SAO: Nobody Dies

Summary

Kazuto slowly opened his eyes. He saw a petite girl sitting next to his hospital bed. She smiled and said, "Welcome back. It's me, Sachi. I've been taking care of you." Oh dear, Asuna is not going to like this. AU starting at episode 14. COMPLETE.
Chapter 1: VRDP

Kirito's life bar was dropping to zero.

*It's over now.*

He heard a voice in his head. *I believe in you, Kirito.*

The bar dropped to zero.

Kirito's world went to black. It was replaced with a message that was displayed in a large red sans-serif font that spanned his entire visage:

**YOU ARE DEAD.**

Kirito had died at the hands of Heathcliff, who in real life was Akihiko Kayaba, the computer scientist and AI researcher who was the creator of SAO and the person responsible for the imprisonment of over 10,000 young souls. Heathcliff was still holding his Tower Shield and his Great Sword over the boy whom he had just defeated.

Akihiko felt a bit disappointed with the result of the battle. He had even turned off his own immortal-object protection mode and disabled all of his cheats, and still the boy could not defeat him.

But then...

No. I refuse. "Not yet."

Akihiko raised an eyebrow. "Mmm?" The boy hadn't de-rezzed yet. Why was that? This was not part of the established death protocol.

And then something happened. With Heathcliff's Great Sword still transfixed within Kirito's thorax, the Black Swordsman stood up one last time...

*What is this? Could it be possible?*

... and ran his sword through the god of this world.

It was finished. Kirito sank to the floor and began to de-rezz.

He whispered quietly to himself, "We did it, didn't we, Asuna?" He disappeared from the world in an explosion of crystal shards.

And so Kirito died.

*On November 7 at 14:55, the game has been cleared.*

Meanwhile, in a higher level of reality, one that was literally unreachable from within confines of the created universe that was called SAO, Akihiko Kayaba awoke in a medical bed located in a
remote mountain villa.

He made a small smile.

The reason he smiled was simple.

For you see, Kirito did not actually see Akihiko die.

Kazuto sensed his spirit moving up and away from the world.

What was death like? Was it simply oblivion? Or was it something else?

He felt himself floating upward, higher and higher. He could now see the Town of Beginnings far below. Higher still he saw the surrounding green environs of Floor 1, then he saw a section of the entire floor-stack, and finally all of Aincrad itself floating magnificently in the clouds.

And yet he went higher still. He felt as if he might be passing right into Heaven itself.

Time passed of unknown duration.

"Where am I?"

He found himself standing on some kind of thin translucent horizontal platform somewhere among the clouds. The sun was low in the sky, painting the passing clouds with brilliant shades of yellow and orange punctuated with gaps of darkening blue.

So beautiful.

Eventually a voice spoke quietly behind him. "Kirito-kun?"

His eyes widened in recognition of her voice. He turned and saw Asuna standing there, her fatal wound now gone, as great orange cloud-pillows rolled in the wind behind her silhouette.

He looked down in shame. "I'm sorry. I guess I ended up dying too."

Asuna gave him a teary smile. "You dummy." Then she approached him. They kissed for what they thought might be their last time.

The lovers embraced each other in the clouds. Finally Kirito asked, "Where are we? Do you know?" They both looked at the orange and blue vista that surrounded them.

Someone else spoke nearby. "A stunning view, isn't it?" The surprised lovers turned and saw a lanky man in his late 30s wearing a white lab coat. He was looking down impassively at the destruction of Aincrad, his creation.

Akihiko Kayaba.

He spoke as if talking to himself. "The SAO mainframe is in a room five floors below street level, and right now it is deleting all the data from its drives. In about 10 minutes everything in this world will disappear forever."

Asuna asked quietly, "And all the players down there in Aincrad? What happens to them?"

Akihiko continued to gaze down upon the dissolution of his creation. "You don't have to worry about them. The 6147 players who survived the game up to now were logged out a few seconds
ago."

The man in the white lab coat turned to face the pair. He had small smile. He said, "You see, I kept my promise. You should be happy."

Kirito's face darkened as he clenched his fists. "And what about the 4000 other people who had already died? What about them?"

_That smug bastard. He's the one that should die, not all those innocent people._

Akihiko looked at him with a bemused smile.

"My dear lad, they are all fine."

"Huh?"

"Nobody has died."

There was a pause.

Eventually Kirito and Asuna both said a flat "What."

Dr. Kayaba's smile broadened. He wished that he had a camera to capture the look on their stunned faces. "Like I said, nobody has died. Well, not in the sense you mean. They merely shifted up a level and woke up."

Kirito and Asuna looked at each other uncomprehendingly, then turned back to face the scientist in disbelief.

They began to yell at him. "That makes no sense!" "But, but, what about..." "That's bull[bleep]!"

The researcher in the white lab coat raised his hands up in his defense. "Please, let me explain..."

They pair weren't listening. It was because they were still yelling at him. "There is no way the authorities would have let it go on that long!" "It was over two years!" "They would have taken the helmets off!"

Akihiko quickly responded, "Oh some of them did take the helmets off right away. I anticipated that in my calculations. They did so despite that the fact that I had broadcast a solemn warning to the whole world, made at the same moment that my in-game avatar warned you on Day 1, that should any attempt be made to remove the NerveGear, that a microwave transmitter inside the NerveGear would emit a powerful focused microwave pulse that would strike the subject's brain and prevent them from ever waking up again."

"But not kill them?"

"Of course not. That would be barbaric."

The pair blinked their eyes.

The scientist crossed his arms indignantly over his white lab coat. "Oh come now. Kill them? Whatever for? It was simply a scientific experiment. What do you think I am, a monster or something?"

Kirito silently registered his opinion of that statement.
The researcher continued. "Of course I did not kill them. I merely had threatened that if the helmets were removed that they put the subjects into what I had claimed would be a permanent coma."

"A coma..?"

"As I already told you, the NerveGear emits a powerful microwave beam, which could in theory indeed fry and destroy the brain just like I told all the players. If a NerveGear helmet was dissected - and its internal self-destruct mechanism was somehow bypassed - it would confirm the threat was real. But what I had neglected to tell the players was that the microwave pulse could be focused to hit only the parts of the brain that controlled consciousness and sleep, namely the pons and the neo-cortex. The beam was focusable so that it hit only those sections of the brain, and for only a very short duration, and at a very specific frequency, in order to temporarily disrupt the higher brain functions in those locations - basically putting the subject into a dreamless sleep state. The lower functions of the brain - the medulla, the cerebellum, and so on - were completely unaffected.

"You can think of the helmet acting like an electroshock paddle when it gives a quick sharp shock to the heart to temporarily stop it from beating during surgery. The heart is still actually alive, just inactive. All it takes is a second shock to restart the heart again. Well, the NerveGear helmet can do the same thing with the brain. Once the brain has rebooted with a second pulse it simply restarts and high level neural activity is resumed. Simple."

Kirito asked, "But what about those 2000 people who died during the first month? You kept them in comas for years!"

"Well, that was anticipated by my statistical calculations."

Asuna spat back, "Those were real people, not lab rats! They had lives! You had no right to do that!"

He ignored her and went on, ". and that was why I had released those people early of course. They were no longer part of my experiment, so there was no point in my holding such a large group in comas for years for no purpose. Are you happy now?"

Asuna yelled, "No!"

Kirito was thinking. "But wait, if you did that then why didn't they just.."

The doctor anticipated. "Of course, I then sternly warned everyone else that the remaining players would suffer permanent comas if anyone else had tried to forcibly remove them from the game. No more reprieves."

Kirito understood. "I get it. So they left the helmets alone after that."

"Yes."

"And the players who 'died' in the game? Hmm.. they woke up immediately. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"Right. It was because they were no longer part of your experiment, so there was was no reason to keep them asleep anymore."

Akihiko was pleased. "Very good. My, you do catch on quickly, Kirito, just like when you discovered me as Heathcliff. I'm proud of you. Good lad."
Now it was Kirito's turn to cross his arms. "Feh."

"Honestly, you were my favorite player in SAO. I knew you'd be the one to eventually confront me on floor 100 and clear the game. It's a pity you saw through my little disguise so early and forced me to abort the experiment on floor 75. Anyway, you are correct, so yes, none of those who had 'died' in SAO actually died in real life."

Kirito re-crossed his arms in disgust. "Oh shut up. You're still scum."

Akihiko ignored the retort. Granted, the psych tests had revealed that he was a sociopath, and he wasn't fooling himself about it. It was why he was never given a security clearance to work in a Japanese national research lab and instead was forced to work in private industry.

He decided to continue justifying his actions to his favorite test subject. "Kirito, please understand, this was a very important experiment. It was a test to see if I could set up a highly complex chaotic system that could evolve and create emergent phenomena. To get it bootstrapped it needed a massive amount human input to create the necessary complexity, the statistical variations, with as many volunteers as I could, uh, get..."

Asuna snorted. Kirito rolled his eyes.

The scientist gamely kept trying to explain himself. He felt that it was important that at least one other person should understand his life's work. "Please, don't you see? I had no choice. Nothing is more chaotic and complex than the human mind. I needed that kind of input into the system to drive it, thousands of minds. But as the months went on there was little progress, and I was concerned. But during the second year things started to happen. I was so excited! You had discovered Yui, that little AI, a basic sub-system that I had completely forgotten about. She was a virtual player assistant who was part of the original game design in order to give help to players who needed it. Somehow she woke up, and she was absolutely amazing! She was a perfect example of the emergent phenomena I was hoping to see. I never would have been able to create anything like her in a million years!"

Kirito said dryly, "Well, how wonderful for you then."

Akihiko looked down again at Aincrad. Huge chunks were peeling away and dropping down into the void. They were like icebergs calving away from an Antarctic ice sheet. As he watched he kept on talking, mostly to himself now.

He said wistfully, "Even before I developed the system for the full dive environment, I dreamed of this place, a floating castle in a world that wasn't governed by earthly laws and restrictions. I had poured my life into making that world a reality. I had created this world, and I got to see something that surpassed anything I could have imagined for it.

"My steel castle floating in the sky. I don't remember how old I was when I became obsessed with it. I wanted to leave the earth, to fly to that castle. I wanted that more than anything else, for as long as I could remember."

He finally looked up again. "You know what, Kirito? I want to believe it's still out there. That somewhere, in some other world, my castle is still standing, taller than ever."

Kazuto began to feel sorry for the poor man. Although he could not forgive the grown-up Akihiko, he tried to understand and empathize with the feelings of that young boy.

Finally he said, "Yeah, maybe it still is." Asuna remained silent.
The scientist finally ended his private reverie. "Oh, before I forget, congratulations on clearing the game, Kirito and Asuna."

_I guess that's it._ He put his hands in the pockets of his lab coat, then turned to leave. "Well then, I should probably get going now."

He walked away into the clouds and he became one himself.

And the lovers were alone.

Aincrad was no more. Asuna and Kirito were now the last living entities remaining in a dead universe. They sat huddled together in silence among the clouds in the dimming sunlight.

Finally Kirito said, "So, I guess this is goodbye?"

Asuna shook her head. "Nuh-uh. This isn't goodbye at all. We are going to be together when we finally wake up. We're going to be together forever."

He smiled at her.

She thought of something. "Hey, you never told me your real name. Could you please tell me so I can find you?"

He said, "Kazuto. Kazuto Kirigaya. Last month I turned 16."

"So you're younger than me. My name is Asuna Yuuki. I'm 17 now."

"Asuna Yuuki..." He said her name again. He tried to burn it into his memory. Then he broke down. "I'm so sorry... I promised I'd save you, get you back to the real world..."

She reassured him. "It's okay. We both know we're going to wake up. I'm just happy I got to meet you here in SAO, Kazuto, and to be with you, and to live with you, and it's the happiest I've ever been in my whole life. Thank you for that, and I love you."

"I love you too. See you on the other side then?"

"Yeah."

And so for the very last time the avatars named Asuna and Kirito embraced as they dissolved into nothingness.

The universe was empty now; the only thing that remained was but a single thought.

_I love you._

The interviewer asked, "So, what you are saying is that we are all living in a simulation?"

An odd looking little man with spiky tufts of gray hair over his ears answered the interviewer's question. He was wearing a polka-dotted bow tie that was slightly askew. The bow tie was affixed to a button shirt under a frumpy yellow sweater that was under a rumpled tan sportcoat with elbow patches. "Well, yes. We are living inside a simulation, more or less." A caption appeared under him, _Dr. Julius Cohen_.

Another man wearing a properly pressed conventional suit and tie was also sitting at the table. He
also leaned forward as he spoke, "Now, Dr. Cohen, we both know that is an exaggeration." The caption read, Dr. Daisuke Yamaguchi. "Even if the Holographic Universe theory is correct - and it is far from proven at this point - that does not mean that we are living in a so-called 'simulation'. Under your theory all physical processes are still real, in the sense that are still actually happening according to the Standard Model."

The interviewer turned and asked, "So, Dr. Yamaguchi, you are saying that we are in fact are not living in a simulation like in the movie The Matrix or the SAO Incident?"

"Not literally as such, no. It is understandable why a lay-person might make that assumption when thinking about the possibility that we are living inside a Holographic Universe, but the analogy is far from perfect."

"Why is that?"

"Because real physical processes weren't actually happening in those two simulations. In the film The Matrix, Neo was not actually flying in the air, nor were those children fighting real battles with monsters in SAO. They were just imagining that they were doing those things."

The little man spoke up. "True, but..."

The television panel continued to prattle on. Sachi's favorite soap opera had ended a half hour earlier. She was irritated that she couldn't change the channel nor cut the sound on the wall panel. According to the doctors it was ostensibly to help 'stimulate the subject's neural activity', or some such nonsense.

She sat as she always did in the chair next to the bed with her book. She was proud that her beloved Kirito was given a private room. Most of the rest of the VRDP victims were relegated to the public wards.

Kirito laid in bed as he always did, with his eyes closed and his face impassive. She lifted his hands and inspected his fingernails to see if she needed to trim them again. Earlier that morning she had given him a careful shave with a razor.

She knew that she would need to give him another haircut again in about two weeks. That was tricky because of the helmet. It was why one of the facility's aides had always had insisted on being present for it. Otherwise she she took care of all his physical needs as a volunteer.

After all, she had been doing it non-stop ever since she had died in SAO and popped up. That was 17 months ago.

She checked the monitors. His glucose levels, his pulse rate, and his BP were all normal. Earlier when she had arrived that morning she had checked his chart. There was still no reports of any sign of further infections with either the catheter or the colostomy bag. A month earlier she had spotted the pending infection with the bag and immediately informed the doctors, who had praised her for catching it so quickly to prevent potentially serious complications.

She lovingly gazed upon his sleeping face.

As she sat there watching him she heard the TV panel babbling in the background again.

The little man said, "Oh not at all, Dr. Yamaguchi. I agree that the physical universe is quite real, in the sense that the various elementary particles, the protons, neutrons, and electrons and their constituent quarks and so on that make up our physical universe are indeed interacting per the Standard Model. What I'm saying is that those physical particles themselves are not real, that they
are projected. In other words.. "He waved his hands around the studio. "... that everything that you and I see here is all fake."

Dr. Yamaguchi replied, "Please, Doctor Cohen, don't use loaded words like 'fake'. I will concede that it is theoretically possible that the universe is actually a projection being emitted from some mysterious and as yet undefined 2-dimensional construct that exists at the farthest edges of our universe. But all that means is that the physical processes that we see in our daily lives actually originate from something that is one step removed from our visible 3D reality, that our everyday experience is somehow being generated from somewhere 'outside' our 3D universe."

The little man almost jumped out of his chair. He spoke excitedly to the interviewer, "Exactly! There is something outside our universe, something driving it - I won't call it a simulation out of deference to the good doctor here - but something is running our universe from the outside. Something at a higher level. Aren't you curious to know what that is? Well, I certainly am."

The other physicist sighed, "Now, we can hardly test that experimentally."

The little man rubbed his hands together, "I admit that it's reaching a bit, but I suspect that, perhaps, it is possible that..."

Sachi mentally tuned out the TV again as she closed her eyes. She began to think about the her schedule for the rest of her week.

She was planning to see Keita's mother again. That poor woman. Keita's VRDP was the worst of all the Moonlit Black Cats. She also knew that she needed to get cracking with her study tablet if she was going to pass her high school history exam. She was also happy that she already had the required signatures to sign up for Individual Study via online courseware, something that was available in 2024 for high school students.

