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Sword Art Online:Rondo of the Transient Sword

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Sword Art Online: Rondo of the Transient Sword [\[edit\]](#)

Chapter 1

"Don't.....Don't— Don't joke with me!!"

The echoes of the shout still resounding in my path, my feet came to a halt.

As my footsteps went *su-su-su*, I attached myself to the wall of the NPC store behind me, and I peered out at the scene in front of me. In front of the road was a wide square, and the commotion seemed to be coming from that direction.

"Re-Restore it!! Bring it back to its original state!! It was a +4..... Ch-Change it back to the original!!"

Once again, a shout rang out. It seemed like there was a dispute between two players. However, since we were within the city's «Crime Prevention Boundary» — in the middle of Aincrad's second floor's main city «Urbus» — neither player could actually harm each other, so there was no actual need for me to hide surreptitiously.

But, though I understood that in my head, I couldn't help but be thirty percent more cautious than usual. This was because, I, the level 13 one-handed sword user Kirito, am now Aincrad's most despised solo player..... since I am the «First Known Beater».

Thursday, 8th December 2022. Thirty-two days after the Death Game that was SAO began.

The four days after the defeat of the first floor's boss monster «Illfang the Kobold Lord» and the activation of Urbus' Teleport Gate, had passed quickly.

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

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

Still, just to be on the safe side, the first floor boss' rare drop, «Coat of Midnight» armor, was unequipped, and a bandana was tied on my forehead, making myself less conspicuous. The reason I had disguised myself to sneak into the main district city was not to see someone, but to obtain the necessary potions, food supplies and equipment maintenance. About three kilometers southeast from here was the small village of «Marome», but its shops lacked variety in their wares, and furthermore there was no NPC blacksmith there.

It was due to those concerns that after I had first filled my storage with loads of supplies, as I was walking down the street to complete my next errand, the cry from earlier reached my ears — this was the reason.

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

In less than a minute, I reached a low, circular open area that was mortar-shaped. Normally, it would be crowded at 3 pm, the so called «Raid Time», but because it had only been a few days since the opening of the district, there were probably many players from «Starting City» who were touring the place.

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

"W-Wh-Why is it like this!! The quality is absurdly lowered!!"

The bright red face of the man who was yelling looked vaguely familiar. He wasn't just a nobody, but a player who should have been on the front

lines. Though he hadn't take part in the first floor's raid battle, his level was reasonably high, based on the metal armor and three large horns on the helmet he was wearing.

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

"Why did I get four consecutive failures! +0 is ridiculous! If it's like this isn't an NPC Blacksmith better! Take responsibility, you shitty blacksmith!!"

—— Furiously scolded for a few minutes, standing there upright and remaining silent, despite having a troubled expression, was a short-statured male player wearing a plain brown leather apron.

A corner of the square was covered in a grey carpet, and upon the narrow space was placed a chair and an anvil, plus a display shelf. That carpet was called a «Vendor's Carpet», and was by no means cheap, since the item, once laid upon the streets of a city, was required to set up a simple player's shop, essential for the novice merchant player. Of course, even without the carpet, one could sell items, but, left alone, the durability of the items would decrease bit by bit, and you had to be wary of your wares being stolen. During the beta test period, the main streets of each floor's main district city were bustling with merchants with various wares spread out over the carpets, but this was the first time I had seen a carpet like this in the official service of SAO which had become a game of death. No, moreover, it was the first time I had seen a blacksmith which was not an NPC, but a player.

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

The sword now being pounded into the ground as the man yelled had probably been «Enhanced» by the downcast blacksmith. In general, a player's success rate was higher than that of an NPC of the same level. The corresponding skill's proficiency had to be raised substantially, but from the look of things, this could only be recognized to some degree. Crafting based skills required tools —— for a blacksmith, the «Blacksmith's Hammer» series was needed —— which decided the equipment based on proficiency, but the specific requirements were very subtle. At this moment, atop the anvil in front of the depressed blacksmith a few meters from me was the «Iron Hammer» which had a higher skill requirement than that of this city's blacksmith NPC, who used the «Bronze Hammer».

In other words, that Blacksmith's enhancement success rate should be higher than the NPC's. Otherwise, his trade would not be possible, which was probably why the three-horned man had entrusted him with his beloved sword.

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

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

".....What's all this commotion about"

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

Standing there was the fine slender body of a Rapier User, wearing a white leather tunic, pale green leather tights, with a silver-colored breast plate adorning her chest. A player could mistake her for an elf, which shouldn't exist in Aincrad. Although, the clean and clear impression of her outfit was marred by an unstylish gray wool cape draped from her head to her waist. Though, this could not be helped. If she took off the cape, her long, glossy chestnut hair, as well as that elf-like appearance, would be revealed, and then any surrounding passersby would not leave her alone.

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

"It looks like that three-horned-kun's sword enhancement had....."

As my mouth uttered those words, I remembered that I was disguised, similar to the girl beside me. My black coat was replaced with a rustic leather armor, and my head was covered by a yellow and blue striped bandana, disguising my person thoroughly. I wanted to think that my disguise would not be easily uncovered. If that were the case, then for now I should respond under the guise of a first meeting.

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

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

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

".....ah, I remember. I remember, now. I even remember that I lent you the bath at my place."

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

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

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

"Good afternoon, Kirito-kun."

I had told her, when we met two days ago at any rate, to drop the «-kun» honorific since this was an avatar. However, it seemed the VR-game novice still hadn't given up using it for some reason. In that case, I should use «Asuna-san» to address her, but when I attempted to, she replied with "It's too troublesome, so don't bother." ——It's really hard to understand a girl's heart.

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

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

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

"If there is a possibility of failure, this person should be informed. That blacksmith-san, didn't he already put up a list of the success rate for each type of weapon in his store; furthermore, if the enhancement failed the customer only has to bear the costs of the item materials, and not

the forging fee."

"Eh, really? That's really honest of him....."

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

".....Perhaps, at the first failure, his blood rushed to his head, and he asked for it to be enhanced once more. With rashness, always comes sadness in gambling....."

"That was a passionate comment."

"N-No, It's merely a general assessment."

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

".....Well, even I don't think it's not pitiful, but there's no need for such ruckus.....as long as he saves money for the materials, he can try again, right."

"Umm.....no, trying again isn't possible."

"Why is that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

So — This was SAO, and its system of weapons enhancement was terrifying.

In this world, the number of times an equipment could be enhanced, «Maximum attempts at enhancing» property was set. This was not «Maximum possible value of enhancing». Rather, that value determined how many times you could attempt enhancing it. For example, my initial equipment «Small Sword» had a limit of one, so if I attempted to enhance it and failed, that sword could never be a +1 after that.

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

success.

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

So, if there were a point on which to blame the three-horned man, it would have been his hotheadedness in continuing to request the enhancing of failed items. Though, if he had taken some time to calm down with a deep breath after the first failure, he could have paid more or come back later. That way, the prized Anneal Blade would have avoided the tragedy of becoming +0 with all the attempts expended.

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

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

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

"If we can work hard for it for a week, let's aim for a +8 this time."

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

So, with this realistic thought,

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

I watched them with emotion. Three-horns, renamed Ryufior-shi, also regained his composure, and left the square as he trudged away with slumped shoulders.

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

"That.....I'm really, really sorry for that. Next time, I will really, really try my best.....ah, again, you can ask me to do it again even though you might hate me....."

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

".....It's not your fault.....I blurted out various things, that was bad of me."

"No..... that is also within the scope of my profession....."

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

As I thought about this and looked on at their exchange, the blacksmith stepped forward and bowed deeply again, and spoke.

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

Zuwa..... the surrounding onlookers stirred, and from my throat an "Ooh" leaked out.

At the current market rate, the quest reward exclusive, clean Anneal Blade +0, was worth sixteen thousand col. Eight thousand col was half that much, and although Ryufior's blade had the same stats, the number of attempts had been exhausted and it was now a «Final Product». It

was now worth less than half the market value, perhaps about four thousand col. It was an exceptional offer as an apology.

Stunned, Ryufi-shi and his two friends glanced at each other, then all three nodded in unison.

Chapter 2

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

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

Originally, I wasn't planning to stay so long in this square, I would have quickly finished my errands by now and escape from Urbus. There were two reasons my plans had changed. Because I encountered one of the few people in Aincrad's who did not call me a «Filthy Beater», allowing me to practice the use of the Japanese language. The other — was my original errand, which was, to enhance the Anneal Blade +6 that was on my back.

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

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

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

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

".....So?"

I gazed blankly at the sudden voice next to me.

"Huh? What?"

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

Asuna glared at me.

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

"Thinking about something..... Kiritokun, you came for that blacksmith's enhancement, didn't you?"

"Eh, ho-how did you know?"

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

"When we met yesterday at Marome, you said you were going to the east of the rocky mountain area to hunt «Red Spotted Beetle». If so, you

must have decided to collect material to enhance your one handed sword."

"O.....Oh."

I unintentionally gave out that sound.

".....What is with that reaction?"

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

"....."

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

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

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

"I see, um, that's a good thing. In the MMO world, without knowledge the results would be very different. If you want to know anything, don't hesitate to ask, because I am a former tester. I know everything up to the tenth floor, from wares lineups to the mobs' cries....."

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

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

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

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

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

".....You bear all the resentment and hate against all former testers by yourself, I think that's too excessive for you..... but because that is your decision, I did not say anything. But, you should respect my choice too. I don't care what other people think. I'll be your acqua.....friend then even if you don't like the appearance, I would not let you have said anything from the start anyway."

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

Muttering, I lowered myself onto the bench once more.

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

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

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

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

"Eh....."

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

"That, should be +4 only?"

Asuna nodded at my question.

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

"Let's see.....four «plank of steel», twelve «Needle of Wind Wasp»"

"Heh, you worked hard..... but....."

I mentally calculated the success rate, and groaned.

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

"Is the risk not low enough?"

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

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

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

"That.....should be true....."

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

On the other hand, my right brain felt something. Whether it was my Anneal Blade or Asuna's Wind Fleuret, if we asked the blacksmith to enhance it here and now, even if we used materials to boost its probability of success, it would fail. Ignoring my intuition was not good, this was my personal rule, based on my experience of playing net games for many years.

"Hey, Asuna"

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

"Wha.....What is it?"

"You'd like the success rate at ninety percent compared to eighty, right?"

".....That is true, of course"

"Compared to ninety percent, you'd like ninety five percent, right?"

".....That is true too, of course"

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

"....."

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

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

".....Eh?"

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

".....Eh?"

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

".....Eh?"

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

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

Chapter 3 [\[edit\]](#)

Blade technique — «Sword Art» was a best seller, because in the game of SAO, there were far greater numbers of humanoid monsters than the average MMORPG game.

However, that was a trend that only started at the seventh, or eighth floors. There were still many non humanoid monster on the first and second floors which you had to watch out for hovering about. That means, compared to the a sword wielding humanoid mob, an animal or plant based mob was more beginner friendly, but of course, exceptions existed.

Although it did not have an extremely dangerous skill like a poison for paralysis or corrosive acid, the «Flight type mob» had an unexpectedly bothersome ambush ability. Anyhow, there was no magic of any kind in SAO. The only way to attack from a distance was to use a weapon belonging to the «Throwing Blade» category, and it should be made clear that it should be treated as only a supplementary weapon. A skill to throw blades all around, although I really wanted to go on a killing spree on all the flying type mobs in the style of throwing knife *bishi bashi* at them, was unfortunately not possible since my mental strength was not strong enough for me to consider making my build out of a hobby in this death game's situation. Added to that, SAO's thrown weapons were not of the 'unlimited throws' kind, so using up all the blades to throw at the enemy would end up with me having sad eyes.

Therefore——

The boring balanced one handed sword user that was me, Kirito, alongside the fencer Asuna with a rapier of similar reach which could not be considered long, who had requested..... or rather, ordered me to cooperate in the hunt against the flight type «Wind Wasp» monster on the second floor's western field, was unable to help but think from the bottom of my heart.

Uheeh, troublesome.

Exiting from the second floor's main city «Urbus», I manipulated my equipment figure to remove the yellow bandana with blue stripes from my head. Soon, I could see my black bangs which hung lower than my eyebrows when I looked up momentarily, and gave off a sigh of relief. When SAO started, I had made a memorable cool looking avatar with fancy up styled hair to avoid a hairstyle similar to that in the real world, but a month has passed since the start of the game, so it is for the best that things have calmed down.

Glancing at me in such a state, Asuna, who was walking beside me on my right, lightly snorted out a few words from her nose.

"Generally, I think disguising yourself with a bandana like that is a horrible idea. I'd prefer hiding the entire face, using something like face paint."

"U....."

Those words stimulated sad memories in me, and I gave out an involuntary low groan.

Before Asuna had said those words, my face was subjected to black paint for the whole night the day before yesterday. However, tribal patterns on the cheeks or a reverse cross on the forehead or something cool like that — was what I expected. As you could guess, I didn't dare to confirm it with my own eyes, but the only person who saw it described it thus. «Kiriemon».

That paint, which had been smeared was from a quest, and the action could not be argued with, and because it was made with an oni's paint, it would not disappear until the quest was cleared, so I had wholeheartedly worked hard on it with teary eyes. I somehow managed to clear it on the evening three days after I had started the quest, and the requesting NPC, the bearded teacher's paint came off. However, I did not feel a sense of accomplishment. The method to erase it was to use the handkerchief from his dougi's pocket, which was so brown it was hard to tolerate it being applied to my face.

Through those circumstances, I was troubled by being fifty or more hours behind after the second floor was opened, as soon as my face had returned to its original state, I dashed to the frontlines at «Marome Village» and reunited with Asuna from the first floor there — that was what happened.

Therefore, Asuna, who didn't know the reason for my strange reaction, furrowed her eyebrows wonderingly. I quickly opened my mouth to cough *Ehem* to deceive her.

"Ah, th-that's right. Then, the time I go to Urbus I should wear a hooded cape too. Where did you get it?"

"This is from an NPC in the west square of «Starting City»..."

As she answered to that point, Asuna shut her mouth tightly, her gaze like a raging fire from within the hood.

".....Hey, don't buy the same one as mine! If you do it's like we're a pair..... no, I don't want to be seen as if we're in a fixed party! Hide your face in a sack or something!"

Pui! She turned her face away at an amazing speed, and tapped to open the window for her equipment figure. Her sober grey wool cape disappeared with a small light effect, and her long, straight chestnut hair sparkled in the afternoon sunshine.

After a long time.....To be exact, it has been four days after the raid against the first floor's boss monster and seeing Asuna's face clearly, as

expected, even with that expression, she was still a beauty of high-level. Actually, I would have jumped in and said that this was the game master of this world, Kayaba Akahiko's honest mistake, I wanted to think that her face was not returned to her original face.

Since the current raid was based in Marome village which was southeast of Urbus, there were no players on the this road heading in the south western direction. In this cage of violent death called Aincrad, a situation where one was walking together alongside a beautiful Onee-san, for a person in the second year of middle school, in the midst of adolescence, would be very grateful to god for such a stroke of good luck. Although, we were on the path toward an annoying flying mob for our mission of slaughtering them to farm their drops.

".....A sack mask might make people think I'm intending to PK somebody. Would you allow it if I got a different color"

"I! Will! Not!"

".....Okaaay"

With that kind of conversation, I too operated my equipment figure. The plain leather armor I had used to disguise myself disappeared, and the jet black «Coat of Midnight» which had dropped from the first floor's boss materialized.

The long hem fluttered with a *thud*, and Asuna glanced sideways at me, her mouth opening and closing several times as if trying to say something, but turned her face away as soon as her eyes met mine. I now wondered, why am I helping this person collect material for strengthening, before realizing that it was because I had recommended her to raise the success rate in the first place.

Well, despite hunting the Wind Wasp being troublesome, it had a reasonably high experience efficiency rate. It is not a bad opponent to earn from before dinner. And probably, since I was helping the kind Asuna-san, she would most certainly have dinner ready for me. Definitely, perhaps.

Along the way, gigantic cattle grazed on the grasslands that divided the wide canyon from the north to the south. Across these plains was the area where the wasps spawned.

".....Although there should be no need to say this since you've hunted a lot of these, when stung by the wasp's poisoned sting, we'll be stunned for two to three seconds. If either of us sees the other under a stun effect, we must follow up immediately, you must keep this in mind."

"Understood."

Right after I gave the instructions, Asuna nodded obediently, so I continued talking.

"If you move too far to the south, you might lure the «Jagged Worm», so watch out for that too."

".....Un-Understood."

After I said that, I recalled my memories of actually facing one during the beta period, and nodded.

A natural stone bridge lay across a canyon about ten metres deep, and despite it being sufficiently wide we were still somewhat nervous, the two of us gave off a single breath at the same time after we finished crossing it.

".....That bridge just now, I wonder what would have happened if we slipped."

At Asuna's murmur, I shrugged and answered.

"At level five, it shouldn't be fatal. But the road upward is really far to the south, and there are a lot of slime based monsters coming out from the bottom of the valley. It's quite troublesome to get back."

"I see."

The rapier user nodded, in her face there was an expression that seemed to be something other than relief, so I looked in the direction of her gaze. That was the moment I understood that sharp question, Asuna was gazing at the valley behind her, as she said.

".....Wait a second, I just had a thought. For example, against boss monsters, if you lose even if you gathered intelligence, levelled up, had strategy and tactics as well as worked hard, at that time you can just feel *it's just too bad*....., but I definitely would absolutely not want to die because of accidentally falling from a high place."

".....That is right. If it were a normal MMO, falling to death might be considered a joke..... but to be terminated in this world because of that....."

Nodding, I gave it a little thought, and added.

"But then, don't you think that, even in the real world, people die despite their hard work? Whether through sickness or through accidents, at the time of death, there is nothing but regret.....That's why.....uh, if you die in Aincrad, at that time, if you can say you have done all that you could, something like the taste of that satisfaction..... that is....."

Unfortunately, this fourteen year old net gamer had reached his limit in his linguistic ability, my hands went **wakiwaki** and my mouth went **pakupaku**. While I was in that state, Asuna gazed harshly at me with zero restraint, before saying clearly.

"That, may not be such a bad thing. But I do not want to taste it at the moment."

"Ye-Yeah."

"Then, first you need to face the second boss raid with all your might and effort. Helping me with strengthening my weapon is also a part of that."

".....Ye-Yeah."

"Since we seem to agree, let us start immediately. Our aim, one hundred wasps in two hours!"

