

水音、槌音

みずおと、つちおと

アインクラッド第48層 2024年8月



九里史生

Aincrad 48th Floor

August 2024

"Please reinforce it."

I stared hard at the face of my client, who placed a long sword in a white scabbard onto the counter while calmly saying that line, for roughly two seconds.

"...Wh-What is it?"

Upper body leaning away, the other party finally responded with a single cough.

"It-It's nothing. ...It's just that, I was wondering how long you're intending to drag this sword along."

It was a line meant as a light jab at that display of bashfulness, but with a—

"It-It's fine, isn't it, me dragging it about. I like it, after all."

I was rendered once again, speechless at that reply. If we were to continue looking at each other face to face like this, that near unnoticeable reddish tinge on my cheeks would be exposed, so I hastily averted my face and spoke.

"Well, it's just like you to not even update your equipment though. Well then, please come along to the workshop."

Reaching my hands towards the counter, I lifted the long sword with my fighting spirit, going "Yoisho!".

The reason my face turned red was simple.

It was because three months ago, this slender long sword in my arms right now, «Dark Repulser», was what I—Lisbeth the smith, forged by swinging my smith hammer: a player-made weapon; also, the black-haired, black-clothed one-handed sword user, Kirito, who just made the "I like it" comment, was the person I am in love with. Ever since the day we met, without ceasing.

My shop, «Lisbeth's Equipment Shop» stood in the southern district of the main town area on Aincrad's 48th floor. It was somewhat average among the manufacturing-class player shops, with the sales area and workshop situated on the first floor, and the second organized into four rooms for the kitchen and bedrooms.

As for the reason it was valued highly despite that house plan, it was due to the fact that it was furnished with a large water wheel at the back of the house, connected to a waterway. Various large-scale devices could be connected to the power transmitting axle that pierced through the wall, reaching into the workshop. For a bakery, a flour mill; as for a tailor, a weaving loom; and as such, for a smith, bellows or a sharpening wheel. Considering the merit of automating these tools that would originally require a player to push and turn them by hand, the thumping sound of its rotation that rang out regardless of day or night could be said to be rather pleasant.

Kirito appeared at the shop early in the afternoon, in the second summer of Aincrad. As it was a time when steadfast players secluded themselves in the hunting grounds or labyrinth areas, while the converse sipped away at iced drinks after a meal at bars or restaurants, there were no other customers within the shop.

I left the NPC, Hanna (female, estimated to be fifteen years old, surname, Heinemann) to tend to the shop, and moved towards the workshop while carrying the heavy sword. After Kirito, who came along, opened the door without requiring any additional prompting, the sound of the water wheel's rotation became remarkably louder.

"...It's such a relief that Aincrad's summers aren't that hot, really."

His impression was probably due to spotting the furnace burning red hot in a corner of the room, I thought, as I heard him speak from behind. I lowered myself onto the chair beside the anvil, unintentionally broke into a wry smile.

"If you care about the heat, you should just take that off when you're within the area, at least."

The trademark of Kirito, who possessed the cool second title of «The Black Swordsman», was that black leather coat of his that extended below his knees; if one were to take up that sort of appearance in the real world during August, it would probably eventually result in heatstroke. Leaving the sheathed Dark Repulser on the

anvil for the moment, I shifted my view to Kirito, who was leaning against the wall, and he had a bitter smile on while scratching his head.

"It's like, well, aside from sleeping, I just can't calm down without this on nowadays, you know..."

"That said, don't tell me you actually had the same one equipped since the first floor?"

Previously, when I was chatting with my close friend, Asuna, at this very spot, the topic ended up being Kirito's only set of clothes. According to her, it seemed that he had the same appearance ever since he got his hands on a unique rare, «Coat of Midnight», from the floor boss on the first floor.

At my question, Kirito smiled once again and shook his head.

"I do have to update my armor every now and then. This «Blackwyrn Coat» is the.. fourth generation, I guess?"

"Oh... That's a monster drop too?"

"Nope, it's player-made..."

That somewhat complicated expression that flashed past Kirito's face as he replied did not escape my gaze. Maintaining my smile, I pressed on without a moment's delay.

"Oh. Which shop is it from?"

"Well, that's... it's just something from A-«Ashley's»..."

"Ohh. Hehh. Is that so."

As I dragged my words out, Kirito made the truly conspicuous motion of averting his eyes.

Ashley was a charismatic seamstress, widely said to be Aincrad's number one. Although it wasn't like she was a business rival to me, a smith, she set up shop in Lindas like me, in the northern section, and it was thrice the size of mine (with two water wheels), not to mention the shop's name, «Ashley's», was one most could not help but to notice. In addition, the person in question was a considerable beauty in her early twenties.

