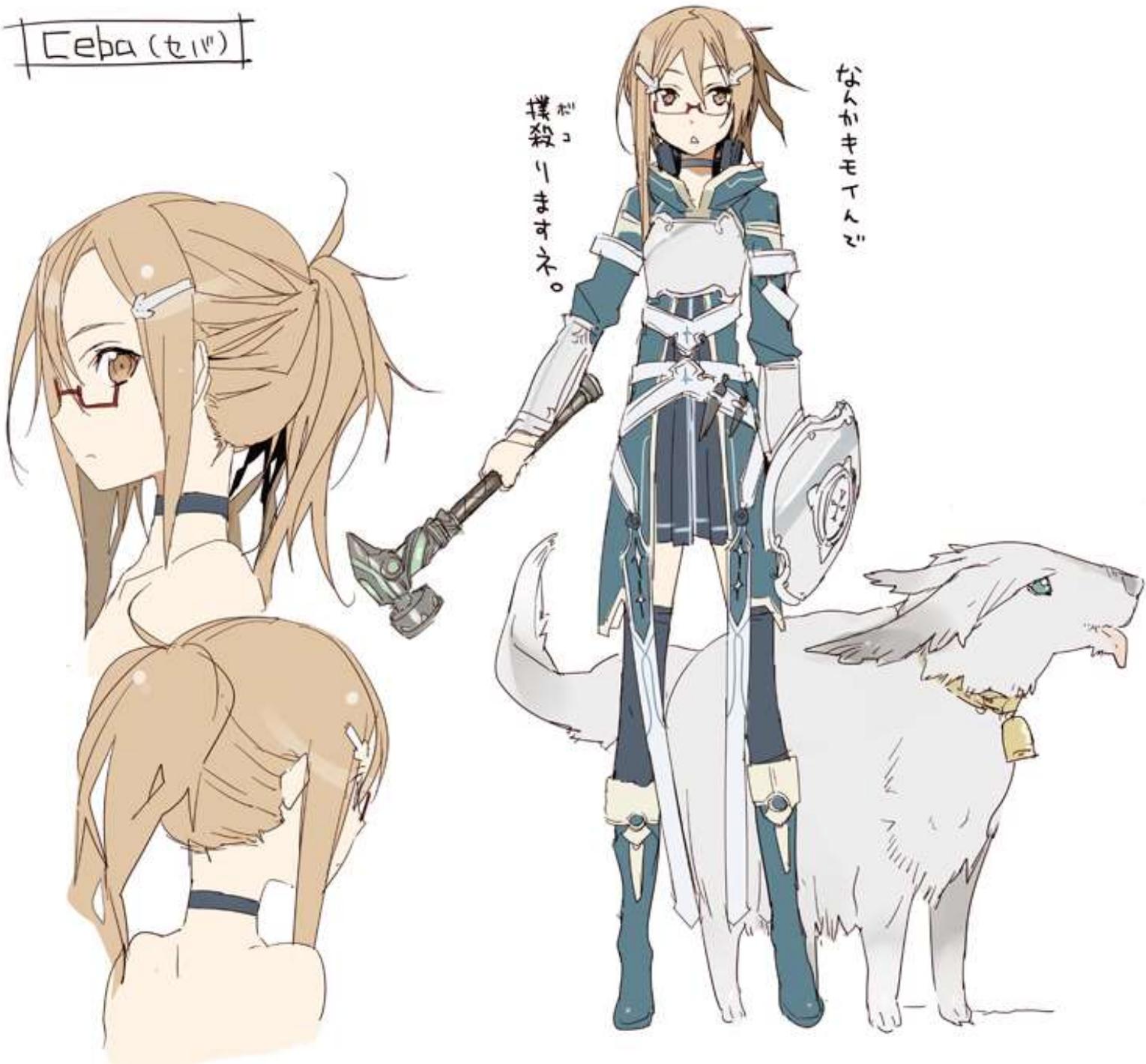


Chromatic Colors

Ceba (セバ)



"You look kind of gross, so I'll just beat you up."