Concluding her words, Asuna pulled out the rapier at her waist with a **sharan** sound, and pointed her sword at the other side of the stone bridge — at a basin surrounded by a grove of short trees.

A hundred wasps in two hours, that would mean one wasp every seventy two seconds? Is she for real?

As I considered those horrible calculations in my mind, I had no choice but to shout "Ooh" with non-existent energy.

Chapter 4 [\[edit\]](#)

The «Wind Wasp» was an earthen black bee type monster with green stripes. Being fifty centimetres long, it would no doubt be the largest insect if it existed in reality, but it was classed as the smallest of the monsters living in Aincrad. Its HP and Attack stats were also not the highest among the mobs in the field on the second floor.

That said, bees larger than a human's head, with a stinger the size of an ice pick poking out of its butt and glowing, buzzing as it swooped down to attack, would definitely make the primitive parts of the brain send out command signals for an emergency dodge at the highest priority, which would be incredibly difficult to override. That instinctive horror which suppressed rationality was the point of hunting the Wind Wasp.

No matter how you looked at it the bugs' specialty did not seem to affect Asuna's movement at all, but I was still a little worried——

".....Haa!"

Accompanied by a sharp shout, the Rapier Sword Skill «Linear» drew a silver trajectory in mid air, piercing the base of the stomach of the wasp, which was its weak point. *Gii*, with that metallic scream, the huge bee scattered into shards of polygons. As I was in the same party, I could see the flow of gained experience and col added to my log.

"Twenty Four!"

I glanced briefly at Asuna, who gave the short cry, and it seemed like there was a triumphant look in her eyes. What was that, as I thought that, the sword in my right hand moved to face a wasp that had just POPped.

I was already in the wasp's Aggro Range, and it looked at me with its curved compound eyes as it flew up high. It started hovering at an altitude of five meters, then, *Buzz* proceeded to carry out its intentions as it dived with a resounding vibration. At that moment, if the wasp's body straightened as it opened its mandibles it was in preparation for a bite attack, if its body bent into a < shape it would be in preparation for its stinger's attack. I didn't identify it wrongly the first time —— however, during the β testing period, there was a superior monster, the «Storm Hornet» which was horrible to fight, and *Scariiii!* was the thought in my mind as I thought they couldn't be stopped.

While enduring that fear, the wasp visibly protruded its stomach out. Determining that it was the needle attack that was coming, I held my ground as much as I could.

The wasp charged towards the front of my eyes, and then began hovering for a short while again. The huge stinger that extended from its butt began emitting a pale, yellow light. Waiting up to that point, I jumped back with all my might. *Jyaki-!* Along with the sound effect, the protruding stinger stabbed the air uselessly.

Here, the wasp would have a five second Delay. Without wasting this opportunity, I used my one handed sword to send out two consecutive slashes, «Vertical Arc». Drawing a sharp V edge, the attack that connected made a pleasant *hit sound*. Slightly less than sixty percent of the enemy's HP was shaved off.

The wasp recovered from its delay, and soared up high once more. Rapidly turning, it charged once again. This time its body was straightened. I closely watched the large mandibles of the enemy, and dodged with a side step without waiting for the attack. The wasp immediately dashed past my left side. Without missing the opportunity in the short moment in which it returned to hovering, I unleashed the single diagonal slash «Slant».

If I used another «Vertical Slash» it would be a certain kill, unfortunately, from the bottom of my view I could see the cooling of that technique was still lit. If the «Slant» hit the weak spot, the remaining gauge would have been cut off —— however, it was difficult to do so with a pair of gigantic wings behind it preventing that from happening. The hit failed to be a critical one, and the wasp had ten percent HP remaining. While clicking my tongue in my mind, I used a normal attack to deal a finishing blow as I recovered from the delay. Fortunately, just before the enemy succeeded in counterattacking with a bite, my sword hit it, and this time the wasp turned into shards of blue glass and scattered away.

"——Twenty Two!"

With that single shout, I began looking for newly rePOPped prey.

My level and main weapon's specs were supposed to be higher here, yet my score lagged behind in competition, and the reason was solely because Asuna's critical rate was higher —— in other words, it was because the wasp's weak spots were infallibly struck with ridiculous

accuracy.

While my «Vertical Arc» would cut the wasp's gauge by sixty percent with a normal hit, Asuna's critical «Linear» would take away fifty percent. In addition to that, as it was a basic skill its cool time was short, so she managed to hit the wasp at every opportunity it gave.

Although in that case it might be good if I could aim for critical strikes using my basic «Slant» or «Horizontal» skills, frustratingly I was not confident that my strikes could reach that kind of accuracy. As an excuse, my beloved «Anneal Blade +6» was classified as «3S3D», or the allocation of +3 to sharpness and +3 to durability. As for Asuna's rapier, «Wind Fleuret +4» was indeed «3A1D», with an allocation of +3 to accuracy and +1 to durability. There was a considerable bonus to her Critical rate.

That said. Since all the strikes were critical, it was not like the player's skill and calmness was not at a high level. In addition to that, there was experience.

Ever since the second floor had been opened, Asuna had probably spent a considerable amount of time fighting against these giant wasps. Maybe it was to collect materials to strengthen her Wind Fleuret, but I couldn't help feeling that there was a greater reason for her to do so. Surely — It was not the stats value, but strengthening the player herself. If a tricky flight-type's weakness could be accurately attacked, then fighting against an opponent on the ground it would look slow by comparison.

Asuna, when we met deep in the dungeon on the first floor's main city for the first time, had told me.

—We're all going to die anyway.

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

Eyes filled with gloomy light, Asuna who was fighting hopelessly and only noticing despair, I was glad that she honestly aimed to be «Strong» like this. I feel that if it was her, one day she might stand in front of all players, giving everyone hope.

But, However.

Just this time, I did not want to lose in this «Race to be the first to hunt fifty wasps competition»

After all, Before we began this battle, Asuna nonchalantly gave an outrageous proposal. Tonight's dinner was to be on me, and aside from that, the first to hunt fifty would be treated to dessert by their opponent, is that fine?

I agreed without thinking deeply, and only noticed it after rushing to hunt. There was an NPC run restaurant in the second floor's main city «Urbus», whose specialty was short cake with cream made from the milk of a huge cow that made one go "Wow!". It was truly delicious. The black bread which was my favourite snack on the first floor's deliciousness paled in comparison. However, it was expensive for its taste and proportion. Most of the col earned during this hunt would have to be spent on it.

There is no doubt that that was Asuna's aim. If I treated her that for one day, in addition to the dinner before that, my budget would be in the minus zone. Which is why I — no matter what, mustn't lose in this battle!

"Uooooooooo!!"

Howling from the bottom of my stomach, I dashed at my target rePOPped wasp.

Shortly after that however, a calm and composed shout of "Twenty five!" could be heard, and I was brought to the brink of despair.

Three wasps difference. This was a dangerous turning point. Up to this point we had hunted at the same pace, but she continued pulling away. At the very least, compared to Asuna, I could similarly use my hands to deliver the final blow to the wasps, otherwise something like a reversal

in the second half was not possible.

——Now that it's come to this.

I glanced behind me, and made sure that Asuna was fighting with her back facing me, then glared at my target again.

The black green wasp, had a pattern which was to hover up high up in the sky before swooping down steeply to attack. Its body was in a < shape, its sharp stinger was aimed at me.

It stopped as I had theorized, attracted to its enemy, its stinger attack was rejected mid air with a vertical arc. *Zashuu zashuu!* A refreshing slashing sound resounded, its gauge was reduced by sixty percent, similar to the past. Here, I broke away from the enemy, as long as the next attack was not unexpectedly critical my hands couldn't defeat it.

".....!!"

I silently let out my fighting spirit, left hand clenched into a fist.

Zuka!

With that, the sword skill rang out with a different sound. My fist projected out in a straight line, the wasp's round inflated stomach caught it. «Martial Arts» basic skill, «Flash Hit». The HP gauge was reduced by another twenty percent.

Here, the wasp's time being taken aback ended, my neck twisted following its figure flying away. On its second dive, once again it used its stinger attack. This time I also avoided it in advance once the stiffness ended, and defeated it with a single strike of «Slant». The time it took to defeat it was more or less expected of using both hands

This way, the speed of finding a rePOP faster would balance the chances. There was that possibility.

My eyes opened up wide, trying to detect occurrences of signs of emergence of the mass of polygons, and dashing to that point.

One hour later——.

With the aim of hunting fifty wasps completed, I was sitting down completely burnt out, and my shoulder was *Pon* pat by Asuna.

"Good work, Kirito-kun"

There was no trace of fatigue in her voice. and taking a roundabout way to face me, her words continued as she smiled brightly.

"Well then, let's go back to Urbas for dinner. After that, while I receive the dessert you treat me to, let me listen closely about it.....the strange bare-handed skill that you used."

"....."

I could no longer say anything, and the beautiful fencer concluded with a critical hit.

"I'm really looking forward to it, eating that cake. Even if it's by one wasp, a win is a win. Since you are a boy, I expect you to keep your word."

So cute.

Chapter 5 [\[edit\]](#)

At the same time as my arrival in the main city Urbus, a clear ringing sound could be heard from around the city coming from the bell tower. The

calm melody that gave a nostalgic feeling informed people that night had fallen. At 7p.m, players who had went out to the fields all returned at the same time.

In the MMORPG I played before SAO, seven o'clock was when the game usually started. Generally, this was the time the server started being filled up, and around ten was when the most traffic was recorded, where the number of veteran players would be the highest and they would continue raiding until dawn. Because I was in the middle of compulsory education, I had to log out latest by two a.m. in the morning on weekdays, but even at that time so deep at night those guys bustled around the hunting grounds, and I couldn't do anything but envy them.

Therefore, if I thought about it the current circumstances which was now preventing me from going to school, obviously I could continue staying in the fields until two in the morning, or five, or even eight, or until whatever time I like, however, for some reason I miraculously returned to town when it became dark.

Of course, after having dinner, getting supplies and maintenance I would head out immediately once again, and occasionally continue to hunt from now until daybreak this time here, but —— It was at this time in the night that I first met Asuna inside a dungeon on the first floor —— even so, the outside of the boundary was covered in a brilliant red by the setting sun, and at the time the color changed from purple to blue I was driven by a strange uncomfortable feeling, as my feet naturally headed towards the town.

As proof that this inclination was not mine alone, all the players walking along the main street of Urbus, gave blurred smiles which could be considered to say they were indeed relieved. Lively cheers could be heard leaking from the restaurants and bars lined on both sides of the street, blended occasionally with toasts celebrating their safe return today.

Even at the city nearest to the frontlines, these scenes could normally be seen. However, even though there were a lot of these, I haven't heard any carefree laughter for quite some time..... In other words, it felt like this was the first time this feeling could be felt since being trapped in Aincrad.

".....Today, is the first time I came back to Urbus at this time, but..... Is it always like this? Or is it possible that, there is something going on today?"

The eighth of December was not a special day, was what I thought as I asked Asuna who walked beside me, and I saw a strange pair of eyes from the back of the hood of the rapier user whose beauty was once again hidden by a wool cape.

"For the past few days, I think Urbus and Marome has given off this kind of feeling. You, have you been hiding somewhere not just during the day, but during the night as well?"

"N.....No, well, that"

Asuna's question had the intended meaning that I should not worry about being seen at that time. However, I could not enter Urbus at night even if I wanted to, that was the circumstances I was in. The story about getting the «Martial Arts» skill would of course also be part of those circumstances, but the time walking was too brief to go into detail and finish explaining it.

"I wouldn't call it hiding."

At my spiritedly uncertain answer, Asuna had a suspicious look on her face as she said,

"That is why, I told you not to worry too much, right? We just passed by a few tens of players, without being disguised, and no one picked a fight with you, did they."

As her words stated, I was not equipped my stylish bandanna at the moment. I only removed my black coat, but my face and hairstyle

remained the same. However, rather than avoiding me because they recognized me as «Evil Beater Kirito», but due to their joy of their survival and anticipation for their dinner, it felt like they just didn't want to see something like the face of a swordsman in dark clothes.

Therefore, without changing my position using Asuna as a cover, though we were only a few centimeters different in height, I gave a light cough.

"Ahem..... We-Well, that might be so. Leaving that aside, our conversation just a moment ago..... Is there no reason for the nights in this city to be so lively?"

"I don't think there is no reason for it though."

Here. Asuna closed her mouth once, then once again looked at my face as she continued.

".....That is to say, seventy percent of that reason is because of you."

"Heh? M-Me?"

As I looked amazed, the rapier user's face gave a completely stunned look as she gave a long sigh.

"Haa.....Look here, just think a little about why everyone can laugh so carefreely. Obviously it is because this is the second floor, right?"

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

".....Not really, the puzzle is not hard to solve. Everyone was very anxious during the time they were trapped on the first floor for almost a month. There were a lot of people in despair of not being able to go back to the real world..... including me. However, finally a group of parties raided the first floor's boss, and even defeated it in their first attempt, opening the second floor. Everyone now thinks that we may one day be able to clear this game. That is why they can smile.Although, if not for a certain someone from somewhere who stood firm in the boss fight, this scenario would not exist."

"....."

I finally understood what Asuna was trying to say, but I did not know how to react all the same. Therefore, after another cough, after looking for words here and there, I finally opened my mouth.

"I-Is that so? Then, this certain someone, surely shouldn't be made to buy you a shortcake after our meal, yeah."

The reply to me, who did not know when to give up, was,

"This is this, that is that!"

That kind of reply.

We walked northward along the narrow lanes to that split to the east and west of the main street, then went further right, then left and the restaurant we were intending to go to was right there.

Although I knew where the shop (and the problematic cake) was located, of course from exploring every nook and cranny during the β period, it was surprising that Asuna who had only been on the second floor for a few days discovered this little known shop. Sitting in a secluded seat, after finishing placing the order, I then decided to listen to this case.

".....So, Asuna found this shop by catching the scent of the cream....."

Immediately, a glare stared at me from beneath the hood, and I changed course.

".....can't possibly be the case. Did you find it by chance? The entrance is narrow and the signboard is small, so I think it is quite difficult to jump in."

Of course, the store we casually entered being a violently overcharging bar isn't something that would occur in Aincrad (I think), it may trigger and automatically enroll us in an event type quest. Our HP should not drop within the city boundary (I think), but for someone who was not familiar with this type of game this development would be astonishingly shocking. The problem was that I didn't think Asuna was a thrill seeker type, and then that person gave me an unexpected answer.

"I bought the information from Argo-san. About an NPC restaurant in Urbus, that did not have many people."

As she said, there were no other players in the shop. Asuna manipulated the window to put her wool cape away, and her long hair swept down alongside her breath.

".....Th-That's true. I see, That's how it is....."

As I nodded, I couldn't help but feel a mysterious cold sweat in my mind. Indeed, I was the one to introduce Argo and Asuna. To be more precise, in Tolbana town on the first floor, I had lent Asuna a bath in the room I had rented. And with great timing, Argo also visited me at that time, I had desperately tried to prevent the two from encountering each other in the bathroom but my effort was in vain, of course Asuna was surprised and screamed despite me fleeing from my rented room——

".....I don't think I'm wrong here, but, you cannot remember something which you cannot remember. If you could do that, I will feast on two cakes which is on you."

".....No, I don't remember."

I *bubububu* shook my head and immediately continued.

"True, well that is assured, Argo's information is accurate and fast, but you have to be careful of the price of dealing with her. «Client's confidentiality» does not exist in her dictionary."

".....Then, I wonder, is it possible to buy all kinds of information about Kirito-kun?"

Crap, I brought trouble to myself., was what I thought a moment too late.

"Po-Possibly..... I'm not sure about this, but it is sure to be expensive. Perhaps the total shouldn't be less than three thousand Col."

".....Somewhat, that is an average price. I should try it out....."

"^{No, NOO}
の、ノオ! If-If it's like that I'll buy all of your information too! After all that person knows Asuna's——"

Here, I closed my mouth quickly with a *Gachin* sound.

Asuna who sat facing me, grinned and said.

"My, what?"

Chapter 6 [\[edit\]](#)

Thanks to the NPC waiter bringing the plate of food with his godly timing, the catastrophe that was waiting to happen was avoided.

Salad and stew, bread that was simple — although it could be said that this was the best food on the second floor — even in the middle of eating everything on the menu, the sides of Asuna's forehead showed an aura of insecurity, until the meal was completed and the dessert that she was waiting for appeared on the table.

As per the promise, the food was paid for by Asuna, but the money for this dessert came out of my wallet. The terrible thing was that the price of that one dish exceeded that of the three main dishes, I lost my position in the bet despite using my trump card, the «Martial Arts» skill, because I started too late, it was impossible, yet I struggled hard. I just felt ashamed of my determinedly using the skill I was inexperienced in.

Whether she knew whether it was in my mind or not, the winner of the bet who sat opposite me, staring with glittering eyes at the pale green plate with a towering white peak, shouted in her brilliant voice.

"Waaa, Amazing! I was looking forward to this ever since I read Argo-san's information, [«Tremble Shortcake » is worth trying at least once] "

—The word «Tremble», that was in its name, obviously came from the name of the terrible gigantic female cow «Trembling Cow» that roamed the fields on the second floor. Twice the size of the ox, it was treated like a mini boss monster, the cake which was in front of our eyes should have used that cow's milk, but right now I should not bring up this inelegant topic.

In the first place, the large plate had, *DON*, majestically towering clusters of fresh cream, which were from giant cows which did not tremble. The cake was cut out of a circle into triangles, with one side being eighteen centimetres and the height being eight centimetres, at sixty degree angles.

In other words, this cake's volume was $18 \times 18 \times 3.14 \times 8$ divided by six. Approximately one thousand three hundred and fifty cubic centimetres, the amount of cream used probably exceeded one litre.

"Th.....This, can't possibly be considered short....."

I groaned, while Asuna picked up a fork that was a bit large in proportion to the cake's size and said.

"Don't you know? The word 'short' from Shortcake does not mean it is «short»"

"Is that so? Then what? Was it created by a major league's legendary short?"

Completely side stepping and avoiding my full body gag, and the rapier user continued to explain.

"Originally, shortening was used to make a cake that was ^{Short}Crispy when the teeth touched it, which is the meaning of the word. In America, they used something like a biscuit as a foundation. However, Japan uses a soft spongy base, so the original meaning is lost. I wonder which type of cake this is....."

