

Sword Art Online 16.6

1

Putting the index and middle fingers on my right hand together, I lightly extended them out. Some fold in the other three fingers, but I'm one of those who would leave them slack and opened.

Next, I moved the tips of the two extended digits slightly below my line of sight, then swung them down, parallel to the axis of my body. Putting a moderate amount of force into the speed of the fingers is fine for this, but the line drawn was rather strict.

I could let them fall straight down with the virtual gravity if I was standing, but it was rather difficult to feel the axis of my body when lying down on my side. Hence the usual recommendation to first stand up before pulling the window out, rather than trying to force it out while lying down.

However, I was now lying straight on a firm wooden surface, so my right arm succeeded in executing the gesture command, despite its awkward movement caused by my tension, and a translucent rectangle appeared under my raised right hand.

Called by its name, the "Main Menu Window" was the one and only interface between me, a player of the VRMMO game, «Sword Art Online», and the incorporeal game system. [Kirito], my name, was displayed at the top of the window along with my numerical level and two bars for my HP and EXP. On the left were tabs such as [EQUIPMENT], [STORAGE], [STATUS], and [SKILL] lined up vertically while on the right, the main region, first showed a human silhouette that was named the «Equipment Figure». And at the bottom were shortcut icons for activating each and every skill.

Taking my middle finger away, I touched the [OFFER] tab near the middle of the menu with my index finger. The main region switched to a mode where the various forms of requests could be chosen from. From the top were trade requests, party requests, friend requests... and the button I was looking for at the bottom-most area.

[MARRIAGE]. This must be the button least pressed in this death game, SAO, where scams and double-crossing ran rampant. Two years and seventeen days had passed since the game began, but I could hardly recall meeting any married players.

However, my finger touched that button without any hesitation. Unlike trades and duels, proposals could only be sent to someone mutually registered as a friend. Without the need to switch to the offer cursor, the available targets were shown directly within the window. Right now, there was only a single player within a ten meter range... no, even if that was widened to a kilometer, there would only be a single name shown there.

I put my index finger on those five alphabets, that arrangement that I now thought of as beautiful; as sacred. I traced the letters with my gaze, an initial “A” followed by “s”, “u”, “n”, and “a”, then softly touched it with my finger.

There wouldn't be any additional “YES/NO” dialogs coming out on my side at this point. The only one with the privilege to choose was the one who got proposed to. Raising my face, I stared hard at the girl standing two meters in front of me.

Aincrad, twenty-second floor, near the outskirts. The afterglow from over the log house's roof in the back shone on the girl's—Asuna's long hair and her white-themed bodice, illuminated in gold. With its radiance so dazzling, I could barely see the girl's expression.

A small window was shown in landscape orientation in front of Asuna. The message displayed there was probably something blunt, on the lines of “Kirito had sent a marriage proposal”, “YES/NO”.

To be honest, we had already gone through a verbal proposal last night. And Asuna had already replied with a “Yes”. But still, I could feel my heart rate accelerating without brakes.

Most of the sensations avatars receive in SAO were artificial signals generated by the Nerve Gear, but the common opinion was that internal senses like the heart rate and breathing were probably real. In other words, that meant my physical body lying down on a bed in some hospital in the real world, too, had the heart energetically pulsing away. I wondered if Asuna was the same, but I wouldn't know just from her outward appearance.

The few seconds that felt like an eternity passed and finally, Asuna's right hand moved. Light shone off the silver studs attached to the white leather long glove moving up towards the window. The extended index finger paused above one of the two buttons.

That finger stayed still for a short while, like what I had gone through, as Asuna raised her face.

Her hazel eyes peered straight into mine. My heart pounded.

“.....Kirito-kun.”

I wonder if I had truly heard that whisper, or if my brain had simply dreamed it up from how Asuna's lips moved. Time froze once more and that slender index finger slowly touched down on that window in this sunset world enveloped in complete silence.

A new message window floated up atop the main window I had left open earlier. But I had no need to read words written down there. Asuna's smile and those gem-like tears in her eyes told me her answer.

We both took a step forward. The windows vanished on their own. The gap of two meters turned to zero with another step.

It didn't matter who was first; we reached our arms out and drew each other in. The closeness in our heights made our hearts overlap. We were dragged into a certain quest that involved combat several tens of minutes ago and thus, a small chest protector covered my chest as a silver breastplate covered Asuna's. But I could vividly feel her heart beat where our avatars were connected.

Our hearts, pounding like alarms, soon synchronized as they slowed down to a gentle tempo. The perpetual beating, once each second, brought a mysterious calm to my heart. The nervousness that froze my breathing when I proposed yesterday was gone.

And thus, as of 24th October 2024, 5:19 PM, I—a swordsman, Kirito, was connected to this girl—a fencer, Asuna, through a bond called marriage, both in the system, and emotionally.

2

“Hey... you sure you don't want it? Something like... a marriage ceremony.”

Asuna held her tea cup in both hands as she inclined her head with a “hmm”.

