements, hence he had a fast technique, and with his heavy sword he dealt deadly damage. The heavily armed Kobold's long axe attack was repelled upwards into the sky by his upward slash. "Switch," he called out as he retreated casually. In his place, Asuna quickly jumped in front of the Kobold, and while the Kobold was bent over in recoil, she easily used «Linear» on its unprotected neck.

Asuna recalled the words that he had said the first time they met. 『Overkill has no demerit or penalty from the system, but it's bad for efficiency』, and she had answered with 『Is there any problem with it?』. At this moment, there would be a large problem with it. If you could remove excess action, the action became easier and thus the vision was broader. The «Sentinel» was much stronger compared to the «Trooper» she was fighting at that time, yet Asuna could see every move it made very clearly.

The vital part of the throat that Asuna launched «Linear» on caused the Kobold's HP gauge to be reduced to a sliver. If it was the old Asuna, she would have waited to counterattack with another «Linear», but that was useless «Overkill». After the delay from the sword skill was over, Asuna poked the throat once again without excess movements, and the Kobold's HP gauge became empty as it burst into blue fragments and scattered away.

"GJ"[\[10\]](#)

Behind her, the black haired swordsman said softly. Even though she did not know what it stood for, she replied with "You too!"

At that time, the first bar of boss' HP gauge had disappeared. Diabel in the front row shouted "We're on the second bar!", as a few more «Sentinels» jumped out of the holes in the wall.

Forgetting that they were extra forces, Asuna and her nearby partner dashed at the monsters. The sword in her right hand, despite being used only starting yesterday, had already been assimilated into her palms and felt familiar. She felt that the response from the sword was clear when she fired off her techniques. Like leather wrapped around her hand, even the tip of her sparkling and sharp blade felt like a part of her arm.

— *If this is the feeling of «to fight», up till yesterday everything felt like a fake imitation.*

——*Surely, there will still be many battles «Ahead» of us. Dashing forward in a straight line beside this swordsman. In this illusory world, despite every conduct being fake... but... but surely, this feeling is true. I want to see what is before his eyes.*

The monster's axe swung down, and the swordsman countered with a high blow. At the next instant, Asuna shouted "Switch" and jumped toward the enemy with her beloved sword.

Part 17

The battle between the Kobold king with its guards and the forty-four players moved faster than I had expected.

Diabel and the rest of Group C had reduced the first HP gauge, Group D had removed the second layer, and now Group F and G had reduced its third layer by half. Until this point, Group A and B, the «Tank» teams, had their HP in the yellow «Half» region, but never entered the dangerous red region. There were also a few guards, which were left to Group E and the two of us to handle, we had performed so well that sometime in the midst of battle, Group G moved to support the main battlefield.

The rapier user Asuna fighting bravely was impressive, and the «Linear» that had amazed me when we first met, with the stronger and sharper rapier, accurately pierced the Kobold guards' throats, their weak point. The time from the first motion of the skill until the damage occurred was just half that of the System Assist's on its own. Even I, who had been practicing deliberately boosting the sword skill since the beta testing period, was not confident that I could achieve those speeds.

She was just a beginner with only one skill. With increased knowledge and honed senses, just imagining what she would become made my spine tingle.

If this comes true, I'd like to see her progress by her side—— Was the thought that came to my mind, but I forced it back into my chest. One month ago I had decided to be a selfish solo player, so I have no right to be together with other players. My first friend in this world was Cline, who should still be around the city we started in, carefully and safely levelling his friends.....

As I recalled those unpleasant memories, in front of my eyes, Asuna had already struck down her second prey. Because the «Ruin Kobold Sentinel» only spawned here, it was considered a rare monster. Although it did not give as much experience and coll as the boss, it still dropped an item. Only money was automatically distributed evenly in a raid, while the experience was split between those who defeated it, which were Asuna and me. The item drop had a higher probability of going to Asuna because her attack was the fatal strike.

So, this was the reason Group E's leader Kibaou, whose party was fighting similar Sentinels, gave that warning earlier. However, Asuna and I working together defeated our target much faster than the full six-member party of Group E. This way, even he couldn't complain——

While I was considering this, from the back came Kibaou's voice.

"I know what you're up to. Feels goood."

".....What did you say?"

Not knowing what he meant, I turned around to ask that. As it was just before the third wave of three Sentinels spawn, and just after the other two had been defeated, this was an opportunity to talk. The cactus headed one-handed sword user frowned at me, raised his voice and spat,

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

"My..... motivations? Aside from beating the boss, is there anything else?"

"What, I can be direct, right? It's exactly what you're aiming for!"

This conversation, seemed to be a lot of guesswork on his part. I was so frustrated I grinded my teeth, before Kibaou finally said what he wanted to say...

"I've heard it before. **In the past, you did a dishonourable act such as LA the boss.** "

"Wha....."

———LA. It meant the final hit «Last Attack».

It was true that I, in past battles against bosses, had a good grasp of the boss' HP gauge in order to determine the best time to use my strongest sword skills. However, that was not in this world, but in another floating castle that existed for merely a single month —— in the «Sword Art Online closed beta test».

Kibaou not only knew I was a beta tester, but knew my behaviour from back then. Wait a minute. This man just said "I heard it". In other words, it was based on hearsay. But, who did he hear it from.....

At that time, as I gave it my second thought, my body felt like it was jolted by electricity.

Last week, Kibaou used the information provider Argo the Rat to attempt to buy my «Anneal Blade +6». Yesterday, he attempted to use forty thousand coll to buy it. Even though I rejected his offer, he did not spend that money.

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

It was not just Argo, Kibaou was also a mediator. The person who had forty thousand coll was not him. If another person was put between that person and Argo, no matter how much I paid, I could not have found out who the original buyer was.

That mastermind, gave Kibaou the information on the original beta tester and stirred up trouble. If it is like this, that guy's aim was not to get «Anneal Blade +6» for battle. No, improving his battle force may still be a part of it, but he might have a larger goal in mind. To weaken me. With my attack weakened, it would interfere with my techniques, preventing me from getting the LA bonus on the boss ——

".....Kibaou. That guy who talked to you, how did he manage to gain information on me being a beta tester?"

"Of course. He used ridiculously large amounts of money, and bought information from «the Rat». I joined the team to keep the hyena in check."

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

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

My attention was drawn to the front lines. It looks like the third HP gauge was removed by the pole weapons of Group F and G before they retreated. Instead of waiting for their full recovery, Group C rushed in to press the attack. The party leader was the commander of the raid itself, the blue haired knight Diabel. Even in the dim light of the dungeon, his blue hair glittered brilliantly.