Translator's Notes:

Chromatic Colors is a short story by Reki Kawahara, included with abec's art book, published on 20 January 2016. It is 6 pages long, separated into 3 chapters. The main character is abec's illustrated original character, Ceba. When the game SAO: Hollow Fragment was collecting character designs on the internet, abec submitted this character design and earned a special prize. Ceba is present in Hollow Fragment, and you can even add her into your party.

Chapter 1

“Furyohanuwa-!”¹

Hearing a fully synchronized scream from the kitchen, I leapt from the sofa in front of the fireplace and lunged towards it, thinking for a split second that a monster had popped into our home.

“Wha-what happened?”

I shouted as I burst into the kitchen, and a unexpectedly pitiful sight, or should I say, a vivid, poetic and fantastical scene unfolded before my eyes.

Asuna blindly adored the lakeside log cabin on Floor 22 of Aincrad as a second home, taking time here and there to decorate the kitchen. And yet, by her hand, the walls, the floor and the ceiling were pasted with color: red, blue, green, yellow, purple and others. But now, the rainbow-colored, sticky, gelatinous substance that wobbled on the ground and dripped from the ceiling in long strands, forming a spectacle that conjured images of a multi-colored hell.

The ones swallowed by the rainbow-colored gel, and likely its creators, were two female players with their hair, faces, and clothing covered in it; their arms stuck out in front of them as they let out moans of “Awww~”; one could not help but compare them to some fancy zombies.

“... By the way, what in the world did you do to make this happen?”

I asked incredulously. The owner of the kitchen — Asuna, an Undine, stammered as red glue dripped from her bangs.

“The jam... The jam, it...”

¹ Asuna and Yuuki’s overlapping screams.

Yuuki, an Imp who seemed to be helping Asuna, spoke up as she wiped off red gel from her left cheek.

“Suddenly... exploded...”

— The jam, exploded?

Processing their speech into words in my brain, I surveyed the room. It seemed that the rainbow gel that had been flung around originated from the pot on the stove. I sniffed the air: a burnt stench was intertwined with the sweet fragrance of fruit.

I silently reached towards Asuna’s face, picked a piece of bluish-purple gel off her nose, and placed it in my mouth; it imparted the unmistakable flavor of blueberries.

“..... It’s definitely... jam. But why would it explode?”

The jam production process in our home VRMMORPG — Alfheim Online, should have been very simple, and I had helped with it before.

All we needed to do was place the original ingredients, which were fruit and sugar, and our favorite spices into the pot, stir the mixture with a wooden spatula, and heat with a small flame. If we didn’t stir it enough or the flame was too strong, it would burn, but I’ve never heard of it exploding. And why was everything so colorful right now?

After I drew my finger through the yellow gel on Yuuki’s shoulder, tasted it, and confirmed that it was mango-flavored, the red gel on Asuna’s head suddenly began to vibrate. Do they turn into monsters after exploding? I wondered. But that wasn’t the case: what poked out of the gel was an AI in the form of a Navigation Pixie — Yui.

Cutely rubbing off goop that looked suspiciously like strawberry jam from her face, Yui explained with a helpless expression.

“When Mama organized the stuff in the food database, she found a lot of fruits and tried to mix all of them to make jam.

A <<grenade pineapple>> was probably mixed in, and it likely exploded from the heat, Papa.”

“Haah... So that’s what it was...”

The grenade pineapple, or grepine for short, a specialty fruit from the Salamander territory in southern Alfheim, was 20% sour and 80% spicy, so not only were they inedible, they became explosive in high heat. They were usually not eaten but used in combat as hand grenades, and it seemed that Asuna had put one into the pot and boiled it.

“Um... Your HP, hasn’t dropped, has it?”