And it was just as well, she thought, that she was able to exploit the advances in 21st century information technology in order to skip most aspects of daily high school life. It was all due to the stigma of her being branded as a Virtual Reality Displaced Person. It was a mark of shame that was shared by all of the awakened survivors of SAO who had died in that game.

*I don't need to experience high school. For social development? Whatever for?

They don't want us. I've heard the whispers, seen the disapproving looks on peoples' faces, listened to their titters and giggles, how everyone avoids us. It is because we are VRDPs: unstable elements, potentially violent, possibly suicidal, useless NEETs. Useless to society. Useless to everyone.

Well, I'm a VRDP. And I don't care. I don't need their approvals.

All I want to do is take care of you, Kirito.

I will protect you and shield you.

I will let you know that you are loved.

She gently touched his sleeping face.

It was at that moment that Kazuto had begun his coughing fit. She snatched her hand away as he slowly opened his eyes.

He grimaced and covered his face with his forearm. The bright sunlight streaming in from the
window had blinded him. It was because his eyes had not seen anything in over two years.

He heard someone exclaim "Oh!" and then quickly run to the shades to close them. Then someone dimmed the lights.

Eventually his eyes were able to focus. He saw a petite girl with long dark hair sitting next to his hospital bed. She had a beatific smile, like a Madonna in a renaissance painting.

"Welcome back, fellow traveler."

He did not recognize the girl. He asked, "Who are you?"

"It's me, Sachi."

"Sachi?"

"Yes. I've been taking care of you this whole time. You are finally home."

And now you've come back to me.

A/N:

* In this story words enclosed in [brackets] are elisions to bleep-out swear words or to redact text.

The Holographic Universe is a real theory. It is possible that our physical universe might actually be a hologram (a three dimensional 'simulation' with real physical effects) that is being generated by some strange 2D projection source at the edge of our universe. For more information search Google for 'quantum holographic universe'. Several physical experiments are now underway to prove or disprove this theory.

Personally I hope the theory is true, as it dovetails nicely with the Hubble UDF and a lot of other recent cosmological evidence (e.g., dark matter and dark energy) that, when combined together, seem to indicate that the universe was designed by some external entity who appears to be going out of their way to let us appreciate it all: A universe that contains over 100 billion galaxies, each with 100 billion stars, all spread across billions of light years, and all of which we can actually see (which by all rights ought to be impossible).

Note on SAO: This series has been on my radar for a long time. It had famously started with a strong first cour (Aincrad), only to fade in the second (ALfheim). Sugou is a ridiculously melodramatic villain, but after giving it some thought I finally came up with a way to handle him in what I think is a novel way (I dropped a couple hints in this chapter) while still making ALO fun, or so I hope.

As always, thank you for reading.

-HuuskerDu
Kazuto was disoriented. His memories were a confused jumble.

*Where am I?*

Slowly his eyes started to focus. He saw a smiling girl sitting next to him that he did not recognize.

It felt like he was still in a dream. Who was she? She wasn't Asuna. Was it Suguha? No, the face and hair were off. Could it be Yui? No, that was impossible.

"Who are you?"

"It's me, Sachi."

"Sachi?"

No, that was even more impossible.

"Yes. I have been taking care of you this whole time. You are finally home."

No, totally impossible.

Then he understood. *I must be having that nightmare again.*

He had seen Sachi so many times in his bad dreams. It was always in slow motion: The booby-trapped locked room, the horde of dark dwarf miners and granite elementals that had suddenly appeared out of nowhere, the Moonlit Black Cats being overwhelmed. Ducker dying instantly under an onslaught of pickaxes, then Tetsuo, then Sasamaru, leaving Sachi and Kirito surrounded.

In his nightmares he was always yelling as he lunged to try save Sachi, but he could never reach her in time. Over and over he saw it happen. The granite elemental slashing her back open, then her turning to face him with a gentle smile.

In that terrible nightmare she had always spoken those same last words to him, words he could not hear. Those unknown words had haunted him ever since.

And then she was gone.

*Sachi, I'm sorry. I couldn't protect you.*

It had all started two months earlier when Kirito had joined a guild called the Moonlit Black Cats at the behest of their leader, Keita, who was the president of the group's high school computer club* back in Yokohama. The members were Keita, Ducker, Tetsuo, Sasamaru, and Sachi. Sachi was the only girl in the computer club.

Shortly after Kirito had joined the Cats, Sachi had secretly confided to him her private fears. Although she had tried to put on a brave face for the benefit of the other team members, she admitted to him that she felt weak and timid, and that she was in fact very scared of the Death Game. She was fearful of the monsters. All she wanted to do was hide in the Town of Beginnings and never venture out. Because of her cowardice she admitted to him that she didn't think she was going to make it.

Kirito reassured her and told her she would survive. He resolved to watch over her and keep her
safe. He promised that he would be her guardian, her protector. He would not let her die.

His promises made her feel better, but she still couldn't sleep at night. Late one evening she
knocked on his bedroom door. He opened the door and saw her in her night clothes holding a
pillow. She said sheepishly that she couldn't sleep, and she shyly asked him if she could sleep next
to him. He said it would be fine, so she crawled in bed with him. She smiled as she closed her eyes
and slept by his side, warm and safe.

Earlier Keita had asked Kirito to be Sachi's mentor and teach her sword fighting. He did, and so as
the days and weeks went by they began to grow closer. He became her best friend, and she was
happy that she was now such an important part of his life.

But it was not to last. She died on June 22, 2023 at 5:54 PM.

Kirito was devastated by what happened. The poor girl who had looked up to him and had trusted
him, the girl who so afraid of the monsters, who had clutched to him in bed every night to keep the
monsters away, had died. He had allowed the monsters to take her.

Shortly afterward Keita committed suicide.

Kirito became like the walking wounded. He fought on alone with reckless abandon, not caring if
he lived or died.

Some months later he heard of a difficult quest that offered a rare resurrection item that could
revive a dead player. He fought like a whirling dervish to get it so that he could bring her back, but
it didn't work.

He had failed her. He had failed all of them.

He resolved to play the game alone and never join a guild ever again.

And then, on Christmas Eve, six months after her death, his SAO menu panel had chimed to alert
him that a delayed audio-recording crystal was now available. It was inside a shared inventory
page that he and Sachi had set up. He played Sachi's recording.

_Merry Christmas, Kirito. By the time you hear this, I'll probably be dead._

_How can I explain this? To tell you the truth I never really wanted to leave the Town of Beginnings,
and I knew that if I fought with an attitude like that I would end up dying some day._

_Kirito, ever since that night when you found me hiding under that bridge you kept telling me I
wasn't going to die no matter what. But what if I got killed anyway? I knew that if I died you'd blame
yourself. That's why I decided to record this for you. I set the timer on this message for Christmas because I wanted to try lasting that long, at least. I want to walk through town with you while the snow was out._

_By the way, I know how powerful you really are. Sorry, I sort of peeked when you weren't looking.
I wondered why you weren't telling the truth about what level player you really were._

_I wondered why you decided to fight with us. I never figured it out though. You know what, when I
found out how strong you were, I don't know, it made me so happy. I felt relieved._

_So even if I die promise me you'll go on living, okay Kirito? Stay alive so you can see the end of
this world and find out why it was created. Find out why a weakling like me ended up here. Find
out the reason you and I met._
Please. That's what I wish.

You said that everyone has a role to fill, that there was a reason everyone was here, even me. That made me really happy.

He had lied to her to comfort her. In reality he had felt the game was pointless and meaningless, and that her fear, pain, and death had all been for nothing.

She sang a song. Then she bade him farewell as she spoke her final words to him.

I'm so glad I met you and could be with you. Thank you. Goodbye.

He now realized that she had soundlessly mouthed those same final words to him just before she died.

The recording broke him. He was never the same after that.

Stay alive so you can see the end of this world and find out why it was created. Find out why a weakling like me ended up here. Find out the reason you and I met.

She became one of his prime motivations for clearing the game, no matter the cost to himself.

Sachi, I'm so sorry.

He looked around the room in confusion. The strange girl had put her hand under his chin. She gently turned his head to face her again.

"Kirito, relax. Look at me. Look at my face. It's me, Sachi. The Moonlit Black Cats? Do you remember?"

He blinked his eyes at her.

"Sachi...? You're alive?"

She smiled again. "Yes. We all are. I'm fine, see?"

He stared at her.

Sachi leaned forward sympathetically. "Look, I know how traumatic this must be for you. You just died a moment ago, and you you were probably fighting a terrible monster at the time. Dying like that is never easy. But you are safe now. It's over. I won't let anything hurt you. The monsters are gone."

He just kept staring at her.

The poor man must be catatonic. She tried to soothe him with her gentle words. "Kirito, wake up. It's me, Sachi. I'm okay. You're safe. The game is over."

He continued to stare in silence.

"Look, I know you must be scared right now. Believe me, I was scared too when I woke up."

That was an understatement. Seventeen months ago she had awakened from SAO in a complete
panic. She was totally disoriented. Like all SAO victims she had lost her memories during the seconds just before her actual death. She only remembered what happened immediately prior to that. The monsters. Monsters were everywhere. Ducker was being killed.

And so she woke up believing that she was still in the game. She thought that she was still fighting the monsters, so she tried to attack the orderlies who came in running to sedate her. It was a very common reaction by the VRDPs in their first waking moments thinking they were re-living their final minutes in the game fighting for their lives.

As soon as Kirito started coughing and stirring Sachi had pressed the emergency call button. She had expected that Kirito would wake up hallucinating and thrashing, thinking she was that monster who was trying to kill him, so she braced herself expecting to be attacked before the orderlies could run in to restrain him.

Be he didn't attack her. He was just staring at her.

Where are the orderlies? Why were they taking so long?

Kirito was taking his death far better than most she thought. Well, he was always strong.

She took a chance and held his hand. She spoke to him as soothingly as she could. "It's okay, Kirito. You're safe now. The monsters can't hurt you anymore. This is a normal part of the awakening process, part of what we call VRDP syndrome. Right now your is body flooded with adrenalin and cortisol stress hormones from whatever battle you were fighting. It's a normal fight-or-flight response. It makes you really jumpy and anxious. So please, just relax.

He stared.

"Kirito, look at me. I'm not a monster. I won't hurt you."

And then something happened.

Kirito suddenly and lunged and grabbed her.

Sachi tried to pull away but he was just too quick. Oh no! Help!

But wait, he wasn't attacking her.

He was hugging her.

He was sobbing. "Sachi.. oh, Sachi.. I'm so sorry. I let you die. I broke my promise."

She was relieved that he did not attack her, but she was also a bit confused. She had never heard of any SAO victim waking up from the death trauma like this. They always woke up very agitated, which was the standard initial phase of VRDP syndrome. But he wasn't acting that way. Instead he was acting like a grieving child.

She decided to set aside her questions for now. And where were those orderlies, anyway?

He was hugging her tightly. She slowly returned the hug, then she rocked him back and forth in their mutual embrace. She kept reassuring him, "It's okay. I forgive you. I know you did your best. Just relax. Everything is okay now. Shhsh."

She had an idea. She started to sing to him softly.

Rudolph, the red-nosed reindeer, had a very shiny nose.
His eyes widened in recognition of the song. He calmed down as he listened to her gentle voice, reliving the memory of it.

When she finished singing he pulled back and looked at her.

Finally he spoke.

"Sachi, it really is you."

Her smile widened. "Yes. I'm glad you finally recognized me."

She decided that he had recovered sufficiently to begin the recuperation process. "Here, let me help you take that off." Using some extra pillows she propped him upright in the bed, then she leaned over and started working on pulling off his NerveGear helmet. As she did so she kept talking to him. "I suppose I should introduce myself. My name is Sachi Watanabe. I live with my mother not far from here."

With Kazuto's help she finally pulled the helmet off his head. The hair under it fell out, and she saw that the unreachable sections along the sides of his face were matted and dirty. She made a mental note to get a bowl of water and shampoo.

She placed the heavy helmet in her lap and started to work on shutting it down.

Sitting up, Kazuto finally was able to get a good look at the girl who had taken care of him for so long.

Sachi was taller and looked older now. Kazuto had noticed that she actually had a figure under that pink sweater, which looked a bit too tight for her size. The sweater was buttoned over a white long-sleeved blouse with a Peter Pan collar, and around her neck was a thin gold chain with a pendant tucked below the sweater. On her cuffs were two small brass cufflinks in the shape of intersecting half-ellipses. Under her pleated skirt was a pair of bobbysocks and black shoes with low heels.

Her hair had grown longer. It now extended well past her shoulders. He saw that her face had not changed. She still had soft round tarame eyes under high black eyebrows, a small beauty mark on her right cheek, a dainty nose, small mouth, and pointed chin.

He wondered why he didn't recognize that face sooner, for he had often studied her kind and gentle visage in SAO when she had lain with him in bed to try to sleep. She would always gaze back at him with a smile, then quickly fall asleep.

Kazuto said absently, "You used your real name.. You shouldn't do that.."

She kept the conversation going. "Yeah, I know. The rule is that we are not supposed to use our real names in a VRMMO. But I was in a hurry when I created my character. It was Day 1 and I was rushing to get in early, so I didn't really put any thought into it." She looked down. "Besides, I didn't care if anyone knew who I really was."

He shook his head. "Sachi, you really should be more careful about your revealing your real name like that. You need to protect your identity. You don't want to be attacked by a stalker or something."

She looked up from her work on the NerveGear helmet. "Who, me? That's silly."

Me attract a stalker? I should be so lucky. Boys never gave me a second glance.
"Yes, I mean it. A pretty girl like you needs to be more careful."

_Huh? He thinks I'm pretty? Oh come on._

"Oh just stop it. You're just saying that."

He was earnest. "No, I mean it, Sachi. You've changed. I didn't even recognize you at first."

"Well, my hair is different.."

"Yeah, the longer hair looks nice. But that's not all. You've also, uh, well.." He was beginning to get embarrassed.

What was going on?

_He's averting his gaze. Why is he not making eye contact with me?_

_He's looking down. I have no idea what he is talking about. Ugh, I look so frumpy in these clothes. This sweater is too old and worn, and I do need a new one. It's gotten way too tight recently anyway, and.. wait.._

"Oh!" She grew flustered and scrunched her sweater.

His face turned red. "I'm sorry!"

She was stunned. She had never gotten that kind of reaction from him before.

True, they were close in SAO. Very close. He was her confidant, her friend, and soon he became her best friend. She was the one person to whom she could share her fears and her secrets, that she would likely not survive SAO while fighting against such terrible monsters.

The monsters gave her nightmares so she could never sleep. Eventually she had taken into crawling into bed with him. Then she slept like a baby. Looking back she felt mortified that she had done such an immature thing. It was something a young girl might do with her parents, to crawl in bed with them to keep the night terrors away. He never took advantage of her foolishness, something that she now realized could have easily happened in such a situation.

In real life she had never known her father, who had left her mother before she could remember. Her mother was forced to find work. She couldn't afford to pay for day care (which in Japan was almost impossible to find anyway), so the little girl had grown up mostly alone.

Looking back at her time in SAO, she had finally realized what was really going on in her relationship with Kirito. She was a just foolish and immature girl who had unwittingly pushed all of her burdens onto Kirito's shoulders, forcing him into becoming the father she never had.

_He acted like a father to me..._

And in doing so she had hurt him terribly. In her innocence she had foolishly given him a postmortem 'farewell present'. Looking back she now realized she could not have hurt him more if she tried.

She wanted to make amends. She started to take care of his sleeping body, tending to his needs every day, keeping him groomed and clean. She watched over him for weeks, then months, then a year.

And in doing so she had grown up. She had changed from a timid little girl into a young woman
who could now take care of herself, and she vowed to help others in turn. She volunteered to help VRDP victims and their recovery, becoming a well known fixture in the wards. But whenever she was not on duty she would spend most of her time in his room.

She often sat at his bedside and simply watched his sleeping form as she tried to imagine what his life in the game must be like, and how much he must be suffering because of what she had done.

And so she made her decision. With steely resolve she promised that would devote her life to him, to pay back her debt, even though she knew it was a debt that she could never fully repay. And so she took care of him as best as she knew how

She acted like a mother to him.

Their roles had reversed.

And now that he was awake? She knew that their roles were about to change again. She did not yet know what form that would take.

No matter. She would follow his lead wherever it went and no matter the consequences to herself. She would do anything he wanted to pay back that debt.

She knew was that had to devote herself to Kirito for his own needs, not her own. She would follow him anywhere, do anything, in any role he wanted for her.

*He thinks I'm pretty? I never heard those words from a boy before.*

He turned back sheepishly. "I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to be so rude like that."