"Uguruoooooooooooooooo—————!!"

«Ilfang the Kobold Lord» gave out a loud roar. At the same time, the final wave of three «Ruin Kobold Sentinel» jumped out of holes in the walls.

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

His voice dripping with hatred, Kibaou returned to the midst of Group E.

While still not recovered from the unexpected shock and confusion, I had no choice but to turn away, and went to regroup with Asuna who was not far away.

".....What did you talk about?"

As she asked quietly, I just shook my head.

"No..... — first, let's defeat our opponents."

".....Yes."

After our brief exchange, I picked up my sword and charged at a Sentinel.

At that moment——

Suddenly, I felt «something», so I quickly gazed at the main battlefield.

The Kobold king, with the bone axe in its right hand and the leather shield in its left, threw both down onto the ground simultaneously, gave another roar, brought its hand to the back of its waist, grasped the rag bound handle and pulled out the «Talwar».

During the beta testing period, I've seen this motion pattern change many times. From here on, it would only use the sword skills from the curved blade category, going into the berserk condition, becoming terribly wild, but dealing with it now is easier than before. It used a long-ranged longitudinal cut. As long as you grasped the timing of the skill when it was launched, even if you're near the boss you could avoid the edge of the weapon.

Under Diabel's command, the six people that formed Group C surrounded the boss. This was a formation that was not used while the boss still wielded the bone axe. Really, I didn't expect that reading the book beforehand allowed them to come up with such a precise and amazing formation. This was really a good decision. As long as the six could avoid the wild swings of the Talwar until the final blow.....

".....U.....?"

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

The player X asking Kibaou to buy my sword for the large sum of forty thousand coll, was to interfere with me performing LA on the Kobold king. I made this guess a while ago. Even though my sword had not been taken, the purpose of X has been achieved. As the raid's extra force, I could only deal with the Sentinels, so I couldn't even approach within ten meters of the boss.

However, if it is like this.

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

In other words..... the player X manipulating Kibaou, is a person who was with me in the beta test, his name is.....

"——It's coming!"

Asuna sharply said, instantly rousing me out of my thoughts. The Sentinel swung its halberd, and I subconsciously used the diagonally cutting sword skill «Slant», repelling his weapon with all my strength.

"Switch!"

I shouted, then jumped backward, as Asuna went in front of the guard. Once again, I glanced at the battlefield twenty meters to my left.

At the end of that motion in which the boss was invincible, the battle resumed. The first locked target was the blue haired knight, who coolly avoided the first strike.

With his back facing me, I wondered within myself.

——*Is it you?*

——*Diabel the knight, you are..... Is everything part of your plan.....?*

Of course he didn't answer. Illfang roared and howled, then it slowly moved the blade in its right hand up high.....

Once again, my mind felt that «something» sensation.

Uncomfortable. Something is different. The boss monster and the Kobold king that I knew were not the same. It was not its color, nor its size. It was more than the looks and the sound. The source of discomfort, rather than its body..... it was the weapon in its right hand.

From where I was, only the silhouette of the sword was visible..... that blade, isn't it too thin? The gently warped blade was certainly similar to the one I was familiar with during the beta test period, but its width..... as well as its sparkle, was different. It was not the rough texture of cast iron. It was forged, and its edges had the tint of steel. I have seen a weapon similar to that before..... it was used by a mob on the tenth floor of the old floating castle. Dressed in red armour, it was a very formidable foe during the beta testing period. The weapon could not be used by players, only by those in the monster category.....

"A..... AA.....!"

My throat spasmed and made some noise. I forcefully sucked air into my lungs, and bellowed loudly.

"Thi..... this won't do, fall back!! Retreat quickly———!!"

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

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

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

Sword skill for katanas, the heavy ranged attack "whirling wheel" «Tsumujiguruma».

Part 18

Six bright red light effects appeared, like pillars of blood.

The HP gauge that appeared at the left corner showing Group C's average HP on the left immediately dropped below fifty percent and into the yellow zone. Although you could expand the gauge with your fingertips in order to see the six individual HP gauges of each player, at the moment there was no point in doing it. Everyone in Group C obviously received equal amounts of damage.

It was a ranged attack with tremendous power enough to take out more than half of the full HP, and that was not all. Yellow lights rotated around the heads of six people that had collapsed on the floor, indicating that they were unable to move for a period time —— this was the stun effect.

There were a large variety of bad status in SAO, and the worst of it weren't paralysis or blindness. Their effect lasted at most ten seconds. However, once the effect started, there was no way to recover from it. Therefore, if the front members were stunned, their friends must save them by diving in front without waiting for the switch, and must become the target to draw enemy fire —— however.

Not a single person moved to help. Despite carefully planning for the fight during the meeting, followed by the march forward in a mood under the impression of an easy victory. Also, the person everyone relied on, their leader Diabel, had been struck down in a single blow. For these various reasons, aside from Group C, everyone was bound to the spot rigidly. After the stranded silence, the Kobold Lord recovered from the long delay caused by using its skill.

As everyone recovered, I gave out a loud shout.

"Chasing....."

At the same time, in the front lines, the two handed axe user Egil and several of his subordinates moved in to support the others.

Unfortunately, it was too late.

"Uguruo!!"

The demi human roared, and the katana—— no, nodachi in both its hands was lifted off the cut floor and raised up high. Sword skill *Floating Boat*«Ukifune». It was aimed for the Knight that had fell right in front of it, Diabel. As if pulled by a red arc of light, the knight in silver armor was sent flying up high. The damage wasn't very high. However, the Kobold Lord's movement didn't stop there.

Using its large wolf-like mouth, it grinned and laughed ferociously.

The nodachi was once again wrapped in a red light effect. «Ukifune» was merely the start of the combo. If you were hit by this while in the air, it was useless to struggle, you could only

defend by curling up. However, it was impossible for a person who was dealing with the situation for the first time.

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

At a speed which could not be seen, an upward attack, continued by a downward one. It was followed up by a thrust. A three hit strike, this skill's name is *Scarlet Fan*, «Hiōgi».

The knight's body was covered in three continuous damage effect, the bright colours and strong sounds showed that all the attacks were critical hits. His *virtual body*«Avatar» was blown twenty meters away, over the heads of the raid members, and ended up near the Sentinel which was my opponent. He fell almost as if piercing the ground. His HP gauge, which was already red, began to reduce further.

".....!!"

I leaked out a strange sound from the back of my throat, from the front, the Sentinel's Long Axe approached, so I put as much force as I could into the «Slant». The Axe's handle was smashed in the middle, and as it stood stunned for a short duration Asuna's rapier found its throat and pierced it.

