

Sword Art Online 16.7

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Asuna sighed with her left ear atop my chest.

“This throbbing... This is the real sound made by Kirito’s heart, isn’t it?”

“Er.....”

I replied after a little thought.

“No, I wonder about that... It might be at the same frequency as the real body, but the sound itself is an SE reproduced by the system, right...?”

Asuna brought up a mildly upset face and pouted.

“Isn’t it the same if it has the same frequency? If you were to bring that up, then the voice you hear when you call someone over a mobile phone in the real world isn’t real, but a reproduction from the phone, right?”

“...That’s true.”

I nodded and a smile easily returned to my new wife who then placed her ear back on my chest, her mood recovered. With my eyelids shut, my thoughts, too, dimmed gradually as I listened to her gentle murmurs of my heart beating.

Now that I think about it, I had never heard anyone’s heartbeat in the real world.

Of course, I had heard them numerous times as sound effects in television dramas or movies, but in the first place, was it even possible to hear someone else’s heartbeat without a stethoscope? Could those beating sounds actually be heard if one placed one’s ear against a chest like Asuna was doing right now?

Above all, exactly what sound was a heartbeat? The sound of the muscles contracting? The sound of the valves opening and closing? The sound of blood flowing...?

...While considering countless questions of that sort, I developed the urge to listen to that sound too—even as a reproduced sound effect—and stuck my two hands under Asuna’s arms.

“Kyaa, what?”

And I lifted the grand, flustered swordswoman’s slender figure with a grunt. The sheets against Asuna’s body slipped off and her bare skin, in its Remove All Equipment state, glittered beautifully

under the moonlight; but to accomplish my initial objective, I pressed my face between her breasts.

“Noo, wait... e-erm...”

I wrapped my two arms tightly against her struggling body.

“I asked to listen to your heartbeat earlier, right, Asuna? It’s my turn!”

Or so I declared—

“Then you should do that on your side instead of straight on!”

And with that, Asuna’s two hands firmly caught my head and spun it ninety degrees to the right with a creak.

The day had changed, it was the twenty-fifth of October, 2024, fifteen minutes after midnight.

A quick seven hours had passed since Asuna and I married. The murky night hung down on the log house we bought on the outskirts of Aincrad’s twenty-second floor and the only sounds audible were gentle ones from insects and melancholic wails from far-away wolves (they were from non-active monsters, the «Maroon Wolf», to be specific).

The streets remained boisterous even in the middle of the night at Algade, where I lived until not long ago, so utter silence might actually be unsettling instead—I considered that before buying the house, but it seemed my worries were unfounded. Rather, lying on this bed here filled me with a sense of ease, rare in this world. Though that might just be thanks to having someone willing to share in the same warmth as myself.

With such thoughts running through my mind, I focused on my right ear, in contact with Asuna’s cool, smooth, bare skin, and the faint sounds coming from beyond it.

Thump, thump, thump.

The sound was neither low, nor high; neither deep, nor shrill.

Living in Aincrad, our bodies were naturally avatars, so warmth, touch, taste, and such were all false sensations created by the Nerve Gears. However, there were a mere two actual sensations fed back from our real bodies lying in hospitals somewhere in the real world. Our breaths and our heartbeats.

Like Asuna mentioned earlier, Asuna’s heartbeat that I felt now was at the same pace as her real heartbeat. It was a little fast... perhaps about eighty beats a minute?

“...Are you feeling a little nervous?”

I asked softly and Asuna replied with a slightly embarrassed voice with my head hugged in her breasts.

“O-Of course I’m nervous at least. This is... my first time.”

“Eh...? First... but yesterday... no, the day before that, at your room in Selmburg, we...”

Creak.

And my neck was spun a hundred and eighty degrees to the left this time.

“T-Th-That’s not what I was talking about! I was obviously saying that it’s the first time I let anyone listen to my heartbeat!”

Asuna’s heart rate rose to 100 BPM as she shouted out in a near falsetto voice, so I quickly nodded in panic. It seemed that action of mine had caused an unexpected tremor to a certain part of her body.

