

Sword Art Online 16.8

1

The first consumer-use full-dive machine, the «Nerve Gear», sends extremely weak electromagnetic pulses into its wearer's brain, making it possible to experience the five senses, sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch, in a virtual reality environment.

But my impression of that virtual reality—or electronic prison—after spending close to two years in it was that the degree of its senses replication was somewhat spotty.

Sight and hearing could be said to be almost perfect. The information delivered were either artificial 3D objects or synthesized sounds, so it wasn't exactly like the real world, but I hardly ever felt any sense of disconnect in regards to seeing or hearing.

Taste and smell also worked pretty well. They gave up on creating the «sensation of eating something»—that was, the food's taste, aroma, texture, and feel—in real-time from the very start, instead combining pre-set data through the «taste reproduction engine» and recreating that, but after getting used to it, something sweet honestly would taste sweet. The food prepared by a certain esteemed fencer who completed her Cooking skill, in particular, granted a sense of satisfaction that would make one forget one was in virtual reality, even if it was a simple fried egg. —Well, I couldn't claim to be entirely uninfluenced by other factors, though.

And the final sense, touch: sensations on one's skin, including warmth.

Unfortunately, the sense of discomfort it had haunted it even to this day.

It was fine when actively touching something. The trusty ease of gripping the leather wrapped about my cherished sword's handle. Or the silky sensation of a loved one's long hair. Those felt more vivid than in reality, satisfying my touch.

But passive information, the various sensations constantly received on one's skin over the whole body, was undeniably much different from in the real world.

The feeling as clothes inside rub against one's skin. The weight of clothes outside and elasticity of bottoms. The temperature and fluctuations of air. The pressure against one's soles when standing or thighs when sitting on a chair. Most of those «composite sensations the entire body constantly experience» were actually simplified to the bare minimum in SAO. The reason was probably due to the excess of information. Of course, there was the sensation of wearing something, but its coarse surface ended up feeling flat, like an image at low bit rate.

That said, it was perfectly possible to get used to that. It wasn't like one would be conscious of the texture of clothes the entire time in the real world either. It was fine if one didn't pay much

attention to it; it didn't feel strange or anything in everyday life (though it felt weird using that term for Aincrad).

But there was one situation where one couldn't avoid experiencing the low quality of the sense of touch.

When one's entire body, with all equipment removed, is soaked in warm fluid.

Or in other words, in the bath.

25th October, 2024, 10 A.M.

I could hear faint humming from beyond the door leading into the bath, going "Nn, nn, nn, fufuu, fuu, funn ♪". And in addition to that, the soft sound of water.

The situation reminded me somewhat of a time long ago when I slept over in the Dark Elves' camp site, but I now possessed one thing that I didn't back then. That was, the right to open this door.

I took in a deep breath before lightly knocking on the wooden door.

The humming stopped with that and after a brief silence, a soft "Okay" came back.

"E-Excuse mee...."

And I, too, replied softly as I opened the door. The morning sunlight shining in from the window inside made the steam effect shrouding the bathroom glow white and my eyes narrowed.

The log house built on Aincrad's 22nd floor was in no way huge, but its bathroom alone was made to be quite spacious. It measured roughly two meters by four meters, a little below 2.8 times a size 1618 standard bath, or one that was 1.6 by 1.8 meters in other words, and it was closer to those in hot springs hotels... no, I'm going too deep into this.

According to rumours, the guild, «Divine Dragon Alliance», had a gigantic ten-meters-class marble bath in their fortress-class guild home set up on a knoll on the 56th floor, but it seemed hard to relax when it was that big. This size was likely exactly what would be considered luxurious in a player home. Not to mention how it was made entirely from cypress wood and had a free flow of hot water.....

"Hey, are you planning to stand there the whole day?"

Those words rang out from beyond the thick steam and interrupted my thoughts. Shocked back to my senses, I spoke in a fluster.

“Ah, I’ll be there, I’ll come in.”

Just as I was about to unsteadily run towards the bathtub, another question came in.

“Like that?”

Taken aback, I looked down at myself and noticed I was wearing my usual blackish clothes. Replying with an “Ah, I’ll take them off, I’ll strip” as I pulled out the window, I spammed the buttons to unequip. The hot steam gently caressed my avatar’s revealed skin after I stored the various cloth equipment in my storage.

Sure, it might be possible to recover from this state, but if there was a young man of age sixteen capable of going through this situation with his presence of mind, he could become the main character of some standalone RPG. As a single player of a VRMMO, I could only stagger forward with a ninety percent debuff to my ability to think.

Parting the dense steam, I walked roughly three meters to the bathtub and saw the gleaming, quivering water surface spreading out. And the fencer with chestnut hair on one end, exposed from her shoulders upwards.