Not waiting for the monster's shattering effect to happen, I turned towards the body of the fallen Diabel. Seeing the fallen knight at a meter, such a close range for the first time, I felt sparks running up my mind.

——*I recognize this player.*

His face and name were completely different from what I remembered, but we have previously met face to face in the other Aincrad, and maybe I even talked to him. As expected, Diabel was an original beta tester like me. And like me, he fought hard to hide his identity until today. No, as I had made close friends while in hiding, my worry was probably several times his.

However, precisely because he had a tester's knowledge of the first floor, he was harmed by it when it came to the later stages.

Although I do not remember him, he remembered I was called Kirito, and although the appearance of me during beta testing is not the same, he remembered that the name of the player who was good at placing the LA on the boss during the beta testing period, so he tried to confirm my identity earlier on. Subsequently, he believed that I would probably try to do the same thing here. The Floor Boss drops high performance items including «Unique» one-of-a-kind items, and in a death game like SAO, combat ability and viability was the equivalent. In order to survive in this world, Diabel ——instead of being a solo player, chose to be a Knight leading a crowd—— tried to get the rare drops from Illfang by all means.

At the moment I thought that, I considered Diabel on the floor. His eyes, as blue as his hair, twitched, but he immediately emitted a pure light. From his trembling lips, in a voice soft enough for only me to hear, he said.

".....Please, Kirito-san. The boss, defea—"

Before his sentence ended——

The commander of the Aincrad Boss Raid Forces, the Knight Diabel, turned into blue shards of glass which shattered and scattered.

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

Nearly all the raid members clutched and hung on to their weapons, with their wide eyes open. But no one moved. The leader being first to fall, to die, was an unpleasant situation no one had prepared for, so no one knew the next course of action.

Of course, this was also true for me.

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

In normal circumstances, «Boss uses weapons and skills different to information previously given» and «Loss of leader», suffering from two disasters, everyone should immediately retreat out of the boss's room. However, if our backs were exposed to Illfang while we retreated, he could easily use his long ranged Katana Skill, the ten people furthest to the back, in the worst case, would end up stunned and deprived of all HP by a sequence of attacks like Diabel. That is to say, even as we retreat we must defend our bodies, but our opponent was difficult as he had unknown skills. Compared to the time taken to dash out of the room, the same degree of HP decrease leading to deaths could be expected.

Above it all, with too many deaths — including the leader — and the boss strategy that was issued failed, it would be difficult to assemble another force to raid the boss again. In other words, all attempts to clear the death game SAO would lead to failure. The eight thousand survivors, would not be warriors of the virtual world, but prisoners trapped in the first floor until there is an some kind of «end».....

At this time, two voices called out at the same time, stirring me from my hesitation.

One was, right at the front lines, the sound of Illfang, who had come out of its delay, raging. Metallic sounds and screams, the damage effects gathered together dimly and violently shook.

The other one, was kneeling by my side, Kibaou's voice.

".....Why..... Why..... Diabel-han, the leader, why the first....."

——*Because he wanted to perform LA on the boss.*

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

Now that I think about it, in the first meeting, Kibaou had ate the bait Diabel acted out. Suspecting that there were beta testers in their midst and making remarks about not wanting to work with them unless they apologized. Not only did Diabel not prevent him from speaking, he allowed the topic to be brought up for discussion.

That scene, was not Diabel's «Compensation» to Kibaou. Instead it was a method of communication, as the representative dealing with the sword transaction, they met up in a public place, giving Kibaou the opportunity to test public opinion against Beta testers. Egil's logical argument ended the wrath in the middle, but if the boss raid battle did not end as planned, Kibaou can bring out the same topic again. In other words, Kibaou did not suspect that Diabel was a Beta tester, but was a representative of the novice players opposing testers.

He was looking forward to people to trust him. Facing this kind of person, how do I at this time to give him further against it.

Instead—— I grabbed Kibaou's drooping left shoulder and forced it up.

"Is this the time to be discouraged?!"

With a low cry, Kibaou's small eyes were instantly filled with a familiar hostility.

".....What..... What did you say?"

"You're the Group E leader, if you are a coward, your companions will die! Listen here, additional Sentinels may still spawn..... no, they will definitely spawn. Handling them is your responsibility!"

".....then, what do you want to do. Are you planning on escaping alone?"

"How is that possible. Of course I....."

With the Anneal Blade in my right hand making a sound, I said,

"——Will get the LA on the boss!"

Part 19

Being trapped in this world for one month, I had taken many actions to keep myself alive. I didn't dispense the knowledge I obtained during the beta test period to anyone, in order to do quests and use hunting grounds that were more efficient while single-mindedly strengthening myself.

If I had to carry out a solo player's normal code of conduct, in this situation, with many raid members standing between me and the Boss monster, I should run towards the exit. Not turning back even as the raging Kobold king kills my fellow humans, instead actively using them as shields, in order to ensure my own safety.

However, at this time, no such thoughts came to my mind, as a fiery feeling flowed throughout my veins, keeping my legs at the edge of life and death. This may have been because of the words the knight Diabel said to me.

Boss —— Defeat. Those were the words he said. Not escape. In order to significantly boost the probability of obtaining rare items, he had persistently tried to LA, and even though he sacrificed his life in the end, his ability to lead was definitely outstanding. In his last moments, Diabel at his defeat had decided not to ask us to «Withdraw», instead to do «Bloody Battle». So, as a member of the raid party, I will comply with his wish..... no, his dying wish.

However, there was still one hesitation that remained.

Before the battle began, I had secretly decided. Instead of protecting myself, I would protect the rapier user «Asuna»'s life with everything I had. She had a sparkling light of talent which I did not own. For this bud to be scattered before it blooms, is absolutely unacceptable situation for anyone fanscinated by VRMMO games.^[11]

Just before I began to run, I looked at Asuna who stood to my left, and wanted to tell her, "Stay in the back, when the front collapses you should immediately withdraw," However, as if she could read my mind, the girl openly said to me before I could open my mouth,

"I'll go too. We're partners after all."

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

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

The two of us turned in the same direction at the same time, and ran towards the back of the hall. Along the way we heard uninterrupted roars and screams. Although it seemed that there were no deaths following Diabel's, the average HP of the vanguard was less than half, as having lost its leader, Group C would definitely be down by twenty percent. Some players were in complete panic, hesitating to escape, if this went on the formation would fall in a few seconds.

The first thing was to calm them out of their panicked state. However, in this situation, the noise drowned out all instructions given. I needed short yet strong words, and being inexperienced in leading I had no idea what words should be used ——.....