“Hyan.”

The great fencer froze after letting out that peculiar voice.

Could a young man who had just become sixteen years old remain coolheaded to such a response when in a full contact state during a Remove All Equipment state? The answer was naturally, a “no”.

I silently turned my head back ninety degrees, then put strength into my two arms that wrapped around Asuna’s body.

I couldn’t hear the sound of her heart any longer, but its beat was certainly conveyed to me. Placing my lips onto the skin right above it, I gently traced over it with my tongue.

“Aah... no, wait, come on, I said...”

Asuna softly denied me, but I definitely heard her declaring “you can do what you want” a few hours ago.

Hence, I continued doing what I wanted.

When I lived in the rented room, or rather, sleeping place in Algade, I managed to wake up each day somehow with the power of the alarm configurable from the time display window.

It wasn't like I was particularly bad with mornings—I did make it barely on time for school before the first bell at eight-fifteen, pre-SAO—but before I knew it, I had reverted to my classical nocturnal style since I came here. The reason, of course, was my hard work levelling up in the middle of the night when the hunting spots were empty.

My daily schedule was as follows for the last few months.

First, I wake at ten in the morning. I spend the morning settling the maintenance for my equipment, replenishing consumable items, and gathering information, then have a simple brunch and finally head out to the fields.

The main battlefield in the day is the front lines of that floor. I explore the uncharted areas in the fields and gather information if the labyrinth tower hasn't been reached yet, and devote my time to mapping it out otherwise. I can't quite claim this time period is very effective. The enemies are strong and the drops are of good quality, but I still have to keep safety as a priority with those being unknown areas.

I keep at it until six or so in the evening before returning to the main city of that floor. I walked back—naturally, without using those costly teleport crystals for these usual trips—while considering what to do for the day's greatest pleasure, dinner; the fulfilling fatigue then is a pretty nice thing.

After solo-ing a heart dinner in the area, I immediately head for an inn for a nap. Doing that in the real world would be a straight conversion from an AGI build to a VIT build (VIT doesn't exist in SAO, though), but luckily, even devouring french fries for an entire day in this world would cause no change to one's avatar's build... probably.

Upon waking up after an hour and a half's nap, I begin my night life where I actually get «serious». There are times when I return to the labyrinth if the clearing seemed to have slowed down, but basically, I fight to strengthen myself here. I clear quests if I took up any or otherwise, stick to some spot for hunting. The latter's tough as expected, with me hunting straight from ten at night, through midnight, to four in the morning at a training spot that «has strong enemies, though not at the level of the front lines, which made it relatively dangerous», before getting close to collapsing at the end.

Using the bit of concentration barely remaining in my reserve tank, I return to the main city and head to Algade from the teleport gate this time. Upon retiring to my sleeping place, I shut away the refreshing rays of dawn pouring in from the window with the curtains and sleep like a log from five to ten in the morning.

Putting it all together, each day would be divided into six and a half hours of sleep, twelve hours of training and working for the conquest, and five hours for transport, meals, and breaks.

There certainly were those tenacious people in the existing MMOs I had played in the real world who could confidently play for twenty hours a day. I, too, had strived for such unreasonable levelling up right after I was trapped in this death game or after the first guild I belonged to was wiped out.

But I felt this while I fought back then. If I maintained that rate of training that shaved away at my mind, I would eventually draw the ace of spades.

But who cares—or so I did think, especially when my guild was wiped out. But there were those who reached out their hands and talked to me even in the state I was in.

It was thanks to them that I began my fight to live once again and that led me to finding a pace that suited me... and.....

I woke up to electronic noises from an alarm that practically stabbed into my mind—no, that sounded like a gentle and light simmer.

I looked at the time display window at the bottom-right of my sight with drowsy eyes. The digital numerals were 08:12, nearly two hours before the alarm would ring. I drew the blanket over my head, extending another invitation to the sandman, and this time, some sort of delightful scent invaded my nostrils.

Fragrant, rich, and abundant in sweetness; this was the smell of...

“Cream soup!”