Asuna’s face, as she looked this way with upturned eyes, turned increasingly red, perhaps due to the hot water or maybe... such thoughts went through my head as I quickly finished pouring water over myself. It was probably the norm and only polite to first wash oneself before entering a hot spring in the real world, but in Aincrad, one would stay clean unless covered by mud, paint, or mucus from monsters. Muttering “Excuse mee...” softly once again, I slid into the plentiful hot water opposite Asuna. The bathtub was a whole two meters, so it didn’t feel tight at all, despite both of us around.

Even with the situation as it was, what I first noticed was the pleasantness of the bath as expected.

“Hauuoo...”

My voice naturally leaked out from my mouth. In terms of passion of baths, I probably only had a thirtieth of what Asuna had, but I certainly didn’t dislike it. The sublime warmth, moderate pressure, and the feeling as hot water soaked into every single one of the cells that made up.....

“Houfhhhbbbb...”

My mouth sank into the bath as well and let out a long sigh, forming bubbles, before I finally noticed «that».

“Bbbb.... bhh?”

Lifting my upper half, I first scooped up the water with both hands and letting it fall numerous times before looking into Asuna's face on the other side of the steam.

"Huh... is it just me? The water sort of feels different from before..."

"Yes, it is, isn't it?"

Curtly nodding her head that popped out from the surface, the young wife with a completed Bathe skill spoke.

"I thought so when I came in, in the morning too, but it seems to feel more natural. Bathing had always felt more like a warm membrane pushing against the whole body, rather than water, though there is a little of that too... but I feel like I'm actually wet in this bath."

"It really does... There's the water pressure, this floating sensation, and the feeling that all the drops of water are flowing over the skin too... —Aah, did bathing always feel this good...? Maybe I should take baths daily from now on too..."

I sank in, blowing bubbles, once again and drops of water came flying from in front. Asuna had flicked some of the water with her fingers.

"Hey, Kirito-kun, it's not a 'should', but a 'must'. ...No, the real question here is why it feels like this."

"Bhbb? Bb.... bh, that's right..."

Lifting myself up again, I stared hard at the gleaming, swaying water.

There and then, I finally noticed an important fact. The hot water filling the bathtub wasn't completely transparent—

"Ah, aaah!?! There's something like bath salts in here!!"

I waved my right hand up and down in the water as I shouted, but the clarity of the cloudy water only allowed me to see about three centimeters down. I shifted my face back forward and on the other side of the steam, the fencer grinned brightly.

"It's a rare opportunity, so I tried putting in the herbal bath powder I gotten a hold of a while ago. By soaking in it for thirty minutes, you apparently get a buff that grants a bonus against poison for three hours. It's a pretty rare item."

"...Bath for a buff."

"Said something?"

“Nothing, sir.”

“You got a problem?”

“No problem, sir.”

I answered the esteemed sub-leader while still staring into the water. The two pale, slender, and charming legs that should have been in my sight originally were utterly hidden behind the unidentified cloudy composition.

Anguish that even I had no reason for filled me as I spoke.

“Then isn’t that what caused this sensation too? Like, maybe the bathing powder had an effect that made the bath more bath-ish...”

“Well, I didn’t add any in when I took one this morning. But it felt the same as this back then.”

“O-Oh really?”

Somehow regaining my enthusiasm for solving the bath’s mystery, I splashed the water with my right hand while restarting my thoughts.

Though it surprised me at first, now that I focused on the sensation, I could say that it really wasn’t exactly like a real bath. The way the water parted was unnatural and the sounds were too uniform. But those problems were for sight and hearing, and there was nearly no sense of discomfort with the sensations on my skin submerged in the hot water if I were to stay still with my eyes closed.

“Hmm... —Maybe there was an update for fluid interaction without us noticing or...”

I voiced out idea number one and Asuna shook her head, splashing water, on the other side of the steam.

“The water didn’t feel any different when I washed the dishes earlier.”

“Then... maybe there’s a sensation magnification service exclusive to the bath in this log house or...”

“If it had a perk like that, I think it would have been written in the remarks in the purchase window.”

Idea number two was shot down just as easily.

“Erm, erm...”

I slowly sank deeper into the water as I sought out idea number three and unconsciously stretched my folded legs straight out.

And the ends of my toes touched something soft. Asuna twitched at the same time. The ripple produced crossed a meter and seventy centimeters, and the water quivered at my nose.

“Hmm, hmmm...”

I hummed while moving my toes slightly. The thing they came into contact with had a lovely bounciness and with that, a new ripple came forth.

“...Come on, Kirito-kun, think about it seriously.”

“I am thinking, of course.”

...This would be the soles of Asuna’s feet... no, the distance would be off, huh. Then her calves... or maybe the bottom of her knees...

“Ah... n-no, don’t...”

Asuna tried to draw her legs back with that soft murmur, but I slid closer in the water and maintained contact. Finding somewhere remarkably soft and smooth before long, I continued my poking and rubbing assault.