Likely due to being aware that the defensive line-up in my Lisbeth Equipment Shop included lightweight armor for swordsmen using one-handed swords as well, Kirito babbled on with an expression on the verge of letting out a cold sweat effect.

"Nah, it's just that my build is based on leather armor and all, and the only tailor I knew that could handle a high grade raw material like black dragon leather was Ashley-san, so I really had no choice at all, you see..."

"I didn't even say anything, did I. But still, if I'm not wrong, wasn't it Ashley-san's policy on custom-made items to only take up requests that interested her?"

"Re-Really? I was, you know, referred there by Asuna, her regular customer... oh right, that's just like the first time I came to Lis's shop, isn't it. That time was a real disaster, eh, smashing that sword you were selling when I tried swinging it and..."

Upon getting to that point, he froze up with an expression that said "Oh-crap-I-stepped-on-a-land-mine", and I ended up bursting out in laughter, unable to suppress it any further.

"Ahaha... there's no need to make a face like that, that's nothing more than a good lesson to me now. Back then, I did make swords only focused on Accuracy and Quickness, without much care for their durability, after all. Swords that are strong with the system assistance are popular, but I realized that the swords that'll protect my customers' lives in a pinch are the durable ones..."

After my laughter settled down and I turned back to the anvil, I lifted Dark Repulser up once again. I gently pulled the sword out from its sheath, it was heavy enough for me to have no proper way of swinging it in actual combat even if I could carry it around with my STR.

The blade that was fairly slender for a one-handed long sword was silver, with a faint bluish tint. Asuna's beloved sword, «Lambent Light», was of translucent silver much like a crystal, but in contrast the appearance of this was exactly like that which often appears in fantasy works, «Mithril Silver».

"If I'm not mistaken, this is +39 at the moment, right?"

"Yep. In short, I'm challenging for that +40 today."

Kirito assented to my question without hesitation, but having a number of +40 as a reinforcement value wasn't quite common.

Every piece of equipment that existed in Aincrad possessed a property named «Reinforcement Attempts Count». As its name implied, it was the number of times one could challenge for a reinforcement on it, and that number fell by one each time, regardless of success or failure.

The value of the attempts count for «Dark Repulser» was 50, far more than the rest, among the swords I forged. And now, the remaining count was 8. In other words, the results of reinforcement thus far was 39 successes, compared to a mere 3 failures. Putting it into a success rate, it was at, erm... approximately 93 percent. This was a figure that could already be said to be a miracle, and if the information brokers were to get wind of it, they would likely come here straight away, sniffing for the trick to it. But still, even if they were to come, it's not like I knew the reason for it.

In any case, the reason why this sword that was forged three months ago could still be used by Kirito on the frontlines (currently the seventieth floor), was mainly due to this terrifying reinforcement value. Players uninterested in weapon reinforcement mostly updated the arms they mainly used with each floor, but Kirito equipping the sword that I made for this long was a cause for happiness, and conversely, concern, as well.

As for why that was so, if one planned to boost the success rate of reinforcement to its maximum value, the quality and quantity of the raw materials required simply became outrageous. Even if he was a solo player, laying claim to all of the drop items, it was not difficult to guess that an immense amount of time was needed to gather all those raw materials.

—How about abandoning this sword, and advancing to a rare weapon dropped on the frontlines?

I wonder if I should be giving such advice, as a smith myself.

Probably, if it's a rare weapon at the class of the 70th floor's, by getting to around +20, its cumulative properties should be able to match this Dark Repulser +39. And considerably fewer raw materials would be required for reinforcement compared to the present.

As I stared at the sword, I took in a breath of air, and opened my mouth.

However, the words that came out were—

"...The raw materials, you made sure to get all of them, right? If you're challenging for +40, I have no desire to do it without the probability fully boosted."

Stifling my inner thoughts, I spoke with my lips pouted, and Kirito nodded with a broad grin.

"Of course."

The right hand fitted into a fingerless glove (of course, made from black leather) nimbly manipulated a window. What materialized was an excessively large leather bag. Laying the sword down and peeking into the bag I received, metal plates that appeared undoubtedly high grade, along with fangs and horns of monsters, various types of jewels and such were tightly packed within.

Spreading those onto the floor to confirm their quantity would require a dreadful amount of time, so I tapped the bag with my finger, displaying a small window indicating its content. Tapping the sword atop the anvil next and hitting once again, on the reinforcement value shown on the small window, a sub-window with the information on the raw material items needed for reinforcement floated out.

If I were to drag the bag's window with my fingertip, the moment it got into contact with the sword's, it would automatically go into comparison mode, informing whether both contents are the same. If the items' names and quantities all turned blue, it was a complete match.