I got up with a shout and the excess momentum propelled me off the bed as someone looked down at me with a dumbfounded expression from the living and dining room beyond the door: naturally, that was Asuna-san, «The Flash», no, «The Young Wife».

“...Good morning, Kirito-kun. That’s an unusual greeting for the morning.”

With my feet on the bed and back leaning against the floor, I voiced out a greeting more suitable for the morning of my new marriage’s second day.

“G-Good morning, Asuna. Erm, that was, I was having a dream... about all the cream soup I could drink and...”

Asuna’s bewilderment grew a degree deeper as she spoke.

“That’s no dream. There isn’t quite enough for that, though.”

“...What did you say.”

I muttered as my nose twitched and sure enough, the fragrant scent had yet to disappear. In other words, that simmering that cut short my sleep was probably no other than the sound of the lid atop a pot on boil?

Despite it being an hour and fifteen minutes earlier than usual—though I did sleep at two last night—I felt completely awake and made full use of my AGI to backflip onto my feet and charge into the dining room.

Now that I had gotten a look, I saw a black pot with steam rising from it atop the wood-burning stove in the corner of the room. And to add on, there was a green salad and round bread already set up on the dining table where Asuna was reading the newspaper, wasn’t there?

Putting down the newspaper and getting onto her feet, Asuna, with an apron on, finally showed a smile as she spoke.

“Let’s eat after you’re done washing your face. I’ll be frying the eggs in the meantime. What do you want for yours?”

To be honest, I had no prior experience in both washing my face and choosing options for fried eggs in this world, but confessing that would likely bring about that astounded mode from my young wife again, so I replied after a little thought.

“H-Half-done and cooked on both sides.”

“Alright. *Over easy*, then.”

...That term was new to my ears, but if the grand master chef, Asuna, said it, that was probably right.

“W-Well then.”

I nodded and rushed off to the bathroom combined with the toilet room.

I focused on three points when hunting for the new property. ①, a place rarely visited by players; ②, a lack of spawn spots for active monsters in the vicinity; with ③ being a large bath.

The snug arrangements of this log house were as follows: living and dining room x 1; kitchen x 1; bedroom x 1; but despite that, the bathroom was relatively large with a plain wood bathtub that measured two meters long. The water and gas fees would probably be horrible in the real world,

but in the dangerous and convenient VR world, fresh hot water was always running from the clay pipe installed on the wall, filling up the bathtub.

I was in no way obsessed with baths, but even I wanted to plunge my head in, instead of washing my face, upon looking at the surge of steam rising from beyond the wash basin. But it would likely turn those from *over easy* to *over difficult* if I did it, so I abandoned the idea of a morning bath and twisted the silver faucet.

The drawback of this bathroom was how the bath had an endless supply of hot water, but the wash basin had nothing more than water so cold it could give you frostbite. “Uhii!”, I screamed while washing my face, the last vestiges of drowsiness flowing away, before dashing back to the dining room.

“Coldcoldcold...”

And I chanted a mysterious spell while warming my face and hands at the stove before letting out a sigh of relief after the virtual chill was cancelled.

Asuna, standing in the kitchen and looking at me, turned to me in that same, old confounded mode.

“It feels best washing your face with cold water, doesn’t it?”

“That... That’s true, but it’s practically ice water here, so...”

“You’re a man, bear with it!”

And Asuna spoke a line that some older sister would probably use before shrugging her shoulders lightly.

“...Well, I went in the bath, though.”

“Wha..... th-that’s unfair! Or rather, you could have woken me up and...”

“...Woken you up, and?”

Asuna’s right hand held a spatula, glistening in the light, as she smiled brilliantly.

“Ah, n-no, it’s nothing... anyway, hey, the egg won’t be *easy* anymore.”

“There are still three seconds left. ...So. And. What?”

—Come to think of it, I believe I had been able to neither block nor dodge this attack from Asuna ever since she got me with that “Give. Me. Half!” in front of Agil’s general store. But I couldn’t very well be on the receiving end all the time as «The Black Swordsman». It was only recently that I

noticed, but even Asuna who always seemed composed, too, was surprisingly weak against frontal attacks.