The many lamps we have bought scattered bright light into the log house's living room where the afterglow from the window had almost faded. However, we had only started customizing these three rooms; with nothing much more than a dining room set and a sofa set for this room; a set of cooking utensils for the kitchen; and a bed for the bedroom. However, the wooden floor and walls were warm and a real (as real as it got in this world) flame flickered in the built-in Russian stove as it crackled.

Asuna who seemed lost in her thoughts on the other side of the round table looked up at me and gently nodded.

“Well, about that, I do wish for a marriage ceremony a little. And Ashley said she would make a dress for me too... I am actually a girl, after all, no matter how it seems like.”

“Y-Yeah, actually, I knew that from the start.”

The amazing swordswoman who held the nickname, «The Flash», giggled at my response, then drew her herb tea, steam faintly hovering above it, close to her lips. Her expression stiffened as she returned the cup to the saucer atop the table.

“...But you see, even so, we did retire from the guild due to personal reasons... the Knights of the Blood and Divine Dragon Alliance, as well as Agil, Klein, and the rest of the clearing group are all working hard to break through the seventy-fifth floor now, aren't they? So... I figured it wouldn't be very respectful towards them.”

“.....I see.”

I nodded as well while reaching my hand out towards my tea cup. Even if we had a marriage ceremony, Agil, Klein, Lisbeth, Silica, and some others would probably happily attend—I couldn't claim to be certain that Argo the information dealer wouldn't abandon her work for this—but the most important factor was Asuna's feelings. I will give my all for what Asuna truly wants from this day onwards. She had always been supporting, encouraging, and guiding me this entire time, regardless of whether she was at my side or not.

Looking at me as I silently reflected on that resolution in the depths of my heart, Asuna smiled once again and spoke unwaveringly.

“I'm already happy enough being able to stay with you alone in this lovely house, Kirito-kun. ...I don't know how long this will last... but this is the happiest moment I had in these two years I've lived in Aincrad.”

“.....Yeah. The same goes for me.”

Saying that out in a murmur took everything from me. After all, I felt it in Asuna's words. That living on the twenty-second floor like this would be our one and only short respite in the sun. That we would have to return to the frontlines one day and throw ourselves back into days of battles.

I took in a deep breath and shook off the irritation drawing close, and then spoke.

“Then, erm. Let's have a marriage ceremony when the hundredth floor's cleared and the fighting's all over. We'll call Klein and the rest, along with a whole lot of the others, when the time comes. Like Caynz and his group, the members of DDA and KoB... I wonder if Heathcliff will come if we ask...”

Asuna's eyes opened wide at that, but a smile came back to her face and she nodded.

“Hmm, I wonder. Let's ask the leader for a speech.”

“Aah... I bet he'll make it all boring and solemn...”

Our laughter overlapped.

Of course—I, the one who suggested it, knew that the «marriage ceremony after clearing the hundredth floor» wouldn't happen and the same went for Asuna too, I'm sure. If the death game

known as SAO were to be cleared, the players would all be logged out and never be allowed into Aincrad ever again in all likelihood.

The clearing group, including Asuna and me, had fought all the way here for two years in order to release all of the players. There were also many who lost their lives in the midst of battle and vanished into polygon fragments. That was why I couldn't possibly voice out this faint emotion bubbling up from the depths of my heart.

Instead, I stood up from the dining chair made from plain wood and then took two steps around the table. Asuna stood up with the same timing and moved before me.

I hugged Asuna tight as though to drive back the anxiety and unease. It wasn't an embrace filled with tranquility like the one from when I proposed; I put strength into my two arms in my urge to feel all of Asuna's existence. Both Asuna and I had removed our metallic armor, so the sensation of her slender yet clearly tangible body was transmitted to me.

"Asuna..."

I called out in a hoarse voice as I buried my face into her lustrously soft and fragrant hair. With my senses all focused on this being so dear to me I felt like I was going mad, I suddenly became aware of what seemed like an unusual numbness deep in my body.

Unusual, but this wasn't the first time I felt it. Yesterday, I had found out about a base desire included in the avatars of this world aside from hunger and drowsiness since getting imprisoned in SAO, in Asuna's room on the sixty-first floor's main city, Selmburg. A single checkbox that appeared after earnestly following small buttons and links in explanation notes so deep in the depths of the main menu window's [SETTING] tab that I had to question who would actually find it. Checking that would allow players' virtual bodies to gain... or perhaps, recover, a certain function.

Just who was the one among the SAO development team who prepared an option like this? I did think that it might not be Kayaba Akihiko, the one who plotted this death game. I recall that in a magazine article I had read in the real world shortly before getting imprisoned in the game, several members of the development team had hinted at displeasure towards the ethics code of the game self-regulatory organization. They had committed the function into a version still in development as a joke and that was obviously deleted before the release edition, but it then made a return when it became a death game for one reason or another... or so I would like to imagine.

I had left the «Ethics Code removal setting» checked since last night. In other words, if my feelings intensify along a certain direction, a certain change would occur upon my avatar—

I tried to separate our bodies in a fluster, but Asuna's two arms, wrapped around my back, wouldn't permit that. She must have realized my response, as her slim body shook with a shudder.