Gently stabbing the fork into the top of the triangle, she cut out about 80 cubic centimeters, and the golden sponge cake could be seen from the cross section. Apparently, the insides was four layers, arranged in sponge→Strawberry flavoured cream→sponge→strawberry flavoured cream. Of course, a real bright red strawberry (or more accurately, a fruit similar to it) sat on top of it.

".....Its the sponge. I guess I truly like this type."

As Asuna grinned while saying that, how do I express it; although I had to spend a lot of col due to losing the bet, I reluctantly thought that it was charming and was ready to admit that the cost was worth it. No, my materialistic point of view narrowly decided that it no longer mattered. Because the girl who seemed like a ghost of the first floor's dungeon with her pale skin and expression of despair engraved on her, was able to smile under the light of the warm lamp, and that was purely a «Good Thing».

On the other hand, the purely «Bad Thing» was the fact that the tabletop only had a plate of cake for one person. Although I did first think of wildly ordering for two people bravely, the price marked on the menu cooled my pitiful head down.

Therefore, I displayed what little (gentleness) parameters that I had, and gestured for her to eat with the most natural smile I could muster.

"You don't have to worry about it, go ahead."

Asuna, who faced me with that still smiling face, replied.

"Yes, that's what I intended to do. Then, I will eat without restraint."

Two seconds after that, "Pu" slipped out of her mouth as she burst into laughter, took out another fork from the cutlery basket beside her, and passed it to me as she added.

"That was a joke, I'm not that much of a demon. I'll let you eat a third of it."

"......Th-Thank you"

I put on an admirable face of gratitude, but what was in my mind was,

—One third, that would mean I get 450 cubic centimeters!

This quick calculation was obviously kept to myself.

As we exited the store, the entire town was covered in the veil of night.

Asuna who was beside me took a deep breath, then gave off a sign as she whispered.

"......It was delicious....."

I understood that feeling. It was probably the first time the girl had put something as truly high-class as that cake just now into her mouth. And it was the same for me. With a similar sigh of satisfaction, I muttered earnestly.

"......Somehow, it tastes better than during the β period..... The cream that just melted in the mouth, its taste was neither too sweet nor left me with an unsatisfied feeling....."

"......Isn't it just your imagination? Would there really be such fine tuning between the β test and the real service?"

With a skeptical expression, Asuna raised an argument with a serious face.

"If you only need to update the data for the taste engine, I don't think a large amount of effort is needed. Besides, the taste is definitely not the only thing that has changed from the β period."

That is because, in my top left field of vision, there was something at a point under my HP bar.

At that place, A Status ^{Buff} Effect icon which wasn't there prior to eating the cake had lit up. It was a stylized four leaf clover, depicting the «Lucky Award Bonus» Buff. The effect that could be obtained by equipping an accessory got from a blessing by donating money to the church, could now be achieved by putting special food or drinks to your mouth.

In SAO, the parameters that were specified with numerical values were ^{STR}Strength and ^{AGI}Agility, which was quite minimalistic specifications, but

increased or decreased by various «Hidden Parameters» such as special effects of equipments, buffs and debuffs, and terrain effects. «Luck» was one of them, it determined the resistance to poison and paralysis attacks, as well as incidents such as ^{Fumble}Weapon Dropping and ^{Slip}Falling Down, and probably also affected the drop rate of rare items, so it is quite an important parameter.

Surely someone on Argus staff had added this supportive effect into the official service due to the price of the cake, deciding that there should be some added benefits aside from tastes. It had a duration of fifteen minutes. However, to find a small pause in mid battle with enough time to eat it——

".....It's really too bad, but it is not sufficient if you want to go down to the field to hunt now."

Asuna who seemed to have the same thoughts as mine, shrugged and said that.

Indeed, even if we ran out of town from this place, the buff would wear off after hunting a few monsters. And the mobs in the fields nearest to the town did not drop any worthwhile items in the first place.

"However..... It is such a waste of this precious buff....."

Due to my destitute nature, I kept glancing at the remaining time of the icon displayed as it diminished, furiously trying to think of a somewhat effective use for the bonus.

The two of us crawling on the road, looking for lost items (like rare coins and jewels that had fallen) —— Asuna would hate it if we did that. Making a single all or nothing bet at a casino —— Although that idea was good, unfortunately there were no such shops until the seventh layer. Even as I thought this and that, the buff expiry limit continued to approach. Is there no opportunity for me to try out my luck..... Should I ask "Please go out with me" to the fencer-san standing beside me without looking at her face..... but how does the system's assist affect that.....

As if smoke was coming out from my ears, I was going to attempt an irrational action, but just before that.

From somewhere far away, I heard rhythmic metallic sounds which sounded familiar. *Kan, kan* This sound is certainly——

"Ah....."

Finally, when twelve minutes remained, I thought of an idea for the use for the buff (Maybe), and snapped my fingers with a *Pachin*.

Chapter 7 [\[edit\]](#)

Returning to the eastern square of Urbus we left five hours ago, as expected there were no longer a lot of visitors here. And aside from those standing around NPC Stores that were open at night, the players were limited to a few people, including two or three couples on the bench at the outer edge of town. But of course, my aim of accompanying Asuna here was not to sit on a bench and gaze up at the starry sky at the bottom of the next floor.

In a northeast corner of the square, A small anvil and a shelf of weapons was spread on a carpet, watched over by a player with a small stature. Ever since the beginning of SAO's official service and death game started, perhaps the first to so seriously take a crafting class..... the «Blacksmith», was my aim.

"Asuna, while we hunted just now, did you achieve the targeted amount of material for the strengthening material of the Wind Fleuret?"

The rapier user beside me confirmed it, as the hooded cape which had been equipped gave small up and down motions repeatedly.

"Yes. We got a little extra, so I was thinking of redeeming it for money and splitting it....."

"You can do that tomorrow. Anyway, won't you attempt your +5 now?"

At my proposal, Asuna's eyes looked at the upper right corner.

".....I see. But this «Luck Bonus» buff, does it also affect weapon strengthening? Isn't the person strengthening it blacksmith-san and not me?"

"Who knows. Which is why, but getting the blacksmith to eat the cake we just had would require that....."

«That» of course referred to my wallet. I shrugged before continuing.

".....I won't say it would certainly have an effect, but as the owner of the sword, maybe the probability bonus is affected? At the very least, a minus effect would not occur, so I thought it wouldn't hurt to try."

Even as I said this, the remaining time of the buff effect was seven minutes. Asuna nodded again,

"I understand. I was planning on doing it today anyway."

With those words she removed the rapier at her waist, and walked directly to the blacksmith's shop. I followed wordlessly.

From up close, the small framed smith player reminded me of a dwarf. With his stocky and muscular build, and an honest looking round face. It was truly regrettable that he had no accompanying moustache and beard. In SAO, appearances such as hair and beards can easily be customised using NPC shops and items, he might as well pursue perfection, as it might increase the number of customers.....

While I was thinking useless stuff, Asuna's voice broke out.

"Good Evening."

The blacksmith looked up from his anvil, then panicked as he lowered his head and bowed.

"G-Good Evening. Welcome"

His voice was far from the baritone of a dwarf's, as he sounded more like a youthful boy. Since the avatar's voice is taken from the sample of a player's natural voice in the real world, and cannot be easily changed like the face. My first impression was that he was a teenager, not so different from me.

Beside the signboard, above the price list, were the words «Nezha's Smith Shop». Ne-zu-ha, should be how it is read, is probably his name. It was a little difficult to pronounce, but in Net Games such as SAO I don't really care about every individual difficult-to-pronounce name. During the first floor boss raid there was short spear user named «Hokkaiikura», whom I puzzled hard at his name, thinking it was «ホツカ・飯倉», and was astonished to find out that it was meant to have the meaning «^{Hokka ikura}北海いくら». Of course «Nezha» might have a different reading, but asking him how it is pronounced in our first meeting was rather difficult to me.

Anyway, the blacksmith Nezuha-shi(assumed) quickly stood up and lowered his head once again before saying.

"A-Are you here to shop? Or here for maintenance?"

In contrast, Asuna removed her Wind Fleuret from her waist and used both hands to hold it up, replying smoothly.

"Please strengthen my weapon. Wind Fleuret +4 to +5, accuracy type, I brought my own strengthening materials."

Nezuha glanced at the Fleuret — then his eyebrows drooped, as if thinking it was troublesome.

"Y-Yes.....The number of materials, how many.....?"

"The maximum amount. Four steel plates, and twenty Wind Wasp stings."

Immediately after listening to Asuna's voice as she answered, I reaffirmed my thoughts. the strengthening materials needed in SAO were divided into two categories, «Base Material» and «Additional Material». The base material was fixed and necessary, but the additional material was optional. how much additional material was used determined the type and success rate of the strengthening. As the additional material, Wind Wasp's sting, was of the accuracy type, this meant that Asuna's critical hit would increase again. Based on my memory, when making the Wind Fleuret +4 to +5, an additional twenty wasp's needles would definitely increase the success rate to 95%.

Therefore, the blacksmith player undertaking the strengthening shouldn't have considered it a bad deal. True, the best customers would be those who bought materials from the blacksmith himself, but it seems far better for the customer to bring their own additional materials than to request a strengthening without any at all and have it fail.

Even so, Nezuha, upon hearing Asuna's answer, made a 八 shape with his eyebrows. of course, the troubled look on his face was no reason for him to turn down the request.

"I got it. Then please allow me to take your weapon and materials."

Then bowed again.

Asuna went "Please do so" as she bowed, and handed the Wind Fleuret over to Nezuha first. Then, she opened her window, and materialized a bag containing the base and additional material she had placed in earlier. Here, she used the trade window to pass the objects to the blacksmith. Finally, she paid the price which was written on the signboard, and finally completed all the preparatory steps.

At this time, the «Luck Bonus» buff had four minutes remaining. If we were in battle I would feel uneasy, but it should be sufficient for the strengthening of a single weapon. Of course, whether the system actually had any effect was unclear, despite the cake's high price. It is good enough even if it increases from 95% to approximately 97%.

I prayed to the gods of the system with a little fervor, as Asuna who had completed her requests first step completed the second step, and stood beside me, and softly gave a short whisper.

"Finger."

"Heh?"

"Give me the finger on your left hand."

Despite not understanding the situation, I lifted my index finger on my left hand and extended it out. Asuna then with two fingers that fit in her light brown leather gloves, held my outreached finger.

".....Um, This is.....?"

"This way, maybe your buff's effect will be added too."

That's just silly, I thought of reflexively saying.

".....Th-Then more would be..... perhaps holding hands.....?"

Now, a cool look came from the depths hidden by hood.

"You and I, are not in that kind of relationship, right."

—Then what does this situation say about our relationship!? As I thought that, the blacksmith's voice could be heard saying "Alright" after he

finished verifying the amount of materials for strengthening, and I reluctantly held out my fingertips — I kept my mouth shut while the buff effect that was there was possibly absorbed.

The signboard watched over us as Asuna and I looked forward, the blacksmith Nezuha turned around, and first pulled out a portable furnace with his right hand that was behind the anvil. The number of ingots it could dissolve at the same time was low — in other words, although large pole arm or metal armor type of equipment couldn't be made, it was enough for the shop's business.

In the pop-up menu, the setting of the portable furnace was changed from forging mode to strengthening mode. Then, the type of strengthening was set and the material received from Asuna was poured into the furnace.

The four thin steel boards and twenty sharp stings instantly glowed bright red with the heat, and soon, a blue light flashed inside the furnace — the color indicating «Accuracy» — completed dyed it. Readily there, was the entrusted unsheathed Wind Fleuret, lying on a brazier-like object in the furnace.

The blue light wrapped around the narrow blade, and soon the entire sword began glowing blue.

Nezuha immediately moved the rapier onto the top of the anvil, his right hand holding a blacksmith's hammer, lifted it high and swung down.

At that instant——

Very subtly, but with a feeling of certainty, something ran down my neck. *This is.....* This feeling, it felt similar to the feeling I had during the day, when I was discouraged from strengthening my own «Anneal Blade +6»——

STOP! I had the urge to shout this, and was about to open my mouth. However, at that time, the blacksmith's hammer's final swing already swung and hit with a high pitched sound.

Clang!* *Clang! As that hammering rhythm echoed around the square, an orange spark could be seen from the anvil. Once the Strengthening had begun, it could no longer be stopped. No, a forced stop is possible, but then it would be considered a failure. If that was the case, it was fine to silently watch it to the end.

There was no foundation for this feeling of fear. The feeling of worry I had didn't last long. The amount of material for strengthening was full, the player should be even more skilled than the NPC blacksmith, and we also had the luck buff on the two of us. There was no reason for it to fail.

Unaware that I was holding my own breath, I watched as the hammer moved up and down. Unlike for forging, the required number of swings for strengthening was only ten times. Six, seven, the hammer hit the blade, giving off blue sparks at the set pace. Eight, nine—— and finally, ten.

As the process was completed, the rapier on top of the anvil shone for a moment

It should not fail! While repeating these words in my mind, I clenched my teeth.

One second later. The phenomenon that happened gave me an even worse feeling.

Transiently, with a metallic sound which could be said to be beautiful—— the Wind Fleuret +4, from the tip of the blade to the hilt, completely shattered.

Chapter 8 [\[edit\]](#)

The owner of the sword, Asuna, obviously, and I, the support buffer, and even the person who caused this phenomenon, the blacksmith Nezuha-san, were all unable to react for a moment.

If there was at least one surrounding onlooker, he might have been able to do something about this frozen atmosphere, as the three of us stared at the anvil which was now empty. No, the person who was most interested was probably me, as I wondered if it were possible to do anything, and a question lingered in my mind ... Aside from the surprise we had earlier, I could not think of anything else.

—*This is impossible!*

As I opened my eyes wide, I shouted that phrase in my mind a few times.

This event shouldn't occur. In this SAO game, the penalty for failure of weapon strengthening, should be «the + number remains the same while the materials were consumed», «the property of the + number is changed», «the + number drops by 1», these three events only.

In other words, the worst that should occur in the case of failure was that Asuna's «Wind Fleuret +4»'s number would decrease to +3, and even then there was only a 5% or less chance of that happening. No, that 5% did not mean that it could not happen in an MMO..... but at the very least, the complete disappearance of a weapon was an impossible occurrence.

On the other hand, it was a fact that the glittering shards of silvery metal around the anvil were Asuna's beloved sword just a few seconds ago.

Because I had seen it with my own eyes. Asuna had passed Nezuha the rapier at her waist, Nezuha had held it with his left hand while controlling the furnace with his right hand, and finally the unsheathed sword was placed inside the furnace. After a few actions, there was nothing out of the ordinary.

In this silence, the shards scattered around the furnace began to dissolve into thin air. Repair was still possible for a blade which was slightly melted by monsters' weapon breaking techniques, or had its edge chipped off, but a sword shattered to pieces had clearly lost all its endurance. In other words—— at this moment, Asuna's beloved sword had clearly been completely removed from SAO's game database server.

As soon as the last shard disappeared, the first to move was the blacksmith Nezuha.

While dropping the hammer in his right hand, he stood to attention with a snap, then faced us and bowed before us over and over again. From under the hair that was divided down the middle, a scream similar to the agony of death could be heard.

"S.....Sorry! Sorry! I will return the full fee..... I'm really sorry.....!"

He fired off continuous apologies, however the person he was apologizing to, Asuna's eyes were still wide in shock. I reluctantly took a step forward and said to Nezuha.

"No, that..... Hold on a second, instead of the fee I want an explanation. In SAO's failure at strengthening..... «Weapon Disappearance» is not an option, is it?"

Then, Nezuha stopped bowing and lifted his head. His eyebrows were angled downwards to the limit, and his honest round face was distorted violently. The face that was filled with a pure expression looked as though he could not take it anymore, to the point I felt like saying "It's fine now."

Instead, he tried his hardest to remain calm as he continued his words.

".....I, during the beta test period, in the official site's manual was stated, the penalties of strengthening failure are «Materials lost», «Property Change» and «Property Reduction» these three were what was written. Of this I'm certain."

Bringing up the story of the β test, «Evil Beater» was not a word fully used for casual conversation. However, for self preservation, I wouldn't think about it for now. I kept my mouth closed and waited for the other party's words.

The blacksmith Nezuha, while he had stopped bowing his head repeatedly, still looked downwards as his spoke in a soft voice.

"Um....., in the official service, the fourth penalty was added..... Maybe. For me, previously..... The same thing happened once. That's why, even if the probability is very low....."

"....."

Now that he said it, it couldn't be denied that there was no insufficiency of materials. In the first place, even if Nezuha's words were lies, he was right in front of us, saying that the system did not have a «disappearance penalty» was like saying the occurrence did not happen. That was extremely impossible.

".....Is that so....."

I murmured without any energy, as Nezuha looked up for a moment, and apologized once more in a quiet voice.

"Umm.....I really don't know how to apologize..... —Even if you want a similar weapon returned to you, I don't have any «Wind Fleuret» in my inventory..... At least..... It may be lower by a rank, but will you have an «Iron Rapier».....?"

This offer was not mine to accept. I looked to my right, looking at the silent Asuna.

The rapier user's downward facing face which was almost fully concealed by her grey hood, gently moved her chin with a sideways motion which could be seen. I faced Nezuha and said.

"No.....It's fine. I think we'll make it somehow."

Although pushing away Nezuha's offer for replacement was bad, «Iron Rapier» was a weapon from the starting city on the first floor, it was unreliable to use on the second floor. At the very least, we should use a sword one rank beneath the Wind Fleuret, the «Gaze Rapier» as replacement.

Even so—— In the first place, for the risk of failure in weapon forging, the liability should not fall on the hands of the blacksmith but on the requesting party. On «Nezuha's Smith Shop» signboard, the current skill and corresponding success rate were clearly stated. Even if it was 5%.....no, «Weapon Disappearance», probably had a probability of less than 1% of getting it with bad luck, it was fully our own responsibility. During the day, Even the owner of the «Anneal Blade» which ended with +0 Ryufior-shi, despite raging, at the end he accepted it as bad luck.

At my answer, Nezuha's shoulder dropped, and said "Is that so" in a quiet voice. then, he continued.

"Umm.....In that case, let me pay you back the cost of the material....."

His hands began to move, but was suppressed.

"It's alright, because you already swung your hammer with all you had, I do not need that. Among the player blacksmiths, the number of hits is the same, and there are those that don't do it seriously....."