"It's all right. You're just waking up and you're still loopy. You're just making silly talk, don't worry about it."

"Still, I'm sorry."

She waved him off. "I said forget it. You just surprised me a little, that's all. I don't see any boys much. It's because the school I attend is girls only, and I go there for only a few hours a week for PE and to take tests, and I don't have any friends there anyway."

"School? It's been so long I forgot that school even existed."

"Yeah, since SAO I don't care for it either. Most VRDP's don't. I heard rumors about the government trying to create a new special school for VRDPs, but I'm not sure many will enroll. Meanwhile I spend most of my time as a volunteer in the wards taking care of the SAO victims. I've been studying for an LPN certificate. Volunteering in the wards like this is actually part of my training."

"Really? That sounds great."

"I really like it. As I said I don't see boys much. The only boys I see regularly all wear NerveGear helmets, and they never say anything nice to me."

They both laughed.

"Well, you have plenty of time to recuperate before you need to worry about school or anything. It takes a full day for your memory to fully re-integrate, so for now just lie back and get some rest."

She added, "Oh, you are going to have a lot of physical rehab ahead too. At least two months
minimum. Don't worry, I'll help you with everything you need."

He nodded and laid back down in the bed.

Then he remembered.

He sat bolt upright. "Asuna!"

The beeping on the monitor increased rapidly. Sachi leaned forward and checked the med panel. She saw that his BP and pulse rate had shot up.

Sachi asked, "Who is Asuna?"

He started to remember. Clouds. Aincrad disintegrating.

A kiss.

He tried to climb out of bed. Sachi gently but firmly pushed him back down. He was too weak to resist. He struggled under her gentle but strong hands.

"Please, I need to see Asuna!" His voice was hoarse.

"Kirito, just settle down."

He rasped, "I need to go!"

"Relax. Do you even know where you are going? You don't even know where she is. She's probably in another facility. We only have 500 patients here, less than 10% of the total."

His eyes were pleading, "Please..."

"Did she die with you?"

He thought a moment, then shuddered.

He said softly, "Yes."

Sachi understood. It must be one of his teammates in his guild. They must have just died together side-by-side in battle. That was always hard.

She stood up. "Okay. Look, let me get you some water for your throat. I don't know why the attendant isn't showing up yet. I'll get your water then we'll talk about your friend and I'll see what I can do to help you find her."

Where are those stupid orderlies? I hit the emergency-call button five minutes ago! It's lucky his VRDP agitation is so minimal. I've never seen such a mild case. Still, I'm going to give Nurse Aki a stern lecture about those orderlies slacking off.

Then the PA sounded overhead.

All personnel, this is a Code Orange alert. Medical teams please report to your stations immediately. Repeat Code Orange.

Sachi knew that Code Orange indicated a that a major disaster had just occurred, like an earthquake or a tsunami. What was happening?
Kazuto asked, "What's going on?"

She ran to the door. "Don't worry about it. I'll get your water and be right back."

She opened the door. A flurry of people could be seen running in the hallway.

Kazuto could see the commotion outside. "Hey, what is it?" He tried to sit up.

Sachi whirled around and raised her hand. "Don't try to get up! I'll be right back."

Kazuto was now fully sitting up. He had only one thought on his mind.

*Asuna, where are you?*

Meanwhile, Sachi was running down the hall. She spotted Nurse Aki ahead with her long brown hair and glasses. The nurse was bent down grabbing supplies from the med station.

Sachi ran up to her. "Aki-san, what's going on?" Shouts and yells were coming from the public ward just ahead.

Aki didn't look up as she gathered the supplies. The tall woman said quickly, "Several of them are apparently waking up from the death trauma. More than a few from the sound of it."

"Which ones?" Sachi guessed that it was probably a TPK, maybe a bad boss fight. She knew the aftermath could be nasty. There could now be a dozen panicky patients who were now trying to claw their way out their beds.

The chaos grew. The shouts and yells coming from the public ward were getting louder and louder.

Aki began to run down the hall while cradling a bundle of med supplies in her arms. Sachi had her own armload and tried to keep up. She asked again, "Who is it? Which ones?"

Aki turned and yelled "I don't know! Just hurry!"

Sachi caught up with Aki just outside of the Public Wards section. These were a set of three long rooms, each with 150 medical gel beds, and each bed containing an SAO victim.

As a volunteer Sachi was very familiar the layout of the wards, having spent a thousand hours in them while tending to needs of the SAO victims. She knew that monitors and security cameras were everywhere. Power to the room came from two large redundant uninterruptible power supplies (UPS) driven by a pair of Daimler-Benz diesel generators with 10,000 gallon fuel tanks that could let them run for a week without resupply. A third short-term emergency battery UPS was located in a closet within each room.

Each bed was the same: an adjustable medical bed with a gel mattress to prevent bed sores, a BP/pulse vitals monitor, an IV stand, a flat panel showing status information, and a small nightstand to place flowers and pictures. Rails ran along the ceiling to support temporary privacy screens when visitors were present.

Each NerveGear helmet was plugged into an RJ45 jack that led to a 4-port 100GBASE-T switch under each nightstand. Port 1 was for the helmet, and ports 2-4 split the network connection between three main routers, each of which led to three different IT rooms that in turn connected to three different WAN carrier backbones, all of which took three different routes across the city to converge finally on the Argus main headquarters.
The final path to the SAO servers was within the Argus headquarters somewhere. Nobody knew precisely where the servers were actually located. Public records indicated they were in a basement five levels below street level, but given the large uplink sat dishes on the roof it was possible that the real servers were moved and weren't even in the same building anymore. Akihiko Kayaba had warned in his worldwide announcement on Day 1 that any attempt to interfere with the final link to the building or cut its power would trigger the microwave beams in all the NerveGear helmets.

During the first week of the incident the JGSDF engineers took a chance. Late at night they secretly broke in to the first floor of the locked building. They had determined that all the other floors and access points to the elevators, stairs, and roof were indeed booby trapped. Sensors, pressure plates, and infrared beams were everywhere. There were probably several other security systems as of yet unidentified as well. Their infiltration triggered a recording from Akihiko that announced that any further breech attempts would trigger the helmets. The JGSDF determined that it was too dangerous to proceed any further.

And so the links were left alone.

Sachi braced herself and entered the first ward. Simultaneous VRDP awakenings were always bad and often caused injuries to the patients and to the medical staff. She had heard about the nasty boss fight on Floor 25 where twenty players had died, and if this was a similar case she knew that this one would be bad, with violence and chaos in the wards. One death-awakening could be handled, or even two or three. But multiple death-awakenings could rapidly spiral out of control and turn the whole ward into a madhouse.

Aki and Sachi reached the outer door, which was closed. They couldn't hear anything except an incredible din of noise. They both took a deep breath and prepared to rush inside.

To Sachi it felt like she was back in SAO again standing just outside a dungeon door with her weapon. Her sense of deja-vu was strong.

But this was not SAO, and she was not a scared little girl anymore. She was no longer Sachi, the timid 14 year old lancer of the Moonlit Black Cats. She was now Sachi Watanabe, 16 years old, and a VRDP Care Volunteer. She knew her duty. There were people inside who needed her, people who were disoriented, panicky, and flailing as they fought the shadow monsters that still surrounded them. She needed to help restrain and sedate them as soon as possible.

The old Sachi had trembled at that door. But the new Sachi did not. In her new maturity she was neither reckless nor heedless of the danger that she knew was just beyond that door. She ran in knowing her duty, and she remained focused on that.

She went inside.

She saw hundreds of patients inside. They were awake.

All of them.

But there was no violence.

None at all.

Instead they were all laughing, back-slapping, high-fiving, hugging, whooping, or glad-handing each other. Some were standing alone or just laying up in bed with silly grins on their faces.

She saw the flustered medical staff trying to check their vitals as the patients pulled out their IVs and crawled over each others' med beds in joyful, loud, and sometimes teary embraces.
It was a scene of pure unadulterated joy.

Sachi knew what must have happened.

*Yes! Someone cleared the game!*

She jumped and made her own whoop for joy.

"Yahoo!"

She hugged Nurse Aki, who was standing next to her and looked bemused by the whole scene.

An older boy that Sachi didn't recognize (who she had later learned was a player with the handle Klein) was also standing right next to the pair. He saw the hug, so he decided to celebrate his freedom by joining in. Before Nurse Aki could react he bent her backwards and plastered a kiss right on her lips. There was a flash of light as someone took a picture with their smart phone.

That photo was uploaded to Facebook a minute later.

In ten minutes it went viral in Japan.

In an hour it went worldwide.

The photo looked almost exactly like the famous photograph taken by Alfred Eisenstaedt on V-J Day (August 14, 1945) at the end of World War II of the sailor who had grabbed and kissed a passing nurse during the wild impromptu celebration in Times Square.

The next day that photograph was displayed everywhere, in headlines and in banners in news media bureaus from New York to Beijing, all celebrating their freedom in what would later be called 'S-F Day'.

Poor Nurse Aki never quite lived it down.

Sachi quietly re-entered Kazuto's private ward. She silently closed the door behind her to muffle the noise outside.

Kazuto was still sitting up in bed.

He looked very grumpy.

"You forgot my water."

She didn't respond. She was just looking at him.

He crossed his arms. "Well? I'm thirsty."

She approached him.

He asked "Hey, did you find out anything about Asuna?"

She didn't respond.

She continued to approach.

Finally, she spoke. She said quietly, "You did it..."
"Did what?"

She was standing right next to his bed. "You cleared the game..."

"Huh? Uh, yeah, I guess I did."

"Oh, you wonderful, wonderful..."

She broke down and grappled him, bowling him over. "Whoa!"

She lost her footing and tumbled into bed with him.

They were now in the bed together with her arms wrapped around him. Tears flowed down her face. "You did it! I knew you would! I knew it!"

He patted her head. "Okay, okay, calm down. Yeah, I busted Akihiko Kayaba on floor 75."

She looked up at his face. "I'm so happy you're back."

"Me too. Uhm, look, I know this was a thing between us in SAO, but can you please get off me?"

He chuckled, "Or do you need a bed buddy again to keep the monsters away?"

She finally noticed they were in bed together. She felt mortified. She quickly got up and brushed herself off. She was totally flustered, her face turning red.

"Oh! Sorry... I got carried away... I'm sorry. It's just so crazy out there. I guess I got caught up in the mood. I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

The muffled commotion could still be heard outside.

She grinned again. "You should see what's happening out there. It's nuts."

He sighed, "Yeah, I can imagine."

"Do you want me to keep them away?"

"Oh god please yes. I don't want to see any media or anyone."

"You got it." She turned and looked up at the TV panel. The beginning of the news bulletin alert was already scrolling by in big red letters at the bottom of the screen.

"And please tell me where Asuna Yuuki is. I have to see her."

"Okay. I'll do my best to find her for you." He didn't need to worry about a teammate who died with him, she thought. If this Asuna person had woken up from the death trauma as well adjusted as he was, then she should be just fine too. None of the newly awakened who did not die had shown any sign of VRDP syndrome either. Still, it was kind of him to be so concerned about another team member.

Then she remembered something.

"Oh! Your family! I need to contact Midori and Suguha right away. I have to tell them you are awake. I'm sure they will want to come see you as soon as possible."
He glanced up at the news alert bulletin, which by now was being broadcast on every channel. "I'm pretty sure they already know by now. They are probably on their way here right this second."

Sachi nodded, "Of course."

She thought a moment, then sat down on the chair next to him. "Look, we might not have much time." She scooted her chair closer.

"Time for what?"

She lowered her voice. "Listen, there are some things I need to tell you before they get here."

"What kind of things?"

She hesitated, trying to gather her thoughts.

"Uhm, well, first of all, when I came back your sister didn't take it very well."

"Really? Why not?" Kazuto had noticed that Sachi had called his step-mom 'Midori'.

Her face became serious and she looked down. "A lot of things happened during the years that you were gone."

He grew concerned. "Like what? Please tell me."

And so she did.

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A/N:

* The term 'high school student' can colloquially refer anyone attending a secondary education institution, particularly a combined one. All it means is that Sachi was at least 13 when she entered SAO, and because nearly a year had passed since SAO started before she had left the story she could have been as young as 14 at that point, and that is how I am playing her here. (She is 16 now.) Otherwise Sachi would have to be much older than both Kirito and Asuna, which does not match her appearance in SAO.
The Stepmother and Cinderella

August 16, 2023 - 15 months ago.

It was a beautiful sunny day with only a few clouds in the sky. On the air could be heard the delightful squeals of small children chasing each other in a park across the street. A gentle breeze came up to move the branches of the cherry trees, which let out a pleasant sigh.

A young man was sitting on a porch with a perfect view. He was dressed in overalls and was wearing a ball cap.

A red-crested cardinal fluttered over to the porch and landed on the railing right in front of the person in the chair. It was only a couple feet away. The bird tucked its red head under a wing to clean it, then turned to face the person in the chair.

The bird tilted its head sideways, then it hopped right into his lap. It stole a breadcrumb that had been laying there. Then it flew away.

The person in the chair did not move.

There was a knock on the door. A woman got up and invited the visitor to come inside.

"Good afternoon, Sachi. How are you today?"

Sachi was holding a shopping bag. "I'm fine, Mrs. Hayashi. It's a wonderful day outside."

"It certainly is."

The girl walked in. "I bought the pumpkin bread that you wanted from the bakery. It's fresh baked."

"Oh that's wonderful. My, you picked some pretty wildflowers."

"Thank you. I got them from my back yard. I thought Keita might like them."

"Yes, I am sure that he will love them. I'll go get a vase. You can put the bread on the counter."

Sachi went in to the kitchen and put down the bag and removed the wrapped loaves. The woman returned with an empty vase and gave it to Sachi, who used a pair of scissors to trim the stems diagonally and fit them into the container. Then she used a kitchen knife to cut a slice from one of the loaves. She picked up the slice and spread some butter on it, then placed it on a small plate and covered it with a paper napkin.

She took the vase and the plate and walked out onto the sunlit side porch. She placed the vase on a small stand within view of the chair, then she sat in a second chair next to the former leader of the Moonlit Black Cats.

Sachi held up the plate. "I brought you some fresh pumpkin bread, see?" She unwrapped the napkin and held the still-warm slice under his nose. "Doesn't it smell wonderful?"

There was no reaction.

She broke off a small piece. She touched the piece to his lips. His mouth opened a bit. She then
carefully placed the piece on his tongue.  
He slowly began to chew it.  
"I knew you'd like it."

She continued to feed him pieces of the bread as she went on with her one-way conversation. "You know, I think this is the best day we've had all summer. Don't you agree?" After a pause she gestured at the vase. "Look, I brought you some wildflowers. I picked them myself. Do you like them?"

Mrs. Hayashi quietly watched the one-way conversation from the doorstep.  
Eventually she went back inside.

Sachi sat with Mrs. Hayashi in the foyer. She sipped her tea. "You know, I think he's improving."

Keita's mother said with some anxiety, "It's been months." She looked down. "I'm starting to wonder if my son will ever come back to me."

Sachi leaned forward to give words of encouragement. "I'm sure he will."

"Really? Do you think so?"

"Yes, I do. It just takes time, that's all. This is a new experience for all of us, this VRDP syndrome. We each reacted differently and recovered at different rates. Do you remember how wiggly I was at first?"

"Oh yes, I remember. You were in a terrible state."

June 29, 2023 - 17 months ago.

It was one week after the Cats' awakening. Mrs. Hayashi and the other parents were finally allowed to see their children in the Acute Recovery Ward.

Ducker remained sullen and listless. Tetsuo was still wild eyed, with outbursts of aggression. Sasamaru had Tourette's Syndrome. Keita remained completely catatonic. Sachi was still coming down from her initial panic attack after she had fought the orderlies who had tried to restrain her.

Five days after awakening she was still jumpy and twitchy, her face haggard, her hair unkempt, with dark black cycles under her eyes. Her stress levels remained highly elevated. She still had not been able to sleep since waking up.

The lack of sleep caused her to have hallucinations. Eventually she had to be sedated. By the end of the first week the hallucinations had mostly subsided, but the doctors were still concerned about her inability to sleep without a strong sedative.

Meanwhile, the government was insisting on interviewing and debriefing the VRDP victims as soon as possible. It was because the fugitive, Akihiko Kayaba, was still on the loose, and the government was anxious for any information they could get on his whereabouts. It was assumed that he was still somehow connected to the game and was monitoring it closely. It was possible that he was even an active participant.

Shortly after their failed break-in attempt at Argus headquarters, the JGSDF was tasked to find out
if Kayaba was still hiding inside the building. At first the mission seemed impossible, for there was no possible access into the booby-trapped building.