I asked Asuna and Yuuki, to which they responded “Nope~”. The next problem was cleaning up the kitchen, whose interior had now become psychedelic. Scanning the room again, I was at a loss for how to scrub off the rainbow gel from the walls, the floor, and the ceiling.

“... Hm, that’s strange. Typically, if you spill jam on the table, it disappears in a few seconds, right? This gel doesn’t seem to disappear...”

“Now that you mention it, that’s right.”

Yui, slightly tilting her tiny head, prodded the large stain of strawberry jam covering Asuna’s head, analyzing its object properties, then quickly looked up and spoke.

“... We’re in trouble now, and it’s probably because this gel exploded before it became jam. It does not have the properties of a <<food/liquid>> object; it’s actually stuck in a <<fruit>> object state.”

“... Wh-what do you mean?”

“Well, if it were a food/liquid object, if we place it anywhere away from dining utensils, its durability would decrease by 5% per second, but fruit objects decrease by 0.05% per second.

Therefore, for normal jam, the time from when it was spilt onto the floor to the time it disappears should be 20 seconds, but this explosive jam will take 2,000 seconds... Or 33 minutes and 20 seconds.”

“33 minutes...”

Repeating the number aloud, I glanced at Asuna and Yuuki, who were murmuring to one another. It seemed that, no matter whether we cleaned up or not, those two had to remain like weird zombies for some time.

“.....”

“Wait a minute... Kirito-kun, who are you sending a message to?”

Spotting me slowly opening a window and punching on my hologram keyboard, Asuna stared at me through a layer of strawberry jam.

“N-No... I just thought, this whole thing is pretty interesting, so why not call Liz and Silica over...”

“.....”

Now it was Asuna and Yuuki’s turn to be silent. After exchanging glances, they nodded, and apparently having thought of something, both of them dived to the floor. With both of their hands, they scooped up as much of the multi-colored gel as possible, and stood up as the gel was still dripping from their arms—

“Heyaaahhh—!”

“Eat this—!”

They flew towards me, yelling. In less than ten seconds, my favorite black shirt was dyed the shade of a rainbow.

After flying out to a slightly far lake while looking like rainbow zombies and plunging into the water to wash off the jam, we discussed what to do next on the lake bank.

There were really only two options. Either we return to the log cabin and meticulously clean up the jam-covered kitchen, or temporarily forget that pitiful scene and wait until the jam's durability runs out so that it disappears.

Although I really wanted to choose Option 1 for my lovely home, cleaning up that much sticky gel was not an easy task, even in the virtual world. We gazed at each other and came to a tacit understanding.

“... Let's go hunting somewhere.”

At Asuna's suggestion, Yuuki and I nodded quickly. When we were immersed in adventure, the rainbow gel-covered kitchen would probably be the last thing on our minds.

“Well, if we don't want to trek all the way to the surface of Jotunheim, the New Aincrad dungeons sound good... Dungeons and quests that can be completed in an hour...”

I suggested quietly as I opened a window, ready to log into ALO's quest page, but before I could, Yuuki clapped her hands together and spoke.

“Ah, I want to go there! I've heard that they've discovered a hidden boss on Floor 5!”

“F-Floor 5...?”

I exchanged glances with Asuna.

Today was 8 February 2026, and New Aincrad had been cleared all the way to Floor 29. A few days ago, the Floor 29 boss was defeated by a party of seven players. The grinning <<Absolute Sword>> Yuuki in front of me was one of them. Although New Aincrad's floor bosses were much stronger than their SAO counterparts, Floor 5 bosses shouldn't make her as excited as this.

As though she were reading my mind, the Imp girl continued with a laugh.

“Like I said, it’s a hidden boss. They appear behind doors that can only be opened with a key item from Floor 20, and they’re just as strong, too. It’s also rumored that you need seven people to challenge one, so I think that’s just right for us.”

“Eh, eh...”

Hearing Yuuki’s explanation, I actually felt that the challenge would be too great for just us three... But even so, we couldn’t back down now.