At this time, Asuna, running by my side, violently grasped her hood and cape that were in the way, and flung it off her body.



The light from countless torches that were the side walls, seemed to gather together and shine brightly. The glossy chestnut long hair, now emitted a deep golden shine, scattering the dim light in the boss's room.

Asuna's long and wildly fluttering long hair, made her look like a shooting star blazing in the current darkness. Even the panicking players became silent with the shine in their eyes. Not letting this miraculous moment of silence go to waste, I called out with the loudest throat ripping voice I could muster,

"Everyone, back ten steps towards the exit! As long as the boss is not surrounded, it will not use its ranged attacks."

By the time the echo of my voice disappeared, time seemed to flow again. *Za!!* As this sound was made, the front line players were by Asuna and my side, moving backwards together. As if to chase us, the Kobold king turned to face us, who were running to meet it.

"Asuna, this battle will be similar to the Sentinel's!..... Move!!"

The moment her name was called, the rapier user glanced at me, then faced the front again almost immediately.

"Understood!"

In front of us, the Kobold king's left hand left the Nodachi that both hands were previously holding, lowering his stance. That motion, was ——

".....!!"

I held my breath, and started to use my own sword skill. I moved my right hand to my left hip as well, leaning forward as if to fall. At this angle, my motion was insufficient in order for the system to recognize it. From such a low position close to the floor, I stomped my right foot to take off. As my body was wrapped in a thin blue light, I ran through the ten meters separating the boss from me. Basic sword rush technique, «Rage Spike».

At the same time, the boss was poised with a Nodachi glowing a green flash, and slashed at a speed which could not be seen. Straight long ranged move, *Whirlwind* «Tsujikaze». Because it was an Iai^[12] type move, it would be impossible to keep up with it after seeing it launched.

"U..... ooo!!"

With a roar, the trajectory of my sword came from the left, intersecting with Illfang's Nodachi's trajectory. A loud metallic sound rang out and many sparks were formed, as the boss and I were knocked back more than two meters from the recoil of each other's sword.

At the opportunity that was produced—— Asuna seized it at a remarkable speed equal to mine.

"Yaaaaa!!"

With short and sharp fervor she used «Linear», stabbing deep into the Kobold king's right flank. The fourth HP gauge, slightly, but surely decreased in width.

I was conscious of my right hand's strong reaction, consumed equally by the feeling of success and anxiety.

The Illfang during the beta period which was equipped with «Talwar»'s sword skills, was impossible to counter using my own sword skills. However, perhaps the Katana-type sword skills were lighter than the Talwar's, my HP gauge did not decrease because of the clash. Instead, the speed of the technique was not as terrible as it was supposed to be. Continuing this with no misses, I wondered if it was possible.

Another one. Troopers required three, Sentinels required four, strikes of «Linear» from Asuna, but as expected of a boss, its HP was at an amount that couldn't be compared with the small fries'. The girl tried to cut the fourth gauge, not knowing how many times it would take to take it down. A big advantage of fighting the boss as a team was due to its massive bulk, allowing multiple players to hit it at the same time, if it were possible I would have preferred other players as attackers by her side. But all the other groups from A to G stayed behind as their HP were greatly reduced. I couldn't ask them for help until they had used their recovery potions.

"—— Asuna and I, could only do what we could do. Originally I was thinking of doing it on my own, but it became two people, this was a situation that I am grateful for."

".....The next one, is coming!"

After recovering from the technique's delay, I cried that out, and concentrated on the long and large blade brandished by the boss.

In August this year, one thousand testers were recruited for the «Sword Art Online Closed Beta Test». Although I reached the tenth floor, I didn't meet the floor's boss.

The district labyrinth, named «Thousand Snake Castle», was guarded by Samurai type monsters, and was the spawning area of the «Orochi Elite Guard», which I could not break through. Since the phantasmagoric katana skills they used were not available to players, I had to receive every hit to feel and determine its skill name and trajectory motion and desperately used that as reference. And finally, once all their used skill's «Pre-motion» were ingrained in my brain..... it was already the thirty-first of August.

Orochi and Illfang, although their shapes and sizes were very different, were both Humanoid type monsters, and used similar techniques so far. Therefore, I used my memories of skills, including Iai, that I stored four months ago to counter its attacks.

Of course, I was walking on a tightrope. The boss' slash had very high base damage, and the basic skills «Slant» and «Horizontal» left to the Assist would not repel it. In order to launch the technique successfully, the body had to be moved deliberately^[13] in order to boost the speed and power of the skill.

However, with the skills outside the system mastered, the attack would be very powerful yet risky. Even a little movement or mistake would hinder the system assist, in the worst case having the sword skill stop in the middle.

I, with a total of two months of experience playing SAO, that is if the beta period was included, had obviously continued to practice this technique which requires great concentration in that long period of time.

And, every fifteenth or sixteenth time, it was disrupted.^[14]

"Cra.....!!"

Cursing, I attempted to cancel the «Vertical» which I had cut vertically, I pre-read Illfang's blade, it moved and drew half a circle as Illfang turned underneath it. It was the motion for the technique that fired off randomly up and down *Phantom Moon* «Gengetsu». The Anneal Blade in my right hand was unavoidably pulled back, suddenly an unpleasant shock overcame my whole body, and I was unable to move.

"Ah.....!!"

As Asuna by my side gave out a small scream, the nodachi from below jumped up, catching the front of my body.

It felt as cold as ice, a sharp shock. My body was paralyzed, and the HP gauge was reduced by thirty percent.

As I was blown away, I barely remained on my knees, and Asuna rushed towards the Kobold king. I screamed "Don't!" «Phantom Moon» had a very short delay. Its blade was raised, and glowed red. Not good, this was the three hit skill that killed Diabel, *Scarlet Fan* «Hiōgi»

"Nu.....oooo!!"

As it roared loudly, its blade was about to hit Asuna.

As the blade grazed her head, a huge weapon glowed green as it launched its skill. Two-Handed Axe Sword Skill «Whirlwind»——

The Nodachi had shot first, but it was a two handed axe that rotated like a whirlwind which intercepted it. The boss' room trembled at the impact that was born, Illfang was knocked back quite a distance. The attacker must have had both legs wrapped in leather sandals, as he only slid back a meter or so.

Entering the fray, was a brown skinned giant and Group B leader, Egil. I explored my coat pockets while kneeling on the floor as he looked over his shoulders at me, smiling.

"You can drink your pot until it finishes, we'll support you. Damage dealers are the walls, this will not change."

".....Sorry, I leave it to you."

I gave a short answer, as my chest was full while I forced down the recovery potion.