Then the engineers hit upon an idea: Check the water usage. They tapped into the water mains and sewer systems at their entrance to the building and placed sensitive electronic monitors to measure water consumption. After a week there was almost no water usage, not even a toilet flush. The conclusion: No one was inside.

The fact that no information was coming out of the game was very frustrating. Other than a basic log that displayed the active player roster, and a second log showing the time and floor number of each victim's death in the game, nobody knew what was happening inside. The only real source of information came from interviewing the VRDPs.

June 30, 2023 - 17 months ago.

Seijirou Kikuoka sat at a small desk in the interview room. The room had no windows and was bathed in a soothing yellow light. A round chair was situated in front of the desk. He was a tall thin man in his late 30s wearing eyeglasses and a business suit.

Kikuoka adjusted his glasses as he read the dossier folder to prepare for the next interview. He was shaking his head.

He worked in the new Ministry of Internal Affairs Telecommunications Bureau, Virtual Division. His current primary duty was to interview and debrief the VRDP victims in order to gather information on the SAO Incident.

He was an ideal person for the task, not only because of his previous experience in giving counseling and training, which gave him good skills as an interviewer, but also because of his martial arts skills. A few VRDPs had a tendency to suddenly lash out violently without warning, and this allowed him to disable any sudden attacks to prevent any harm to himself or others.

Kikuoka had doubted that his martial arts skills would be required for his next interview session. He pressed his mic and said, "Please bring her in."

The door opened and a girl hesitantly entered the room. Her eyes were dark and bloodshot.

"Please, Miss Watanabe, sit down. Can I get you anything?"

She paused, then sat in the offered chair. Her fingers idly twisted her hair in ragged knots.

"Would you like some tea perhaps?"

Another pause, then she shook her head. She simply looked down at the floor while avoiding any eye contact.

_That poor girl, she's just a child._ He checked the dossier: Sachi Watanabe, age 14, single child living with her mother. Above average intelligence, some computer skills, type INTP in the Myer-Briggs system (a rare category), with anomalous scores on the MMPI-2 in the D, Hy, Pa, Pt, and Si scales. _She's introverted and smart, but she's still pretty messed up._

He clasped his hands together on the desk. "Miss Watanabe, I know this has been very hard for you, and I know that you are still recovering, but I have some questions for you. I want to help you, to see if we can find out what happened to you. Do you think you can do that?"
She continued to look at the floor in silence.

"Please, Miss Watanabe. It is important that you try to help us. So that we can help you. We want to learn more about who did this to you and why."

At the word 'why' she looked up. Then she repeated the word. "Why..

He sighed, "Yes, why. Do you think you can help us? Then maybe we can try to learn the answers, together."

She began to get agitated. She stood up. "It makes no sense! Why create that world? Why did I end up stuck there? Why did all of those terrible things happen to me? Why?"

Kikuoka got up and walked around the desk. "It's okay." He gently placed his hands on the scared young girl's shoulders. He spoke soothing words. "I understand. We have a lot of questions to ask you, but I know that you have a lot of questions too. Let's work together." Poor thing. She's the same age as my own daughter.

The petite girl looked up into his eyes, pleading, searching for answers. "Then please sir, tell me why? Why did he do that to me? Why did I get hurt like that? Why was I killed? I didn't do anything wrong." She clutched his suit jacket. "I didn't do anything wrong! I didn't!"

He said softly, "I know. Please, sit down."

"I'm sorry, sir. I just don't understand why any of this happened to me."

As the case officer walked back to his desk he felt a sense of obligation to the girl. I should try to give her an explanation, or at least the best one I can muster. She deserves that. "I understand your frustration. I want to help. Please, sit."

She did.

He leaned back in his chair. "Okay, I don't normally do this, but let me give you a little bit of my personal philosophy. Maybe it might help you. The truth, Miss Watanabe, is that I believe that the game is a kind of simulation, a microcosm if you will, of the kinds of things that happen in our real lives, only placed in a fantasy setting and simplified. Yes, life is unfair. Bad things can happen to us and do happen to us, for reasons we don't understand. They happen even when we don't deserve it and we think that we have done nothing wrong."

"But sir, there's no purpose to it. The whole thing, being trapped in the game, it's so meaningless."

He looked up at the ceiling. "Actually, I personally believe that there is a purpose to everything in life. We just don't know what that purpose is sometimes. That's my opinion, anyway." He leaned forward. "You see, I believe that we were all placed on this earth for a reason. We all have a purpose. You do too, Miss Watanabe. I believe that you were put in that game for a reason. A reason that perhaps you don't fully understand. At least not yet."

She looked at him. "A reason?"

"Yes. There was Kayaba's reason, which we don't know yet, but I think there was also a higher reason. A higher purpose. We know that Kayaba had created this little universe, one that was completely controlled by him. SAO is nothing more than a discrete finite automaton [DFA] consisting of pure information, a system that was actualized on the Argus physical mainframes, all running under well-defined logical rules and controlled from the outside, by him. He remained outside the system. He was controlling and watching the game, watching everything.
"Well, I believe that our real universe works that way too. Just like SAO, we live inside a closed finite system, one that also operates under well defined rules and principles. There are many famous people like Isaac Newton, Joannes Kepler, and Albert Einstein, who have helped us to discover those rules.

"And that system is being operated from the outside, at a higher level, a place that we can't see for ourselves. It's just like how you couldn't see outside the boundaries of SAO even though you knew that a much bigger world existed outside of it. Well I believe that there is another place, call it 'Heaven' or whatever you want to name it, that is bigger than our own reality, bigger in ways we cannot possibly begin to imagine.

She was thinking. "I see. So you think someone is watching us even now. From this outside place. This so-called 'Heaven'."

"Yes, I do."

"Really? Can you prove that?"

"Well, it's a complicated philosophical argument. Unfortunately we don't have time for it here. It has to do with quantum mechanics and the act of observation actualizing events by collapsing the wave function into a single well defined state. Events in QM don't come into existence until they are first observed. Sounds weird, I know, but basically observation is the key to everything. The key to existence. The reason is that if something is not observed it literally does not exist in the QM sense. I say, 'I think, therefore I am', and since I am aware of myself right this moment then someone must be observing me doing it.

"I admit it's a gross oversimplification, and the argument is far more technical than that. Anyway, we don't want to get off track." He glanced down at a second dossier that was hidden under a folder on his desk. It was for the notorious game 'beater', Kirito.

"The point is, Miss Watanabe, I think that you had a purpose in being in SAO, and together you and I are going to try to discover that purpose." Kikuoka pulled out the second dossier and opened it.

Kirito's real name in the dossier was Kazuto Kirigaya, a VRMMO enthusiast. He also rated INTP on Myers-Briggs (estimated), the same rare category as Watanabe. It was a rather extraordinary coincidence given that less than than 3% of the population was in that particular category.

The dossier contained a summary of the results of previous interviews with VRDPs who knew of Kirito. The interviewees had all reported the same thing: he was a reviled and hated beta-tester, one who cheated by taking advantage of special privileged information that he had gleaned during the beta-test phase. Kirito was the beta-test cheater: The Beater. Because of his reputation he always played solo.

Kikuoka felt that the reaction of the other players was foolish. If they really wanted to escape the game, he reasoned, and if Kirito had the best chance doing that successfully, then logically they should be helping him as much as possible, not ostracizing him.

Jealousy, spite, hatred, fear. All born out of ignorance. The human condition never changes, Kikuoka thought ruefully.

But all the available information that he had about Kirito was only second hand. Nobody with any
direct experience with Kirito had been interviewed yet. Either they were still in the game, or they had died but were still too mentally disturbed to give any useful info, or they were just flat out lying. For example, a player named Diavel, another beta-tester according to the dossier, had claimed to have worked directly with Kirito in clearing floor 1, but the information he had given was internally inconsistent.

Kikuoka knew that Sachi Watanabe had died in a TPK during a fight on floor 23 that happened about a week ago. The other players who died were so far either too incapacitated or too uncooperative to give any useful info. But one, named Ducker, did give his interviewer some useful information on Kirito.

Ducker had claimed that Kirito had joined their party, a 5-person group called the 'Moonlit Black Cats'. Sachi Watanabe was the only female member, and Ducker had said that she and Kirito had become close friends. He also said that he spotted them sleeping together and that they had become lovers.

Now, if those claims were true (a big if), then this would be a major breakthrough. It meant that Sachi Watanabe had a stronger personal connection to Kirito than anyone else in the game. If the claims were true then she knew Kirito - the famous game 'beater' who had the best chance of clearing the game and freeing the other victims - so she might be a very important person of interest.

The other information on Kirito was still conflicted. Kikuoka suspected that this young girl might be the key to unlocking the mystery of who Kirito really was. Once Kirito was understood there was a good chance of learning more about Kayaba himself, for surely the god of that world would be very interested in watching the person who appeared to be SAO's best player.

"Now, Miss Watanabe, please listen carefully. Let's figure out what happened to you. And in doing so maybe we can even try to figure out the reason why it happened. Would you like that?"

"Yes sir, I would."

"Good girl. Now, please, this is important. I need you to tell me everything that you know about a beta-test player with the handle 'Kirito'."

She looked down. "Kirito. Yes, I know him, sir."

"Yes, I am aware of that. He's still inside the game."

"I know that too, sir. He is still trapped in the game."

"Yes. I'm sorry."

"Not half as sorry as I am."

"Really? Please tell me why."

She looked up at him. "I.. I was an idiot. I messed up."

"Messed up?"

She looked down. "I left him a note. I was stupid."

"In case you died, yes?"
"Yes. In case I died."

"But you will see him again so you can explain it. You died and left that universe, then you popped up a level and woke up here, and this is your second life. You have a second chance to make things up with him."

"Yes, but.."

He mused thoughtfully, "You know, if more people knew that there was a life beyond this one, they might behave a bit differently towards each other, don't you agree?"

She jumped out of her chair again. "I know! I know I have a second life. But I made a mistake! Oh, that note is going to absolutely devastate him. Argh, why did I do that?"

"It's not your fault, Miss Watanabe. You didn't know. You didn't know that you and he would have second life together."

"A second life..."

"One day he will wake up and find you very much alive. You'll be together again."

She slumped in her chair.

"Wait, doesn't that make you happy?"

"No."

"But why not?"

She looked up at him with pleading eyes.

"Sir, it's going to hurt him so badly. On Christmas Eve he'll be destroyed. I made a terrible blunder."

"I see."

"I have no idea what to do about it. How can I undo my mistake? How can I fix this?"

"Hmm."

"There is no possible way I can make amends to him for what I've done. How could I? What can I do to make up for this?"

He steepled his fingers together thoughtfully.

"Okay, I understand your predicament. Hmm. Well, let's discuss this." He pushed a button on his mic.

"Nurse, please cancel all my other interviews for today."

_October 20, 2023 - 13 months ago._

With Sachi's small size she could barely see over the bundle of groceries that she was carrying. Mrs. Kirigaya had her own bundle and walked up the steps in heels. She fumbled with her latchkey to open the front door. Using her shoulder for leverage she started to awkwardly pull open the outer
screen door with her elbow, but then it slipped and started to close again.

Sachi jumped forward. She pulled open the screen door with her teeth while holding the huge load.

Mrs. Kirigaya chuckled at her door-opening heroics. "Oh Sachi, you don't need to do that."

Sachi grunted something as she waited for Mrs. Kirigaya to finish unlocking the main door. They went inside together.

Mrs. Kirigaya hummed a pleasant tune as she and Sachi unpacked groceries in the kitchen. After they were finished Sachi said, "Well, I'm going outside to finish the windows."

"Thank you so much, dear."

"It's no trouble at all."

"You know, I really feel like I ought to be paying you for all this."

"No, I won't accept anything."

"But please.. you've done so much. And you've taken such good care of my poor boy. You don't need to feel like you need to replace him too."

"Nope. This is all part of my volunteer work. You're right, you don't have a son to do these chores. So it's my duty to help."

"Honestly, he wouldn't do half the chores you do even if I ordered him. You are really such a dear."

"Oh, it's nothing."

"And thank you for the meal that you served last night. The teriyaki was wonderful."

"My pleasure. You really shouldn't be eating frozen dinners and take-out so much."

Mrs. Kirigaya sighed, "Well, with my work schedule what else can I do?"

Sachi looked around the room. "Now where is that stupid cat? He's overdue for a claw trimming again. We can't have him scratching the furniture."

"Yaya must be with Suguha again. Honestly, the way that girl clings to that cat you'd think they were married. Well, I need to get back to work writing my computer magazine article. I'll be downstairs at the computer probably for the rest of the evening. You can let yourself out with the key when you are done."

"I'll be sure to lock it. Oh, do you still want me to try to buy those tickets using your credit card when the box office opens tomorrow?"

"Oh yes. Thank you for reminding me. That play has gotten such wonderful reviews. The tickets will probably sell out fast. You'll need to get in line early to get seats for the main section."

"Will do."

"And get four tickets."

"Four?"
"Four. You are invited too, of course."

Sachi pleaded, "But Mrs. Kirigaya, those tickets are expensive. I couldn't possibly.."

"No, I insist. Given all you've done it's the least I can offer in return." She smiled, "You don't give me a lot of options to thank you, you know."

Sachi looked down. "Ma'am, if I go to the play with you and your husband then you know that Suguha, well.."

"Yes?"

"Well, you know she won't go if I do..."

Mrs. Kirigaya put her hands on her hips. "Oh Suguha is going to that play all right. I will tell Minetaka to pick up her insubordinate daughter and carry her to the theater under his arm if I have to. I am simply fed up with her."

"Oh ma'am, no, it's better if I don't go..."

"You are DEFINITELY going! Frankly, I am getting sick and tired of Suguha's moody teenage behavior. If she wants to act like a child around you then she'll get treated like one. You are both going. That's final."

Sachi bowed. "Yes ma'am."

"You might want to wear something nice. You can use my card to buy whatever you think you like."

"No, I couldn't..."

"Do it for me. Honestly, you look so pretty when you dress up." She laughed, "Cinderella needs a gown to go the ball, yes?"

Sachi smiled a bit at the mental image of herself.

Mrs Kirigaya mused, "It's a pity that Suguha's been acting like your evil step-sister. It's so childish. And she's been putting on weight. I know she's naturally curvy but she has too much padding now. Look at you, you're so naturally thin, and you are developing such a darling figure."

"Oh ma'am, please. Suguha isn't too heavy. You shouldn't say things like that."

"Well, what do you expect me to say about her? She sits in her room all day with that cat and eats fig newtons. She won't swim, she won't practice kendo, she won't do her chores or help cook. All she does is sit in her room."

Sachi looked down. "I know. Maybe I should just do volunteering at the hospital..."

Mrs. Kirigaya got her dander up again. "No! Absolutely not! I won't have that little drama queen chase you out of my home!"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, I need to get to work on that magazine article. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Mrs. Kirigaya."
Kazuto's stepmother went down the stairs to her basement home office and closed the door.

Sachi found the kitty-claw trimmers in a drawer. The next step was to find Yaya, which meant going upstairs.

Sigh. She knocked on Suguha's bedroom door. "It's me. I need Yaya for his trim."

A muffled voice came from inside the room. "Go away."

"Please. You know I can just come in if I have to. Your mother said..."

The door swung open. Sugu was in a bathrobe holding the cat. She raged, "I know what mom said! Here you are, Little Miss Perfect, go take him!" She tossed the tortoise shell cat at Sachi, who instinctively caught it. The door slammed shut.

Sachi went downstairs and wrapped Yaya in a towel for his claw trimming. She sat on a chair in the kitchen and petted the cat.

"She hates me, Yaya. What do I do?"

The cat gave a cheerful meow in reply.

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**A/N:**

One of my concerns in writing this story was that I was uncertain in canon what Kirito's feelings really were with respect to Sachi. He was definitely acting like a father to her in episode 3 but there was no overt romance seen going on between them, and in the LN (Vol 2) Kirito had narrated that their shared bedtime was tender but always platonic (althoughironically it was more intimate than was shown in episode 3). So was he ever actually in love with her?

Then I found out that during an interview with Reki Kawahara he had stated that Sachi was in fact Kirito's first love. Although Kawahara tended to reverse himself a lot, it still gave me more confidence to press on with this story.

After much thought, I decided to change the ending. Originally I had intended the story to go dark, with Sachi declining almost down to Nice Boat territory and then recover in a bittersweet ending with her being redeemed before dying again. But as I worked on chapter 2 her character started to gel in my mind, with her voice yelling in my head "Hey! I'm not like that!" And then in my research I had learned that there is a notable Kirito x Sachi fandom out there. Search Google Images for 'SAO Sachi Kirito' and you will see what I mean. That made me happy that I changed my mind.

