

## Chapter 6: "This is delicious!"

"This is delicious!"

Morino Nouichi said this as he drank his iced coffee. It was a graceful soliloquy said to himself. The iced coffee was a plastic bottled brand, not hand-made. Of course, he could have used the convenience store's brewing machine to have freshly roasted hot coffee, but he made sure to avoid that. The cup they give you is simply too slender and lacks stability--a simple nudge would knock it over. Thus, the plastic bottle with the cap: always safe, always effective. Its longevity was also a plus, as you could leave it for a while and it would still taste good, unlike hot coffee left out to cool.

Nouichi sat at his local convenience store's eat-in counter. The time was just past 9am. It had been raining since early that morning--perfect weather for outdoor hikikomori, a strange expression he liked to use for himself.

Nouichi considered himself an outdoor hikikomori.

His morning routine consisted of waking up early enough to be here at exactly 6:50am, and he would make his rounds around the store checking out all the new products. If nothing stood out, he would buy his usual goods: bottled iced coffee and a chocolate bar. By the time he paid, it would be 7am. The store had a counter by the entrance where customers could relax and enjoy food or drink. They were allowed to use the outlets as they pleased, so using the spot to study was okay. This area was best suited for outdoor hikikomori.

He would stand outside the door and look in to see if there were any other customers, and more often than not it would be empty. He was always the first of the day--that's why he woke up so early.

No lecture today, so Nouichi planned on sitting here all day. He was the master of the eat-in rest area of this convenience store. He always took the seat next to the window, giving him not only the best view, but the best convenience too; the toilet, garbage bin, and smoking area were all far enough so their stench distanced itself from him. The spot also had two outlets, and only one other seat next to it. However, he makes sure not to rush to this seat everyday. Nouichi would first survey the area: sunlight, check; napkin dispenser, filled; area, cleaned; table, clear... wait a second.

"Ah!"

He saw the minute remainder of some spilled juice or the other the clerk had forgotten to clean. That was close. If he had placed his things on top of that, who knows what would've happened?

He took out an emergency napkin from his pocket, unwrapped it, and used it to clean up the spill. After that, he gave the spot one more check. Table clean, all clear for landing. He placed his things on the table and took a seat.

He lifted the screen of his laptop and swiftly plugged it in without missing a beat. He removed his iced coffee and chocolate bar from the polyethylene bag and lined them up neatly next to his laptop where they wouldn't get in the way. In the same movement, he took the receipt and placed it in his pocket for safekeeping. A perfect landing, no errors.

Outdoor hikikomoris like himself were the pioneers of the new field of "digital nomads," corporate workers who set up shop in odd places like this with only their electronics and worked remotely. However, the trend of outdoor hikikomori like Nouichi had preceded digital nomads by about ten years or so. In that sense, they were the true pioneers, and the digital nomads were second generation.

Now he would spend the next two hours completely focused on the homework that had been assigned just yesterday. Well, to be precise, he would be spending the two hours just writing a rough outline of the paper, but that was enough to allow him to relax afterward.

He finished the outline pretty quickly. As he was about to take a well-deserved sip of his iced coffee, the social media app on his phone made a noise. A friend from his university had sent him a message, and he sent back a response while drinking.

He felt especially exhausted, so he took a bite of the chocolate bar as a reward and washed it down with more coffee. Now it was time for the main program. Nouichi loaded up The World on his laptop and pulled out his FMD from his bag.

In The World, Nouichi was known as Silabus, the guildmaster of the large guild Canard.

Resolving conflicts, planning events, managing new members--the guildmaster had many roles to play. Immediately upon logging in he would systematically read through all his messages asking for advice or game tips and respond politely to each one. If he had felt he had responded too strongly, he would attach a little "(^^;" next to the message to lessen its impact.

However, the most common notification he saw these days were of players quitting the guild.



For the last two or three months, players were steadily quitting The World. The reason was no secret; in June of the same year it had been announced The World R:2 would be shutting down at the end of the year. In about three more months, it would all be over.

It's not that they were quitting just the guild, they were quitting The World itself. It was painful to read so many notifications like that everyday, as seeing off old guild members is never easy.

Nouichi checked the on-screen clock and saw it was almost noon--almost time for his partner Gaspard to log on. Gaspard was the oldest member of Canard besides himself, and was an executive.

Silabus navigated to their usual meeting spot. The town's population was thin, with only a few people wandering the streets. After about ten minutes, Gaspard made his appearance.

"Sorry for being late, Silabus! Did I keep you long?"

"Nope, I just got here. How about we get going?"

The two began walking to the square. Even though it was the end of the world, they wouldn't be stopping their usual business of helping newbies. When they arrived, they set up their shop and spotted a Blademaster struggling with a dozen menus open in front of him. Telling by his equipped weapon, he was most definitely a beginner. Probably started playing right before the end of service announcement. Silabus looked at Gaspard, and then he called out to the player:

"Nice to meet you!"