Egil was not the only person who came to the front. His friends and, a few people from Group A and D who had finished recovering as their wounds were light.

I used my eyes to tell Asuna "I'm fine", and shouted at the swordsmen from behind.

"If the boss is surrounded from the back it will use an omni-directional attack! I will be calling out the trajectory of the attacks, so the guys in front, deal with them! You don't have to unreasonably try to cancel it with sword skills, you can avoid large damage just by blocking it with a weapon and a shield properly!"

"Ou!!"

The deep sound of men reverberated, and I imagined that it blended with the roar of irritation that the Kobold king gave.

Part 20

Retreating to beside the wall, while waiting for the recovery potions to slowly take effect, I updated myself on the condition of the rear.

The boss' weapon had changed, and sure enough, along with it, the number of spawns «Pop» of the Ruin Kobold Sentinels had also increased. Kibaou's Group E, as well as the lightly damaged pole-arm equipped Group G, took on all four of the heavily armored guards at the same time. Although they did not take much damage, as long as Illfang remained alive, those four Sentinels would probably jump out of the hole in the wall regularly. The parties resisting them would eventually reach their limits with just the two of them.

In addition to that, in between the front and the rear groups, Group C who were the first to get heavily damaged, were trying to recover their HP like me. However, potions in this game were really frustrating items, having only a slow, continuous healing, «Heal Over Time» effect..... in other words, drinking the bottle would not instantly recover the gauge, increasing gradually in dots instead, and when drinking the potion there is a cooldown time indicated by a «Cooling» icon displayed at the bottom of the vision, which rendered drinking the next bottle useless until it disappeared. On top of that, the first layer NPC shops only sold these low end products, of which only sorrowful tales could be told of their taste.

Putting the taste aside, because of the set cooldown period, healing from heavy injuries took up a lot of time. Therefore, once someone received damage worthy of a potion, they would normally switch with their partner to take it. Falling to the rear (that is, for Pot rotation) was the general theory, but as the number of those who received unexpectedly heavy wounds multiplied, it became easy for the rotation to break down. On higher floors, the dreamlike item which could instantly recover the gauge, «Healing Crystal», could be obtained, so it such recovery is possible if one does not bother with the cost, but it would be asking too much to have one on hand now.

Therefore, how long Egil and the six people under him who were presently replacing me were able to maintain their HP gauges against the boss's fierce attacks would decide the flow of the battle. For that reason, I would have to predict Illfang's skills the moment it started its preparation motions.

As I kneeled, of course I kept my eyes carefully peeled while focusing my senses to capture every movement the Boss Kobold made, and after determining the sword skill used I shouted things like "Horizontal slash, right" and "Downward slash, left".

Egil's team of six were not pressured into desperately countering the way I instructed, instead they used their shields and large weapons to guard themselves. In the first place, they were players with «Tank builds», having both high defence and amounts of HP, but receiving zero damage from the boss' released sword skills was impossible. A loud sound effect would occur, and each time, their gauges were gradually reduced.

In between the group, was a single fencer who danced lightly. Asuna. Never fleeing to the boss's back from its front, as long as Illfang was in a recovery period, «Delay», for even a moment, the chance to impale its body with «Linear» was never wasted. Of course, after repeated strikes the «Hate» value would be focused on Asuna, but the six men who were tanking appropriately used skills such as «Howl» to regain the target's hate to themselves.

Even though it was a dangerous battle, the balance in danger of collapsing if even one of the factors failed, the situation still lasted for close to five minutes.

Soon, the boss' HP finally went below thirty percent, and the final gauge was dyed in red.

At that moment, perhaps letting down his guard for a moment but one of the players acting as a tank tripped over. While staggering, where the player stopped, was positioned right behind Illfang.

".....Get out of there quickly!"

I called out reflexively, but it was a moment too late. As the boss felt that it was «In a surrounded state», it gave out an exceptionally ferocious roar.

Boom, its large body sank down. Then its entire body sprung up in a high vertical jump. In its trajectory, its body and Nodachi, contorted and rolled as it jumped. It was the omnidirectional attack *Whirling Wheel* «Tsumujiguruma»——.....

"U.....ooaa!!"

As I gave off a short howl, forgetting even that my own HP had not fully recovered, I jumped from beside the wall.

Carrying my sword on my right shoulder, my left foot kicked the floor at full force. The acceleration that shouldn't had been possible with my actual Agility smashed against my back, my body flew up diagonally into the sky like it was shot from a gun. Single handed sword rush technique «Sonic Leap». Its range was shorter than «Rage Spike», but its trajectory could be aimed towards the sky.

The sword in my right hand was wrapped up in a bright yellow-green light. In its path was Illfang's katana, which had reached the apex of its jump, producing a deep crimson shine.

"Reach..... it———!!"

As I shouted, I stretched my right arm to its limit, and swung my sword.

The point of my beloved Anneal Blade +6 drawing a long arch as it raced through the air, hit the left section of the waist of Illfang, on the verge of using «Tsumujiguruma».

Zashuu! A loud slashing sound emitted. The intense light effects which showed that it was a critical hit flashed in my eyes. In the next moment, the Kobold king's mass was sent tilting to its side, crashing to the ground before the tornado that is its special attack could even form.

"Guruu!"

It yelled, as it tried to stand up as both its feet and arms wobbled. It was a bad status that affected humanoid type monsters, the «Tumble» state —.

I barely landed successfully, and turned to face Illfang, before forcing out the air in my lungs to shout.

"Everyone —! «Full Attack»!! Surround it!!"

"O.....oooooh!!"

Egil's six men shouted as if to release the anger that had concentrated because they were made to guard all this while. Surrounding the fallen Kobold king, they activated all their vertical cutting sword skills at the same time. Axes, maces and hammers wrapped in lights of various colours, roared as they rained down on its body. Bright lights and loud sound effects exploded, and Illfang's HP gauge which was shown at the top of the field of vision went down scratch by scratch.

This was a gamble. If the Kobold king's HP was reduced to nothing before it got up, it would be our victory. If it gets out of the «Tumble» status first, we would be met with «Tsumujiguruma» again, and this time everyone would be cut down. My «Sonic Leap» was in the middle of the «Cooling» period, so I was unable to deal attacks in the air.

Egil's group who had recovered from the delay of their techniques, began to get into the motions for the next skills. The Kobold king stopped struggling at the same time, and its body started to rise.

".....We are not going to make it?!!"

I forced my voice down as I shouted, then raised my voice at Asuna who moved beside me while I was not paying attention.

"Asuna, one final «Linear», let's go for it!!"

"Understood!!"

As her answer was so upbeat, I could not help but smile.