While I said that casually, for some reason the blacksmith winced as his neck seemed to shrink. His arms began trembling harder and harder as his body seemed to approach the limit, before he managed to force out.

".....Sorry.....!!"

After hearing that sad apology, I couldn't say anything else.

I took one step back and prompted Asuna, to move to somewhere else for now.

My finger was still held onto by the rapier user's right hand, but I was unaware when her left hand had balled up into a fist.

I gently pulled Asuna, who had remained silent, and moved to the North from the Urbus' eastern square for now.

There were few NPC shops and players here, and buildings with an unclear purpose ——Maybe they were the earliest set of player homes, which were still unsold—— standing side by side, there were few people walking around.

Occasionally there were small signboards for inns along the way, but we continued walking.

There was no destination, and I couldn't see the next step we should take. The fencer beside me kept silent, her beloved sword that had been with her in many battles had been completely lost in one failed strengthening, I understood her feeling based on my left hand which was held in a cold yet strong grip by the girl, what should we do now, two net gamers who in the middle of sadness was an experience which should not be judged. Somehow I understood, «Pulling my hand away and running away to solve this» was the worst option. I prayed for a helping hand to save us, but the «Luck Bonus» that was under my HP bar had disappeared long ago.

——*For now, I will walk without stopping.*

Anyhow, as I was thinking, there was a small open space in front of us on the road, where I noticed a bench was installed, so I determined that place as our destination.

I walked fifteen meters more, stood still, and opened my mouth.

"Th-There's a bench in a place like this."

What am I saying! As I shouted that in my heart, it was fortunate that the rapier user did not guess the intent behind my words, as she quietly changed her body position, silently lowering her waist. As my hand was still being held on tightly, I automatically sat down beside her.

After a few moments, Asuna's finger's slacked, and she let go of my hand, as her own fell onto the bench.

I had to say something. As I thought of thinking what to say, my throat constricted. I do not think I was the same as the person who, during the first floor's boss room, had declared "I am a Beater" in front of many soldiers in a defiant pose. ——No, it was not just that. When I had met Asuna in the dungeon of the first floor for the first time, didn't I approach and speak to her due to her dreadful expression? Despite the only content being something boring like "That's overkill", Is there a reason I could speak then but not speak now? Nope, none.

".....Umm, hey."

I desperately struggled to open my mouth, and fortunately, continuing the other half seemed to be easier, as I said.

"The Wind Fleuret, although it is unfortunate..... but, on the second floor, if you go to the next village of Marome, there's a shop which is selling a slightly stronger one. Of course it is not cheap..... but, I would ride that boat, as it would help my budget greatly....."

If MP existed in this world, the words that came out next would have reduced the spirit to zero—— as Asuna, in a quiet voice despite being so close, said

".....But,"

The words that came out, seemed to melt the cold night air.

"But, that sword is..... to me, it's the only sword....."

That voice seemed to hide something, and I was drawn to look at Asuna's face.

Under the hooded cape, on her cheeks lit by a pale blue light, two clear drops of liquid silently flowed down.

Chapter 9 [\[edit\]](#)

Something like a girl's tears, it couldn't be said that it was my first time seeing it up close.

However, the source of the tears back then was my sister Suguha, and even then most of them, around 90% of those were from long ago, most of them were stories from around the time we were in kindergarten or elementary school. The last time I saw her tears, was three months before I was trapped in this death game, when she lost in the early stages of the kendo prefectural tournament, where she let her tears flow in regret in the corner of the garden. I didn't say anything then, as I just held out a sucking type Ice-cream taken out from the convenience store bag with my right hand.

As a summary, my proficiency in my «Skill at responding to crying girls» was almost zero, so I was in no condition to make a choice. In fact, I wanted to praise myself for not running away.

That said, objectively looking at this situation, freezing in the spot while Asuna was beside me looking down as teardrops dripped from her face, it showed how very pathetic I was. Either moving or speaking should be fine, but I did not have sucking type ice cream in my storage to take out, and as Asuna was crying, I was hesitant to guess what words to speak.

With the sword which was her main weapon breaking in front of her eyes, obviously she would be shocked by what happened. Even if it were me, if the Anneal Blade on my back were to disappear, something would probably come slowly and steadily from my eyes too.

However—— I honestly did not think that Asuna was «That Type». That referred to a person who treated their sword like a part of their body, being very fond of it, and sometimes even talked to it..... In other words, a person like me.

I thought Asuna preferred the exact opposite, her sword had the only purpose of being for combat, for example, if a slightly strong sword dropped from a monster, she was the type of person who would immediately discard her current sword for it. This is because, the first time I met her, she had bought rapiers from a dungeon store, and didn't bother maintaining them as she used them disposably.

Since that time, about one week had passed. In just seven days, something made Asuna's policy change a hundred and eighty degrees——
.....No.

No, there was no need to worry about whatever the reason was for that now. She had just lost her one and only partner of seven days, and was crying. And I could understand her feelings. Then, isn't this enough?

".....That was too bad."

I muttered that again, and Asuna's small back shook. Her Avatar now gave a feeling of being delicate, like a doll.

"But..... well. It might be cold of me to say this..... If Asuna wants to continue to clear this death game on the front lines of battle, your weapon must be constantly updated to the latest one often. Even if the strengthening earlier was successful, the Wind Fleuret cannot be used on the third floor. Even my Anneal Blade will have to be changed after reaching the first city on the fourth floor. An MMO..... No, an RPG, this is the kind of game it is."

I didn't know how comforting those words were, but this was the best I could do.

Asuna did not react for a while after my mouth was closed, but soon weakly sounding words came from within the hood.

"I..... don't like that."

Her right hand lightly clasped the leather skirt above her knees.

".....Always, I thought of a sword being just a tool..... no, just polygonal data. I thought that my own skill and resolution were the only strength in this world. However..... on the first floor, during the time I used the Wind Fleuret that you chose..... although it was frustrating, I was deeply moved. It was as light as a feather, and seemed to be attracted to any spot I target..... It was as if the sword had its own will, as if it was helping me....."

Her wet cheeks trembled, and her lips gave off an unclear smile. I thought that, at this time, with this expression, this was the most beautiful face Asuna I had seen.

".....I thought I would be alright if I was with this child. I would always fight with this child. Even if the strengthening failed, I promised that I would not throw it away. For the sake of those swords that I had used like disposables at first, I would cherish it forever..... I had even made a promise, but....."

"....."

New tears began to fall on her skirt, making a soft sound, and then disappeared quickly. In this world, there was no traces of anything that disappeared. The sword, monsters..... and even players.

Asuna shook her head gently, and whispered in a voice I almost couldn't hear.

"It is as you said, if a sword is not replaced in succession..... I would no longer want to continue further. After all..... Isn't it sad? Working hard together..... fighting, surviving..... and after all that, is soon cast aside....."

At Asuna's words, I had a had an out of place flashback here.

A black framed children's bicycle. With 20 inch tyres and six gear stages. On the day I attended elementary school, I chose and bought it myself. I had treated that junior MTB extra special. I would pump air in every week, and if it got wet in the rain I would wipe it dry and maintain it by putting oil to the driving unit. Although borrowing my father's car's chemical for repelling water on the frame was going too far.

Thanks to that the bicycle was still sparkingly shiny after three years, or should that be considered a catastrophe—— As to be expected, I outgrew it, and although I went to buy a new 24 inch tyre one, I had planned to keep my cherished one, unfortunately it was sentenced to be passed down to a male relative of mine.

As I was only in my third year in elementary school, I do not remember if I put up any resistance in the past. If so, I must have insisted on getting a new bike, and in the end, even asked the old man in the familiar bicycle shop to hide it.

And then the old man had said. *I will now transfer this machine's soul to the new bike.* As I stood there watching in amazement, the old man took out a hexagonal wrench, then removed the right crank's fixing bolt in no time at all, then said impressively. "This screw is the most important screw out of all the screws of a bike. So if we put it in a new bike, the machine's soul would also move——"

As expected, I now know that that was merely a method for dealing with children, but even though that was the case, the saddlebag of the 26 inch tyre bike that I was riding now still had the two bolts belonging to the previous bikes.

And while recalling that episode, I told Asuna.

"Even if it is time to part with the sword, there is a method to take the soul along with you."

".....Eh.....?"

The rapier user's face lifted slightly, and I showed two outstretched fingers.

"Furthermore, there are two ways. The first is, using the sword with insufficient specs and turning it back into ingots, then using that as material to create a new sword. The other is to simply continue to keep the old sword in the storage. Both methods have their demerits, but, that is why it has meaning, I think."

"The demerits..... are?"

"Firstly, if you turn them back to ingots, then when a monster drops a strong sword, your willpower will be tested. If you switch to the dropped weapon, the «Lineage» will be broken. Although turning the dropped weapon into ingots and using it together to make a new sword is fine.Of course, continuing to keep it in the storage would reduce the capacity. This will also take considerable willpower when it comes to obtaining dungeon items, yet you can't hold any more. —Either way, the practical pro-players would laugh at this nonsense."

At that point I closed my mouth, Asuna seemed to be thinking while looking downwards, then cleared up the tears on her face with her fingers and said.

".....Which method do you use.....?"

"I prefer the ingot method, but that's a rather broad interpretation..... Aside from swords, I also use it for Armor and accessories."

".....I see"

Giving a nod, the rapier user smiled once again. Even though her smile now was clearer than the previous smile, it was obvious that her sadness remained.

".....If only we could obtain ingots from the pieces of a broken sword....."

At that kind of muttering, I could only nod deeply. Asuna's first sword that connected to her heart had already disappeared without leaving a shard. There was no way to regain that soul.....

As I fell silent again, the rapier user sighed and said.

".....Thanks."

"Eh.....?"

Despite asking her to repeat, she did not say the same words again, instead Asuna stretched out her legs in front of her before standing up as she got off the bench.

"It's getting late. Let's get back to the inn. —Tomorrow, you are going to help me buy a sword, right?"

"A.....Aaaah, of course."

I nodded, and quickly stood up.

"Umm..... Ah, I'll accompany you to the inn."

Asuna shook her head slightly at that offer.

"I don't feel like going back to Marome, so I'll stay in Urbus today. There's an inn just here."

Looking around, it was true that there was a signboard with the words 【 I N N 】 faintly glowing just up the street. Come to think of it, it was too dangerous to leave town after losing your main weapon. Staying here today, and finding a sword in Urbus' market tomorrow is fine.

I nodded, and accompanied her along the twenty meter walk to the inn, and watched as Asuna checked in. She waved as she headed up for the second floor, and we parted for tonight. As expected, I didn't have the courage to say that I wanted to stay in the same inn.

Besides, I had one more thing to do tonight.

Walking along the road, I headed south once more—— and started walking quickly towards Urbus's eastern square.

Chapter 10 [\[edit\]](#)

As the bell notifying that it was eight in the evening rang, the continuous hammering sounds stopped.

I hastened my steps, and went past the entrance arch to Urbus' eastern square. While avoiding moving within range of the lighting effects from the streetlamps, I arrived at the broad leafed tree which grew in the eastern square and leaned my back against its thick trunk.

I chose one of the shortcut icons aligned to the right side of my field of sight, and set my third skill slot to «Hiding». A small indicator appeared on the bottom of my field of sight. 【70%】 was displayed, indicating what was called the «Hide Rate», which meant that my avatar had blended in with the trunk behind me by 70 percent. That rate finely increased and decreased according to the type and color of the worn armor, the brightness and terrain of the surroundings, and of course, by my own movements.

Right now, despite risking being caught as the evil beater, I had re-equipped the «Coat of Midnight», hoping that the black leather coat possessed magical properties that increased the hiding rate. With the addition of the surroundings being dark, and no one being nearby, the hiding effect function was at its highest. Seventy percent was a modest number, but that's because my skill was at a low level, as training the hiding skill to achieve its complete state was boring and tiresome.

That said, the hidden state at this level of skill was sufficiently effective for most opposing monsters on the first and second floors (aside from the non-visual type mobs), but unreliable against humans. Against a slightly perceptive player..... for example, Asuna, at a rate of 70% it was highly likely that I would be detected. Besides, hiding in the middle of the city was like a *No Manner*^[1] action. Recently the people from the disciplinary committee could often be seen using Reveal^[2] in the Area, so it would be very troublesome.

Even for me, it was not like I had a hobby of secretly watching people; however, it could not be helped at the moment. Because from here on, for the first time since the start of SAO's official service, I'm trying to tail other players.

In front of me, as I was under the tree, the crafting class player stopped working at eight in the evening, and quickly closed his shop. Of course, it was Aincrad's first Smithy, Nezuha-shi.

The forge's fire went out, and the ingots were put away in a leather bag. The hammer was placed in a special box for keeping a blacksmith's tools. The displayed signboard was folded and the vacant carpet was left lying there, and the weapons for sale were also rearranged closely.

All of the objects for trade were placed without any gaps on the two tatami sized carpet, and Nezuha gave a tap on the corner on the menu. As

he pressed the «Storage» button, all the various items that were on it were swallowed up as it rolled up, and in just a few seconds, changed into a cylinder.

The small framed blacksmith lifted it and threw it over his right shoulder. The Magic Item «Vendor's Carpet» had a constant weight independent of the amount of items that was stored in it. Suppose you go into a dungeon, it was like a dreamlike space, being able to bring whatever food and potions you wanted in and take back any drop items. Obviously such a sweet story did not exist, as the carpet could only work within the Area of towns and villages. In addition to that, the carpet could not be stored in a player's storage's item field, so the one and a half meter long, ten centimeters in diameter cylindrical object had to be carried around by hand all the time.

In summary, this item was horribly useless to a person of any class aside from a craftsman merchant—— Although this was the case, those people sure had considered many things, as during the β test it was popular to exploit the rule that «The objects arranged on top of the carpet cannot be moved by someone other than the owner» by playing pranks like putting large furniture on it in order to block the road. Of course, this was quickly patched, and the carpet's «Edge defining the area of the affected space» no longer spread out.

Nezuha carrying that magical carpet with such a story behind it, as expected of his tired state, gave off a deep sigh. And while in that state, he trudge along with a somewhat crestfallen posture. He headed for the square's southern gate.

I waited until there was a space of twenty meters between us, before separating from the trunk of the tree. the indicator for hiding rate in the middle of my field of vision decreased rapidly, and the hiding effect was cancelled at the same time it reached zero. Even so I tried to remain as close to the shadows as possible, unnaturally erasing the sound of my footsteps as I chased after that small back.

The reason I was tailing the blacksmith Nezuha, was obviously neither to complain about the failure at strengthening Asuna's rapier, nor to threaten him while there is no one else.

If anything, there would be a slight sense of discomfort—— probably.

He had, as far as I know, just today had two..... No, more accurately five failures in his attempt of strengthening weapons. When Asuna's Wind Fleuret disappeared, as well as when Ryufior-shi's Anneal Blade+4 sadly ended as a +0, makes five times altogether. Although the probability of that may occur—— somehow it occurred too much, no, it's not about #Occuring too much#.

In the first place, I had come to visit Urbus' east square this afternoon in disguise because I had heard of the story of a «the appearance of a skilled blacksmith player» in Marome, and had intended to ask him to strengthen my own sword. Bringing a leather bag filled with enough material to boost the success rate of the strengthening to 80%, and arrived at the square wondering whether I should increase the sharpness or durability before coming upon Ryufior-shi's tragedy, and then I had encountered Asuna and so lost my timing..... If not for those circumstances, I would definitely have requested Nezuha to strengthen my weapon.

And thanks to that, my sword did not encounter a failed strengthening. Although there was no basis for that feeling, for some reason I could not help but feel that it was true.

Because so many rumors that he was «Skilled» had spread all the way to Marome, the success rate of Nezuha's strengthening should not be low. Although there was no way to confirm that, but the actual results did not seem to be higher than a proper NPC blacksmith's. However, supposing he #always fails under certain conditions#, if there were some reasons—— and he explained it, I would believe that this was not a malicious trick.

Of course, this was all my guesswork, as I had an unpleasant feeling of distrust. In the worst case this kind of trick existed, but at the moment I had no idea. After all, in front of my eyes, he had put all the materials he had received from Asuna into the furnace, heated the received sword

in the furnace, then used the hammer to hit it on the anvil. All his movements were exactly as described in the manual, and there were no odd movements at all. First, destroying or lowering the performance of a specific player's sword, were there any merits for him.....?

As those various questions swirled round and round in my brain, I singlemindedly followed the blacksmith's back. Fortunately, he didn't seem to think he was being followed, as he continued walking at a constant pace without looking back. Although thanks to that I didn't have to stop unnaturally, and despite having no experience following a player compared to having monsters as an enemy, I did not break out in cold sweat. With the «Hiding» skill's proficiency as well as the considerable distance I was following behind, right now I was like a spy from a movie who had no choice but to extract information somehow.

A BGM from a certain Impossible movie began playing in my mind, as I continued to stylishly move from cover to cover for seven, eight minutes.

The town of Urbus's southeast area, close to the outer wall, was where Nezuha was walking trudgingly, and he stopped moving his feet in front of a dimly glowing signboard. I immediately stopped and stuck myself close to a roadside tree. If a third party looked around I would look ridiculously suspicious, which was something that I realized later.

The word 【 B A R 】 on the signboard was illuminated under the lamp. In other words, it is a bar. Once again, I felt a sense of discomfort. Of course, after a day's hard work it was not strange for players to go to the bar for a drink..... However, in comparison to that, Nezuha's atmosphere was strange. It was like he wanted to say "*I want a cold beer quickly!*" and rush in, yet it was as if he did not want to enter this kind of shop, as he stood in front of the swing door for more than ten seconds.

——*Surely, he's not turning back now.*

As I worriedly kept him in my line of sight, Nezuha carried the carpet on his shoulder again, and put his right foot heavily in front. He arrived in front of the door of the bar, and gently pushed with his left hand. As the swing door opened, the small figure disappeared into the store, and the door swung close once more, and after just two seconds—— a sound came from within, and I could hear it faintly from twenty meters away.

Cheers and applause suddenly welled up. And then—— a man's voice called out "Nezuo, WB!"

".....!?"

I inhaled sharply.

This progression was completely unexpected. My motive for following Nezuha was to get to his residence for the time being in order to understand him better. However, arriving at a bar at the outskirts of the town just a moment ago, there were even players who knew him inside—— I felt there were four, five people in there. *What on earth is this.....*

Hesitating slightly, I came out from my cover, and quickly rushed to the bar's swing door

I put my back flat against the wall, but unfortunately could not hear the conversation within. It was all because of the «Closed Door», where sounds were generally blocked, and only allowed those with the «^{Straining}Listening Ear» skill to bypass it. Even with the huge gaps above and below the swing door, it was no exception.