I cleared my throat and put on a smile with as much poise as I could muster along with a smidgen of severity—

“...You could have woken me up and we could have gotten in together.”

I inched my right foot away, bit by bit, in preparation to escape the instant that spatula gets the light effect for «Linear» (though I didn't know if she could activate that), and before long, Asuna's face was dyed a brilliant red from her chin to her forehead, with a bit of steam puffing out from near the roots of her hair. This was no analogy; that really happened.

Wow, so there was an emoticon like that.

I restrained my surprise from appearing on my face and Asuna turned back to the stove with extreme haste, poking at the fried egg in the frying pan with the spatula as she softly spoke.

“W-Well... If you insist... on it.....”

Poke, poke, poke.

“...But we're only going in together, okay? ...I-I can wash your back at least, but...”

Poke, poke, poke, poke.

“...E-Erm, I'm not doing any perverted, okay? I mean, it's still morning... and we need to get groceries for lunch..... wait, ah, kya—!”

Her left hand flashed out with that scream and tossed the frying pan with such vigor it became a blur.

The fried egg that were definitely beyond half-done and now overdone swiftly flew up and spun near the ceiling, landing back on the frying pan. Still holding onto it, Asuna turned back once more.

“Geez! It's all because you said something weird like that that it ended up *over hard*, Kirito-kun!”

...So it wasn't *difficult*.

That went through my mind as I obediently apologized. Though the way she scolded me was somewhat unreasonable, everything paled in comparison to the «Bath OK» agreement I got out of her.

“Sorry, really, but I'm sure the egg will turn out delicious even if they're hard since you fried them for me.”

Those were my honest thoughts. It appeared Asuna understood that too, as my young bride's face turned red again before finally giving her usual collected smile.

With a sense of fulfilment, I thanked Asuna for the breakfast more perfect than any I had before, made up of that fried egg that was well fried on both sides, fresh green salad, soft round bread, and a fragrant cream soup, that I took my own sweet time to polish off.

"Thank you for the meal, it was really delicious. This isn't breakfast anymore, it's *breakfast*... no, a *morning dinner*, huh..."

"You're contradicting yourself there."

A giggle escaped from Asuna before she replied with a "You're very welcome".

After absorbed in the sight of my wife gracefully tidying up the tableware on the table for a short while, a thought suddenly came to me. I had taken Asuna waking up before me and making breakfast for granted, but that wasn't an acceptable attitude to have in this time and age, was it?

In the real world, I had unwittingly built up walls between myself and both my mother and sister, hardly helping out with the housework. No matter how I thought about it, my mother, with her job as a magazine editor, and my sister, in the kendo club, should have had overwhelmingly less time to themselves than me, absorbed in online games without joining any clubs.

If this game was cleared and I could return to the real world, I should pitch in and do the housework. Or rather, I should start from today.

Pledging so in my heart, I stood up as well and carried the remaining tableware to the kitchen.

"Erm, I'll take care of the dishes."

I called out, but Asuna turned back and shook her head with a smile."

"It's fine, it only takes an instant."

"...An instant?"

"Yes."

Nodding and taking the dishes from me, she passed it through the water flowing from the tap once while they were still stacked on each other. With just that, the dirtied effect on the dishes completely vanished and they even dried immediately, so I ended up letting out an "Ooh!". Asuna's eyes instantly changed to staring hard at me.

“Ooh, you say... Kirito-kun, what have you been doing in your home this whole time?”

“Erm... I basically eat out, or go with meals that don’t need tableware like sandwiches, or buns, or...”

“Ooh.”

“.....I humbly apologize...”

“Well, you are a man. But make sure you take your baths.”

After commenting with a wry smile, she apparently noticed the other nuance within the words she had just uttered and her face immediately went red once again.

“Ah, that’s not quite what I was trying to...”

Asuna’s shy murmurs were truly lovable and I couldn’t help but to grab hold of her left hand.

“Yeah, will do.”

There was nothing else I could have said.

(End)