“That’s definitely worth challenging.”

“Isn’t it?”

To Yuuki’s wide grin, it was Asuna who answered this time.

“But this is very rare. Both Kirito-kun and I haven’t heard this news, and Yuuki already knows about it.”

Yuuki stuck out her tongue and shrugged.

“Ah ha ha, I actually heard about it from Talken. I’m a lii~ttle interested in that rare equipment the boss is supposed to drop...”

Talken was a spear user in the guild that Yuuki led, the <<Sleeping Knights>>. Consistent with his tall, skinny, round-bespectacled exterior, he was quite good at collecting and analyzing intel. Since the rumor of the rare equipment greatly piqued my own interest, I asked reflexively.

“What, what’s the rare equipment like?”

But for some reason, Yuuki looked apologetic, put her two index fingers together, and replied.

“Ah, well, it’s not going to be much use to Kirito and Asuna... It’s called the <<Guild Flag>>, and it’s a flag only used to buff guild members...”

Hearing those words, Asuna and I stared wordlessly at each other—.

““EHHH~::~?!””, we screamed together.

Chapter 2

New Aincrad took the quests, monsters, and floor bosses from the old floating castle and greatly increased their numbers, but kept its basic geography.

We walked out of the teleporter on the main street area <<Calruin>>, and after meeting Sinon, a Cait Sith and the only one of our friends whom we were able to reach, just like that, we headed towards the dungeon tower that was rumored to conceal a hidden boss.

The gear named the <<Guild Flag>> was in SAO as well.² It was dropped by this very Floor 5 boss, which, back then, was a gigantic, jointless stone golem. Just for this gear, two of the large clearing guilds almost broke out in heated warfare, and as I remember now, it was nothing to laugh about.

We effortlessly crossed through the ancient ruins scattered around Floor 5, and upon reaching the dungeon area under Yuuki's lead, we headed towards an underground area that was rumored to be newly discovered. On our way we defeated monsters that seemed quite strong for this floor, and after we cleared the dungeon three floors underground, two colossal swinging doors loomed before us.

“Ahh... This feels a little challenging...”

Sinon commented, her bow resting against her shoulders as she looked up at the great doors. I couldn't help but chuckle.

“Oh wow, so Sinon-san can determine how strong a boss is just by looking at the doors of its room?”

The icy-blue haired Cait Sith swung her long tail, glaring towards my direction.

² See SAO: Progressive Volume 4.
At time of writing only available in Japanese.

“The one who judges a boss’s strength by its door’s weight has to be you.”

The weight mentioned here was not the physical weight of the door itself, but the size of its data. A tradition from the old SAO era, doors that were made out of gleaming material covered in intricate carvings and encrusted with numerous gemstones, in other words, data-«heavy» doors, usually indicated relatively stronger bosses.

As Sinon and I were talking, Yuuki produced an important piece of equipment — an enormous key — that opened the lock with a click. Asuna and I placed our hands on both doors, and pushed them open.

Rumble... After the tremors in the ground ceased, a new sound came from within the darkness beyond the doors. An earth-shaking roar unique to gigantic monsters, and the sounds of Sword Skills being activated. It seemed that there were already people battling inside.

“Why make another key if you’re going to lock something...?”

I asked quietly; Sinon gave me a little push from behind.

“Cut the chatter and hurry up. If we can see the battle, we’ll know the strategy against the boss.”

“Oh wow, so Sinon-san can determine how strong a boss is just by hearing...”

Not planning to listen anymore, she pushed me hard; I could only break into a jog to catch up with Asuna and Yuuki.

The last road to the boss room was not very long, and soon we were able to see sporadic flashes of light from the room ahead of us. But compared to the boss’s attacks, the effects of magic and Sword Skills were quite insignificant. We’d heard that this boss was limited to seven people per challenge, but we could only hear its screams.

Within five seconds, we knew why.