"Crap....."

And gave a light curse, as in this situation I only had two options. «Pretend to be a customer and go in» was out of the question. «Give up and go home» or——

I sucked in my stomach, and stretched out my left hand, pushing open the swing door. I pushed it five degrees, ten degrees, but still couldn't

hear any sounds from within yet. When I finally pushed it to fifteen degrees, I could finally hear the voice of the man from earlier again.

Chapter 11 [\[edit\]](#)

"—— Come over here, Nezuo, Gutto! After all no matter how much Sake you drink you won't get drunk!"

The person shouting in that voice which seemed to contradict the contents of his words. Indeed, it was true that even if we drank many litres of wine in Aincrad our bodies wouldn't ingest any alcohol, but occasionally there would be people who got drunk. In fact, the high tension voice and commotion that slipped through the slightly open door was similar to groups of students that POP in the shopping district for a drinking session after classes in the real world.

I strived to listen harder(literally pricked my ears harder-personal note), the reply "Y..... yes" could be heard in a quiet voice. The volume of the noise decreased for a short while, before cheers and applause resounded.

Based on this situation, it seems like around five of the blacksmith Nezuha's acquaintances had been waiting in this bar, and they seemed like close friends. Somehow the Lone Wolf(although not the image of the carnivorous kind) impression of the crafter class, was outside my expectations. I was curious about his comrades' character build(configuration-personal note), which was of course impossible to find out through their voices alone.

I risked myself even further, as I peeked in from the top of the swing door to glance momentarily at the inside of the wine shop. Blinking once like a camera taking a picture, I immediately pulled my head back out.

As I had expected, there was only one group of players within that confined enclosure. Pretending to be a customer while rushing into the shop would have attracted a large amount of attention. At the table furthest to the right, there were six people, including Nezuha who sat with his back facing the entrance. The other five people were clad in leather and metal armor for battle ——.

It was not strange that they were different. In an MMORPG, it was extremely common to have a mixture of craftsmen and combatants. Although you couldn't make a guild before clearing a certain quest on the third floor, there were plenty of players who had formed coalitions and groups..... or should I say that solo players like Asuna and me were now a minority.

If a blacksmith and a merchant were comrades, the maintenance of equipments and the sale of dropped items would be very easy, and the producer's material and items could be got for a cheap price as a merit as well. Which is why, Nezuha having other comrades, and among those comrades were of the combat class, there was no feeling that they shouldn't be together..... However, there was an uncomfortable feeling in my chest that refused to go away.

While I was trying to determine the cause of it, Nezuha's comrade who was drinking from a large mug said something I was interested in.

"...... So, Nezuo, How was business today?"

"Ah..... Y, Yes. I sold twelve of the weapons that I made..... and there were reasonable amounts of requests for maintenance and strengthening."

"Oh, Isn't that a new record!"

"Did we get ingots again!"

The other two men shouted, and continued to applaud. It was indeed peaceful, «A group of good friends after a hard day's work.» kind of scene. Although I did not recognize any of the five people aside from Nezuha because they weren't in the forefront clearing groups, having a skillfull

blacksmith as a friend might eventually be useful.

—— In the end, was it just my suspicion.....

I was somewhat ashamed of the mutterings in my chest. Even if Nezuha used some kind of trick to deliberately spec down or destroy certain players' weapons, it would be a scheme set up with this group's consensus, and I thought that there was no rational reason for them to do such a thing.

Although they were painful memories, the «Knight» Diabel who had gathered and coordinated the raid against the boss on the first floor went to the trouble of going through two people in an attempt to buy my beloved «Anneal Blade +6». And his reason for that was to prevent me from taking the last attack on the boss, which was what I found out when Diabel was dying.

In hindsight, as I eventually managed to defeat and pierce the Kobold Lord, obtaining the unique item «Coat of Midnight», there was a rational reason behind Diabel trying to reduce my combat ability.

On the other hand, Nezuha's comrades weren't even in the frontline clearing groups. They were obviously not in the position to obtain the LA from the floor boss, and weakening and destroying Ryufi-shi and Asuna's swords was unlikely to provide any merits.

—— So, everything that happened was by chance..... Probably.....

I silently sighed as I talked to myself, and was about to remove my hand from the swing door which had been kept barely open. But just before I did that,

".....However, THAT is at its limit....."

Was what I heard in Nezuha's fine voice, and I pressed myself against the door and stopped moving.

Inside the store though, the noisy men's voices immediately reduced in volume. After a short moment of silence, the first man seemed to have some sort of reply, and whispered it in an inaudible voice. My left hand naturally exerted some force, and the angle of the door increased to twenty degrees.

"——Though it is naive, it will definitely still work"

"That's right, Nezuha, there are no rumours at all yet"

As these words flew towards my ears, I held my breath. Discussing about the failed strengthenings, made me lean in instinctively to concentrate on listening. At the encouragement(?) of the men, Nezuha finely replied.

"Any more than this, would be even more dangerous..... Besides, it's more than enough for the original....."

"We haven't been caught at all yet! You know how much that rug and blacksmithing tool set costs, right? We should earn that much, no, three times that at the very least....."

Original? Three times that.....?

I couldn't understand the meaning of those words right away, yet I tilted my body further forward.

——Is what they are talking about related to the failure at strengthening? After all, Nezuha should have gone into the red to buy Ryufi-shi's end product, and didn't charge Asuna the usual fees. Based on all this, it wouldn't be likely that he made any profits.....

.....No. No, perhaps I somehow, misunderstood the basics.....

I thought up till that time. Inside the shop, a suspicious voice came.

".....Hm? Oi, somehow that door-"

I heard up to this point, before I returned the swing door to its original position as smoothly as possible, and immediately jumped to the right. As I stuck to the nearby tree on the street and activated my «Hiding» skill, the bar door swung open as if repelled from inside.

The head that emerged, was that of the enthusiastic male leader who was beside Nezuha. His large physique looked rounded in his Banded Armor, at the top of his head lay a sharp bascinet, it was a humorous outfit, but somehow his eyes were sharp. His thick eyebrows furrowed together, staring down the scenery around the shop forcefully.

When those eyes reached the tree where I was hiding, the bottom of my view's hiding rate decreased to 60 percent. Although there was no physical dangers since I was in the area, at the moment I was trying to avoid alerting them. Because, in the end, somehow I managed to catch hold of «Nezuha and friends» scheme. Although it was very little headway — at the very least, I only got an idea of their purpose.

As long as the man's eyes continued to gaze at the trees by the street side, the hidden rate continued to decrease. At around 40 percent, he would probably feel odd about the contour of the tree trunk. While staring at the numbers, I slowly moved my body, trying to move to the opposite side of the trunk. Ensuring that the rate remained around 50, I, slowly, slowly escaped from their line of sight. 。 somehow, I managed to get to the back of the tree, at the same time, the leader gazed away from the trees, and the numbers suddenly rose back up to 70. A few seconds later, as soon as I heard the sound of the swing door closing, I dashed away from the bar, escaping all the way to a back alley a block away.

"Phew....."

Leaning against the wall, I used the sleeves of my coat to wipe of the virtual cold sweat as I caught my breath. Thinking that Argo the rat-jou's job would be to sneak around like this daily, I don't think I'll change my job to an information seller.

That said, for the time being I was acting as a spy yet the mission was possible. Nezuha's main base of operations — would most likely be in the inn on the second floor of this bar —, All his comrades's existence was exposed, and even better, I obtained a fragment of information regarding the question of strengthening failure as well as the trick behind it.

Of course, my ears only conditionally caught a part of the series of conversation regarding the trick, but if that was so, it would mean that they had a definite benefit from intentionally failing to strengthen the weapons. Moreover, the +0 end product was bought back at double the market rate yet he still made profit.

If such a thing was possible..... were there people who made other requests to him, hiring him to reduce the combat strength of particular players.....? No, that was unlikely. This operation was too devious, and in the first place it was too uncertain for the target to ask to Nezuha for strengthening. Since money is spent anyway, contacting the target directly like Diabel's method was more certain.

If that was the case, there was many other ways of doing it.

As my brain thought hard until smoke was likely to come out from my ears, the events minutes ago were replayed.

Nezuha received the Wind Fleuret from Asuna. Then he received the strengthening material, and while holding the sword in his left hand, put the materials with his right hand into the forge. The forge was filled with an azure light, before the sword was unsheathed and its blade put onto the forge. When the light enveloped the blade, he moved it to the Anvil, and hit it with his hammer. After a few seconds, the sword gave off what sounded like a death scream, before being enveloped in a encircling shine — Cracking into pieces, vanishing.

I had witnessed that series of movements from the beginning to the end. I do not think that there was any space to perform any tricks. A possibility that the strengthening materials was stolen could be forced out, but the furnace filled with azure light was impossible to faked.

"A....."

—— Wait. Hold on..... Although I was going to look at the full process, there was a moment..... where both Asuna and I, for a very short moment had unavoidably.....

In other words. This meant, the object that was stolen was not the strengthening material.

".....Ku.....!!"

At that instant, a series of thoughts and steps flew at me, and landed on a certain point. I let out a low voice as I opened my main menu window with a strike, as I stared at the current time displayed in the corner.

The digital numbers were —— 20:23.

—— There's still enough time!

Waving my right hand, I tried to send an instant message tab flying, but at the end of it I cleared the window. It was impossible to accurately convey my intentions through text. I can't help but to give my direct instructions in that place.

"I can still make it.....!"

Once again, this time shouting aloud, I dashed out of the alley towards the north.

On the route that had taken me eight minutes while tailing, I covered it in three minutes by sprinting wholeheartedly, returning to the nostalgic eastern square of Urbus. However, I dashed from the north to the south without stopping, even dashing past the unusually designed streets and the surrounding stalls and houses. I also passed the bench where I saw Asuna's tears, and turned at a right angle after twenty meters. I ran into the inn she had checked in to, and ran up the stairs at the back three steps at a time

GJ to myself for having remembered the room number that I had heard just in case! While shouting, I rushed to the door with a 207 plate on it. Hitting without destroying it, I knocked. *Bang Bang Bang* However, as the «Door was Closed» , I still called out a few seconds after knocking for a while.

"Asuna, it's me! Open up!!"

Turning the knob without waiting for a reply, with the momentum I pushed the door open with I rolled inside, at the same time, I met the eyes of the person who just stood up from the plain bed. Her hazel eyes were opened wide, and as air began being inhaled through her lips, I BATAN! shut the door.

"——KYAAAAA!! "

That scream, did not even leak out a little because the door blocked it..... It was as if I was a criminal, or rather my actions were close to one, although I was doing everything for Asuna's sake.

Holding both fists in front of my chest, the fencer-sama continued screaming, with a white sleeveless shirt on top, and the bottom with a similar colored..... how to say it, soft and round shorts were what she was wearing. I would probably be judged safe because it was not underwear, I

rudely entered and approached her to grab her narrow shoulders.

"Asuna, it's a transcendent emergency! There is no time, so just listen to what I say!"

At that point the scream finally stopped, and the rapier user's face, there seemed to be a hesitation of deciding between screaming louder or directly attacking me. I really didn't have the time, so I went straight to the point.

"First take out the window and change it into visible mode! Quickly!"

"E.....eh.....?"

"Come on, hurry up!"

With the fists that were still in front of my chest I grabbed Asuna's right hand, moved it to the correct position, and extended two fingers to manipulate in mid air. With a clear sound, a purple rectangle expanded out, but all I could see was a plain board. Now, I guided her to press a button which allowed other players to see the screen.

"But, that, How I, the door was properly, the lock....."

She muttered as she was stunned, and I answered subconsciously.

"Asuna, you are still in a group with me as a party. The inn's door's default setting is «Guild and party members can unlock it»"

"W.....Wha, You, this is the first....."

Standing beside the rapier user and quickly wrapping around, from a normal position, I stared at the main menu window which had visualized. Of course the configuration was similar to mine, but the skin has been customised using a floral pattern. Hardworking, huh, mine was still the default, I thought that for a moment, This is not the situation to think about that! and moved my line of sight.

To the right side of the window, a familiar equipment figure appeared. Since she was unarmed, most of them were empty. Passing by the items like the camisole and petticoat, I kept my eyes on the cell to the right side. The set item there — there was none. In other words Asuna, after passing the wind fleuret to Nezuha, did not equip any new weapons.

"Good, the first condition is cleared! And the time....."

Displayed by numbers at the bottom right side of the screen, despite me running quickly, it was already 20:28.

Asuna and I, finish hunting the Wind Wasp and reached Urbus at 19:00. We finished eating dinner around 19:30. From there we immediately went to the square, and requested Nezuha for strengthening..... In the worst case scenario, we only had one or two minutes left!

"This is bad, we need to speed up the operation! Click according to my instructions, first go to the storage tab!"

"Eh.....ah, Y, Yes....."

Maybe her thoughts had not caught up to the unexpected situation yet, or maybe she was overwhelmed by my vigour, Asuna obediently moved her right index finger.

"Good, now go to the Setting button..... Search button..... to the Manipulate Storage button....."

The slender fingers continued to press the buttons following the flurry of instructions, continuing to move deeper down the menu level. After three or four levels, the desired button showed up.

"Th, That's it! «Completely All Items Objectize»! Go!!"

Pushed by my shout, the fingers pushed the small button. The confirmation Yes/No screen appeared, and in my loudest voice ——

"YE————S!!"

Click

At the same time the button was pressed, Asuna finally muttered something.

"N,nnn.....? All..... Item....., That is, all of the items..... Turn into objects.....?"

At that question, I gave a «Smile of a man who accomplished something» smile as a reply.

"Completely with the meaning of everything. All things, fully, the entire set."

At the next moment, all the rows of words depicting what was in Asuna's storage field disappeared.

Immediately after that ——.

Garan goton dosun gachiyan charin bosatto subba sapa sari fuwa fuwa, with various types of sounds, it rang out hard and heavy -> light and soft. That was, all the items that Asuna had in her storage as a player, the sound of it all materializing and accumulating on the floor of the inn.

"Na Na, Nana, Na.....!?"

The owner of the objects bent backwards again and let out a sound of surprise, but obviously I was expecting this phenomenon —— or rather, I had dashed from the bar in the southeast of Urbus here with all my might just for this. However, on the other hand, the amount of items that appeared was a more than I had expected by around two to three times as much.

The storage capacity was, determined by a player's strength(STR), a certain skill's proficiency, and various magic items for compensation. As her level was still low, of course there wasn't any chance to enhance the skill easily, but Asuna who as a fencer had the agility (AGI) as her priority having this many items stunned me for a moment. The reason became clear immediately.

Despite calling it capacity, the unit was measured by weight rather than volume. Armors and weapons made out of metal, liquid potions and obviously coins would soon overwhelm the storage, so light items like leather and cloth armors could be panned and scrolled to save space. So, the stash in Asuna's storage, were mostly cloth-based equipment of various sizes..... That is, clothes and undergarments.

AS expected, I felt somewhat embarrassed, as I looked at the mountain of items one and a half meters high. When the items that had appeared first dropped away, the metal equipment were those at the bottom, items like leather stuff, and clothes of various colours on top of that, and further on top, consisted mostly of a lot of white and pink underwear. In the first place, why on earth is there such a large stash. Aincrad did not have any biological waste matter, just wearing the outer armor for combat was fine, and one set of undergarments should have been enough. Personally, I had one for combat, one for daily use and one for sleeping, but even that was considered a lot for a male player.

—— and, that said.

I cannot afford to stop after coming here. If my guess is correct, and the window operation was completed in time, it should be there. Within that mountain.

".....Excuse me!"

Although I would have refused as a gentleman, I approached the mountain of items, and moved the first layer of fabric horizontally *insert sound effect here*. As soon as I did that, a trembling voice could be heard from behind.

"He,Hey..... You..... Could it be you want to die.....? Do you want to be a murdered person.....?"

"Of course not!!"

Answering with a straight face, my hands continued to move. As I finished moving the clothes, what emerged were the leather armor and leather pouches, and after digging out a small box, finally reached the metal layer, starting with a breastplate.

As I struggled to push them away, finally seeing that I reached the bottom of the small mountain, I caught sight of it. The heaviest of all the items that Asuna owned — however, on the other hand, light as a feather compared to similar items on my back, a Rapier.

Wind Fleuret +4 —.

Picking up the green sheath with both hands, I pulled it out from beneath the mountain, stood up and turned around.

Asuna, whose eyes had a glint as if wondering how to kill me, at the moment I discovered something which should have been destroyed an hour ago, was opened wide. Her lips quivered, and in a really soft voice, a word slipped out.

".....Impossible....."

Chapter 12 [\[edit\]](#)

Later, Asuna told me, "If you couldn't find my sword underneath that pile, I would have thrown Kirito-kun out the window." She said that while laughing.

Actually, at that time, I had not considered the fact that my guess wasn't wrong at all. Instead of having confidence in my powers of reasoning, I had been urged forward during those few seconds by the urgency caused by the time limit. Which was why I walked into Asuna's room without waiting for a reply, forcefully opening her window, and with a strange tension, shouted *YES!*. It was not what I wanted.

The extremely chaotic situation finally returned to order about three minutes after I held out the «Wind Fleuret +4» to Asuna.

The objects that were on the floor were stored in the item field(storage) again, and Asuna returned to wearing her usual leather tunic and skirt as she sat on the edge of her bed. In her hands, a miraculously resurrected green sword was clasped as if it were very important, and the owner's emotions seemed complicated—her emotions were probably swinging between the two extremes of being impressed and being furious, so I stayed silent for a while.

Meanwhile, I was sitting in a chair for guests in a corner of the room, cold sweat flowing once again. Pressing the «All Items Objectify» button which existed deep within the layers of the menu, and the urgency of it, so there was insufficient time for an explanation. But because the time limit was already up, personally searching for the sword wasn't necessary.

In addition to that, handling the soft, snow white, some kind of cloth which was equippable to items by myself was overkill. On the other hand, I've had this thought from a while ago, I involuntarily couldn't remember the amount that had been stockpiled. However, based on my dim recollections, there should have been two weeks worth for everyday use. Well, it was true that the light cloth was negligible in weight, but it wasn't inexpensive. The one on my hand, had a silk like smooth fabric that could have obtained a good price from the fellow at the NPC shop, then that material could be used as a strengthening item with a property of plus one increase —

"I'm considering many things, but-"

At the voice that suddenly came from the other side of the room, I jumped and sat nervously.