As always, thank you for reading.

-HuuskerDu

P.S. A person with the handle 'Akiie-chan' at DeviantArt did a series of drawings entitled "Sword Art Online Sachi's awake" that are simply amazing. The one with Sachi with the longer hair and the nurse volunteer outfit (with a pink sweater!) blew me away. Somebody is reading my miimind! The gallery also has an older Sachi wearing a beautiful blue and white dress. (You can assume she wore that to the play.) She was also given a fairy-winged long-eared ALO form that I just love.

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**A/N Update:**
This story follows the stylistic and linguistic conventions of the official English translation of the Light Novels (LNs). Like the LNs, I don't follow the otaku conventions of putting the surname ahead of the given name, appending honorific suffixes ubiquitously (-kun, -san, etc), or inserting Japanese terms everywhere without definitions. I might use a name suffix occasionally for emphasis (e.g., -chan for endearment), and if I use a Japanese word that is relevant to the plot I will translate it (e.g., onii-chan). (By the way I did a search for onii-chan in LN vols 1-4 and the word never appears even once.)

-H
Seijirou Kikuoka inspected the contents of the thin folder that was on his desk, then he pressed his mic. "Nurse, please send in Mrs. Yamashita."

A woman who appeared to be in her late twenties walked in. She had a slender build and wore a simple dress. Her brown hair was in a pageboy cut, with one side held back with a hairclip. Despite her unassuming physical appearance she carried herself with an air of authority and self-confidence.

Kikuoka stood and greeted the former leader of The Golden Apple Guild. "Thank you for coming, Mrs. Yamashita. Please, have a seat." She sat in the offered chair. He asked graciously, "Would you like some tea?"

"No thank you. I am glad I was able to finally get this visit. I have a lot of questions to ask you, if you don't mind."

Kikuoka sat down behind his desk. "No doubt. We have some questions for you as well. Perhaps during this interview you and I might find the answers together?"

"Yes. I am at your disposal, Mr. Kikuoka. You have my full cooperation."

"Excellent. Let's see here..." He opened the folder and scanned it. "Your name is Yuuko Yamashita. You live in a small apartment in Kyoto with your husband, Takeshi Yamashita, age 31. No children. Is that correct?"

"Correct. They told me that my husband is still trapped inside the game?"

"Yes. I am sorry." Kikuoka closed the dossier. "We have almost no information on Mr. Yamashita. How is he fairing?"

She looked down. "My husband is not doing well, I am afraid."

"I am sorry to hear that."

She sighed. "To be honest, he is terrified of the game. He hides it well, and he puts up a brave front for the others in our guild, always smiling and cheerful. You see, our guild is not officially part of the front-line Clearers, but we try to do what we can. That means we fight a lot of battles. I try to protect him."

"That is very commendable of you. So, you decided to play SAO together?"

"It was his idea, not mine. I very much disliked those VR games."

"Then why you did agree to play it with him?"

"He is my husband. I am a Japanese housewife."

Kikuoka understood.

She went on. "Still, I begged him to not make me play it. I told him that I would be a terrible player, that I would just hold him back, but he had insisted we play together. His plan was for us to get married in the game and then he wanted to..." She looked down with some embarrassment. "He
Kikuoka raised his hand. "I understand; you needn't go on." He checked his notes. "I received your psychological test results a few minutes ago. I must say, based on your pre-SA0 dossier you are not the person I had expected to see."

"Yes, I admit my personality has changed."

"Well, we have learned that the game does that. Changes people."

It did, sometimes dramatically. Mrs. Yamashita was a particularly exceptional case. In the game she had become a formidable swordswomen: strong, smart, attractive, and powerful.

According to her pre-SA0 profile, Yamashita's Myers-Briggs original personality type was ISFP - someone who was gentle, sensitive, nurturing, and flexible. She was also Type B, meek and passive. And yet in her pre-interview test she had come out with a diametrically opposite personality type: ENTJ - ambitious, strategic, logical, and out-going. She was also now a Type A, a leader - someone who always took the initiative, someone who acted rather than reacted.

Griselda explained her new role in SAO. "I became a real leader. Oh, it was so wonderful! I was making a genuine contribution. I was determined to do whatever I could to help others and to beat the game."

She looked up at the ceiling and sounded wistful. "It was so amazing. I never felt so alive."

"And yet you died."

She looked back down at him and sighed. "Yes. I left my poor Grimlock behind. I expect our guild will likely break up now."

"That is unfortunate."

"Takeshi is probably all alone now. I love him, that poor man, but he was becoming so withdrawn. He needed me so much, but we became distant." She leaned forward. "Please, sir, if you find out anything about my husband or my other guild members, will you let me know right away?"

"Of course, Mrs. Yamashita."

He adjusted his eyeglasses. "Let's move on. We have no information about your death. Could you please tell us what happened to you?"

She looked down. "I'm not exactly sure..."

"Go on."

She tried to gather her thoughts. "I was staying alone at an inn near the front lines. I was waiting for an appointment with a pawn shop owner to cash in a powerful ring that our guild had found, a +20 Ring of Agility. We took a vote and decided to sell it. I was sleeping in my room at the inn. Then.. I simply woke up in a medical bed. I don't know what happened. I've been trying to wrack my brain but I just can't remember." It was because the death trauma always erased the final moments before death.

Kikuoka frowned. Something didn't add up. "You died inside an inn? How is that possible?"

She jumped up. "I know! The town was a safe zone! Inns especially. The doors are supposed to be
secure. I made sure mine was locked. It makes no sense!"

Kikuoka mused thoughtfully, "It must have been someone with a very high level who could get past a locked inn door. A master thief perhaps?"

"I suppose. But killing me should still have been impossible. I was inside an inn, a safe area. How did they do it?"

"Hmm. Excellent question."

A few minutes later the interview ended. Kikuoka stood up. "Thank you, Mrs. Yamashita. We will continue to investigate and get back to you."

"Thank you sir. I would very much like to know what happened."

"As do I."

December 25, 2023 - 11 months ago.

Suguha cautiously opened the door to the private ward. She peeked inside.

*Good, she finally went home.*

She could see Kazuto in his medical gel bed in his usual state. She went inside. Nobody else was present.

Midori's framed 5x7 family photo was on the nightstand in its usual position, with Suguha, Kazuto, and her parents beaming at the camera. Kazuto had placed his fingers behind Suguha in a 'V' to give her rabbit ears. The birthday cards he received from October were also there. Suguha noticed a vase with some red Christmas poinsettias in it, which was new.

She looked at the vase and wondered who put it there. Was it from her mom? Or from Little Miss Perfect? She guessed it was most likely from her mom, as sending flowers was something an occasional visitor might do, not a daily visitor, and LMP was there practically every day. Besides, she knew that whenever LMP got anyone flowers they had always come from her garden.

Suguha noticed that there was a small card attached to the red Christmas flowers, affixed to one of the stems inside the vase just above the waterline. It could have been easily overlooked. She got up to close the door, then she went back to the vase and carefully removed the card.

Suguha turned the card over. There was nothing written on it; no name attached.

She sat in her chair and looked at the little card carefully. She noticed it was folded in half with a small piece of cellophane tape.

She used her fingernail to slowly and very carefully peel the tape off while trying hard not to tear the paper it was affixed to. She successfully opened the small card and peered inside. It had only four words written in it.

*Merry Christmas.*

*I'm sorry.*

She looked at the card for several moments, then she resealed the cellophane tape. She carefully replaced the card inside the clump of flowers in the same position where she had found it. There
would be no evidence that it was ever opened.

She sat back down in her seat. She looked at Kazuto, who was breathing softly with his eyes closed. The WAN and Data LEDs were slowly blinking on the NerveGear helmet.

*Yep, she really messed you up, didn't she. She got herself killed, and now you are blaming yourself for it.*

Finally she stood up. She moved her hair aside and bent over towards his left ear. She yelled into his ear, "Well, she's alive you idiot! You can move on!"

Of course there was no reaction from the bed.

She clenched her fists. She moved even closer and yelled as loud as she could at the left side of the NerveGear helmet: "SHE IS ALIVE! GET OVER IT!"

She then plopped back into the chair and sighed.

She held his hand gently.

*Kazuto... Why were you always so distant with me, but not with her? Was it the game? Did it change you somehow?*

*I wish I knew what you were thinking right now.*

*What is the game like for you?*

*What is it like to play a VRMMO?*

There was a knock on the door. She jumped. Did someone hear her outburst? She got up and cautiously opened the door.

She found that it was Shinichi Nagata, a small boy with glasses wearing a long brown coat. He was one of Suguha's classmates at her middle school.

The boy looked a little embarrassed to have caught Suguha in what was obviously a private moment. "Sorry.. I didn't mean to interrupt you.."

"So you overheard me, huh?"

"What? No! I didn't! I mean I didn't try to! Honest!"

Suguha sighed, "It's okay, c'mon in."

"Uhm, maybe I shouldn't..."

"It's nothing. I was just yelling at my brother for being an idiot. Come in."

He hesitated, than he came inside and looked around. She reassured him, "Don't worry, she's not here."

"She's not?"

"Nope. She was here yesterday until who knows how late. She finally went home this morning and crashed, I think."
The timid boy said, "Yes, well, uhm, this is obviously your personal alone time. Maybe I should go..." He turned to leave.

She rolled her eyes. "Like I said it was nothing. Don't worry, I'm not embarrassed or anything. Get in here."

"I see.. well, okay." He approached. "Uhm, I just wanted to wish Kazuto a Merry Christmas."

"That's great. Here, sit down with me". She patted the seat of the chair next to her.

He looked nervous. "S-Sit with you?"

"Yes. Sit."

"O-Okay." He did as he was ordered.

There was an awkward silence.

Nagata tried to think of something to say to break the ice. He tried to sound non-chalant. "He, uh, looks peaceful."

He cringed at his own insipid remark.

She turned and said, "Hey, he's not dead you dummy."

He turned quickly. "I know that!" He looked down. "I'm sorry. It's just that, uh, I just don't know what to say sometimes. Words are hard for me."

She continued to watch Kazuto's sleeping form.

"Then don't say anything. I am sure that he appreciates us simply being here with him."

"You think?"

"Yeah."

They both looked at Kazuto for several moments.

Finally Suguha whispered to herself. "What's it like in there..."

Nagata turned again. He used the same quiet voice as hers. "You want to find out?"

She turned to face him. "Yes!"

Nagata has happy to oblige. "I can show you."

Suguha looked at him eagerly. "Really? How?"

"Well, there are several other VRMMOs up and running. I play a couple of them myself."

"You do? There are other VRMMOs out there?"

"Oh yeah. They're really fun to play."

She looked back at her step-brother as she spoke. "I'm surprised anyone would still be playing a VRMMO after this."
Nagata said quickly, "Oh they do. Everybody knows that SAO wasn't a death game. Nobody died, so now lots of kids now actually want to get into SAO."

"You're kidding. They do?"

"Yes! Everybody thinks that SAO is really exciting and cool."

She thought a bit. "I can see why. If you knew you couldn't die it would be a real thrill."

"Yeah. These VRMMO games are really fun. And ever since SAO got all that free publicity the other VRMMOs have really taken off."

He chuckled to himself. "Can you imagine what would have happened if everyone had died? Nobody would touch these things in a million years. But since nobody died there's a half dozen competitors up and running. It's a 100 billion yen industry now."

He leaned forward. "So, do you want to play one?"

She kept looking at her step brother. "Yeah. I want to see what it's like."

"Okay! The first one is called Alfheim Online, or ALO for short. I play that one as a Sylph called Recon. The only problem is that I can't fly very well because I get airsick really easy."

Suguha widened her eyes. "Wait, you can fly?"

"Yeah! Everybody can."

To fly...

She turned her chair to face him, temporarily forgetting why she was there.

"Shinichi-kun, I want you to tell me everything you can about that game."

April 19, 2024 - 7 months ago.

Mrs. Kirigaya heard the front door open. She looked up from her tablet in the kitchenette when Sachi let herself in.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Kirigaya!"

"Hello Sachi. How is Kazuto?"

"Oh he's doing very well today. I checked for infections and cleaned the bags again. All clean."

"That's wonderful."

Sachi entered the kitchen. "I brought you some sweets from the shop."

"Oh thank you. A perfect pick me up." She unwrapped a bon mot and bit in to it.

She inspected the open candy wrapper. She looked thoughtful. "You're been so helpful in taking care of my poor Kazuto..."

Sachi said brightly, "Oh, it's nothing really. I just do what I can to help."

Mrs. Kirigaya stood up. She held a chair. "Sachi, can you please sit with me?"
She seated Sachi at the kitchenette table then sat across from her.

Sachi grew concerned. "What is it? Did I do something wrong?"

"Oh no, it's nothing like that." Kazuto's stepmother tried to collect her thoughts.

"You see, Kazuto has always been... distant. With everyone. From me, from Suguha, everybody. He dived into computers..."

Sachi grinned, "Yeah, he's a computer geek, like me."

Midori smiled back. "Like both of us, yes. But I think he was doing that for a different reason."

"Which was?"

Mrs. Kirigaya shifted in her seat uncomfortably. "Well, you see, something happened to him when he was young. It made him want to avoid getting close to anyone. He put up a wall around himself. What happened is very personal for him, and without his permission I cannot..."

Sachi raised her hand. "Please, I don't need to know the details."

Midori leaned forward in earnest. "I am glad you understand. The point is, Sachi, you broke through that wall. You got through to him somehow. In the game he finally found someone to care for, to protect. That is such a huge step for him..."

Sachi looked down. "But all I did was hurt him. I can't imagine what he is feeling now, thinking that he failed to protect me. I'm certain he is blaming himself for letting me die. Then I sent him that awful, awful recording."

"I know. You are probably right about all that. I can't imagine his state now either. But the thing is, you did NOT die. You're alive! And you'll be there to greet him when he wakes up. He will be absolutely overjoyed."

"Yes.. he will."

"And so you will help him with his recovery when he wakes up, of course."

"Yes, I will, but..."

"I know it will be difficult. For all of us. You've done so much for him already. And I know how much you care for him."

Sachi looked down. "It is a debt that I need to repay."

"Actually, I think there is more to it than that."

Sachi looked up again. "What do you mean?"

"Sachi, I've watched you. You are such a wonderful girl, and you have matured so well. You will be by far the best thing in his life when he returns. Now, please don't be embarrassed about this."

"About what?"

"Well, I know your secret."

"My secret?"
"Yes."

"Which is..?"

"I know that you two were lovers in the game."

"What!? Oh no, Mrs. Kirigaya. We weren't, uh, I mean, we never.. uh, we weren't lovers.."

Mrs. Kirigaya smiled. "Actually, I'm pretty sure you were."

"Oh please, that's silly."

"I talked to Ducker. He told me everything."

Sachi gave out a sigh. "Whatever Ducker said to you, it's not true. I was just a scared, foolish little girl, and, well, okay, I did sleep with him. Wait! No! I mean I didn't sleep with him! I mean, I had to sleep, and I did sleep next to him, but it wasn't what Ducker thinks at all! Kirito was always a perfect gentleman towards me, and..."

Mrs. Kirigaya raised her hand. "I know. I'm sure he was. I believe you and I trust you."

"Then you know our relationship wasn't like.. like that."

"Oh heavens no. You were only 14 back then. And he is a good boy, very responsible."

"Yes, he is. Thank you. I'm glad you understand."

"But you had told me yourself how important he was to you, how close you two had become."

"Well, I suppose I did..."

"And when he wakes up those feelings inside you won't change, right?"

Sachi searched herself. "No, they won't."

"Then it's decided."

The girl looked at her questioningly. "Decided?"

"Sachi, I want to make it official. I want you to consider yourself part of our family."

"What? Mrs. Kirigaya...?"

"I mean that. And please, from now on call me Midori."

"But, oh, I couldn't possibly..."

Midori stood up. "I insist. I know that if anyone is going to save Kazuto, heal him, and bring him home, I know it's going to be you."

Sachi stood as well. "Yes, Mrs. Kiri... I mean yes, Midori. I promise. I will do everything I can to bring him back."

"I know you will." She embraced Sachi.

In their embrace, Sachi looked out the window. "Uh-oh, it looks like rain. I need to go bring in the laundry."
Midori smiled and let go of her embrace. "Go on."

Sachi began to leave.

Midori said behind her, "Don't forget: You are family now."

