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Sword Art Online Progressive:Volume 1 Intermission

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Intermission - Reason for the Whiskers [\[edit\]](#)

Aincrad's second floor's main town «Urbus» is a town located inside a table mountain that measures three hundred meters in diameter, which had been dug up with only the outer circumference remaining.

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

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

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

Although that was the case, obviously, this situation wouldn't continue on for much longer. That was because exactly two hours after the floor boss' annihilation, the «Transfer Gate» at the center of the main town of the next floor (which was Urbus) would be automatically activated, connecting it to the main town on the lower floors. At that time, the large crowd of players, who were watching on the lower floor, would rush out from the gate.

Conversely, if I wished to, I could spend the remaining hour and twenty minutes monopolizing this town — or this floor.

With that much time, I could clear a few slaughter quests two or three times, which I normally had to compete with other players for the pop. It was a very attractive idea to a solo player who ultimately advocated self-interest, however, I didn't have enough courage to seriously anger the several hundreds..... or possibly more than a thousand people who were eagerly awaiting the activation of the gate.

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

It was called a gate, but it was actually just an arch made of neatly stacked stones. Without a door or any bars, there was nothing to block its other side. However, upon getting closer, I noticed a faint distortion from the empty space in the middle of the arch, as if seeing through a thin film of water.

As I looked around at the surroundings to confirm an escape route, my right hand stretched slowly toward the swaying transparent veil. The fingertip, which was wrapped in a black leather glove, touched the surface of the water, which spread vertically — and at that moment, My field of vision was dyed in an overflowing bright blue light.

The pulsing light spread in circles within the five-meter-wide arch. Once it had filled the entire space, it would be the opening of the Transfer Gate, the so-called «Town Opening». The very same phenomenon would also happen at the gate in each town on the first floor as well, where the crowd of players before that gate would prepare to dash in when they realize that the gate started to activate and they wouldn't have to wait two hours for the automatic opening.

However, after pushing the switch, I turned around without watching this phenomenon to its very end.

As I ascertained beforehand, I started a fierce dash to a building, which looked like a church, at the east of the square. After jumping into the entrance and climbing the stairs inside, I put my back against the wall to the side of the window in a small room on the third floor, and looked down upon the square.

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

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

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

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

Over half an hour earlier, soon after defeating the boss, I had made an announcement in front of more than forty raid members. It was that I, «Kirito», wasn't just a mere Beta Tester, but a «Beater», who had reached the highest floor among the thousand testers, and had accumulated the most knowledge of the game.

I didn't want to act so nasty, but it was partly a reaction to avert the hostility from the new players to the former testers; and as a result, currently, my infamy had spread among the highest leveled players at an ultra-high-speed. If I went out of my hiding place, far from receiving congratulatory remarks, it wouldn't be strange to hear boos and jeers. In that situation, I certainly didn't have enough emotional strength to remain calm like a willow in the wind.

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

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

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

Normally I wouldn't poke my head out and get involved, as this place was within the effective area of the Anti-Criminal Code, but since the one being chased was my acquaintance, the story had changed. With golden-brown curly hair and that plain leather equipment, she was none other than the information dealer, «Argo the Rat».

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

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

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

«Pursuit» was a modification that could be learned after the proficiency of the «Tracking» skill had increased, it was normally used to raise effectiveness while hunting monsters, but it could also be used to pursue a player who was registered as friend. However, as my proficiency was still low, the footprints that could be seen were from a minute ago. I hastily chased after the disappearing lines of the small shoe soles.

Argo's focus was on AGI, so for her to be unable to shake off the chasing two guys, they must not be ordinary players. Although I didn't see them among the boss raid, their levels should be top-class. In addition, the footprints that went straight along the road toward the west, had exit to the outside through the city gate which was dug out of the outer rim of the crater.

The western plains of Urbus was a dangerous area with large buffalo type monsters roaming about. The situation was getting worse. I bit my lips and rushed into the virtual savanna without even stopping.