"Y-Yes"

"..... Because I feel that if my wrath is currently 99G and my happiness is 100G, I have decided to thank you with 1G's worth"

I decided to confirm with the rapier user who was saying that with luster in her eyes.

"U,Uumm..... Why are you using the unit 'G's.....?"

"Isn't it obvious. Because if my anger has a higher proportion then I will hit you."

"Ah, it isn't go-gold(money), but shock acceleration..... I-I see"

"I'm so glad I got it back. —— Now, please give me a full explanation as to how my sword, which had been smashed to pieces, ended up in my storage..... and why you were rushing."

"O, o-o-of course. But, it's quite long. I haven't grasped the full picture of the mechanism yet either....."

"I don't mind. It is still night after all."

Saying that, the fencer who got back her beloved sword gave off a slight smile.

At the check-in counter on the inn's first floor, I redeemed bottles of Herbal Wine and mysterious assorted nuts, then returned to room no.207, this time knocking and waiting to hear a reply from within before entering.

Pouring out two glasses of wine, while there was still a pirikara feeling around Asuna's eyebrows, for the moment we toasted to the return of the Fleuret. The subtly bittersweet non-alcoholic wine moistened my tongue, then I quickly cut to the chase wisely and opened my mouth

"—— Just a moment ago, Asuna, you asked 『How did my sword, which had been smashed to pieces, end up in my storage』 "

" What about it?"

"About that, this mechanism or should I say trick frankly, the disgusting «Strengthening Fraud»".

Fraud, the word which was very clear in meaning, caused the rapier user's eyes to narrow. But she remained silent to urge me to continue.

"Rather than describing it with my mouth, it would be faster to show it to you."

Saying that, I waved my right hand to draw out my own menu window, and made it visible using the button to the right. Using both hand's index finger to touch the top and bottom of the window, I flipped it around. Adjusting the angle, I made it easier for Asuna, who was sitting opposite me, to see, and indicated a point with my finger.

"Here. The cell for my right hand of my equipment figure, displays «Anneal Blade +6» right?"

She glanced at the grip protruding from my back with her Siberian Hazel colored eyes. Then nodded. My hands reached for my back, and removed it by pulling it out of the sheath that was an attachment to my equipped coat, and placed it on the floor by my feet with a *Gotori* sound. A few seconds later, the string of words in the right hand's cell in my window greyed out.

"This is the «Equipment dropped condition». Sometimes occurs due to Fumbling in the middle of battle, caused by taking a mob's attack with the Disarm attribute."

" Ee. I'm not familiar with that, and I am getting impatient"

"Although you can avoid the next attack if you calmed down, it is quite difficult the first time round. The «Swamp Kobold Trapper» that suddenly appears on the first floor would disarm you first, victims seem to appear there often"

"In Argo-san's strategy guide, you are advised to pick it back up immediately..... I, while fighting it substituting it for a charm, while I had put my rapier down slightly further away beforehand"

"O, Oh I see, you have many weapons similar to your main weapon, and can also use your hand."

For the first time the beginner fencer in front of me averted her eyes..... or, perhaps it was once again caused by my imagination causing me to be admired, but I quickly returned to the original topic.

"Oops, I got a little off-track. Uum..... well then, if this sword is left in the drop status, it would go into the «Leave State» and would soon begin to lose its durability..... Asuna, pick up the sword for a short while"

Frowning at my words, Asuna removed the wind fleuret from the attachment point to her waist, then used her left hand to place it on the floor. Muttering "This is heavy", the rugged one handed sword was held with both hands.

"Is this fine?"

"Yes. Now, look closely"

I poked at my menu window that popped up on the table. The Anneal Blade's name which was displayed dimly just a moment ago in the right cell, became completely blank when Asuna picked it up.

"This is Mid battle «snatched item state». Unlike Disarm, the users of the snatch skill don't show up until the higher floors, this is considerably dangerous and eats Solo players. At that point, if you do not have the weapon skill-based mod «Quick Change», it would be absolutely..... No, it isn't like that. Hmm..."

Having almost gone off topic again, I cleared my throat and tried to return to it.

"When not in battle, you can pass your equipped weapons to your comrades. Although in this case, it would be called «Handover state» instead of snatch, picking up a dropped weapon, or passing it to someone else, will make the equipped figure weapon cell empty. Similar to the time you passed your wind fleuret to the blacksmith a few moments ago, Asuna."

".....!"

Finally, the point of this story could be seen. The hazel colored eyes snapped wide open in an instant, tinged with a sharp light.

"However, isn't it fine, the most important is, in this empty cell, although it looks like there is nothing equipped..... the Anneal Blade's «Equipment Information» is not cleared. The 'right' of the equipment has stronger protection than the normal ownership of items. For example, taking out unequipped item from my storage and passing it over to Asuna, then the ownership will be cleared in three hundred seconds..... five minutes, then goes into the storage of the person who holds it at that time, becoming a part of that player's belongings. However, the duration for an equipped item is much longer. For it to be cleared, it needs to be left alone and untouched for three thousand and six hundred seconds, or at a moment where the next weapon is equipped in that hand."

At that point I closed my mouth, Asuna seemed to give it some consideration as her eyelashes drooped, and said a few unexpected words.

".....Then, the words you said a moment ago, «Quick Change» after your main weapon has been snatched, when you bring out the reserved

weapon, it should be better for it to be in the left hand instead of the right?"

"Heh?"

It was a few seconds before I understood, as it struck me. It was true, using the same hand in which the mob had taken away the weapon, would clear the ownership of the weapon. Once you take it back after immediately killing the mob, but if you were forced to retreat it would be very tragic. Therefore after using this tech, after retreating to the safety zone, was a last resort.

"I, I see..... That is true. However, waving your sword with your non dominant hand is quite difficult."

Although I wanted to say that, I wondered if it was worth practicing my left hand's sword skill..... and considered it deeply——.

"By the way, one more thing. When you suddenly burst into this room, the first thing you did was sneakily look..... I mean, 'Stole a look' at my equipment figure, you guessed it right, that I had not equipped any other weapon. This was because, it was my first sword....."

Facing that gaze directly, I slowly nodded.

"Ah, is that so, and the second condition was, before three thousand and six hundred seconds —— in other words, an hour passed since you put the weapon down. If these two conditions are met, that means it is still there. wherever the equipped weapon is, even if it is on hand I mean at your feet, it is a last resort, no questions asked method to get everything back. And as for when Asuna first asked 'How did the broken shard go into my storage'....."

".....So in truth, my sword didn't break into pieces, but on the other hand it didn't enter my storage at all. This is the case, eh."

Chapter 13 [\[edit\]](#)

For one beat, I sheepishly looked up to see her continuing to look at me.

"Then, the only way to get the sword back is the last method..... «completely all items objectify». Because of the situation where there were only a few seconds before the information about the sword was cleared, I rushed into this room, and it was necessary to forcefully manipulate your window..... Is that what you would say."

"W, Well, That is the case..... I guess?"

I tried my best to tilt my head so that I could look as innocent as possible, but Asuna did not give any indication that she was affected, otherwise she would have made a *fuun* noise with her nose. Fortunately, she seemed to give priority to the situation rather than blame me, as the fencer used both hands to hold the Anneal Blade and faced me, switching her tone before asking.

"Even so..... That fully objectify button, why did it drop the things in that order? Somehow it looks like it is too hard to use..... before that, why is «Complete» necessary? Can't it just select all owned items in hand, without materializing under..... unrelated equipment?"

"The answer, Asuna has already said it yourself. Frankly, it's because «It is too hard to use.»"

"Eh.....? What do you mean?"

While the rapier user gave a good frown, I shrugged with both shoulders.

"Just now, the words «Last resort». Where important items were somehow misplaced, dropped, or the equipment snatched by a monster and you were forced to run away..... because it is caused by your own mistake, the items that had been lost would not be given to you so easily. However, those people in production probably decided that the difficulty was too high to do so. So only one method to recover it is given.....

although that is the case, it is limited so that you can't use it easily, and because of the depth, the level of access is difficult, therefore the flexibility of selecting the most recent item out of all the items does not exist. There is a sad story during the beta test....."

From a small plate on the tabletop, I took a star shaped nut and threw it up high, catching it with my mouth. Even this childish action, in this world affected by dexterity etc with a surrounding brightness, was corrected by the hidden parameter of luck.

"..... In a dungeon on the ninth floor, the first snatch mob appears there. A player who had lost his main weapon, without using the «Quick Change» reluctantly ran away, and after managing to shake them off, regretfully returned to a safe room. The dungeon, seeing what looked like the safe square, used «All Objects Materialize», and while all the objects fell at his feet, obviously including the sword which had been taken, but..... Actually, that dungeon, aside from having snatch mobs, also had #Pick Up#(Looter) mobs! From all sides, tiny gremlins crawled in, and got away with one bag of items on the floor....."

".....Th, That is truly depressing..... — Ah, but, once he goes back to a safe area he should be able to completely objectify again, right.....?"

"But then, Looter Mobs have the «Robbing» Skill so the ownership would immediately move. Fortunately, other players had not reached the area, so after five hours of hunting down every gremlin on that floor, he managed to manually recover all the items..... at that time there were tears in his eyes....."

At the moment I took a breath mixed with nuts, Asuna sighed as she said.

"That comment sounds extremely personal."

Right after that, as a disturbance was introduced into my system, the nuts that should have entered my mouth, dropped into my hair and was buried there. While shaking my head, I replied with a straight face.

".....I heard a rumour of that story, of course. More importantly, about that, umm....."

"Although «All Objects Materialize» is useful, it could be said that it's usefulness is because it is restricted by various factors."

Asuna's face showed how shocked she was, while I picked the star shaped nut off my head with my right hand. What to do now, I thought for a moment as my thin fingers curled, Pin! The nut was sent flying into my slightly open mouth with a nice shot. It was a really terrible accuracy correcting trajectory, I thought as I crunched on it.

"In any case, I now understand the logic behind the sword's return."

Nodding lightly, the glass of herb wine was brought to her lips, and the fencer's eyes continued giving off a strong shine.

"But, isn't this only half? Because I did actually see it. My sword in the hands of the blacksmith-san, broke into shards on top of the anvil. If the sword that returned to me was the wind foil, the sword I had originally equipped myself with..... What was the sword that broke at that time?"

That was an excellent question. I returned a nod, putting together some information and speculation as much as possible, before opening my mouth.

"Honestly speaking, I'm not a hundred percent certain of the logic behind this. However, for this case..... Asuna's Wind Fleuret, some time between the period you passed it to him and it reached the anvil and was destroyed, it must have been switched with an item of the same type. At first I thought, he intentionally breaks down weapons of specific players, but that is not the case. He is, Aincrad's first player blacksmith, and also the first «Strengthening Scammer»....."

Strengthening scam. It was like enchant scam, forging scam, refining scam, et cetera.

What it is called varies depending on the game title, and has been done nonstop since the beginning of MMORPGs, a classic trick technique.

The method was extremely simple. Place a weapon strengthening signboard outside the player's blacksmith shop(Or any other similar jobs), and customers would come with high grade weapons, and then scam them by saying that«The Strengthening of the weapon has failed and caused it to be destroyed». Even though there was no damage to the title or penalties due to failure, a similar equipment with the + number reduced could be returned as the failed item, and there were many variations, in which the unused strengthening materials were stolen.

After all, in the player's monitor, when a player leaves his weapon at the blacksmith they can't see it at all. Since the work was all done on the screen of the other person, there was no way to check whether a scam has occurred.

Of course, if such a scam occurred so often and quickly, the blacksmith would get a bad reputation and no one would go to him, but when facing a very rare weapon in the MMO which is expensive, occasionally scamming could be very profitable. The blacksmith Nezuha, up till now I have not heard any bad rumours about him, and with the frequency of fraud it could have been suppressed. However ——

" ... The question is, in this SAO, it is not a flat panel game, but the world's first VRMMO. Here, even after passing the swords we can still see its existence. Secretly swapping it is not easy..... in fact it should be quite difficult."

After giving off my long explanation, Asuna's eyebrows grew tight as she nodded.

"Yes..... I, even though I handed the sword to him my eyes never left it. The blacksmith-san, with my sword in his left hand, his right hand was used to operate the furnace and hammer. In that situation, it is not possible to open the window to the storage to put the sword in, and swapping it with a fake is impossible."

"Ah, I'm confident of that. In that stall, ready made rapiers like the «Iron rapier» were arranged so that it was easy to take, but because there was no extra «Wind Fleuret», it was impossible to substitute it..... —— But..... "

"But.....?"

"but, in that short amount of time..... there was a certain instance my eyes weren't on the sword. Nezuha, with the strengthening material he received from Asuna put on the furnace, the blue light had started from the furnace..... The longest it would have taken would be three seconds. I was anxious with the material that we had struggled to get in the furnace....."

I said in an uncertain tone, and Asuna's hazel eyes opened lightly.

"A.....! A, at that time I was looking at the furnace..... However, not for the same reason as you, I just thought the blue light was beautiful."

"I-Is that so. ——Anyway, in those few seconds, it was difficult for both our eyes to stay on the sword in the left hand. In other words, I think everyone would be looking at the furnace. The materials were burned, melted, it's property changing colors, those can be called the highlights of strengthening. I suppose, at that moment, a misdirection like those used in magic was used....."

In the three seconds when our eyes were drawn to the furnace, the sword was replaced? Without opening the window?"

Asuna could not believe it and just shook her head, then suddenly stopped moving.

" — But, it's true, that timing was there. that three seconds, perhaps there was some hidden trick. I may not know what it is now, but if I can see that same scene again....."

If you pay attention to the left hand this time, we'll see through the trick — That, is what I think. But, it will be difficult....."

"Why?"

"Around this time, Nezuha should have realized that the Wind Fleuret he secretly took has disappeared. In other words, the scamming player..... In this case, by Asuna using the «All objects materialize» command, it is likely that the existence of the scam has been revealed, is probably what he thinks. He'll probably be alert and not set up shop for the time being, and will absolutely not think of doing any strengthening scams."

".....That's right. He's not the type of person who has too much urge to continue..... I mean, in the first place....."

Here, Asuna's mouth swallowed her words, and I instantly realized the rare case.

In the first place, the scam was not seen by other people.

"Ah..... I too, agree with you."

Muttering, Asuna hid her line of sight while facing me, and smiled faintly. Returning a nod at that face, I continued in a quiet voice.

"I took some time to collect information. I don't know about the switching trick though..... Only Nezuha would know. Anyway, he won't show up tomorrow.

"Yes..... I see. I heard talk at Marome in the afternoon today, tomorrow morning would be the last field boss battle, so in the afternoon they'll probably be in the dungeons."

"Heh, that's fast..... Who is the raid group leader?"

"Kibaou-san and, another one..... Lind-san"

Of those two people Asuna mentioned, The first was a familiar name. However, I twisted my neck, wondering whether I knew the second —

"Lind is..... During the first floor boss fight, the scimitar user in Diabel-san's party."

Those words, came out from Asuna's lips somewhat reservedly.

As soon as I heard that, I could hear something deep within my ear. A scream of "Why, did you leave Diabel-san to die", mingled with tears.

"Is that so..... It's that guy"

"Yes..... That person has begun imitating Diabel-san. Right now, his hair is dyed blue like Diabel-san's, and he also wears silver armor."

I closed my eyes for a moment, in my mind, I envision a blue and green dressed «Knight», and muttered.

"In any case, Kibaou..... That scimitar user serves as a leader, so I don't think I'll join the field boss raid. —How about you, Asuna?"

Upon being asked, the rapier user who was a solo similar to me, the long hazel colored hair swayed from from left to right as she shook her head.

"I've joined during the scouting of the Field boss, and it feels like it is just a very large cow, so it probably doesn't need a lot of people to

control..... — Also, the matter of the last attack bonus is treated in a style of not wanting to listen to others, "Then do not participate" was what they said."

Having seen the situation there, I gave a stealthy bitter smile and nodded.

"I see. Well, as you said, Asuna, the field boss is not a worthy opponent. However, the problem would be the floor boss....."

"Problem..... Is it?"

Asuna's straight question, made me smile bitterly again.

"That is so. After all, logically it would be stronger than the first floor's Kobold King."

"Ah..... I see. That is the case....."

"I don't think it has strong attacks but it will use some special skills. It would be fine if we had time to practice against the mobs that spawn in the dungeon, but....."

Me and beta test players like Diabel if he were alive, would probably have subtly told that theory to the frontline raiders. However he has died, so now the only information during the beta test would be from the well known «Argo's strategy guide». But, there was a problem there as well. As found out in the battle five days ago, the boss battle's patterns had changed slightly from during the beta test.....

"Then, ignoring the matter of the blacksmith-san, we shall train tomorrow."

While I was thinking, I nodded at her words automatically while she was talking.

"Ah, that is right....."

"So meeting at seven in the morning at Urbus's south gate is fine"

"Yes, that is right....."

"Don't stay up late tonight and sleep properly. If you're late this time there is an acceleration of 100g."

"Yeah, that is right.....— Te, eh, huh, what?"

Finally tuning in to the conversation, I looked up. On the other side of the table, the fencer-sama who had got back her beloved sword had used her completely recovered tone and was setting up her alarm clock quickly.

Chapter 14 [\[edit\]](#)

In every field outside in Aincrad, something called a «Field Boss», a named Mob, is strategically placed at the entrance to the dungeon, its key function to block the dungeon from being accessed. The field boss's dens are usually surrounded by cliffs or raging streams on both sides, arranged in such a way that there is no other way to the dungeon as long as the boss is not defeated. In other words, each vast disc shaped floor of the floating castle, is essentially divided into a number of different areas.

This second floor was divided into a vast north area and a narrow south area, which was where the field boss was located. Its name was «Bulbous Bow», probably the portmanteau of a bull(male cow) and a bulbous bow(A bulbous bow on a ship, used to reduce drag), and, as its name indicated, it was a gigantic cow which had moves reminiscent of a battleship's heavy ramming when it lunged forward.

With its four horns close to the ground, its sturdy forelegs pawing the earth, as the four meter tall monster looked down on from far away, I whispered casually.

"That, I wonder if it's black brown skin is supposed to be Kuroge Wagyu beef....."

Then, an curt response from beside me.