What we saw when we reached the entrance of the boss room, was a gargantuan stone golem 15 meters tall, and — a solo Leprechaun female player, equipped with a one-handed hammer and a small shield.

No, technically, she wasn't alone. The white dog-type monster scampering dexterously on the ground was probably her pet. But even if she was a beast-tamer, soloing a boss equivalent to a New Aincrad Floor 20 boss should be impossible. Right now, the boss's six HP gauges still had four remaining, while the female player's HP was already completely red. Perhaps she had used up all of her potions.

“Kirito...!”

Standing at the front, Yuuki turned to me with an anxious expression. She probably wanted to help, but it was common courtesy in ALO and other MMORPGs to first confirm the other side's intention during boss fights. I charged ahead, preparing to get the Leprechaun's attention.

But I was too late. Blue beams of light shot out of the golem boss's eyes, and although one of them was blocked by the Leprechaun's right wrist guard, the other struck her squarely in the chest. What little remained of her HP drained completely, and her avatar exploded in all directions, leaving a silver remain light. The great dog familiar wailed sorrowfully.

“Ahh...”

Yuuki made a regretful noise, but we could still do something. Watching the golem boss return to its square boundary after defeating its challenger, I shouted at the remain light.

“If you don't mind us reviving you, don't go back to the safe zone, just wait here for a bit!”

Waiting until the boss completely disappeared, I sprinted as fast as I could into its room. Although the boss reappeared deep within, I ignored it, scooped up the remain light near the center of the room, and made a sharp return. The dog chased after me.

Returning to the road in the safe zone lobby, I handed over the silvery remain light to Asuna.

“Revival magic. Please do your best.”

“Got it!”

Asuna nodded, raised her beloved wand, the <<Crest of Yggdrasil>>, and fluently recited a spell well over ten words. A blue glow tumbled forth and enveloped the remain light, expanding into a complicated magical formation. In the instant that an intense light burst to being, I leapt back.

The revived Leprechaun stood silently; her great dog happily bounded over from a distance away, emitting an ecstatic, nasal warble.

“... Thank you for reviving me. My name is Ceba. This little guy is Yodare.³”

As the Leprechaun introduced herself, all four of us happened to shift our gazes from the owner to her pet.

It was a quadruped beast wearing a huge bell collar, sticking its tongue out, and breathing rapidly like a dog, but no drool was in sight. Interpreting its name to have some deeper meaning, we looked back to the owner.

The first to declare her name to the bespectacled female player with her milk-coffee colored hair pulled back in a ponytail was Yuuki.

“Hi, Ceba-san! I’m Yuuki, this is Asuna, the archer is Sinon, and the blackish guy over there is Kirito!”

We nodded individually as our names were called. After the name exchange, Yuuki instantly launched into praise.

³ Means “drooling”

“You’re so strong — solo challenging that boss! I thought that blackish guy over there was the only one who would attempt something crazy like that.”

Despite receiving frank praise, Ceba’s expression did not change at all. She shrugged and replied.

“But there is a huge disparity in strength. New Aincrad’s bosses are as strong as I thought they would be... But I think this little guy will get them sooner or later.”

Hearing Ceba’s words as she stroked Yodare’s head, Asuna and I shivered at the same time.

I don’t remember when we began calling the new floating castle that revolved around Alfheim’s sky <<New Aincrad>>, but that name was definitely not common in ALO. Most players simply called it Aincrad. The ones who added the word <<New>> were the minority that were bugged by the details, or — SAO survivors who were aware of Old Aincrad.

But whether Ceba was among them was not a question for our first meeting. We’ll just ask her about her rash decision to challenge the boss.

“Um... Ceba-san, why did you challenge the boss alone...?”

I raised my right hand. To my question, Ceba replied with some hesitation.

“... I wanted the rare item that the boss here is rumored to drop.”

“Eh, isn’t that, the Guild Flag?!”