The wasteland area beyond this savanna was still quite risky for my current level to enter alone. But fortunately, the footprints engraved on the thicket were getting more vivid (in other words, Argo had already stopped running), from inside the valley between two small rocky mountains, a familiar voice could be heard.

".....imes I'll still be saying the same thinG! This information, no matter how much you offer, is not for sale!"

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

"You don't want to monopolize it, but also don't want to make it public. Doesn't that mean you want to jack up the price-gozaru?"

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

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

"It's not a problem about price! I told you that I don't want to be blamed after I sold the information!!!"

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

"Why would we blame you!? No matter what price you ask, we'd still be expressing our gratitude-gozaaru!! So just sell us the information about the quest hidden on this floor — the acquisition quest for the «Extra Skill» already!!"

.....Huh?

I couldn't hold onto my breathe upon hearing that sentence. The extra skills were those that wouldn't appear as choices unless some special conditions were met, the so-called «Hidden Skills». The only one I discovered during the beta period was «Meditation», a mental concentration skill (the pose looked like so) that increased the rate of HP recovery and increased the probability to recover from the negative statuses. However, due to its low efficiency and lame pose, not many players took it. The other was the «Katana» extra skill, which was used by the Kobold Lord and samurai type monsters on the tenth floor, but I still didn't know its prerequisites.

In any case, I'm certain that the topic between Argo and the two mysterious gozaaru guys isn't the «Meditation» skill, as the NPC giving this skill is on the sixth floor. That means, there is a flag quest to unlock an extra skill that I still don't know of (also equals to all former beta testers not knowing about it) hidden on this second floor, and these gozaaru guys are trying to make Argo sell the information — something like that?

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

"Today, we'll pull it off for sure-gozaaru!"

"We'll certainly do anything necessary to get that extra skill-gozaaru!"

"You guys just won't understand—! No matter what you say, I won't sell that information-goza..... oops, I won't sell iT!!"

Piri— the voltage of the tension in the air seemed to have increased a step higher — at that moment, I stood up on the stone ledge and jumped to the ground five meters below. I landed in the middle between Argo and the two guys. In order to receive no damage for jumping from that height while still lacking in AGI, I bent my knees and took a defensive posture to absorb the impact damage before quickly standing up.

"—Who are you-gozaaru!?"

"Spy from another clan!?"

Just when I saw the shape of the gozaaru guys, who were shouting at the same time, a corner of my memories was intensely stimulated. Their entire bodies were clothed in dark grey cloth armor. It seemed they wore light chain mails on their upper bodies, and the weapons on their back were small sized scimitars. On their heads were bandana caps and pirate masks of the same grey color.

Overall looking, it was the so-called «Ninja» appearance, which was originally and ingeniously reproduced. Seeing these guys like that, I also had a hunch that I may have met them during the beta period once or twice.

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

"It's Fūma-gozaaru!!"

"We are Kotarou and Isuke from the guild «Fūmaningun»-gozaaru!!"

"Oh, that's it!"

I snapped my fingers in satisfaction as they helped me remember who they were. These two were the members of the ridiculously fastest ninja guild which was feared during the beta test period. I should make a note about what was feared first. Every member were just like Argo and focused their parameter on AGI, they would open the battle as the front row and used their AGI wall to confuse the enemy. When it became

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

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

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

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

At that moment——

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

““You bastard, are you from Iga!?””

“Hah!?”

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

No way —— are they really unsheathing? But here is the «Outside» with no Anti-Criminal Code, where Players can attack other players and HP would decrease for real. At the same time, the color cursor of the attacking side would turn orange, indicating a «Criminal» status, preventing them from entering towns. Even if they were ninja, they wouldn't be able to deceive the God of the system controlling this world.

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

The solution to the situation came from an unexpected source.

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

As I slowly moved a step backward, I said in a low voice,

“Behind you.”