"I won't forget, and thank you." She left.

Meanwhile, someone silently closed a bedroom door upstairs.

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**July 2, 2024 - Four months ago.**

Suguha was in her room when she heard the front door slam. Then she heard a commotion downstairs. She silently opened her bedroom door to better hear what was going on below.

Sachi was sobbing bitterly. Suguha could hear her mother saying, "Now, now..."

She became increasingly curious. She walked to the stairway railing and watched the pair below.

Her mother was sitting at the kitchenette table with Sachi, who had her head down on the table. Suguha could see Sachi's shoulders heaving up and down between sobs.

Midori was trying to console the distraught girl. "It's all right."

She could hear Sachi's muffled voice. "The rejection letter said..."

Midori patted the girl's head. "I know, dear."

Sachi pulled her head up, her face covered in tears. "They're wrong!"

"I know. You most certainly are not a 'potential threat to yourself or others'."

"And I'm not 'unstable'? Why would people say such things?"

Midori sighed. "Well, the media likes to blow these things out of proportion. It's just to get ratings. Just a handful of bad apples out of thousands, like in that 'Laughing Man' scandal or whatever they were calling it last month."

It was the worst awakening situation ever recorded. A player-killer (PK) guild called the 'Laughing Coffin' was becoming a real problem in the game, so a high level Capture Group (that had included Kirito and Asuna) was formed to arrest and finally send them all to the prison under Floor 1. However, the capture operation was compromised by a spy and it became a major battle. By the end of the battle, 21 Laughing Coffin members and 11 members of the Capture Group were dead.

The awakening of a single high level player was always difficult to handle. It sometimes even caused injuries, but fortunately it was a rare event. Not this time. Eleven delirious high level players had awakened along with 21 Laughing Coffin members who were even worse, and it had caused a major news media event. The LC members and the CG members were soon cross-interviewed as VRDPs by the Ministry of Information's VR unit, and most of the LC members were detained based on the shocking information that had tumbled out of those cross-checked interviews. However, a lawsuit was soon filed, and those not certified by a physician as actually mentally ill were ordered by a judge to be released on their own recognisance. It was because legally they had committed no crimes in the real world, and many of them were minors to boot.

But soon a handful of the former LC guild members had started a crime spree. They were quickly
recaptured by the authorities, of course, but by then it was too late. The damage was done. The media accounts were lurid and were broadcast everywhere. The public, who were already somewhat suspicious of the VRDPs in general, had all of their worst fears and prejudices confirmed by the crime group.

And so the VRDPs had an even harder time trying integrate themselves back into society. They became pariahs who were unemployable. Private schools refused enrollments. Nobody wanted them.

As if the VRDPs weren't isolated enough as a group, another side effect of VRDP syndrome was that the awakees tended not to socialize with each other. Nobody was sure why. It was speculated that it might possibly be due to the fact that they were mutually embarrassed or ashamed of their failure to survive the game.

Sachi had not seen any of the other members of the 'Cats since their initial interviews and debriefings (except for Keita). None of them had tried to contact her. She wasn't even sure where they lived now.

Sachi kept crying. "I can't get a job. I have no friends."

Midori said gently. "It's all right. Remember, you have a family now. And family is everything."


Midori was about to reply when her cell phone chimed. She looked down at it. "Ugh, it's my publisher. I need to take this call. Look, we'll talk about this more when I'm done. Just make yourself some tea, dear. I'll be back soon." She went downstairs.

Sachi put her head down on the table again.

A couple minutes later she sensed that someone else was now seated at the kitchenette table across from her.

The person spoke. "Wow, you look like crap."

Sachi began to pull her her head up. With her bloodshot eyes she saw Yaya nearby on the floor licking his paw. Then she looked across the table.

It was Suguha.

Sachi had noticed that Suguha had been losing weight. She was also practicing kendo again. More importantly she was now seeing Kazuto regularly. The two girls had an unspoken arrangement for Sachi to quietly leave the ward for at least a two hours each day after Suguha's middle school let out. This had been going on for a couple months now.

Sachi dropped her chin on top her crossed wrists, facing Suguha.

A minute passed in silence. Finally, she spoke what was on the minds of both girls for the past year.

"He's your brother. Tell me to go and I'll go. I won't come back."

Suguha put her own hand under her chin. She looked thoughtful.

"Hmm, no. Besides, Mom would freak out." She made a small smile. "And I like you this way. No
offense."
Sachi sighed, "Go ahead. Enjoy it."

"No, what I mean is that you're approachable now. You're not doing your fake Cinderella act."

"Mmm."

After a minute Suguhha raised her head. She asked plainly, "Were you lovers? Tell me the truth."

Sachi didn't hesitate in her answer.

"No."

She quickly added, "It was just me trying to get some sleep. I was a stupid scared little girl who crawled into bed with him. We were both too busy trying to survive for anything else."

Suguha kept pressing her. "But he looked at you in bed, right?"

"Uhm, yeah."

"You looked at each other under the covers, side-by-side?"

"Yeah."

"So was he tempted? Did he ever look at you in bed like.. you know what I mean, the way guys look at a girl sometimes...?"

"Uhm.. well.." She got frustrated. "I don't know! Those eyes were caring, yes, loving, yes, protective, yes, but greedy?, no, lustful?, no, desireful?, no, ... what more do you want me to say? I'm not a mind reader! How could I know?"

"And you fought together, side-by-side, fighting for your lives."

Sachi pulled her head up from her chin. She smiled at the memory. "Oh yes. Looking back now, it was.. exhilarating. When I fought that praying mantis with him, wow, it was a head rush. A total head rush. Afterwards we were both panting, sweaty, and grinning at each other like total idiots."

Suguha looked up wistfully. "Yeah, I know what you mean. There is no feeling quite like that..."

Sachi was surprised. **Huh? What is she talking about?**

"... and you really bond over that..."

"Yeah."

"Ok, fine. So tell me, what were your feelings?"

"What..?"

"Tell me straight. Did you love him?"

And there it was. The big question. The one question she was never directly asked until now.

Sachi knew that Suguhha deserved an answer, and an honest one.

She had to think hard. "I had feelings... I had feelings... of terror, of fear, of wanting safety, of
being protected, of being cared for..."

Finally she told her. "Yes. I did."

Then she quickly added, "But it was the way a 14 year old girl would love anyone who protected her like that: basic, undeveloped, primal, for survival. Not romantic. Maybe eventually? I don't know."

She looked up. "Suguha, am I making sense?"

"Hmm. Yeah."

_I was drowning, and he saved me. The feelings I felt... Yes. I know where she's coming from._

Suguha's smile grew. "You know, I think I'm starting to understand you."

Sachi smiled back. "Thanks. I'm glad."

Suguha got up from the table.

"But you're still not my sister. And we are not family."

"But... can we at least be friends?" Sachi waited apprehensively for her answer.

Suguha shook her head. "No, not yet."

Then she added, "But, Sachi, you know what?"

"What?"

"We don't have to be enemies anymore." Suguha put out her elbow.

Sachi got up too. Her tears were drying.

"Okay. I'll take it."

Their elbows touched.

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_A/N:_

**I forgot Suguha, shoot me!** I had made a huge blunder in this story in assuming that when dealing with a Sachi-Kirito-Asuna triangle that Suguha could be dispensed with as a minor character. Ijustwannahelp and his pals really straightened me out on how wrong I was. Suguha is actually the most complex character in SAO Season 1, and her relationship is actually deeper and more nuanced with Kazuto than anyone else in the story.

So until Asuna gets going in this story - which by plot necessity cannot happen until fairly late (unless I drastically shorten ALO) - the tension isn't actually Asuna-Sachi. The tension is really Suguha-Sachi. Boy, how did I miss that? (I added Suguha to the character summary. Wow, I'm dumb.)

As always, thank you for reading.

-HuuskerDu
July 10, 2024 - Four months ago.

Seijiou Kikuoka looked across his desk at the petite girl who walked in to the interview room. He stood and greeted her warmly.

"Ah, thank you again for coming in, Miss Watanabe. I have your tea ready." The teacup was already filled and sitting in a saucer near the edge of the desk. He sat back down. "I apologize for inviting you back yet again so soon."

Sachi made herself comfortable in the familiar round chair. "Oh no, sir, it's no trouble at all. The first time here I was pretty nervous, but now I don't mind these interviews all. I enjoy chatting with you." She picked up the teacup and sipped it.

"That's wonderful, and I am glad to hear it."

Sachi put down her teacup. "So, Mr. Kikuoka, what did you want to ask me about?"

"Miss Watanabe, have you ever heard of a player named Silica, age 12? We think she might be a beast tamer.

Sachi thought a moment. "No, I don't know that name, sorry."

"Well, it was a bit of a long shot, but I needed to ask." A member of an orange guild called Titan's Hand had died recently during their attempt to escape from the prison on Floor 1. Back in February he and his friends had attempted to steal a valuable item from the little girl, and he claimed that Kirito had intervened to stop them. The thief's claim that Kirito was some kind of invulnerable superhuman seemed rather far-fetched, but the story needed to be checked out.

She looked down. "I wish I could have been of more help."

Kikuoka relaxed and loosened his tie a bit. "Oh, it's fine. You have been most helpful in many other ways, Miss Watanabe. Thanks to the information that you have provided us so far, we are now creating a detailed profile on Mr. Kazuto Kirigaya. I must say, the profile differs quite a bit from the public image that lad is intentionally projecting to the other players."

Sachi leaned forward. "Oh, I know sir. He's such a good person. He was just trying to protect the other beta-players by drawing their ire on himself."

"Yes, he made himself a deliberate scapegoat."

"A scapegoat?"

"Are you not familiar with the term?"

"No, sir."

"Well, it refers to a person that is made to bear the blame for others. According to the Old Testament in the Bible, on the Day of Atonement a priest would confess all the sins of the Israelites over the head of a goat, then drive it into the wilderness to bear the sins away."

"I see. I take it, sir, that you believe in God?"
"Well, yes, I do. My family was killed in a plane crash when I was very young.* As an orphan I led a rather difficult life."

Kikouka's case was typical. Only one in eight orphans in Japan ever found foster homes or adoptive parents.** The vast majority were warehoused for life in state-run orphanages, in rows of beds in open floors, with little or no privacy. Many of the children developed emotional problems because they lost the opportunity to bond with adults. And once they left they often could not find employment and ended up homeless.***

"I was very lucky. A pair of Christian missionaries decided to take me in as a foster child when I was 3. They had seven other kids, three of them their own. It was a pretty raucous bunch, I must say. I converted at age 7."

"I see. I'm happy that you found a home, sir, but..."

"Yes?"

Sachi looked down and said quietly, "I don't think I could believe in a god who sends good people to hell."

Kikuoka chuckled and leaned back in his chair, "Yes, that is probably the number one objection of atheists. That and the whole Young Earth thing."

"Young Earth?"

"The idea that the Earth was created 6000 years ago in six literal 24-hours days."

"I take it you don't believe that?"

"Well, no. It's mainly a canard tossed out by atheists to try to denigrate believers. That is why you see it brought up in the media all the time. But if you take a poll of actual evangelicals, you will find that very few believe that. In fact, more atheists believe in the existence of UFOs than there are Young Earth creationists."

"Why don't they?"

"The reason is simple: It is not Biblical."

"It isn't?"

"No, it's not."

He decided to indulge the inquisitive girl, so he went on with his explanation.

"That 6000 year timeline was actually cooked up in 1642 by a guy named James Ussher. He did a basic misreading of Peter. What he did was simple. Peter wrote, With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.*4 God created the world in 6 days, a day to God is a 1000 years, so 6 times 1000 years = 6000 years, QED. But that's not what Peter wrote. He wrote a thousand years is like a day to Him, not that it literally was. That is why I think those 6000 year timelines and 24 hour creation clocks are silly. All they do is merely diminish His true majesty and glory, as is so plainly manifested in what He actually created: a Universe over 43 billion light years across, with over 100 billion galaxies, each with 100 billion stars, and all visible to us so that we can see and appreciate the whole thing as lowly humans, in all its majestic glory."

"So you are saying he was trying to downsize God's creation, make it smaller than it really is?"
"Oh, I don't think that was Ussher's deliberate intention. He was just a man who was using the best information available at the time. The point is, before we jump into arguments about whether Creation was made in seven literal 24-hour sidereal days or not, we as believers need to remember that we need to tread very carefully in dealing with matters concerning what the Lord wrought before we existed. God chewed out Job pretty hard for it*5. We lowly humans need to be very, very careful when we presume to know what God is thinking. Who can understand His unfathomable mind?*6 All we know for certain is that He loves us and He wants a relationship with us."

"I see. But, sir, I still don't understand. If He loves us then why does God send people to hell?"

My, the girl certainly has a knack for asking the tough questions. Still, she deserves an honest answer.

"Ah, yes, that is the other big objection. Tell me, Miss Watanabe, when you think about Hell, what do you imagine it is like?"

She tried to think. "Uhm, isn't the western concept of Hell supposed to be a bunch of red devils with sharp horns and pointy pitch-forks, Satan torturing the damned, and things like that?"

"Well, yes, that is the common popular misconception in the West. You see, during Medieval times most people were illiterate, and the priests only spoke Scripture at Mass in Latin, which was an otherwise dead language by that time. The imagery that you are describing originally came from popular sources like Dante's Inferno. And that imagery was very vivid. Neither Dante as an author nor Inferno were ever proscribed by the Church as far as I know*7, and I don't think the Church particularly dissuaded that notion either."

"So there are no red devils with pointy pitchforks then?"

"No, not at all. The word Satan comes from the word Shaitan, which literally means 'accuser'. The purpose of demons, of devils, including the Evil One himself, is to tempt and to mislead the living, to try to lead us all astray, and then to condemn us or convict us whenever they succeed. Their business is with the living, not the dead."

"Are you sure?"

"Well, I admit I might be wrong. But you can go read the Bible for yourself. There is nothing that I can find anywhere in Scripture that says that devils or demons torture the dead. Actually, it is rather the opposite."

"The opposite?"

"Yes. Satan was dropped into the Lake of Fire*8. There is no evidence that I can find in the Bible that says he ever ran the place. Now, I freely admit I might be wrong about this whole notion, but I cannot find anything in Scripture that says Satan ever actually ruled Hell."

"But Mr. Kikuoka, sir, with respect, you have not answered my original question. Why does God throw people in Hell? That doesn't make any sense to me. Why would a loving God do that?"

My, she certainly asks the tough ones, doesn't she?

"Well, Miss Watanabe, that is a very good question, and it's a very understandable one. Atheists jump on it all the time. You see..."

The speaker crackled. "Mr. Kikuoka, your next appointments are still waiting."
Kikuoka checked his watch. "Oh dear. Well, as much as I'd love to explore your most excellent question some more with you today, I am afraid that I do have some other interviewees waiting outside, so I don't think we have the time."

Sachi looked a bit disappointed. "Oh, that's too bad. I was rather curious to hear your opinion."

Kikouka stood up, as did Sachi. "I tell you what, let's talk about this more some other time."

He walked around the desk to escort her out. "We are still working on cross-correlating the information that you gave us with other interviewees. I'll summon you again when we need you, and then we can explore your questions some more. Would you like that?"

"Thank you sir, I think I would."

He smiled at her. "Goodbye." He closed the door behind her.

That poor girl, she does not have a friend in this world.

Lord, please protect her, show her Your love...

... and let her know that she is not alone.

The next day Sachi sat down by herself at a small table in the hospital cafeteria with her dinner tray. She started to slurp some ramen noodles from a small paper cup.

Two nursing aides were already sitting at a booth not far from her table. They had not seen her and were talking in quiet voices.

The first aide asked, "So, how's life in Recovery and Counseling these days?"

The second one put down her chopsticks. "I just hate it. Those people are like walking time bombs. You can just see it in their eyes."

The first replied, "Well, you should have enough seniority to be able to transfer to the sleep wards soon."

"Yeah, I'm counting the days on my calendar. Nice and quiet."

"It is."

Then she added, "It would be prefect if it wasn't for that pesky VRDP volunteer girl."

The second one leaned forward and said, "I know. She's always wandering around the wards. As soon as I hear her coming I have to drop my magazine and pretend like I'm working."

The first one nodded. "I don't like her either. If an IV feed gets crooked or a rotation is missed she harps on it like nobody's business."

"Well, I'm sure she'll be gone soon. Mark my word, one day she will crack. You'll see. She will grab a scalpel and slit someone's throat. Then she'll be gone."

"Good, just as long as it's not my throat."

"You said it."
Sachi quietly got up and left the cafeteria. Afterwards she no longer ate meals at the hospital.