“S-Sorry...”

Asuna apologized softly, but clung on to the embrace and raised her face before she whispered at point-blank range with her cheeks blushed pink.

“...I *am* your wife now, Kirito-kun.”

“Y-Yeah...”

“...Let’s go to the other room.”

The kitchen? Abandoning the thought of verbalizing that joke, I silently nodded, then turned my feet towards the door that continued to the room that wasn’t the kitchen.

Upon entering the dim bedroom from the bright living room, we turned to each other without switching the lamp on. The west window where the purple afterglow shone in from was the only source of light, but I could distinctly see Asuna’s form as a result of my mastered Detection skill. Her metal armor, as well as her gloves and boots were removed, but the familiar knight uniform in the colors of the Knights of the Blood stayed on as always. Her gallant figure as a swordswoman heightened my desires all the more.

Whether she realized that or not, Asuna clasped her lowered hands in front of herself and spoke in an embarrassed tone.

“At times like this... should the guy be, erm... the one to take the girl’s clothes off?”

“Erm... w-well, I wonder...”

There was no way an online game addict in his second year of middle school when this became a death game could give an immediate answer to such a question. But I would have to do my best if I had to. First taking in a deep breath, I took a step towards Asuna and my right hand—

“.....Wait, that’s impossible, isn’t...”

To my knowledge, there weren’t any methods for a player to remove another’s equipment, even if it was a mere ring. I could reduce its durability and destroy it, if I had to state all possibilities, but that was obviously not happening here and now. Asuna looked up at my frozen expression with upturned eyes, blushed with a giggle, and spoke.

“Sorry, that was a joke.”

—And she sets the pace from the start yet again.

That sense of impending danger, too, disappeared in the instant Asuna opened a window and pressed down on the «Remove All Clothes» button in her equipment figure. The knight uniform and socks disintegrated into light particles and nothing more than modest, white undergarments lined with lace covered her avatar.

When I became absorbed in simply gazing at the texture of her moist skin and those graceful curves that practically rejected the notion of being mere polygons, Asuna's arms and legs squirmed as she slightly pouted.

"It'll end up just like yesterday at this rate."

"Hah... fweh...?"

I blinked, and finally remembered. Last night, I had turned towards Asuna, undressed as she was now, and made an unbelievable slip of the tongue, resulting in the fear of an in-the-area attack carved into me. It would be preposterous to repeat that same mistake. I, too, pulled out the window and removed my clothes, throwing caution to the wind. My familiar shirt and trousers vanished into my storage, but I felt no coldness on my skin, perhaps thanks to the stove still burning in the adjoining room.

Looking at me wearing nothing more than a single piece of black-colored equipment, Asuna continued her pursuit despite her blush turning even rosier.

"Well... let's press the next button on a 'ready, go'?"

I couldn't handle any more than stiff nods.

Matching Asuna who putting her right hand upon the window, I, too, braced my finger above the «Remove All Undergarments» button.

The great vice-leader of the strongest guild, Knights of the Blood, (retired for the moment) put on a solemn face for some reason and drew in her breath—

"Ready, go!"

And she let out a dignified yet lovely yell.

Our opposing fingers moved centimeter after centimeter and three articles of clothing vanished from the room in the next second.

Once again, I was mutely enthralled by Asuna's standing posture with all of her equipment taken away. I believe the word, *avatar*, originated from the Sanskrit word, «*avatara*», with its original meaning of «a manifestation of a deity». A fact that crossed my mind with just how beautiful, how unapproachable the existence before my eyes was.

But the longer that continued, the more my lust surged and heightened from the depths of my body. I could just barely hold myself back, but my breaths were shallow, my heart rate quickening without release. The saturation in my sight started fading to white as—

“...Go on, you can do what you want... I’m all yours now, Kirito-kun.”

With that line from Asuna while she tactfully covered up a part of her body with her arm, my sense of reason vanished into a gap to some other dimension just like my underwear did.

Though we had bought it in quite a hurry, the bed was wide enough, soft enough, and elastic enough, faithfully serving its purpose.

3

“Your heart’s... beating.”

Lying down on her face atop me, Asuna had her left ear on my chest as she said that with a murmur.

Nightfall occupied the entire world outside the window and the pallid moonlight sneaked in slantingly in the place of the afterlight. The fingers on my right hand toyed around with Asuna’s hair, clad in beads of sapphire light, as I muttered.

“Avatars’ hearts beat with the same timing as their real bodies’... or so I’ve heard somewhere else.”

“I see... then, this is, really the sound that your heart’s making, huh, Kirito-kun...”

A thought came to mind, and I voiced it out to Asuna, smiling as her eyelids fell.

“Let me listen to yours too, Asuna.”

An unexpected response returned after she glanced at me with upturned eyes.

“...You pervert.”

“Wh... th-that’s, after all that we’ve...”

“Well, the way you said it sounded perverted. ...But alright. After I’m done, though.”

And with that whisper, Asuna pressed her left ear even deeper against my chest.

(End)