The weapons of the six people hummed once again, throwing the boss's giant body into a swirl of light effects.

However, before the lights even faded, the boss roared as it stood up. Its HP gauge was left with merely three percent, shining brightly in red.

Egil was still stuck in delay, unable to move. In contrast, Illfang who was attacked while in the «Tumble» state was neither stunned nor knocked back, smoothly entering its vertical jump motion.

"Let's..... go!!"

As soon as I screamed, I kicked the ground at the same time as Asuna.

Through the gaps in Egil's party, Asuna first sent a «Linear» at the boss' left flank.

Slightly behind it, my sword coated in a blue light, made a cut from the Kobold king's right shoulder to its stomach.

The HP gauge..... was left with a dot.

It felt like the demi-human gave a smirk. In return, I gave off a fierce smile as well, quickly realigning my wrist.

"O...ooooooooh!!"

I swung my sword with my body and spirit. The blade, which was nicked in several places after the fierce battle, drew a "V" shaped trajectory along with the earlier slash, exiting from Illfang's left shoulder. One-handed-sword two-consecutive-strikes skill «Vertical Arc»——

The Kobold king's gigantic frame, suddenly lost its strength, staggering backward.

Its wolflike face looked at the ceiling, as it gave a howl. On its body, various cracks appeared noisily, snapping and crackling.

Both its hands went slack, and its nodachi fell on the floor. Right after that, Aincrad's first floor's boss, «Illfang the Kobold Lord»'s body shattered into millions of fragments, and scattered in all directions grandly. As I bent backwards under the intangible pressure, the purple system message [You got the last attack!!] flickered soundlessly into my vision.

As the boss disappeared, the remaining Sentinels in the back seemed to have scattered into the void as well.

The hue of the shining torches on the walls changed from a gloomy orange into a bright yellow. The dimness in the boss' room was removed at once, and from goodness knows where a cool wind swept across the room, taking away the heat of the battle.

There was barely any who broke the silence. Group G and E who remained in the back, Group A, C, D and F who were on their knees, awaiting recovery, and Egil alongside his Group B, the «Final Wall», sitting on the floor, dazedly looking around. It was almost as if we were worried about the terrifying demi-human king reviving.

I too, with my right hand holding the sword in the slashing position, remained stationary.

Is this really the end? Would any «Minor differences from Beta» occur here as well.....?

And, at that time. A small white hand gently touched my right shoulder, causing me to slowly lower my sword. Standing there, was the rapier user Asuna. Her chestnut long hair waving in the breeze, as she stared at me.

With her hooded cape off, revealing her face, this was the first time I saw something so beautiful I doubted it was the player's true appearance. I continued to stare hazily at her beauty, Asuna —— probably just for this moment —— silently accepted the stare without a trace of annoyance. She eventually whispered.

"Thanks for your hard work!"

At those words, I was finally convinced. It was over..... the first floor which had confined eight thousand players, the greatest obstacle, has finally been cleared.

And, as if my system was awaiting that recognition of mine, a new message appeared in my view. Experience gained. The distribution of coll. And finally —— items obtained.

As everyone that was there saw the same thing, their expressions lightened up. After a short moment, a *Waa!!* cheer occurred.

Some people threw both hands up in the air. Some embraced their comrades. Some danced nonsensically. In this storm of uproar, a large figure slowly got off the floor and walked over. It was the two-handed-axe user, Egil.

".....Those were wonderful commands. And brilliant sword skills beyond even that. Congratulations, this victory is rightfully yours."

Even with the English word in the middle, the giant pronounced the sentence perfectly, and as his mouth closed, he had a large grin. His gigantic right hand clenched, and stretched it out.

I wondered how to respond, but sadly nothing came to my mind, and I could only say "No.....", as I formed my right hand into a fist as well at least, raising it.

At that moment.

"———— Why!!"

Suddenly, that loud shout burst out from behind me. As I turned halfway around, due to that loud shout that sounded like a lament, the entire room became calm in an instant.

Looking away from Asuna and Egil, I turned to see a man in light armor, a scimitar user, whose name I could not recall. However, as soon as his mouth parted and the distorted words emitted from his mouth, I understood.

"———— Why, did you leave Diabel-san to die!!"

This man was, Group C..... which was the deceased knight Diabel's group, his comrade from the very beginning. If I looked past him, the remaining four members behind him, stood looking dishevelled. Some of them were crying.

Looking at the scimitar user again, I murmured. I really couldn't understand those words.

"Let him die.....?"

"That's right!! Because..... Because you knew the skills the boss used, didn't you!! If you gave us that information from the start, Diabel wouldn't have died!!"

Speaking as if he was vomiting blood, the remaining raid members began to mumble. "Now that you mention it....." "Why.....? It wasn't even written in the strategy guide....." Such voices were born, and gradually spread across the room.

Giving them the answers, as I had expected, was Kibaou ——

Not. He was standing motionlessly further away, as if trying to resist something that was pulling at his mouth. However, one of the team members of Group E under his leadership walked closer toward me, pointing at me with the index finger on his right hand, and said.

"I..... I know!! This guy, he's a beta tester!! That is why, the boss' attack patterns, good hunting spots and quests, he knows all of them!! He hid them despite knowing about them!!"

Even though he heard those words, the scimitar user and other members from Group C did not show surprise. I thought they might have heard it from Diabel, but —— as a beta tester himself, and hiding that fact from his comrades, it was unlikely that Diabel brought up the topic of beta testers on his own —— when I saw through those katana skills that should have never been seen before by anyone, they must have known since then.

Instead, the scimitar user's eyes seemed to seethe in hatred, as he tried to shout out something again.

It was interrupted by the mace user who had served as a tank with Egil until the end. He raised his hand honestly, and said in a calm tone.

"Even so, the guide that was handed out yesterday, it was written that it was only information on the boss's attack pattern during the beta period, right? If he was really a beta tester, wouldn't his knowledge be the same as in the guide?"

"Tha, That is....."

Substituting the Group E member who became silent, the scimitar user spoke in a voice dripping with hatred.

"That strategy guide was a lie. Argo's information shop was selling lies. That person was a beta tester after all, there's no way she would have given us the truth for free."

——*This is bad. This is becoming very bad.*

I quietly held my breath. I could endure any amount of condemnation on myself. However, a situation where hostility flares up towards the other testers, starting with Argo, was one that I want to avoid by all means. But —— But, what should I do.....

At this time, as I looked down on the light black floor. The system message was still vividly displayed. The acquired experience, coll, and items.....

Instantly.