August 28, 2024 - Three months ago.

It was late in the afternoon. The girl who had no friends was standing in the upstairs hallway of the Kirigaya residence. She knocked on the closed bedroom door and said quietly, "It's me."

Kazuto's step-sister opened it. "Oh, good. I wasn't sure you got my message. Come on in."

Sachi's voice was emotionless. "You wanted to see me." It was a statement, not a question.

Suguha tried to sound gracious. "Yeah, please, come in. I wasn't sure you'd come. I'm glad you received my text."

"I got it."

Suguha continued to be magnanimous. "I didn't know your cell number so I snuck downstairs yesterday and got a peek at Mom's phone. I hope you didn't mind the unsolicited text message while I was at school."

At first Suguha had intended to send her SMS text message with the privacy setting turned on, but at the last moment she had changed her mind and included her own cell number in the message. She knew that Sachi would never have presumed to ask her for her own number, so this way she now had it without asking.

"No, it's fine."

"Well come in then."

Sachi hesitated.

"Hey, I won't bite. We're cool now, remember? Come in."

Sachi changed her mind and tried to make her excuses. "I just remembered I need to start working on dinner." She turned to go back downstairs.

Before Sachi could take another step, Suguha lunged and grabbed her by the shoulder. "Look, please, just get in here."

The girl came in as ordered.

Suguha closed the door behind her. As she did so she made a silent sigh.

Cinderella was now standing obediently before her. Her arms were extended down and crossed politely in front of her work skirt, her eyes averted.

*Hoo boy, just look at her.*

Suguha could tell that Sachi had been losing weight. She was too thin now, even for her naturally slender build, and with her unkempt hair and rumpled clothes she could see that Sachi wasn't grooming herself properly either.

*Oy. Why did she have to keep it a secret? Mom, I could have warned you.*

Suguha continued to welcome the sullen girl to her inner sanctum - the Holy of Holies of a teenage
girl. She made a friendly gesture towards the rolling chair that was under her small computer desk. "Please, sit here."

Sachi shook her head. "No, I can stand."

"Let's sit together and chat. Hey, you want a fig newton?"

"No thank you."

Suguha frowned. "Please, it's okay. Sit."

"No, really."

Suguha's graciousness had its limits. "Sit. Down." She gently but firmly pushed Sachi's shoulders. Sachi didn't resist and sat. Suguha then sat on the double bed next to her.

Sachi looked up. "All right. So what do you want from me?"

"Look, we need to talk."

"Talk?"

"Yes. You need to snap out of it."

Sachi looked down and did not respond.

Suguha sighed, "I know. It's not your fault. Mom was an idiot. She can be total doofus sometimes."

Sachi looked up and tried to defend Suguha's mother. "She was just trying to be nice to me. Cheer me up..."

Suguha waved her hand in dismissal. "Pshaw. Look, if it was me in that situation I would have been jumping off a bridge after that."

It was because three weeks earlier Midori had thrown Sachi a huge surprise party for her sixteenth birthday. She had been planning it for weeks and had pulled out all the stops: a big professionally decorated birthday cake, elaborate ribbons, streamers, banners, confetti poppers, party hats, and with as many co-workers as she could forcibly drag from her office.

It backfired. They were all strangers who were cajoled or bribed to be there.

Sachi had tried to put on a brave front, but after 20 minutes she broke down. She tried to run out the front door, but the path was obstructed with guests. She then turned and tried to flee through the kitchenette and out the back way, but the route was clogged with more sullen office workers who were huddled in a circle mooching on the party trays and talking among themselves with muted voices. Eventually she wrested herself out of Midori's grasping hands and fled upstairs.

Suguha had heard everything through her open bedroom door. She quickly waved Sachi inside and closed the door.

Realizing her blunder, Midori dismissed the guests and went up and knocked on the door.

Suguha swung the door open and angrily told her mother to get lost, then slammed the door in front of her mother's face. Midori realized that she had already done enough damage and went back downstairs.
Meanwhile, Sachi was laying prone on the bed. Her tears were pouring out on Suguha's pillow.

Suguha quietly sat next to her prone figure. She gently placed her hand on the small of her heaving back.

Finally she asked softly, "You want me to kill her for you?"

Sachi continued to cry.

"I can use a +3 halberd, or maybe a +4 mace?"

Suguha leaned toward her ear and whispered, "Hey, I bet Kazuto must have some kind of fancy +8 sword by now." She stood up. "Yep. That's what I'll do. I am going over to the hospital to borrow one of my brother's fancy swords, then I will come back. I'll assume first stance, then hold that sword in the jodan no kamae position. Or maybe ko gasumi, or perhaps te ura gasumi - I haven't decided yet. Anyway, whichever finishing move I pick, I will then use it to absolutely kill my mother. Don't worry, I will be quick and efficient." She mused, "Humm. I'm not sure where I'm going to hide the body. Sachi, you got any suggestions for me?"

It worked. Sachi stopped crying and turned her head. "Don't do that..."

Suguha jumped up and said brightly. "Well, I'm off. I'll be right back!" She left the room.

Sachi sat up and rubbed her face.

Wait, she was kidding, right?

Just before Sachi decided to follow her, the kendo expert had returned. She was holding a small empty plate and a glass of milk. With her free hand she slid open her top dresser drawer and pulled out a bag of fig newtons that was hidden under her folded clothes. She dumped several newtons on the plate, and then she sat next to the distraught girl.

Suguha handed her the plate. "Here, eat one."

Sachi said shyly, "Thank you." She ate.

"Have another." She did.

"They're great with milk. Here." Sachi accepted the glass and took a sip.

Suguha poured the rest of the fig newtons on the plate, with a couple falling on the floor. "Here, eat 'em all."

"Uh.."

Suguha then leaned next to her and whispered, "You realize this is part of my evil plot to get you hooked on 'em. Eventually they will have to roll your fat butterball butt down the steps." She laughed theatrically, "It's working! Bwahahaha!"

And Sachi smiled.

Sachi was still smiling inwardly to herself as she remembered how Suguha had tried to cheer her up on that awful day three weeks ago.

But it was only temporary. Three weeks later and she was again sitting in Suguha's room, and she
was thinner than ever.

Suguha knew she needed to do something more drastic. She had invited her here to try to cheer her up some more, but now she realized that she had no idea what she was going to say.

Suguha tried to think quickly.

*What do I say?*

*Should I just say, 'Hey, let's be friends' now?*

*No, that would sound patronizing. She wouldn't believe me anyway.*

Suguha knew that the lonely girl was spiraling down and would probably crash soon. She really needed a friend, but the list was short. She had already dismissed her own foolish mother from the list.

Kazuto hadn't woken up yet. Everything was in a holding pattern.

Unless something happened soon to alter the situation, she knew that Sachi would probably end up in the hospital again.

There was no one else. If it would be anyone, it had to be herself.

But should she?

Suguha tried to think through the possibilities.

*Okay, let's see. Let's say Kazuto wakes up and he says he's gotten over her. They shake hands and they go their separate ways and that's it, everything is chill. I simply gain a nice friend. Easy.*

*But she's a VRDP, and VRDPs are all definitely messed up psychologically. No question about it. Her Cinderella behavior is an unhealthy sign. And she's so obsessive about Kazuto.*

*Hmm. What if all her selfless devotion is all just an act? What if she is just trying to win Mom over to her side?*

*If that's true then her plan has already worked. Mom is very likely going to play matchmaker as soon as Kazuto wakes up. Two years later and she will probably be measuring that girl's wedding gown.*

*Ugh!*

*Is it possible? Did she deliberately trick Mom? If so then she's smarter than she looks. Well, she is a computer geek, and I got a glimpse of her Individual Study report card with those high marks. Yeah, she could pull it off.*

*Okay, what is the worse case scenario then? She's a hidden psycho, a yandere. He dumps her, and she cracks. Six months later she is cradling his severed head while sitting in a nice boat babbling to herself.*

*Could something like that happen? She's a VRDP, and they've been known to snap without warning.*

She felt a jolt of adrenalin in her stomach.
Ugh! In that case I need to watch her closely. Conclusion: Become her friend.

Next scenario: He wakes up, discovers she is alive, and he is overjoyed after having played solo for a couple years because of her. They are older now, 16, maybe 17, mature enough to enter into a real relationship. Mom is thrilled, plays matchmaker again, and... and...

Double ugh! The adrenalin jolt was even stronger.

I think I know her better than Kazuto does, although I admit I need to learn more about her. I have to tell him about how obsessive she can be. If he falls for her hard...

I need to warn him!

Okay, think, Just think. If that girl and I weren't already chummy he might think that I was just being petty or had some dumb jealousy thing going on. He wouldn't believe me. Not unless...

Conclusion: Become her friend.

Suguha quickly ran through a bunch of other scenarios in her head. They all pointed the same way. Become her friend.

But how?

They would need shared experiences, to bond over something.

But what?

Sachi was still waiting patiently for Suguha to begin. She wracked her brain while trying desperately to think of what to say.

But then Sachi herself came to her rescue.

From her chair the girl was idly looking around Suguha's bedroom. Eventually she pointed at an object that was sitting on her dresser. "Hey, what is that hoop thing?"

Suguha froze. An image formed in her mind of a slim graceful girl with wings. She smiled.

Suguha got up and picked up her AmuSphere visor that was laying on top of the dresser. It had wear marks from months of use. "There is a VRMMO game that I started playing about seven months ago. It's called **Alfheim Online**, or ALO for short." She put down her visor and picked up a second one that was still enclosed in its clear hardshell box. "I bought two of them, one for me and one for a friend of mine so we could play together and then compare notes at my computer, but he chickened out."

Suguha recalled Shinichi sitting in the same chair where Sachi was sitting now, with his face turning white at the suggestion of diving into ALO while physically being in the same room. He was already nervous about entering a girl's bedroom, and he had absolutely freaked at her suggestion.

Shinichi knew the game well, but he had difficulty communicating over the link. Suguha was always forced to prompt him and badger him to give her the vital info that she needed to play the game. After a dive she had wanted to quickly interrogate him to get his immediate feedback, and the only way she could drag it out of him was face-to-face. She knew that her bed was big enough
for both of them, and what was his problem anyway? They would be fully clothed and unconscious, the door would be open, so it should be fine, right? She told him that she had no problem with it. But Shinichi would have none of it and he refused, and so the second visor had remained in its box.

Suguha unpacked the second AmuSphere visor and showed it to Sachi. It was shaped like a halo, with a curved band of semi-transparent acrylic that covered the eyes. The band was held in place with a thin piece of aluminum wire in a curved plastic bar along the top. The bar merged with a ribbon of sturdy U-shaped plastic that wrapped completely around the head.

"It's really fun. ALO is a fantasy world with magic, no levels, and with several races that you can play: Sylph, Spriggan, Salamander, ..."

Sachi looked down. "I don't know..."

Suguha sidled up to her. "And you know the best part?"

"No, what?"

"The game has this really sophisticated flight engine. Here, check out this datasheet that came in the box." She showed a Sachi a technical looking document that explained how ALO used actual Navier-Stokes*9 equations to compute realistic airflow, pressure gradient, flow inertia, and other aerodynamic quantities. Even with her computer background it went way over Sachi's head.

"Flight engine?"

Suguha shrugged, "Well, I don't understand any of it. The datasheet says it uses.. let's see here.. a 'numerical model using a custom-designed SIMD GPU chip'."

"No, I mean.."

Suguha made a big grin. "That's right, girl, you can fly."

Sachi was fascinated. "Really?" She held the visor and looked at it closely. She saw that along the left and right sides of the halo were stenciled a pair of tiny little wings.

"Yeah! Pick a Sylph and we can play together. Wanna do it?"

She remembered her time with Kirito, how exciting it all was, and all their shared adventures together (well, except for the whole dying part). She recalled how they had fought side-by-side, panting and grinning, laughing at each other after each battle.

"You wanna check it out with me?" Suguha nodded her head towards her double bed.

Sachi tried to decide if she should accept Suguha's offer. Was she just trying to make her feel better? Still...

*To soar in the air with Kirito. I can see it now. Oh, that would be so wonderful...*

"Well?"

She thought some more.

"Yes, let's try it."

"Okay! I'll get you calibrated."
Suguha began to work on getting the visor initialized. She was pleased with herself.

*Good. This will be the perfect opportunity for me to finally figure you out.*

*I am going to learn who you truly are.*

*One way or another.*

---

**A/N:**

* Web novel.

** The Economist, 2016/06/17.

*** "Witness: Lack of Support in Japanese Orphanages", Human Rights Watch, 2014/05/01

*4 2 Peter 3:8, based on Ps 90:4. (The latter also uses 'like a' in a simile.)

*5 Job 48

*6 1 Cor 2:11,16

*7 Ironically, secularists in Britain have attempted to ban Dante's Inferno under the U.K.'s hate-speech laws.

*8 Rev 20:10

*9 Navier-Stokes equations are used in the aviation industry for aircraft design and in Hollywood for complex CG models in film and television. I used to run Navier-Stokes simulations from NASA/Ames on Cray supercomputers at the University of Illinois. A simulation of turbulence over an airwing could take days to run. Today, recent advances in GPU design at NVidia and AMD have led to the creation of high-end PC video cards that can run these models in SLI mobos and Alienware gaming rigs and do it in real time, something that was unthinkable only a few years ago.

Special thanks to Ijustwannahelp for reviewing a beta of this chapter.
"Break right!"

"Break left!"

The Sylphs broke formation. Two zoomed upward while the third flew straight on. The latter turned his head and watched in silent admiration as the first two separated and soared upwards in the darkening sky, twirling as they went. Tiny motes of light shed from their gossamer wings like glowing embers, glittering in the light of the large blue moon that was rising in the eastern sky.

The third one sighed as he watched the two females, then he turned and continued on a straight-line course.

The creature that had been pursuing the trio hesitated. It saw the green Sylph directly ahead of him, but then it turned and went after the smaller one that was climbing up and left. At first it had been hoping to catch the much tastier looking one on the right, but after the nasty slash that it had received across its flank from the larger one's katana followed by a volley of green needles, it decided that it was better to go after the smaller meal.

The smaller Sylph turned her head and became annoyed as she saw the creature climbing up after her.

*You're supposed to follow Recon, dummy.*

The smaller one doubled back and zoomed toward the creature. As she did so she used her closed fist to rap it smartly on the snout while yelling a taunt. The creature emitted a frustrated yowl and turned to follow her back down.

The creature was a sand wyrm, a medium sized male. Sand wyrms lived in the Desert Wastes in Salamander territory. For some reason they were recently leaving their natural habitat in the Desert Wastes and had begun entering the Ancient Forest in adjacent Sylph territory. It was rather unusual for them to venture away from their native habitat and leave behind their natural prey like that - the dust bunnies and sand hogs that lived in the Desert. They were much easier to spot from the air compared to the dark and hidden creatures that lurked in the Forest below.

This was the fifth sand wyrm that Leafa, Sachi, and Recon had encountered during the past several days. Lady Sakuya, with Sigurd's help, had organized the hunting parties to eradicate the beasts from her territory.

Sachi quickly caught up with Recon at the lower altitude. "Dang it, I got chased again. When it catches up I'll ditch it and we'll re-do the dive."

The boy grinned, "That's the third time one chased you."

Sachi shrugged, "I guess they just like me?"

"Then they're stupid idiots."

It was because, in all the weeks that Sachi and Leafa had been flying together on missions, repelling Salamander incursions, chasing Spriggan thieves, and going on creature hunts like this one, Sachi had not been hit even once. Trying to catch her was like Wile E. Coyote trying trying to catch the Road Runner. She was untouchable.
Naturally, Leafa and Sachi raced each other. Previously, Leafa had been nicknamed 'Speedaholic' because she could out-fly anyone in a straight race. She could beat Sachi too, but with Sachi’s smaller mass and better agility she had often won shorter sprints or races that involved lots of intricate zig-zagging. The two girls had laughed and whooped as they weaved in and out of the massive tree trunks in the Ancient Forest while trying to out-fly each other.

Sachi looked up. She could just make out Leafa high in the air. She could see that Leafa was now floating in a stationary upright position with her hands on her hips. It was probably because she was feeling annoyed at the delay.

"Recon, slow down. Let it catch up."

They slowed down to about 40 KPH to allow the wyrm to get closer. When the creature was 10 meters behind them, Sachi turned and zoomed directly at it. She was a green blur as the creature snapped its jaws in a futile gesture to try to bite the Sylph that was already behind it.