The bespectacled Leprechaun nodded at Yuuki’s question. Immediately, Sinon utilized her especially perceptive observational skills and raised a new question.

“But it seems like you’re not in a guild... Why would you want the Guild Flag...?”

Indeed, there was no guild icon beside Ceba’s HP gauge.

If the Flag was the same as it was during the SAO era, the flagbearer must drive the Flag staff straight into the ground and keep it straight; if a one-man guild were to raise the Flag, it would be very difficult to use the buff.

Ceba glanced in the opposite direction of the boss room — the locked outer gate, confirmed that there were no new challengers, and pointed towards the end of the road.

“Since I want to help you guys for saving me, let’s go over there to talk.”

I took out a <<picnic set>> from my storage — an ultra-lightweight round table and tablecloth, with five folding chairs — and placed it on the side of the road; Asuna took out a teapot and teacups, placed them on the table, while Yuuki made a comment as though she had forgotten the sorry state of the log cabin.

“Hm—, if we had tea, then I’d want something sweet to eat~.”

“Sorry, Yuuki, the sweets are all gone...”

“It’s okay Asuna, you can make me a strawberry cake next time.”

Sinon and I chuckled wryly at Yuuki’s words. Ceba opened a window with a practiced motion, and what materialized was a huge plate about 40 centimeters in diameter.

“Um, if you guys are okay with this, please take this as a token of my gratitude.”

As she had said, we looked towards the huge plate on the table, and all four of us uttered an “Oh—” of amazement. An enormous bavarois⁴ sat on the plate. But we were not amazed at its size.

Brightly colored cream on top of a milky white base with a gleaming sheen. Blooming flowers in various colors: green, pastel yellow, pink, azure, intricately detailing an expansive, verdant plain on a spring day.

⁴ Bavarois, short for Bavarian cream, is a custard-like dessert originating from France. More info here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bavarian_cream

“Woooooow, incredible~~~! It would be such a waste to eat this!”

Yuuki shrieked; A hint of a smile appeared on Ceba’s face as she shook her head.

“It’s okay. Since decoration takes a lot of time, it doesn’t have a lot of durability left... And also, this is a practice work.”

So without further ado, I tapped the mousse with my small knife. With three taps I separated the mousse into six equal parts and placed them into small plates, even putting one in front of Yodare, who was obediently staying on the ground.

Although the bavarois was a regular yogurt flavor, its decadent exterior improved the taste by several times. In the blink of an eye, the four of us had finished it, and we exhaled deeply at the same time.

“... Thank you for your hospitality, and that was delicious, Cebasan. If your practice work is so outstanding, with just a little higher Cooking skill, you can open a store.”

Yuuki, Sinon and I nodded fervently, agreeing with Asuna’s suggestion, but Ceba’s expression turned complicated for some reason.

“Ah... I’m sorry, I don’t mean ‘practice work’ in that way.”

“Eh...?”

Asuna froze as Ceba looked at the huge, empty plate, and said something unexpected.

“That bavarois was the biggest canvas one can get in ALO. — The reason I’m looking for the Guild Flag is not for combat use... I actually want an even bigger canvas.”

Chapter 3

If fine arts were divided into literature, visual art, music, and drama, by far the easiest to express in a VRMMO was music. The musical elf race in ALO, the Pookas, had «Instrument Playing» and «Singing» skills, along with an array of musical-instrument items. Along the wide streets, player bands exhibited their exceptional skills and voices day and night, and large-scale concerts were commonplace in the theaters.

Additionally, novelist players who published their own novels in-game and player theater troupes that put on dramatic and musical performances were also numerous. But unfortunately, the field of visual art, usually represented by drawing, in ALO — and most VRMMOs, was not supported by the system.

The reason was probably due to the fact that drawing and painting required a massive amount of storage. Music and stage performances would disappear as the performances ended, but pictures were different. For example, a full color, 600 dots-per-inch A1-size painting would have an uncompressed size of 1 GB. If players continued to create those without restriction, no matter how many more servers were installed, it would never be enough. Therefore, the reality was that, regardless of everything, if one wished to draw or paint in the virtual world, they could only use professional VR drawing software.