“Nn... geez... like I said, we were only, going in together...”

The fencer fought back with a strained voice and a face three times as red as several minutes ago. Her expression was truly lovable as she lowered her eyelids, lightly chewed on her lower lip, and stopped the prods invoking her sense of touch. A sixteen years old young man capable of stopping in this situation would fit as the main character in a young adult fiction book with a narrative circling entirely around that main character *.

I was already closing in to the midpoint of the two meters long bathtub when I noticed. Careful attention would be necessary from this point onwards, along with the occasional daring advance.

Observing Asuna’s reaction, I extended my hand into the cloudy water and caught her petite right leg where I predicted it would be.

“Ah, no!”

A forward charge as she instinctively retreated. Finger sliding across the petite leg that shot out from the water, from the ankle to the calf. Gently massaging those tender muscles usually hidden by those long boots.

“...!”

Asuna's upper body, leaning against the bathtub, bent back sharply. Bulges, more white than even the hot water, were exposed as they parted the opaque water. I lost my sense of reason there, turning the distance of seventy-five centimeters to zero in an instant.

2

".....Ah, I see, so that's it."

I let out those words and Asuna, drinking from a glass filled with iced water on the opposite side of the table, glanced over.

"...What did you say, what is it?"

Her words and expression were apprehensive, but the fencer looked truly adorable with a towel wrapped around her head and a large white bath towel around her body. Now that I think about it, this was the first time I saw her dressed in such a state, wasn't it? Of course, I only had a towel around my waist as well—not wrapped by hand but by equipping a towel on the «lower underwear» section of the equipment figure—so the two of us should take a photograph to remember this moment... or so my mind thought, addled by the long hot bath, narrowly stopping after judging that suggesting it would result in iced water in my face.

Draining the water remaining in the half-filled glass in front of me, I cooled my thoughts down somehow before voicing out what I hit upon several seconds ago.

"Erm, look, about why the bath seemed more like a bath."

"Eh... you know why?"

I began an explanation filled with confidence to my young wife who blinked in surprise.

"It's simple. Look, the sensations on our skin are magnified to more than the usual for us at the moment, right?"

"The sensations on our skin...?"

Asuna made a doubtful expression, but roughly three seconds later, that face immediately turned red from her cheeks to her ears. I would rather not go into detail, so I put on a solemn expression and stopped at a nod with a "yes".

The reason for what had occurred in the bathroom earlier was because Asuna and I currently had a hidden setting, «Ethics Code Off», switched on. In this state, it was like some limiters were removed, especially in regards to the sense of touch. The quantity of tactile data, kept to the minimum by default, must have been temporarily increased.

“...Of course, that will cause just as much burden on the circuits and Nerve Gear, so we should keep it off when we go out. But you agree, don’t you, if only I knew quicker that baths would be so much more realistic just by switching off the code... it probably didn’t take long for that Argo to find out about it, so if only she sold me that information...”

And immediately after I voiced out that absent-minded remark, I ended up suffering a *cold water* attack in the end, after all.

Asuna went off to the bedroom in a huff, so I continued my train of thought while cold drops of water dripped from my hair.

We switched the ethics code off the night before yesterday and left it off since then. But we were only conscious of the tactile sensations being different from usual when we entered the bath, with no feeling like my senses were amplified now as I sat here half-naked and moreover, half-wet. In other words, the effect only manifested itself when all equipment were removed. Thus, even if we leave it on, there wouldn’t be any problem with the load on the machine and circuits...

“Come on, how long are you going to stay like that?”

I raised my face at that voice; Asuna stood with both hands on her waist, her bath towel changed into a dressing gown.

“Don’t come complaining to me when you catch a cold from after-bath chills.”

“R-Right.”

It remained a mystery whether such a phenomenon could happen in this world, but I could only nod obediently after being nursed by Asuna in an inn when I previously felt ill here due to my body in the real world catching a cold or something like that.

Standing up with only a towel on, I thought to turn towards the bedroom, but came to an abrupt stop. I had to tell Asuna the conclusion I arrived at several seconds ago even if it meant I had to suffer through another explosion of water.

“...Um, Asuna-san?”

“Whaat?”

Timidly, I asked the young wife who started tidying up the glasses and pitcher.

“Erm... I know I said all that about burden earlier... but apparently, those sensations only seem to amplify with all equipment removed, so I was just going to say that there’s no real need or hurry to switch it off and all...”

Is she going to get mad again?! I spoke out expecting that, but Asuna showed an unexpected reaction, holding tightly onto the pitcher with her face turned down.

“...it off yet.”

“Eh?”

“Like I said, I didn’t switch it off yet. After all... it’s such a bother going that far into the options every time...”

The fencer who quietly explained with her cheeks red was so adorable and captivating—

“Ah... I-I guess so...”

—that I could only reply in a giddy voice.

(End)