An idea occurred to me. Additionally, a large conflict within it caused my body to quiver. If I take this choice, I don't know what kind of future I will see. There was the risk of being killed in a sneak attack, like what I had feared in the past. However —— at the very least, the animosity directed against Argo and other beta testers might just be avoidable.....

Behind me, in silence, Egil and Asuna who had patiently endured up to this moment, opened their mouths at the same time.

"Hey, you guys....." "You....."

However, I delicately moved my hands to subtly quieten them.

I took a step forward, intending to have an impudent expression, and coolly looked at the scimitar user's face. I shrugged my shoulders, and told him in a voice as apathetic as I could muster.

"Beta tester, was it?Don't lump me together with those amateurs."

"Wha..... What was that.....?"

"Listen here and remember this. SAO's CBT «Closed Beta Test» had a ridiculously low pass rate for the lottery draw. Out of the one thousand people, how many real MMO gamers do you think got selected? Most of them were just «Newbie» players who didn't even know methods of leveling properly. You guys here are much better than that lot."

At the end of my contemptuous words, the forty two players fell silent simultaneously. A chill, like the atmosphere before fighting the boss, returned, forming into invisible knives brushing across their skin.

"——But, I'm not like those guys."

Deliberately sneering, I opened my mouth and broke the silence.

"During the beta test, I reached floors that no one else could reach. I learned of the Katana Skills the boss used since I kept fighting mobs that used katanas from a floor way higher. I know way more other things too, there's no way even that Argo person could even match me."

".....What, is that....."

The person who first pointed me out as a beta tester, the man from Group E, said out in a hoarse voice.

"That's..... no longer on the level of a beta tester.... that's totally cheating, you are just a cheater!"

From around us, yeah, cheater, cheating beta tester, many voices with those words came out. Those words were soon mixed up together, in the end a strange sounding word, «Beater», reached my ears.

".....«Beater», that has a good ring to it."

Laughing and grinning, I looked around at everybody in that area, and told them in a clear voice.

"Exactly, I am a «Beater». From now on, please do not lump me together with those former testers."

———*That should do it.*

From here on, the current four or five hundred people that seem to be beta testers, will now be further divided into two categories. The majority «Testers who are merely amateurs» and, the remaining few «Information controlling dirty Beaters».

In the future, the hostilities from new players, should be all directed towards Beaters. Suppose a beta tester is found out, players would not hate them on sight.

In return, I alone, will have lost the ability to fight on the front lines in any guilds or parties..... However, it's not like much has changed. I am a «Solo» even now, and I will still remain a solo. That is all.

The scimitar user became pale-faced and fell silent, and along with the members of Group C, they looked away from the Group E member. I opened my menu window and ran my finger along the equipment figure.

The dark gray leather coat that I had worn up till now, was instead set to the unique product dropped by the boss just a moment ago, the «Coat of Midnight». My body was then wrapped in a small glowing light, and the ragged shade of gray was replaced by a shiny jet black leather. Its length also increased, as the hem hit my knees.

I waved that black long coat with a flourish, turning to my back —— and faced the small door further inside the boss's room.

"I'll go on and «Activate» the second floor's transfer gate. From the exit up there it will be a short walk to the district town, if you want to come along, be prepared to be killed by any mob that comes along."

Egil and Asuna, kept staring at me, as I started the walk.

The two of them had eyes which showed that they understood everything. That was a relief. I faced the both of them and gave a small smile, stepped forward with large strides, and pushed the door to the second floor, right behind the main throne, open.

After climbing the narrow spiral staircase for a while, a door appeared once more.

As it gently opened, a spectacularly scenic view jumped into my eyes. Outside of the door was a steep cliff by the hillside. A narrow terrace-like fleet of stairs down the hill was set to the left in the rocks, but I first swept my eyes through the scenic view of the second floor.

Unlike the complex and various terrain of the first floor, the second floor was lined from one end to the other with flat-topped mountains. The mountain tops were covered in lush green grass, where gigantic ox-type monsters swaggered about.

The second floor's district town, «Urbus», looked as if it was a city entirely excavated out from the flat-topped mountain at the bottom of my sight. I now went down the fleet of stairs, as I had earlier described, it only required walking a short kilometer across the field, to reach the «Teleport Gate» in the central square of Urbus which would be activated upon touch, linking to the «Starting City» on the first floor.

If, by any chance, I died along the way —— or perhaps, if I sat here idly, two hours after the boss is defeated, the teleport gate would open by itself automatically. But today, the fact that the first Raid unit was going to challenge the boss must have already been conveyed to the Starting City, and many players would now be waiting at the teleport gate, waiting for the moment the blue warp gate appears. I really should hurry to Urbus for their sake, but..... for just a little bit more, I should have the right to immerse myself in this breath-taking view.

I took a few steps forward, I sat down near a terrace jutting out from the rocks.

Beyond the lined rocky mountains, from the opening of Aincrad's perimeter, a little bit of the blue sky could be seen.

I wonder just how many minutes passed that way. Eventually, small footsteps could be heard climbing up the spiral staircase behind me. As I continued without turning, the one causing the footsteps stopped after coming out of the main door, and following a faint sigh, the person came closer again, and sat down beside me.

".....And I told you not to follow too."

I muttered, and the intruder answered with dissatisfaction.

"You didn't say so. All that you said was you must be prepared to die if you wish to come."

".....Is that so, sorry."

My neck drew in, and as I sat next to the rapier user Asuna, I glanced at that face of hers that was beautiful from every angle. For a moment, her light brown eyes caught mine, but I immediately restored my sight to the view below us, speaking out "Pretty" while sighing.

It was quiet like that for close to a minute, before she suddenly spoke up.

"Egil-san and Kibaou have something to say to you."

"Eh..... What is it?"

"Egil-san's words were 'Let's go for the second floor's boss raid together', while Kibaou....."

Asuna gave a small cough, and with a serious face, attempted to imitate the Kansai dialect with awkward results.

".....'You may have helped me today, but I still don't recognize you. I will aim to clear this game my own way.' was what he said."

".....Is that so."

I repeated those words in my mind a few times —— Asuna gave a small cough, and continued while looking away.

"And also.... this is, my own message to you."

"Wha..... What?"

"You, shouted out my name in battle, didn't you."

Well, and I recalled it in an instant. Certainly somewhere in the heat of battle I had roughly called out a name without honorifics.

"So-Sorry, I forgot the honorifics..... or was it, that I pronounced it wrong?"

This time, Asuna gave a puzzled look.

"Pronounced.....? —— What I meant was, I never gave you my name, and you never told me yours, right? How did you know my name?"

"Haa!?"