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

“There's no trick, just look behind you.”

Something within my voice seemed to have moved the deep skepticism of the ninja. Kotarou and Isuke, who turned their faces around, made a slight jump at the same time. That was because in front of their eyes and noses, a new intruder —— no, an intruding-cow stood tall.

Its formal name was «Trembling Ox». The height to its shoulders would be about two and a half meters, it was a huge cow type monster, specialty of the second floor. While its toughness and attack power were just as expected from its appearance, what was troublesome was actually its terribly long targeting range and duration, which made it very hard to switch targets mid-fight. Since I had already retreated to the ledge, there was no doubt that its target would be none other than those guys.

“Bumoooo———!!”

The cow howled,

“Go-gozaruuuuu!”

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

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

Again, an unexpected event occurred.

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

“.....You're too cool, Kiri-bou.”

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

“But doesn't this mean Onee-san is breaking the first rule of being information dealer?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“.....OkaY, I'll tell you-ru. But you need to wait a bit while I take off the painT.....”

Eh?



Paint..... she means taking those whiskers off? Does she intend to show me the unpainted face which no one had seen before? Does it have some deep implication?

As my mental burden had increased to the crisis level, Argo exclaimed before she separated her body from me,
“.....Thinking again, I'll change the information I'm telling! I'll tell you about the skill hidden on this floor!!”

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

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

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

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

To my question, the Rat showed a broad grin.

“For that information, I'll need to collect the fee, Kii-bou.”

I leaked out a sigh as I nodded.

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

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

For the path we took from there, I felt it would be impossible to travel along without having bought a map beforehand, or having unlimited amounts of curiosity and endurance.

We climbed the cliff of the table mountains standing close together on the vast — the diameter shouldn't be different from the first floor — second floor, got into a small cave, and glided along the underground stream like it was a waterslide. We also went through three battles, but the enemies weren't difficult to me, who was leveling to the limit in order to defeat the first floor's boss. The total time of our traveling was about thirty minutes.

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

“.....Is it here?”

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

There was an NPC inside, along with some furniture. It was a big middle-aged man with a well built body, his head was a slick skinhead, and around his mouth was a thick beard. Over his head was a gold-colored [!] mark, indicating a quest starting point.

To my questioning gaze, Argo gave a nod again.

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

“.....M-Martial arts?”

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

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

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

To Argo, who made a puzzled face, I also gave a ‘This is service,’ preface before giving an explanation.

“When speaking about ninja, normally you would imagine their weapons to be ninja katana and shuriken, but it was a bit different in game industry. Removing the head with a single bare hand attack. That has been the highest peak of ninja gaming style for a long time. So Kotarou and Iuke would want that martial arts skill in order to make their ninja being «Complete». —Hmm... wait a sec. They didn’t know this place, then how did they know about the content of the martial arts skill and Argo knowing that information?”

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

“T.....Then, why don’t you just say ‘I don’t know’ at that time? So they wouldn’t keep pestering you about the information like that.....”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Thou wishes to be a disciple?”

“.....Yes.”

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

“I’m expecting no less.”

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

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

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

“.....W-Wait a minute.”

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

Yeah, it’s impossible.

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

“Until this rock is split, leaving this mountain is forbidden. And thou hast to bear the mark for that reason.”

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

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

E-Err, I want to quit!

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

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

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

“O-Owaaaa!?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Excellent! That’s some excellent reasoninG!”

As she clapped her hands, the Rat continued,

“Isn’t it greaT, Kii-bou! As a result, you gained the information of both «The reason behind the whiskers» and «The extra skill»! For celebration, I’ll tell you one more thinG. This rock..... it’s demoN!”

“.....I thought as much...”

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

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

“Hmm, it’s quite differenT—“

“Oh..... h-how does it look!?”

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

“Oh righT. I can express it in one word..... it’s «KiriemoN».”

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

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

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