"Looks okay. But really now, it's amazing how you manage to gather this much every single time!"

After I voiced out a line that went against my actual thoughts again, Kirito casually shrugged his shoulders.

"Most of the items drop even at the frontlines, so they naturally pile up while mapping. There's only a small portion that I have to gather over at the lower floors, you know."

I knew just how difficult it was to gather the required amount of that «small portion», with me doing the same for my one-handed mace on occasions. But as expected, words opposing that left my mouth.

"Don't let the news that the clearers are rampaging about the lower floors get tattled on to the information brokers. I'm totally against getting onto the newspaper as «That Mr. Big Shot Bastard's favorite shop» or anything like that!"

"Hahaha, I limited myself to only hunt at the lower floors late at night, so it's fine."

"...Is that so. Well, that's fine, then."

Mapping the frontlines' dangerous labyrinth areas in the day, and after taking a mere short nap, switching to the tiresome work of gathering materials. That meant Kirito had kept up that sort of lifestyle for these three months. I checked his complexion with a sidelong glance on reflex, but that smoothness on his avatar was just like that of a girl's, without any sign of the fatigue that must have accumulated within him.

Chewing over the silent discord in my mind, I cleared away all of the windows with a single wave of my right hand.

"Well then, let's get started right away. What's the property you want?"

"Sharpness, please!"

My perpetually positive client gave a slight nod in return, and after I reached my hands out to the large forge, what could be said to be the main fixture of the room, I changed the menu from «Production» to «Reinforcement». Setting the details to Sharpness, I poured the raw materials for reinforcement, stuffed in the bag, into it.

Actually, there was a need to operate the bellows until the furnace burns bright red, but thanks to the water wheel, that process was currently automated. The small hand-carry furnace meant for street stalls used fuel, so bellows were unnecessary, but it did not have the capacity to take in this large quantity of raw materials.

The large furnace that easily swallowed down the objects, which numbered over a hundred, somehow appeared delighted as it burned ever stronger, and the mass of raw

materials was liquefied in mere seconds. The blaze, which was orangey-red in color, turned into the silver used to represent the Sharpness reinforcement mode.

Without further delay, I thrust Dark Repulser, extracted from its scabbard, into the furnace. The silver-tinted light wrapped around the blade, and right as it started gleaming brilliantly, I moved the sword to the anvil.

All that was left was to hit it with the smith hammer for the required number of times.

Although I really had no choice but to swing the hammer for close to two hundred and fifty times back when this sword was meticulously forged from the ingot, for reinforcement, whether challenging for +1 or +40, the number of hits needed was fixed at ten.

I unfastened my beloved «Zoringen Hammer +20» from the belt on my waist, and firmly held the grip, wound up with red leather.

Smith hammers were classified as tool items while being blunt-type weapons at the same time, so they naturally could be reinforced. That said, it was impossible to hit it with itself, so I had a sub-hammer exclusively for the sake of reinforcing it.

I matched my breathing with the lifting of my beloved hammer, the so-called *beloved sword* of my own, that though not at the level of Kirito's tenacity, still took a good two months to reinforce. I held it still for a slight bit at its peak, and brought it down in one go.

Kaan!, a clear hammer sound. The sound I loved. Silver and orange mingled in the scattered sparks, springing onto the floor and vanishing.

Two times. Three times. When producing my goods for sale, or reinforcing the weapons of other customers, I was able to achieve a state of nothingness on the very first hit—or rather, I became entirely absorbed in the sounds and lights, but only when working on Kirito's sword did I end up getting my personal feelings involved.

Do protect that person; be sure to come back to this workshop with him; I would swing my hammer as I speak.

Four times, five times. As long as this sword stayed on Kirito's back, we were connected by a unique bond. I was unable to guard his back during the boss clearing battles like Asuna, but I could assist him by repairing his sword's durability, and increasing its reinforcement value.

Six times, seven times.

...However.

This bond would not last forever. Dark Repulser's reinforcement attempts count would decrease by one yet again today, with 7 left. If it were to continue being reinforced at this pace, there would be two months left... it would wear out before the arrival of winter. If that happened, there would be no choice but to switch over to a new sword to continue fighting at the frontlines.

When that time came, it was not certain that Kirito would request for me to produce a new sword once again. No, that possibility was unlikely. To forge a sword with high specifications, overwhelmingly rare... in other words, extremely highly priced ingots were necessary, but a monster drop wouldn't cost even a single col. To Kirito who was always fighting at the frontlines, participating in all of the boss battles, not to mention having a rather high chance at obtaining the last attack bonus, there should be plenty of opportunities for him to get his hands on a rare one-handed sword.