I involuntarily cried out. How did I find out —— because we were still in a party, so in the upper left corner of my field of vision, two HP gauges were displayed, and underneath one, five letters, [ASUNA], were clearly written.....

"Ah... co- could it be..... this is the first time you've formed a party with someone.....?"

"Yes."

".....I see."

My mouth slacked open involuntarily, as I lifted my right hand, pointing to the left edge of Asuna's field of vision.

"Around here, you can see an additional HP gauge other than your own, right? Underneath it, isn't something written there?"

"Um....."

Murmuring, Asuna turned her face, trying to look to the left, and I held back her cheeks with my fingertips subconsciously.

"When your face moves the gauge would also move. With your face fixed, use your eyes to look to the left."

"Like..... Like this?"

Asuna's hazel eyes moved about clumsily, and saw a string of words I could not see. Out of her glossy lips, came three quiet sounds.

"Ki.....ri.....to. Kirito? Is that your name?"

"Yup."

"Really..... This whole time, it was written here....."

Asuna whispered, and her whole body suddenly shook. And finally, I realized my palm was still left on her cheek. This was—— just like some sort of «Pre-motion».

I let my hand go in a hurry, and a **Gyuntto** sound was likely made from the force as I looked away. After a few seconds, *Giggle*, I heard those sounds —— or at least, that's what it felt like. Eh, could she be laughing? That transcendent «Linear» user, Kobold «Overkill» performer Asuna-san? I thought in my mind, but despite the strong desire to see her face, I desperately endured it.

Regrettably, the laughter soon stopped, replaced by a quiet voice.

".....To tell the truth, Kirito, I followed you here to thank you."

".....For the cream bread, and the bath?"

As I asked without thinking, "That's not it," she replied in a somewhat scary voice, and she immediately continued with a ".....Although, that may be a part of it too."

"That's right..... there are a lot of things. Thanks for the many things. I..... In this world, for the first time I found an aim, something that I want to chase after."

"Heeh..... What is it?"

As I glanced at her, Asuna flashed a brief smile,

"It's a secret."

That was all she said. She stood back up, and stepped back.

".....I will, do my best. Do my best to become stronger. To get to my aims."

I faced my back to her, and nodded gently.

"Aah..... You will be strong. Not only in your sword techniques, but you will have greater and more valuable strength. So, if one day someone you trust invites you to a guild, don't you refuse. There's an absolute limit for solo players, after all....."

"....."

For the next few seconds, only Asuna's breathing could be heard.

Eventually, the words that reached me, were a little unexpected.

".....The next time we meet, tell just how did you carry me out of that labyrinth section."

"Aah....."

That's a piece of cake, I thought of following up with that, but I swallowed those words. Instead, I answered with a simple "I understand."

".....Then, see you again, Kirito."

Squeak The door opened. Footsteps. *Bam* The door shut.

I waited until the information describing the fragrance Asuna left dispersed from the virtual air, before standing up. That girl and I walked in different directions —— I began to descend the wide staircase down the cliff step by step.

Counting the number of steps the endlessly winding stone staircase had, it turned out there were forty eight steps. And upon giving a little thought if there was any meaning to that number, I realized. It was eight by six —— in other words the number of people in a Full Raid. Assuming a situation where the first floor's boss was challenged with that line-up, and none of them died, these stairs, from landing to landing, would have just enough space for each player.

But surely, the designers of this area, would not have imagined that the group of players walking down these steps would be a *group* of one.

Going down this path seemed to imply what my future would be like. There was no one to my front or back. No matter where I went, wherever I went, it would be alone.....

However.

After going over a number of landings on the stairs, in the right corner of my field of vision, was a small icon of a letter flashing.

It was a Friend Message, of which could be sent and received even when not on the same floor. And I have only registered two players as friends. My first friend Cline and —— the information dealer, Argo the Rat.

Who is it, I wondered as I opened the message, and found it was the latter.

[Looks like I gave you a really hard time, Ki-bou]

Looking at these first few words, "Info sure travels fast!" was what I ended up reflexively speaking aloud. I continued reading, and scrolled through, but there was only one following sentence.

[To apologize, I will sell you one piece of information on anything at all for free.]

———*Ho.*

I couldn't help but grin, and I continued to walk once again while taking out the hologram keyboard, and quickly typed out a reply.

[Then tell me the reason for your whiskers in person.]

Then, I pressed the send button, laughed once more, and having reached the ground of the second floor at that very moment, I started to walk towards the main city, «Urbus».

(The End)

References

1. ↑ Standard scores are also called z-values, z-scores, normal scores, and standardized variables. They are most frequently used to compare a sample to a standard normal deviate, though they can be defined without assumptions of normality. The z-score is *only* defined if one knows the population parameters, as in standardized testing; if one only has a sample set, then the analogous computation with sample mean and sample standard deviation yields the Student's t-statistic.
Basically a z score of 2 means your in the top 2.3% of your year.
2. ↑ Kibaou, one translation of this name can be 'Fang King'
3. ↑ [3.0](#) [3.1](#) Game term, short for healing and various potion
4. ↑ A tatami is Japanese floor mat made from the straw, in this case it was used to describe the size of the room big enough to fit 20 of them (approximately 330 square feet).
5. ↑ A 'Will saving throw' is a Dungeons and Dragons Tabletop RPG term, for example if someone cast a death spell on you, and your dice roll is sufficient, you won't die.
6. ↑ Mountain bike
7. ↑ Computer display brightness: Gamma correction
8. ↑ A Heater Shield is a form of European medieval shield that's shaped smaller than the kite shield with a reverse teardrop shaped shield with a flat top.
The Kite Shield was the earlier design of the Heater Shield and had a reverse teardrop shape with a height that covers the whole body.
9. ↑ A «Talwar» is a sword or saber with a curved blade. The **word** *talwar* literally means sword or dagger in the majority of the languages of the South Asian Subcontinent, where the «Talwar» is from.
10. ↑ GJ means **Good Job**
11. ↑ In this sentence Kirito is saying that, "for the bud (which refers to Asuna) to be scattered (ie: be killed) before it blooms (before Asuna grows to reach her full potential), would be an extremely unacceptable situation for any person (Kirito included) who is fascinated by VRMMOs (ie: takes VRMMOs seriously)."
12. ↑ Iaido is Japanese martial art associated with the smooth, controlled movements of drawing the sword from its scabbard, striking or cutting an opponent, removing blood from the blade, and then replacing the sword in the scabbard.
13. ↑ By *body had to be moved deliberately*, it means that the user him/her-self had to move his/her body without the use of the system assist.
14. ↑ Meaning that the chance of failure was 1 in 15 or 16.