“... But, no matter what, I just want to paint in this world... No, I will paint in this world.”

A hammer user, a beast-tamer, and a cake decorator. But Ceba, whose real job seemed to be an artist, spoke in a small voice, her tea-colored eyes drooping behind her glasses.

“I’ve, wanted to be an artist ever since I was little... After graduating from high school, I decided on going to art school. But since I was twisted into that incident, I was locked in a virtual world for two years...”

She stopped then, gazing up at me and Asuna. She definitely felt something from our presence. I nodded gently at her, and her calm voice began once more.

“... Luckily, I returned to the real world alive. But... after two years, even if I hold a brush, I can’t paint anything. I want to put color on top of the white canvas, but my hands tremble uncontrollably, and I just can’t put my brush to it...”

This time, Sinon nodded slowly. Ceba glanced at her and continued.

“... I slowly began to realize why. It’s definitely because, I’m scared. I’m scared that I had forgotten how to draw after two years... That I can’t draw like I did before. But one day, I decided to forget about drawing and hide in ALO, and unconsciously, I drew a street scene on parchment. My hands can move in this world. If I stay here and draw like I did before, I’ll definitely remember how in the real world. That’s what I’ve been thinking...”

Ceba fell silent, and in her place, Sinon spoke.

“ALO’s parchment has a maximum size of A4...”

“Is there drawing software in GGO?”

The archer lightly shook her head at my question.

“No, no, there are no players in that world with that kind of hobby.”

“Hm—, there isn’t anything that can produce large pictures in the games I’ve played either...”

Ceba nodded at Yuuki’s comment.

“I’ve researched around, but among the VRMMOs that use The Seed, there seems to be no real drawing capabilities anywhere. Also... it seems, that it needs to be here. It needs to be in Aincrad, where I spent two years of my life...”

Ceba’s urgent voice caused Yodare to emit a nasally “guun” sound from the ground.

Ceba ruffled the white dog's head with her right hand, just like Silica with her beloved Pina, whom she had stuck together with since the beginning of SAO. It was then that I understood why she had challenged the boss alone.

“That’s why you came for the Guild Flag. That Flag is indeed larger than the bavarois, and is also a plain white cloth that you can draw on. By that logic, it is the largest obtainable canvas in ALO...”

Ceba nodded silently; Asuna, Yuuki and Sinon looked towards the boss room at the same time.

When they met gazes together again, Yuuki shouted.

“So we can only do our best!”

To Ceba, who only showed a confused “What...?” expression, Asuna stretched out her right hand.

“Come with us and challenge it again. We five and Yodare together can definitely defeat it!”

Before Ceba could reply, Yodare let out a vigorous “Woof!”.

Compared to old Aincrad’s Floor 5 boss – «Fuscus the Vacant Colossus», this bigger stone golem boss was, as rumored, on par with a Floor 20 boss; the boss’s violent attack thrust our quickly-assembled team into a difficult battle.

But Sinon’s newly acquired legendary weapon «Light Bow Shekinah», my treasured «Holy Sword Excalibur», Absolute Sword Yuuki’s invention, the super 11-hit combo OSS «Mother’s Rosario», and Berserk Healer Asuna’s dive-in techniques, slowly shaved the golem’s HP down bit by bit, gauge by gauge—.

With Yodare’s rapid rotating attack, and Ceba’s hammer attack striking its forehead, the boss’s colossal physique finally shattered into pieces. Reveling in victory for a moment, everyone hurriedly searched for the dropped rare equipment.

“.....”

What broke those few seconds of anticipatory, anxious silence, was Yuuki's sigh.

“Oh, come on~~...”