"The meat drop, if we get it we can divide it up for eating."

"Mu....."

For a moment, I seriously considered it. Aincrad's animal based monsters, upon their defeat may drop food based items like «XX's meat» or «XX's egg», which are actually edible. About its taste, they were rich in variation compared to the NPC restaurants within the area—— in short, it can be said that while there are tasty ones, there were also some that are not so tasty.

The «Trembling Ox» that walks proudly in the second floor's fields had meat which was so stringy that even though you chewed and continued eternally chewing, unfortunately, it wouldn't be chewed through, but there were the occasional «Cow» which were so-so. In other words, the existence of the boss of the cows on the second floor, Bullbous-kun's meat might not be more delicious, as I did not try it during the beta period, so I considered it ——.

"If that's the case, let's start."

At that voice and a nudge of the elbow, I quickly went back at looking at the field below.

I, the one handed sword user Kirito, who for some reason partied with the rapier user Asuna for two days consecutively, was on top of a small table mountain, which overlooked the Field Boss's den. The shrubs that grew at the edge were good camouflage, we shouldn't be seen from below.

The elliptical shape of the basin which was two hundred meters at its longest and fifty meters at its shortest, and within it was what was a Bullbous Bull that looked like it had been aggroed, and in front of it was a tight formation of raiders gradually closing in. The line up was two parties of six and a reserve party of three, a total of fifteen people.

Even though the raid against the first floor boss, the Kobold king, consisting forty people, seemed a little unreliable, the field boss was basically defeatable with one party so long as it was at the appropriate level, without the need of forming a raiding group. So, a force of fifteen people could be considered more than sufficient —— Furthermore, if they meet the prerequisite levels, they should be able to use the boss's fighting patterns and weaknesses well by working together closely.

"Hn.....?"

While watching the raid, I gave out a small sound, and at the same time Asuna whispered.

"In that party, I wonder which are the tanks and which are the attackers."

"Y, Yes..... Somehow, it looks as though they both have a similar configuration."

The gigantic Kuroge Wagyu Bullbous Bow, with the body the size of a small mountain, was a boss that had a basic simple attack of rush->turn->rush repeatedly. The two raid parties should use the tank members to act as the target against the continuous rushing and block it, while the attacking members to deal damage to it from the side and front.

However, from what I could see, there seemed to be no differences between the six individuals in both parties. Both seemed to have members that wear the same type of heavy armor for protection, and had the similar light equipment for attacking.

I strained my eyes staring from the summit three hundred meters away, eventually noticed something and made a noise.

"Ah....., Those guys, take a look at their cloth equipment under their armor."

"Eh?ah, it's true, the colors match the party."

It was difficult for me to tell from the metal and leather armor, but according to Asuna, the six to the right wore Royal Blue doublets, while the six opposite them, to the left, seemed to wear the same Moss Green.

If it is the method to determine who belongs in which party, then placing a sash of a different colour would be the normal method, and the color of blue and green were so close to each other as well, meeting halfway. In other words, those matching colors were not temporary, but should be thought of as belonging to the original group that claimed it ——.

".....Those guys, their raid forces were not reorganized for this battle."

In a voice that was getting more urgent, Asuna made certain my assumption.

"The right side's blue party is all comprised of Lind-san's..... in other words originally Diabel's comrades. In addition to that, the left's green party is Kibaou's comrades. It is true, those two do not feel like they are close accomplices.

".....Well, if the trusted comrades party was divided, maybe they decided the six of them weren't enough....."

"But if that is the case, the cooperation between the parties would be bad, wouldn't it. The situation with that boss, I can't think of a more important method than a target party and an attacking party method."

"I completely agree with you."

Immediately after I nodded deeply, the twelve people began to gradually move forward, finally stepping into the boss's reaction zone.

Bullmo-o-o-o-o-o-o——!! With that great roar, the craggy mountains three hundred meters trembled and shook. Pure white smoke began spewing out from the Bullbous Bow's nose, and it tossed its four horns around fiercely, then the bull began to recklessly..... no, vigorously rush forward.

The distance between the boss and the raid was only a hundred and fifty meters, so it looked as though there should have been a sufficient delay to react before contact, and the vision from the safe zone should have allowed them plenty of spare time. The players on the battlefield should have seen Bullbous move almost instantly.

While I worried about impatiently during the delay, the leaders of both parties finally gave instructions to their comrades in their party. As expected, I couldn't hear its contents, but both the party's heavy warriors stood out front, and hollered "UOOOO!!" loudly at the same time they lifted up their shields.

That wasn't a basic battlecry, it was a «Howl» based skill. It would increase the amount of the monster's hate toward them, drawing fire from the monsters. —— But.

"O,Oi oi.....Are both of them gonna be the target against it....."

As I muttered involuntarily, Bullbous decided which of the two warriors it was going to thrust its head into for a while, flicking its head left and right, then finally decided on the blue party and charged ahead. The howl using player, and another player bearing a shield beside him, both took up defensive positions.

Two seconds later——.

Zugaaaaan! With a loud noise, the giant cow slammed into the two warriors. If the defense here was not enough they would have been sent flying

and take a lot of damage, but the two managed to withstand it despite being pushed around ten meters backwards, and counter pushed the cow's head. The remaining four members of Lind's party rushed in, using their sword skills to inflict damage on its unarmed flank.

"That was nerve wracking..... —But, how did that happen..... I wonder"

Asuna said in a rigid voice, and I nodded at a slight angle.

"That's..... right. Originally, the boss can be defeated with a single party..... But then....."

Frowning as I moved my line of sight, Kibaou's green warriors did not join in the attack, remaining a distance away. On the contrary, their tanks were out front, ready to use howl again once the cooldown was over.

".....This means, they are not acting as a raid party, but rather they're fighting over the mob. It may be fine now, but I wonder if it will be fine later....."

Saying that with a sigh, I suddenly came to realization.

In the twelve members of the front lines, they were divided into exact halves of Lind's team and Kibaou's team, so which team does the reserve three belong to? Looking away from the battlefield, I gazed at the three players waiting in the rear.

At that moment.

"U.....!?"

I gave off a low voice. Asuna who was beside me looked at me with a questioning look, so I leaned forward, reducing the space between us to answer.

Standing in the middle of the three people, was a well built one handed swordsman. With black bandit armor covering him up, his head was covered by a pointy onion shaped bassinet—— Certainly——.

Chapter 15 [\[edit\]](#)

There was no doubt about it.

Yesterday night, when I followed the blacksmith Nezuha to the bar, this was the leader of the five men, his friends, who were waiting at the bar. Despite his humorous appearance, I couldn't forget those sharp eyes of his when he noticed signs of eavesdropping and ran out of the store looking for me. I looked at the player standing beside the onion head, intending to check them out, but it did not seem that they were comrades of Nezuha who were at the bar.

"Why..... Is that guy.....!?"

Overhearing my quiet mumble, Asuna glanced at me with questioning eyes. At her gaze, I pointed in the direction of the rear of the battlefield.

"Over there, do you know the names of the three people in the reserve team? In particular, the person in the middle wearing the bassinet. "

"Ba, Bassi.....? Isn't that, a net for babies to use?"

"Heh? N, No..... The helmet with the pointed top and the beak-shaped visor is called the bassinet....."

"Fuun.....I wonder if it's a different spelling. Oh, not being able to check a dictionary in this world at times like this is frustrating. I wonder if someone made one."

"Well, It's not like it is impossible to recreate an English to Japanese Dictionary by hand..... If it is something like a simple encyclopedia, that fellow Argo said there was a plan to find volunteers to help with it..... wait, that's not it."

Rerailing after I almost lost the topic, I pointed to the back of the basin again.

"The middle of the reserve group, the one with a little rounded body, have you seen him before?"

"I have."

As Asuna nodded lightly, I stood rigid momentarily. Turning my neck quickly, while looking closely at the rapier user's face closely I asked many questions rapidly.

"W,when did you see this? Where? He, who is he?"

"The time, is yesterday morning. The place, where he is standing right now. While scouting the «Bulbous Bull», he came along. His name..... If I'm not wrong, O....Orlando-san or something, I think."

"Orlando.....? Previously it was a knight, now we have a Paladin-sama....."

While I muttered, Asuna raised her eyebrows; What are you going on about?

The main battlefield was filled with noise as usual, while I watched the state of the three men patiently waiting in the rear, I explained while speaking quickly.

"That Orlando, is the name of a knight who served Emperor Charlemagne of France. He was an invincible hero who held the Sacred Sword Durandal. "

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

Asuna's words were as if they were satisfied with something, so it was my turn to tilt my head. The rapier user's fingers extended, and pointed to the right of the onion headed paladin Orlando, at a small framed two handed sword user.

"During self introduction, that man introduced himself as Beowulf. That is, certainly, a legendary English Hero, right? Then, the spear user on the opposite is Cú Chulainn-san. Here too, is a somehow familiar name....."

"Ah-..... That is also the name of a legendary hero. I think its Celtic."

I added some supplementary information, and Asuna shrugged without any change in her expression, saying the clincher.

"Those people, seem to have determined their guild name before any others. It is called the «Legend Braves»."

".....Is that so.....Un.....Uu———n!!"

I gave a long groan. I couldn't think of any other reaction to give.

Of course, you can freely give an avatar in an MMO all kinds of names..... No, free as long as it does not violate the governing body's established ethics code. Naming themselves after knights and heroes, and a guild name «Legendary heroes», is absolutely not a problem at all. In other words, it would be unusual for those kind of names not to be taken and are left unused.

However, as the avatar integrated into the VRMMO is fully your own, I couldn't help feeling that they were quite courageous.

Even so——. Their naming was a sign of their pride. In these worlds, they would try to live up to the names of the heroes. You could laugh that

it was because of the «Mistakes of youth», but no one could do that now. That was because Orlando, Beowulf and Cu Chulainn these three people, at this time, were standing majestically just behind the front line raiding party in the death game of SAO. If we were to compare their distance to mine, there is a difference of two hundred meters.

" Those people came to join the frontline player's raid meeting in Marome Village yesterday, and said that they wanted to do it together."

Without waiting for me to ask, Asuna muttered.

"Lind-san checked the status, their level and skill proficiency was below the average of most raid groups, but their equipment were strengthened quite well..... Although it was impossible to join the front line immediately, being in the reserve was enough. Since I wasn't participating, I did not ask for those people for their reasons of coming here."

".....I see..... That is how it is....."

While nodding slowly, I looked at the three heroes with a lot of mixed feelings.

I still haven't told Asuna yet, that he is the blacksmith Nezuha's comrade..... In other words, based on the situation I saw at the tavern, Nezuha might be a part of the «Legend Braves». Although «Nezuha» isn't the name of a knight or a hero, that was because he wasn't a combat specialist but a producer class.

Furthermore, I could deduce something else from that.

Neither Asuna nor I recognized that name, in other words this three did not participate in the first floor's boss raid, but the reason they were able to catch up to the front line players..... That is.....——.

"Bulllllomo-o-o-o-o-o-o-U!!"

Suddenly, a very loud roar resounded, and my sights went within the basin. Soon, a second "Oy oy" came out from my mouth.

The reason was, both the blue and green subtly different teams of Lind and Kibaou, had clumped together in the middle of the basin. Somehow, the cow boss Bullbous Bow did not know which party was the target, and the Wagyu beef began charging left and right, colliding with everything in its path. The shield bearing tank's stance was off—— Heavily Armed warriors took a longer time to recover from Tumble—— so they were not yet in a defensive stance.

"It's dangerous.....!"

Asuna whispered sharply,

"Dash to avoid the attack!"

My voice shouldn't have been heard, but Kibaou and Lind finally waved their right hands, the light and middle armored members, eight of them, scattered in various directions.

However, they just did not make it in time——.

The rampaging bull passed through the gap between the shield wielding warriors that had just got up, and targeted the two people up ahead with its four horns. As it's head moved up vertically, the two people were sent flying high upwards.

".....!!"

Asuna and I held our breaths at the same time. When they fell down from the middle of the sky, I was expecting the two avatars to fragment into shards, but—— it seemed fortunate that the pasture below did not give any further damage, and the two people got up after a few bounds.

However, the mental impact was considerable, as they couldn't get to their feet steadily.

Lind quickly waved his hand—— Probably an instruction for them to retreat and use a recovery pot—— At the same time Kibaou looked at the back of the battlefield and brandished the sword in his right hand.

At the time the cow started its dash back towards the depths of the basin, the names of the two were dropped, and the same number from the reserve players moved to the front to replace them.

The bassinet wearing paladin Orlando, and the two handed sword armed Beowulf. They ran a few meters, then hesitantly stopped. But right after that, Asuna and I heard the war cry from the top of the summit where we were hiding in, as they began running forward.

Orlando took a round shield that was hidden up till now from the left side of his waist with his right hand and extended it outward. The black steel one handed sword that he vigorously pulled out, was definitely the same type as the sword strapped to my back—— The semi rare quest reward available only on the first floor, the «Anneal Blade».

Chapter 16 [\[edit\]](#)

Twenty five minutes had passed since the start of the battle against Aincrad's second floor's only field boss, the small mountain-like huge body of the «Bullbous Bow» had scattered.

The scale, level and equipment of the raid, caused the raid to be a bit slow paced, you could say that it was because it was literally a high view worth seeing. That being said, in this world, there was one fundamental principle that didn't exist during the beta test that had to be prioritized. No matter what happened, a single person must absolutely not be allowed to die—— that fact.

Because of this, I wouldn't say that the Guild.....no, at the moment there were only three members in the team «Legend Braves» were admirable. Being a pinch hitter for the front line member due to taking unplanned #danger zone# (Yellow) damage, their movements were somewhat clumsy, but they performed their duties splendidly.

".....That made me nervous..... But, well, I'm thankful. It ended safely."

Asuna who was beside me muttered as well, two steps away from the cliff of the table mountain, sitting on a nearby rock. Lightly crossing her legs, she looked up at me with upturned eyes——

"Then? Kirito-kun, why are you so curious about the hero-san?"

"U,uuuum....."

I let my eyes freely flow to look at the field down below again. Within the depths of the long and narrow basin, fifteen raiding players gathered in one place, giving off shouts of triumph. However, the one who could be seen to be more joyous was the royal blue vested Lind's team, and the Braves that were yet to be given a team color, while there seemed to be a subtle tension among the moss green, Kibaou's team. The reason for this was probably because the pierce that stopped the boss..... in other words, the last attack was taken by Lind's scimitar, with the inherent name «Pale Edge». It was too far away to see the number of times it has been strengthened, but it appeared to be forged quite a lot.

As I looked near Lind, and saw the Paladin Orlando who had raised his sword without any hesitation, I faced Asuna.

At the moment, in the back of the hood's wool cap, light brown eyes were shining brilliantly. Looking at me as though her gaze could penetrate through my avatar and into my consciousness, it seemed that deception would no longer work. I told her meaningfully in a low voice.

".....The blacksmith Nezuha, is a member of the «Raging Braves»."

"Eh.....! That means.....Then....."

I gave a small nod, affirming the question that she had omitted.

"Nezuha who did the strengthening scam, the group's..... In other words, I think he was following the leader Orlando's instructions.Do you know the accurate time when «Nezuha's smith shop» first appeared in the streets of Urbas?"

"Uum..... I think it was on the day when the second floor was opened."

"This means, that it has not even been a week. ——But, Wind Fleuret and Anneal Blade class of.....and strengthened swords furthermore, getting one or two such swords in one day would be extremely profitable. The amount earned compared to hunting normally would be ten..... no, twenty times faster..... Asuna, you said this just now. Orlando's group's stats are low, but he compensated for it with strengthened weapons. Although he does not have the weapon skill proficiency for combat, strengthened....."

"......if you have the money, anything is possible. That's what you're trying to say."

Saying that in a tense voice, Asuna forcefully stood up. Her eyes glaring at the battlefield below, at the bottom of the slope of the rocky mountain we were facing, and immediately stopped.

"W, Wait wait! I understand your feelings, but we don't have solid proof yet"

"Which is why, for now....."

"At the very least, we don't know the trick behind the strengthening scam, so we would be considered to be defaming them. This world doesn't have any GM, so it would be dangerous to go against many people here. It is too late for me so I don't mind, but there's no need for Asuna to be treated like a beater-"

- Bish*.

My mouth was suddenly confronted by an index finger, stopping me in my speech.

"I'm going into a dungeon in a party with you, so it's too late for me to be concerned here too. ——But, I understand what you're trying to say. It's true that if there is no evidence to disclose how it works, we are merely accusing them....."

She retracted her right hand and placed it at her own chin. Eyelashes looking downcast, she continued speaking in a restrained tone.

"I'll try to think of something too. Not only to expose the trick behind the weapon switching, but to hold clear evidence in our hands."

At those words the piercing eyes of the fencer seemed to carry a flame different from the one she had earlier, so I nodded while saying "Y, Yes, that's it".

At the time the successful Bullbous Bow subjugation group of two party +3 people returned to Marome village for supplies and maintenance, Asuna and I descended from the rocky mountain.

After the narrow basin had lost its guardian, we hastily ran through it in a low stance. In actuality, the rights of the first people to walk through the southern field of the second floor should belong to Lind or Kibaou, but we did not have the patience to wait for them to come again. Anyway those two, not only the last attack on the boss, they would definitely have a dispute over who should be the first to enter the southern area.

At the back of the basin was a narrow, winding valley. The cliffs to the left and right were really vertical, and the smooth rock of the mountain made it impossible to climb, since there wasn't a single hold.

Asuna and I took a deep breath when we walked to the end of the valley where there were no mobs, as we stopped at the exit, the first — although to be more precise, it was my second time— our eyes gazed at the sight before us.

The continuous terrain of the two to three story table mountains did not change, but unlike the atmosphere of a relaxed pasture of the northern fields, the ground was covered by a dense jungle. The mountain sides were all covered with Climbing plants as well, and a heavy fog seemed to linger here and there, making visibility very poor.

Despite that, beyond the jungle a towering silhouette was clearly visible. It extended vertically from the next floor, hundreds of meters in the sky, to the bottom, the second floor's dungeon tower. Although it was more slender than the first floor, it should still be about two hundred and fifty meters in diameter. In other words, it was more like a colosseum than a tower.

Like me, Asuna was watching the distant large tower silently, then she suddenly muttered.

".....What is that?"

At her indication, I guessed that she was indicating the two curved protrusions that extended from the frontal upper part of the tower, and gave a short answer.