Eight times. And the right hand of mine that caused the ninth hammering sound to echo out—stopped in midair.

I felt Kirito's confused gaze on my left cheek. But I could not bear to look in that direction.

Instead of swinging the hammer down, I embraced it close to my chest. «Dark Repulser», engulfed in a silver brilliance atop the anvil, was waiting for that final hit in silence. The duration of the reinforcement effect was three minutes. If that time passed by, the glow wrapping up the blade will extinguish, and the reinforcement would result in a failure automatically.

"...I..."

What leaked out from my lips was a quivering voice unfitting of the ever cheerful smith, Lisbeth.

"...I-I won't hit it anymore... Because... be-because when the attempts count runs out, this sword's role will... it will then..."

End.

Honestly—Honestly, if I really were thinking for Kirito's sake, I would have thought it better for that day to hurry up and arrive. If he were to advance to a new sword, reinforcing from +1 again, gathering materials will get much easier. My mind understood this, but my arm refused to move. With the hammer clutched to my chest, I could only tremble softly.

Then, I felt Kirito parting from the wall. Step by step, I could hear his muted footsteps stopped right beside me. The hem of that black coat fluttered as it spread out, the swordsman went down on his knees at my side.

"...Hey, Lisbeth. I... have a hunch."

It was a situation where it would have been perfectly fine for him to go, "Hurry up and hit it!" with anger as the client, but Kirito's voice was gentle. Since that night of the day we met, when he recounted various stories to me at the bottom of that dragon's nest; nothing has changed.

"...A hunch?"

I turned apprehensively, and those black pupils shyly blinked once, right in front of my own.

"Yeah. The frontlines are still on the seventieth floor, and there's still thirty left above... but I wonder why. I have a hunch-no, a belief that when I fight the last boss of this castle, what I will be holding, is this Dark Repulser."

"...Why exactly, do you think so...?"

"Well, you see, the Cardinal System's the one who decided the title for this sword, right? «Dark Repulser», that which will repel darkness... there's no way such a name will be labeled onto anything aside from «end equipment»."

—Having said all that, he looked on at me with that impish grinning face for a bit, without any further words.

Normally, this would have been the point when I took a deep, looong breath, or jab in with a "Why are you running your mouth off like that". But for just this time alone, my lips too, twisted into a meek smile. I answered in a voice that was soft, but trembling no more.

"...That might be right. No... it will, definitely happen..."

"That's right. ...So, come on, that one last hit, finish it off with a klang."

"Yeah. I have a hunch too. This time too, will be a success."

I gently lifted the hammer that I was embracing up once again.

I inhaled a deep breath, stopped, shut my eyelids, and whispered to the sword.

—Sorry for the suspense. You, with your master, have always driven away the darkness from around me, haven't you? I'll believe too... that one day, a time when that light of yours shines upon all of the people imprisoned in this castle will arrive.

Tenderly, and thus, strongly, the hammer swung down.

Ten times.

The right hand clothed in a black leather glove firmly gripped the hilt of the «Dark Repulser +40» I held out.

Swish, swish the blade flashed with nearly no hint of its weight, dispersing a prismatic display of radiance into the air. Finally, the sword blade slid into its scabbard with a fluid sound, and its owner smiled, seemingly pleased.

"Yeah, with this, the 70th floor boss can just come at me."

"If you're going to say that, don't you dare go tumbling over accidentally right in front of the boss, like on the 69th floor. That report got on the front page of the newspaper, and even I got ashamed over it, you know."

"Y-Yes... Sorry about that..."

Before the smith, Lisbeth, with her arms folded, was the swordsman, Kirito, scratching his head. We had completely returned to how the two of us usually were; it felt somehow comforting, yet just a little lonesome.

Stifling those feelings, I stretched out vigorously.

"O-Oof... Haah, well, anyway, I'm glad it succeeded. Even if the probability was fully boosted, there are still times when it fails. No way will I be accepting another reinforcement attempt this stressful for a while."

I mentioned those lines casually, but upon hearing it, an awkward expression surfaced onto Kirito's features for some reason.

"...What's the matter?"

"N-Nah, that's... actually, just how should I say this, the timing just happened to cross over today..."

"...The timing?"

With that, the swordsman opened his storage window and stored Dark Repulser. Following that, with some swift manipulation, what materialized above the window was wrapped in a scabbard of black leather, a long sword that gave off an intense presence that I could feel, even from where I stood.

"...I was thinking that it would be nice if I could entrust the +40 for this guy to you as well..."

Those words, along with the sword which was brought before me, «Elucidator», another one that was precious to Kirito, made me gaze at him in silence for several seconds.

Haa— And I let out a deep, long sigh.