Apart from a large number of Yrd coins, the only things the golem boss dropped were three pieces of rare-ish items, and about a dozen ore materials. Normally, those would be very satisfactory spoils, but this time, no one felt like posing in victory.

Beside Yuuki, Sinon, Yodare, and I dropped our shoulders in disappointment—.

“... Um, Ceba-san.”

Gazing at the wall of the boss room for some reason, Asuna spoke. Following her line of sight, I saw charred streaks left by the boss's beam attacks. Asuna suddenly spun around, walked to the melancholy artist, and continued.

“As long as you draw in this world, it's okay if your finished work doesn't keep forever, right?”

“Uh... yeah. Since I've already tried on the bavarois.”

Asuna turned and looked directly at me.

“Kirito-kun, where is the largest building with smooth walls in New Aincrad?”

Now I slightly understood what Asuna was thinking; my brain began to sift through my memories at full speed.

“Hmm, uh... the forest fairy castle on Floor 8... no... the dungeon tower on Floor 25... it is very big, but the walls are curved...”

The one who finally answered the question was not me but the Navigation Pixie who was supposed to be napping in my chest pocket this whole time; she flew above the surprised Ceba and Yodare, then landed on Asuna's head, shouting.

“The answer is simple, Mama! The largest wall in Aincrad is the outer wall of Aincrad itself!”

An hour later.

Asuna, Yuuki, Sinon, Yui and I, along with Ceba and Yodare, met together high in the air along the south outer wall near Floor 1 of the floating castle. Yodare, who earlier appeared to be a land animal, now flapped his large ears that transformed into wings, hovering in the air.

We had spent some time beforehand, because everyone had helped make the stuff that filled the big tub in my arms. Red, blue, green, yellow, purple, white, black, transparent... A large amount of gelatinous material radiating in various colors. It was the high durability jam that had transformed the kitchen in our forest home into a colorful hell.

“... Ceba-san, can you do it...?”

At Asuna’s inquiry, Ceba gazed silently at the basin that replaced normal painting tools, then looked up at Aincrad’s outer wall. The wall was actually very slightly curved, but since Floor 1 was 10 kilometers in diameter, from here it looked like a completely flat surface. Although this was definitely ALO’s largest canvas, since it might be too big, would it worsen Ceba’s depression instead—.

Yuuki’s carefree voice shattered my doubts.

“Ceba-san! Let’s enjoy this delightful time together!”

Yuuki shouted and immediately plunged her hand into the bowl. She scooped out a handful of red gel, and lobbed it at my face.

“Uwa! Wh-What are you doing?! It’s in my mouth... It’s sooooouur!!”

Asuna and the others began to laugh after hearing my screams, and Ceba, whose eyes had widened instantly, lifted the corners of her mouth in a small smile.

She hovered in the air, both hands full of color. Expanding her wings, she moved along the outer wall—.

“... Hyaaah—!!”

Letting out a determined voice unheard even during the boss fight, and throwing the color towards the wall, she drew a long, straight stripe in a burst. A bright blue line stretched higher and higher. Finally, she bent to the right, drew another straight line, went down, then turned left. When she returned to where she began, she had drawn a ten meter tall rectangle.

Then Ceba spun around, grabbed the tub of color out of my hands, and raced to the wall again, holding the bowl in her left arm. What happened next can only be described as magnificent. Her right hand moving unceasingly with fierce determination, she coated the empty canvas with color. As if she were releasing everything saved up in those two years that she was unable to hold a brush, she painted, painted, painted.

After thirty minutes, when Ceba's movements finally stopped, a gigantic portrait had appeared on the outer wall of the floating castle. A portrait of four ALO players.

“Woow... It's us...!”

Yuuki exclaimed in awe; Asuna, Sinon, Yui and I furiously applauded. Yodare barked “Woof woof!”, and Ceba, hearing all of this, turned her head around—.

On her face splattered with dappled colors of jam, there formed a genuine smile shining with innocence, just like a child finishing her first painting.

(End)

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