"The cow's horn."

"C,Cow?"

"If you go nearby, you can see a gigantic relief of a cow. It's the second floor's main theme"

".....I, Earlier, wasn't a large cow already defeated....."

"You're too naive, the real part of the second floor's moo-moo heaven starts here. although, it's unlikely that they will come up with a lot of horses in the future"

Aside from 'cows', I had narrowly avoided giving additional information and coughed a bit to gloss it over, then clapped my hands together.

"Well, lets get going. The last village should be around a kilometer to the southeast, and there is a dungeon before that. The village quest can be received in one of the streets, we should reach the tower by noon. On the front road leading into the forest, there is a shortcut to the left which is quick and safe."

Just before starting to walk, I noticed Asuna's face having a delicate look, and tilted my neck.

".....Is something wrong?"

"No....."

The fencer cleared her throat, her expression remaining serious.

"I'm not trying to be sarcastic or insinuating, so this is my honest thoughts."

".....Y, Yes"

"You, really know a lot of useful things. I feel like I want one in my family."

While I could not determine how to read that comment, Asuna briskly walked in front of me, looking at my face as she said.

"Well, let's get going. I want to enter the tower before Lind-san's group catches up to us."

Chapter 17 [\[edit\]](#)

"No..... Don't come.....! Don't get any closer.....!!"

Both eyes filled with fear, the trembling voice dripped from the pretty girl, as a sturdy silhouette approached.

It could be mistaken for a scene from a suspense or horror movie, from here it was a bit like a previously deployed scenario from Hollywood..... but it deviated considerably.

"Don't come..... I told you didn't !!!"

The girl cried in a voice that was filled with anger, who dashed forward instead of backward. The big framed assailant reacted to that movement by brandishing the hammer in his clumsy hands, but faster than the trajectory of it reaching the highest point, the girl's right hand flashed like lightning.

The thrusting skill which was accompanied by a silent fighting spirit explosively peeled off the assailant's chest. A pure white glow scattered, as the speed of the hammer was somewhat weakened. Although in normal cases one would jump back to avoid the attack, the girl went in closer, and the rapier in her right hand retracted decisively for a final blow. Now the two stroke attack had pierced both the top and bottom of the bulky chest, the half naked body of the assailant shook violently.

"Bu.....Mo-o-o-o-o!!"

As the head with short horns and a metallic nose ring bent backwards, an agony filled scream of death resounded. The bulky body that continued to bend backward stopped in mid air. The smooth muscle changed into hard glass and started cracking, while from the cracks blue light began emitting brightly — and explosively disappeared.

The rapier user, who used the one hit skill «Linear»'s two hit skill combo «Duplex», which had defeated the cow headed human bodied «Lesser Taurus Striker», stood in place to catch her breath for a while — Then looked up, giving a glare as she said.

".....That thing isn't a cow!"

Asuna and I were probably the first of all the players to set foot in Aincrad's second floor dungeon, and two hours had passed since then.

By now, Kibaou's or Lind's groups would probably have found an open chest and are grinding their teeth, since as the evil Black Beater I did not have a mind compromising enough to ignore the boxes that I passed. 80 percent of the location of the POP of the treasure boxes did not change from the Beta period, so I went on to open them freely from one to the next between battles, all the way until we got to the second floor, and finally encountered our first of this tower's main inhabitant, the taurus family — This is the case.

".....W,Well, if we were to ask whether it is a human or a cow, its full body is still eighty percent human, so....."

Having no idea how to respond to Asuna-san's fretful reasoning plainly, I scratched my head.

"But, the minotauros in a net game gives you this feeling, the minotauros type mob is definitely called a «Cow»."

".....Minotauros? As in, from Greek mythology?"

The dangerous glint in her eyes finally softened. It looks like the rapier user had a scent, although weak, of having studied the topic a little. Although I wasn't very familiar with lore and myths, my sister likes those kind of books, so I had read it often as a kid. I nodded. At this time I managed to obtain the knowledge.

"Y, Yeah. The Minotauros in the myth, in a dungeon on Crete island..... is a monster that inhabits in an actual «Labyrinth», or should I say an underground maze, and was exterminated by the hero Theseus, right? The element is in the game probably because of that, the minotaurus is a monster staple even in classic RPGs. Well, in this game I wonder why reading it in English Mino is added to «Tauros», but it is from the «Taurus type» though."

"It is appropriate. After all the Mino in Minotauros comes from King Minos"

"Eh.....Then, wouldn't the abbreviation for Minotauros, «Mino» be inappropriate?"

"Of course it is, it is said that after death, King Minos became a judge of the underworld, calling them Mino would probably offend him."

With this story, it seemed that Asuna's rage had finally subsided. Seeing an opportunity, I fearfully put forth a question.

"Then, Asuna-san, the mino.....I mean Taurus earlier, what didn't you like about it.....?"

The rapier user glanced at me with a sideways glare and answered.

"It's because he, that..... he's wearing practically nothing! He just has some cloth wrapped around his waist, it's like sexual harassment. I really want to send it to the Black Iron Castle for breaking the Harassment code."

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

It's true that the lower Taurus types were dressed a lot lighter, compared to the kobold types and goblin types that appeared on the first floor, the cow headed men were «Nearly naked Macho men». For an Ojousama from a girls school (probably), this type of appearance was certainly not acceptable.

However, when it came down to it, there was one problem. The treasure chest we opened a moment ago, contained the armor «Mighty Strap of Leather». While it gave decent defensive strength on top of a great strength bonus, it is for equipping the upper body and is fixed with «half naked leather belt coiled around various places», excluding undergarments or armor from being worn on top of it. Well, it was fine inside the dungeon, and I was going to change into it in the next safe zone—— But, after seeing Asuna's reaction it would be better not to. But it was also true that this would be a waste of a rare item. I guess it would be better to pass it to her, purely from the point of view of the party's combat ability.

".....Hey, Asuna, the box a moment ago had a strap type armor with magic effects come out, but"

In a moment, the rapier user's eyes flashed with a light three times colder than when she had slaughtered the taurus.

"Come out but what?"

".....Uum..... this, it would suit that guy well. Ah, that's it, how about that person. The first floor boss's raid's tank group leader....."

"Agil-san?Well, there's no need to call that person 'sama'. Yesterday, I met him during the scouting of the «Bullbous Bow»"

While I was secretly relieved that I had narrowly avoided stepping on a landmine, I used my poker face to express surprise.

"H, Heh. But, he didn't take part in the main show just now?"

"That person, in the end, both Lind-san and Kibaou-san didn't mix well with him. Even so, because he said he would take part in the raid against

the floor boss, Kirito-kun can meet him there. Couldn't you give it to him at that time?"

"T, That's right. — then, how do we deal with Mino..... I mean Taurus's «Numbing Impact»?"

"Mino is fine, really. I think I can handle it after seeing it two or three more times"

"I see. Although the boss's «Numbing» is a wide ranged version, the timing should be the same as the small fry Mino. That said, let's get to the next block."

At my words, Asuna nodded without showing signs of tiredness, and started to leave the room we were standing in earlier.

After defeating four more of the taurus types (Because of the mob spawn time, hunting more of them would be difficult), from its drops and the treasure chests in various locations, Asuna's and my item storage was overflowing, fortunately we didn't come across any other front line players in the dungeon.

Opening the Map Tab of the menu, the first and second floor's blank areas had nearly been completely filled. Although we could get a tidy profit if we turned it into a scroll and sold it, as the Black Beater I don't have a merchant's soul. I'll pass this information to the information seller «Argo the Rat» free of charge, closing the tab.

It's natural, Argo is an original tester like me and puts information from it in the «Strategy guide», and tomorrow it would be out in the nearest village, but it feels unreasonable because I have to buy it for 500 coll. However, according to her, the front liners have paid for the middle zone players who get the free reprinted version, so I can't really complain.

Changing the tab, I sent Argo an instant message containing the gist of the map data before closing the window, then stretched out wide while looking at the sky.

Above the dense jungle, it isn't really the sky but actually the bottom of the third floor that covers this floor. However, it seems like the outside circumference covered by a sunset with an orange glow, quite a beautiful sight as it is.

"Today is, the ninth of December.....Friday. It should be winter on the other side."

Asuna who was beside me muttered, I gave it some thought before saying.

"In some net article, I read that Aincrad's floors reproduces the real world's seasons. So, perhaps if we went up higher it would be winter"

".....Stories that are happy and unhappy. Ah, but....."

Because my words were interrupted, I tilted my head and looked over. For some reason Asuna seemed both angry and embarrassed as she pouted her lips, and soon softly said.

"It's nothing, I just had a little thought. If we could reach a floor which has a season setting during Christmas, perhaps it might snow."

".....I see, that is true, we're already in December..... Christmas is..... in fifteen days. I hope this floor will be cleared by then....."

"What's with that, such weak determination. I want to leave in a week's time.....No, five days. I'm sick of the cows."

"They're just cows."

Asuna looked blankly at my face that said I could patiently withstand it, and after a few seconds her cheeks became a bright red, stepped hard on my right foot with force enough to nearly cause damage to me. Facing the back of the rapier user who was walking in the direction of the nearest village, I hurriedly rushed to catch up to her.

The stone paved road through the jungle, took about twenty minutes to reach the nearest village if we avoided battle as much as possible —— we went into the boss raid base «Talan», and I breathed out.

Although I had expected it, the village's main street was already filled with quite a number of players walking around. By mid morning the Mid-Boss «Bullbous Bull» was defeated, so the entire front of the players based in Marome Village would have moved here together. I immediately removed my black leather long coat on the spot, while hiding the upper half of my face with the usual bandanna which Asuna extremely disliked.

That girl, had removed her hooded cape during battle, but now pulled it over her eyes, similar to me. The reason for her to hide her face was almost opposite mine, so it was a little sad.

"Erm.....I, have a promise to meet with that Argo here after this....."

I said in a quiet voice while walking along the side of the road, and Asuna nodded slightly within the back of her hood.

"That's good. I have something to do with her too..... Since there is another request, let's go together"

"H, Heh"

It was fine with me, but for some reason it felt that the reason for Asuna and Argo to be in the same place made me nervous. With my back secretly trembling, I nodded, in that case we should meet together at the tavern ——

Just when I was about to say that.

I could hear, a certain faint sound passing by. Although I was going to pay no attention to it, I caught it in a hurry.

It was a regularly continuous metallic sound. It wasn't the sound of a light musical instrument, the tool involved in making this tenacious sound is ——

"—————!!"

Asuna and I looked at each other at the same time, then turned toward the source of the sound at the same time..... facing the eastern square in the village of Talan.

Chapter 18 [\[edit\]](#)

I endured the urge to throttle forward with a dash, but even then we walked quite briskly and arrived at the square shortly, and I stood for a moment as I saw the sight that I had expected.

A two tatami sized carpet overlaid with neatly arranged steel weapons, and a simple wooden signboard. A portable forge and anvil. Sitting on a folding chair, the profile of a small framed male player was swinging his hammer intently, it was definitely the blacksmith Nezuha. A member of

Team «Raging Braves», Aincrad's first «Strengthening Scammer».

".....How bold of him. Yesterday, we had just spotted his scam, but he has still opened his shop on the front lines like normal."

As soon as we moved to hide in the shadows of a pillar at the edge of the square, Asuna whispered angrily. I tried to nod in reply, but midway doubtfully changed the angle of my movement.

"No..... Isn't coming to Taran Village the result of him being wary? If he continued on the other side, we would wonder why he didn't come together with us here. He is probably avoiding the possibility of the scam being found out in Urbas, while temporarily doing business here."

"Even so, it does not change the fact that he's shameless. After all, he set up shop after moving to this city..... that would mean he intends to continue, right? The switching of weapons."

As the last of her words came out of her mouth quietly, Asuna bit her lips lightly.

Her face was obviously filled with anger, but there seemed to be another emotion mixed in there as well. My facial expression reading skills' skill level was equivalent to zero, so there was no way for me to find out what the girl was thinking. However, for some reason, I saw a colour similar to grief from the faint shine from the eyes from within the hood, which took my breath away.

My vision went back to face where Nezuha was, twenty meters away, and said.

"Let's..... Do it. Although we will have to choose our opponent....."

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

"The purpose of Nezuha being a part of the «Raging Braves», is to join the frontline players in one swoop, so he shouldn't be targeting people from the front lines for scamming. The team's trustworthiness would drop, it's like getting their priorities backwards."

The stuff that came out from my mouth, was a possibility that was in my brain that I murmured.

——Orlando's group, Nezuha's friends are a different story altogether.

This was because even though they were close comrades the system did not yet allow the creation of guilds, so the color cursor of the shared emblem could not be displayed. There is no evidence that Orlando and Beowulf are comrades of Nezuha's, the enemy could be frontline players who do not care about the weapon scamming, and by the time the trust has been completely tarnished it was possible that the team would cast him away.

".....No, That's impossible....."

At my gloomy conjuncture, I sighed and denied it.

The atmosphere of the six people at the bar of the I had followed Nezuha to yesterday, was unbelievably close for a net game's population. I felt that it was possible that they were close friends even in the real world.

Which was why it was impossible..... no, such a thing wouldn't happen. Feeling my cheeks was being looked at, I turned to look, and saw Asuna in the thick hood watching me with a stare. She might have overheard my previous muttering, and wanted to know more without removing eye contact.

".....Then, you don't consider me in their midst, as a front line raiding player. Because my sword was almost deceptively taken from me"

At those words, I realised that they were a response to my words two lines ago, and quickly shook my head.

"N,Not that, When I said front line players earlier, I was referring to those people in blue and green. I can't claim to know information I do not see with my own eyes..... Which is why even if it was me, Nezuha's team wouldn't recognize as a member of the front line raid. Well, I guess it's a reality of being a solo....."

"What do you mean, you participated in taking down the Floor boss, right?"

Under her glare, I nodded in reflex — but, I said in an inevitably ambiguous tone

"W,Well, There's that..... But Lind or Kibaou will probably say "There is no need". Frankly speaking, there's a very high possibility....."

In a moment, Asuna's eyebrows raised to a dangerous angle, but fortunately it returned to the normal line. With a somewhat discontent filled calm voice,

"Anyway, besides Lind-san, Kibaou should understand. In a boss raid, your strength and knowledge is absolutely necessary"

"Eh, you think so?"

"Those people specifically sent me a message after we defeated the kobold king after all. "Thanks for your help today"."

As she unexpectedly managed to repeat the words in the Kansai dialect with her mouth, I endured it too.

"But, the words should be this. "You should care only about yourself. My way is mine....."

"The aim is to clear'. If that is his final aim, isn't the floor boss battle a boring dragged out one due to pride?"

".....If that is so, isn't it fine?"

In my mind, the image of the noisy «Bullbous Bull» raid that I had seen this afternoon came up, and I nodded.

I had talked with the scimitar user who lead the green team Lind-san once, during the Kobold King raid — although I could consider it was a one way condemnation, even so, I imagine his aim to be quite clear. To raise himself and the players who are comrades of the knight Diavel, to become the strongest raid group. Even though they failed to get the LA bonus on the middle boss, their will remains strong. Surely on the third floor he will immediately challenge the quest to be a guild leader, making a guild wearing the Diabel-like image of silver and green.

It would be rather complicated, a topic he would have discussed with Kibaou since the first floor.

There was no doubt that there exists a hatred for original beta testers in him. Therefore, he was hostile towards me as an original tester from the beginning, as he believed that Diabel who lead the raid group was a non-tester. If that was the case, I think I would have joined his group during the first floor raid.

However, even if Diabel was still alive, that dream could never be fulfilled. This was because, Diabel was also an original tester. On the other hand, Kibaou probably noticed Diabel's actions such as his forceful attempt to get the first floor boss's LA. Furthermore, even though I say it myself, during the turn-around of the battle that nearly wiped us out, he knew about Kirito's «Dirty Information», my status as an original tester.

Which was why Kibaou, with his own belief of «Don't rely on original testers», did not join Diabel's old group — which was now Lind's group, and instead started his own. And thus, the moss green vested party. They must have worked hard, as in the battle seen earlier, there was not much difference in strength compared to Lind's group. However, while that was true, those two groups were in conflict.

The top two groups, no, perhaps they should be called guilds, two large guilds opposing and competing against each other would cause all the raid players' battle strength to rise quickly, but at the same time it would prevent cooperation when a raid group is formed. This development can be both both good luck and bad luck. Then there is a third group, «Raging Braves»lead by the Paladin Orlando, what role will they play on

the front lines.....

"Ah, speaking of which....."

Suddenly curious, I asked Asuna who was looking at the blacksmith's stall.

"Of Lind and Kibaou's party, do they have any names yet?"

"Umm.....I don't know about Lind-san's. But I've heard about Kibaou-san's."

Giving off a very small smile, the rapier user told the name.

"It's pretty good. It's «Aincrad Liberation Front»."

"He, Heeh....."

"Somehow, it seems like he has a great plan."

"I-Is that so?"

"He aggressively recruited members while on the base of the first floor «Town of Beginnings», from the few thousand players who stayed behind. Supplying them with Armor and Weapons, and also training them in group combat, to increase the number of players on the front lines....."

"..... I see. 'My way is mine' huh....."

I nodded, and continued thinking once more.

It was true that his «way» did exist. The number of front liners continuously increasing would theoretically increase the pace of a raid. However, at the same time a large dilemma could appear. If the number of people increased, the probability of the increased death toll would definitely increase as well.....

"Still, That's not all there is to it."

Asuna suddenly said that, causing me to blink.

"Eh? What is?"

"It's the name. Whether it is «Foremost Raid Players» or «Front Line Group» or «Raiding Team», they can call themselves whatever they like. the name should be conveyed appropriately too. Some of the people from Lind's Group are calling themselves «Top Players»."

"A-Ah..... that's true. That Argo's «Front Liner» or whatever she calls it.....oh crap"

I quickly opened the window, to check the time. I'm supposed to meet the informant, Argo the rat in less than two and a half minutes.

"Eh, Umm Even Asuna, you're going, right?"

".....I'm going. What about it?"

She asked in return calmly, compelling me to nod.

I gave a final look at the small built blacksmith continuously swinging his smith hammer, and said.

"Make the meeting with Argo as short as possible, I want to observe Nezuha a little more. I think I've understood the trick used for the scam."

References and Translation Notes [\[edit\]](#)

1. ↑ Kirito's English, probably *no manners*
2. ↑ Another skill that seems to expose Hiding skill users

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