Sachi then pulled an Immelmann maneuver: She flew right along the dorsal side of the wyrm and past its still-snapping jaws while arcing up in front of it, inverted. In a smooth continuous motion she did a U-turn and barrel roll. As she flew toward it again, she whacked it on the snout a second time and flew away.

_Sheesh, give it up. Stop wasting your time with me._

The wyrm decided it had enough. It turned and moved towards Recon.

_Finally._

Sachi flew up again to rejoin Leafa at the higher altitude. The senior Sylph removed her hands from her hips and resumed her own upward trajectory.

Together they zoomed upward, going higher and higher, flying thousands of meters up into the air, right up to the limit of their mutual ability.

At their flight ceiling they looked down. The target far below was like a small brown 'T' silhouetted against the green forest canopy.

Leafa and Sachi were floating next to each other and panting hard. The bigger Sylph turned and asked the smaller one, "You ready?"

"Yeah. Let's do the delta."

Leafa began to cast the spell **Protection From Falls** on both of them. Soon a softly glowing light enveloped each of them.

The pair closed their eyes. They began to concentrate. Nothing seemed to happen at first, but after a few moments their wings began to subtly shift and slowly sweep back. Eventually the wings converted themselves into a tight delta shape like the wings of an F-15 fighter jet pulling in just before going supersonic.

Finally, they opened her eyes. Sachi looked down and said calmly, "Target acquired."

Leafa made a nasty grin. "I so love this part." She turned to her partner, "Sachi, you're a genius."

Sachi was self-deprecating. "Oh, it was nothing. Once I figured out that Protection From Falls was basically just an inertial dampening spell with a shield component, the rest was easy. Anyone could
They rotated head down and pulled their arms in tight against their bodies. Leifa's eyes glittered as she watched her target below.

"Let's do it. Diiiiiiive!"

They accelerated downward, going faster and faster, building up their kinetic momentum.

The SIMD GPUs in their AmuSphere helmets grew warm as the processors furiously computed the complex aerodynamics. The processors soon detected that the wings were exceeding the spec limit on the maximum airspeed for their design.

At this point the processors would normally have flagged for exceeding max-Q (maximum aerodynamic pressure), which would have sent the pair tumbling out of the sky with significant tearing and damage to their wings. But the processors ran the Navier-Stokes equations on the shape of their delta wings, which were now more like arrow feathers or missile guide fins, and after a half second the SIMD engines had completed their analysis: the airflow was laminar and non-turbulent.

They gave a green light.

The pair rocketed down.

Recon had spotted the start of their kinetic dive and was already quickly flying out of the way. He didn't want to get splattered like he did the first time. Sachi had been surprised at how large the radius of the shockwave had been, and both girls had apologized profusely to the boy when they finally rejoined him back at Swilvane.

Recon flew as fast and as far as he could away from ground zero, then he closed his eyes and covered his ears while curling into a ball.

_Sheesh. Putting those two together in the same VRMMO is the worst idea ever._

The sonic boom rattled his teeth as it thundered across the hills.

It was night. Leifa and Sachi were sitting together at the campfire. They had just finished cooking marshmallows for 'smores. The large golden-blue moon loomed high the sky.

Recon had fallen asleep in the tent and his AmuSphere halo had automatically logged him out. It was because he was completely exhausted after having helped clean up from the aftermath of Sachi and Leifa's huge kinetic explosion above the forest canopy.

Sachi pulled the last marshmallow off her stick, then she poked the fire. "We should have coaxed that target higher."

Leifa spoke through a mouthful of graham crackers, chocolate, and white goo. "I didn't know a shockwave like that could start fires."

"Neither did I."

"We put 'em out though."

Some graham crumbs fell down Leifa's front and onto her green and white battle dress. "Sakuya is still gonna call us on the carpet for all those flattened trees though."
It was because together they had created a ring of arboreal devastation that had covered almost a
square half kilometer.

"Probably."

They watched the campfire some more.

"That was fun."

"Yeah."

"We gotta do it again."

"Oh yeah."

The two Sylphs were sitting side by side, their shoulders touching. Sachi became conscious of their
close physical proximity but it didn't bother her. It was because she knew that back in Saitama they
were still in Suguha's bedroom laying side-by-side on her double bed wearing their AmuSphere
visors.

The first time Sachi had dived with Suguha she felt very nervous, so Suguha offered to hold her
hand when they went under.

Sachi had marvelled at the experience.

She was a natural flyer, and she dispensed with the hand control on her second attempt. She even
managed a loop-the-loop that second time, although she had crashed on the landing. She had sat up
in the grass and rubbed her head, "Ouch."

Leafa was worried and had run up to check on her, but she seemed fine. Sachi jumped up to try
again. After three hours Suguha decided they had enough for the first day and she logged them out
despite Sachi's plea to let them stay longer.

After Sachi woke up from her first exhilarating dive in ALfheim Online she turned to Suguha and
tightened her clasp on the other girl's hand. She said softly, "Thank you."

Suguha smiled back at her.

From that day on they always held hands whenever they dived in together.

For the first couple weeks they had dived in almost every day after Suguha got home from school.
Sachi adjusted her volunteering schedule at the hospital to compensate. She moved her
volunteering hours from late afternoons and evenings to mornings and early afternoons.

Midori came home from work late the next night and checked on her daughter. She was pleasantly
surprised to see the pair laying together side-by-side, the WAN and Data lights blinking on their
headsets, their hands held together.

Once the pair had dived in too long for Sachi to go home safely by herself so late at night. Sachi
had offered to sleep downstairs on the couch but Suguha would have none of it.

It happened again on another night after a second too-long raid. That night Midori had quietly
entered Suguha's bedroom around 4 a.m. and used her smartphone to sneak a photo of them
sleeping together, facing each other in the fetal position, snoring softly, with their foreheads
touching.
Sachi and Leafa were each laying along their sides across the campfire from each other. The embers of the fire were slowly diminishing and the coals took on a ruby glow.

They sat in silence as the flames began to sink into the glowing coals.

Leafa shifted her eyes toward Sachi and studied her surreptitiously. Meanwhile, the petite girl seemed lost in her own world, staring at the fire in silent contemplation.

Suguha thought it was remarkable that Sachi's face and body in her Sylph form looked so similar to her appearance in real life. ALfheim Online was suppose to assign avatars randomly. Suguha herself had to regenerate her character about a dozen times (and pay a considerable amount of yen in fees) until she got the form she wanted, and yet Sachi got hers the first time.

In her avatar form, Sachi's face looked much like her face in the real world but with more maturity. The birthmark below her right eye was gone. She had the green eyes and the long ears of a Sylph, and her luscious dark green hair rolled down to the small of her back.

Leafa could see that her small body was sleek and trim and built for speed. In the real world Sachi had usually worn long baggy sweaters or loose fitting blouses to hide her figure, but not here. Her green and blue leotard was skintight and it flattered her figure wonderfully. Below the leotard she wore a slitted dark green skirt over long light blue nylons and ballerina slippers. On her back her graceful wings were long and narrow, built for agility and speed.

With the tight fitting outfit Leafa could see that her figure was actually quite graceful and slender, with her bust and hips proportioned like that of a dancer or a ballerina. In the real world Sachi was still too thin, but that was probably due to her earlier bout of depression. Suguha suspected that the form of the pretty girl now laying before her was close to the way her real figure would look about a year from now.

She remembered when Sachi's avatar appeared in front of her on that first day. She was stunned at the transformation of a girl that she had thought was meek and rather mousy into the pretty winged angel that stood proudly before her. For some reason it had hit her in the pit of her stomach. Meanwhile Sachi had stared back at Leafa in return.

They both had continued to goggle at each other's avatars for several moments. Eventually Suguha recovered first.

Leafa did a modeling pose. "You like it? It's just like on the poster on the ceiling."

Sachi continued to stare in mute appreciation at the senior Sylph. Leafa was quite tall for a Sylph female, and well endowed, with powerful legs and large wings that were built for raw acceleration. Her long blond hair was held by a flower-shaped hairpiece in the back that created a ponytail effect that extended well down her back.

Leafa asked impatiently, "Well?"

Finally Sachi said softly, "Wow. Suguha, you look so beautiful."

That's better. Yeah, my avatar is definitely way hotter than yours.

Leafa then said testily. "Hey, always call me Leafa in here, not Suguha. Look, my name is floating just above my life bar, see? Never say my real name in here."
"Oh, I'm sorry."

Leafa checked the life bar that was floating above Sachi's own head. The name on it read: 'Sachi'.

Leafa crossed her arms. "Hey! You used your real name again. Go back and pick a different handle!"

"But I always use my real name when I play video games."

"I don't care. Go back and fix it. You don't want people in here to know who you are in real life."

Sachi protested, "But I don't care if they do. Besides, I like this avatar. If I roll a new character I'll lose it."

Leafa sighed, "Okay, fine."

She approached Sachi. "Let's get you started. First, pull out your flight controller and I'll show you how it works. The flight controller is based on motion sensors and uses..."

"Well? Leafa? What do you think?"

Leafa blinked her eyes. She was still sprawled out in front of the campfire. She shook her head to break herself out of her reverie. She saw that Sachi was now sitting up and looking at her expectantly.

"I'm sorry, Sachi. My mind drifted off. What were you saying again?"

Sachi looked down. "Never mind." She picked up a stick and poked the campfire again.

_Dang it. It was probably something important._

Leafa sat up. "I'm really sorry. What did you want to talk to me about again?"

"It was nothing."

More time passed. It was getting late, and both girls knew they needed to log out soon if Sachi was going to be able to go home that night.

But they both stayed.

Leafa understood. She picked up her own stick and swirled the glowing coals around a bit.

More time passed. The fire continued to crackle.

Finally Sachi spoke what was on both their minds.

She sighed, "His face."

Leafa understood. "Yeah. I've seen it. Mom too."

During the past two months Kazuto's face had become noticeably more gaunt, with his cheekbones starting to show. His closed eye sockets were also starting to sink in.

"Mom hasn't said anything yet."

For some odd reason the two girls could only talk to each other about such delicate matters while
jacked into the game. It was as if the game created some kind of buffer that made it possible for them to confide in each other in ways they still could not do in real life. They were in fact laying side-by-side in bed right at that moment, and they could easily log out and just talk to each other face to face.

Sachi picked up a stick and threw it into the fire. "I don't understand it. I've been checking his IV line, looking at the labels on his glucose and lactate bags, and reading his chart. I know he's getting enough nutrition."

"You talked to the doctors too?"

"Yeah. They say it just happens sometimes. When a coma goes on for years, sometimes the body just starts to eventually break down. Nobody knows why. The nurses told me that it is starting to happen to some of the other SAO victims too."

More silence.

"Sachi... did you ask the doctor.. how.. how long?"

Sachi continued to stare at the fire and didn't respond.

"Please, tell me. Mom won't talk to me about it. I know you got a health information waiver to see his medical records."

Finally Sachi looked up at her.

"They said six months, maybe less."

Leafa/Suguha picked up a rock and threw it as hard as she could. "Argh! They have to get him out of there!"

Sachi leaned forward. "Suguha, believe me, Mr. Kikuoka is working on it. He said that as soon as they find where Kayaba is hiding that the SAO players will be released. He thinks Kayaba won't kill them if he gets caught. He hasn't killed anyone yet, so I don't think he'll start doing it now. And I don't think he will just let them waste away and die either."

The blond Sylph ignored Sachi's use of her real name. "Then.. you think Kazuto will be out soon? Really?"

"I think so, yes. One way or another."

Leafa/Suguha was thinking hard. "We need to be ready when he wakes up. We need a plan..."

Now it was Sachi's turn to jump up. "What do think I've been doing these past 16 months!? Knitting socks? Of course I have a plan!"

"Ssh.. sit down."

Sachi sat back down. She hissed, "Suguha, of course I have a plan."

"No, I said *we* need a plan. You and me."

Sachi studied her face.

*Is she serious?*
We've been palling around ALO like best buddies for weeks now, but that's just in the game, right? Does she mean...

I have to ask.

"Are.. are you trusting me now?"

Suguha's face remained blank. Meanwhile she thought furiously.

Oh, why did she have to ask me that? I really do like her, but I can't lie to her either. Do I trust her?

Argh... how can I answer that question?

Suguha tried to distract her. "Hey, call me Sugu. I mean, you know, not here." She waved her hand around. "Here I'm Leafa. But you can call me Sugu at home."

Sachi searched her green eyes. Finally she said softly, "We're friends?"

Leafa squirmed a bit. "Well.. I think you're really nice, and you're smart, and you really care for Kazuto, and you're a kick-butt flyer, and we make a super flying team, and, and... well."

Finally Leafa said, "Okay, yes. Here in the game, yeah. We are friends now."

"But out there."

The blond Sylph looked at her with pleading eyes. "Sachi, well, I..."

"Please. Be honest with me."

Leafa looked down. "I am. Look, I want to. I really do. I do like you, I mean as a person. That's the honest truth. But, well, this is Kazuto we are talking about. He's my brother. And I... it's just that.."

"You feel really protective of him."

"Yeah."

"... and you love him." To Suguhai it sounded more like a question than a statement.

She looked at Sachi incredulously.

"Well, of course I do! He's my brother. Why would you ask me something like that?"

"Of course. I'm sorry if that sounded like a question."

Sachi then watched her in silence. It unnerved Suguha.

Those eyes again. They scare me sometimes. It's like she is.. judging me?

What the heck? Is she thinking that *I* am not good enough for him?

Dang it! Where does she get off thinking that way! She's a stranger! He's my brother!

He's my.. brother."

Leafa pulled her eyes away. Sachi eventually did too.

They sat cross-legged in the dirt for minutes in silence while averting their eyes from each other.
It was Sachi who finally broke the impasse. She turned back to face Leafa.

"You don't trust me."

Leafa looked up at her. "Well, it's like.. I mean, I like you, Sachi, I really do, and I know you would never intentionally hurt Kazuto, but..."

"But."

"But, well, you're a, you know, a VRDP and all, and..."

"I know, it's okay."

"I'm sorry. Look, like I said he's my brother, and.."

"I said it's okay. I understand."

More silence.

Meanwhile Sachi was studying her again carefully.

Ugh, those eyes. Sachi really unnerves me when she's like this.

Sachi continued to study her.

You don't trust me? Well, Suguha, you are holding back something too, something about you and Kirito. I can feel it.

Leafa shifted her legs uncomfortably under the watchful eyes of the VRDP survivor.

And until you come clean with me, Suguha, and tell me the secret you are hiding...

She averted her eyes from Sachi's hawk-like gaze.

... I don't trust you either.

October 28, 2024.

Three folders were laying on Seijirou Kikuoka's desk. One was considerably thicker than the other two. He set aside the thick one and picked up one of the thin ones. He reviewed it, then he briefly scanned the other one.

He nodded to himself and stood up. As he did so he straightened his tie and buttoned up his suit, brushing it off with his hand. He knew that this could be an important interview.

He pushed the mic. "Nurse, please send him in."

The door hissed and slid open. The door was freshly painted and re-enforced with steel, replacing the one that was kicked apart during the unfortunate incident that happened the previous week. The authorities had still not managed to locate the escaped Laughing Coffin member.

After a moment, a small and unassuming man in his early twenties came through the open doorway. With his round face and bulbous nose he looked like a stereotypical otaku. He seemed nervous.

Kikuoka greeted the man warmly and sat him in the offered chair, then he sat down in his own
chair and adjusted his eyeglasses as he put aside the dossiers.

The big nosed otaku brought out a little toy from his pocket. It was about 4 or 5 centimeters across and made of plastic, with three lobes mounted on a central rotating axis and with a finger hole in each lobe. He started to absently spin it as he sat.

Kikuoka ignored the spinner. "Thank you for coming, Mr. Sugimoto. I know you are still in recovery so I appreciate the fact that you are willing to be interviewed like this so soon after your revival. Would you like some tea?"

"Uh, no thanks. They said you really needed to see me right away. Am I in trouble? Did I do something wrong in the game?"

"Oh no, Mr. Sugimoto, not at all. I just need to ask you some questions, that's all."

"Okay, uh, sure, whatever you want." He kept twirling his fidget spinner.

"Very good. Let's dive in, shall we? Your name is Hikari Sugimoto, age 23, single. You were a former member of the Furin Kazan guild, led by a man with the handle 'Klein'. Is that correct?"

"Yes sir."

"During your initial debriefing you had told the caseworker that when you were still a member of that guild that you and your party had met the Black Swordsman on Floor 74."

"Yes sir, we did."

"And you said that he was with a female sword fighter."

"Yes sir. It looked like they were working together."

"So you claimed. Are you sure about that?"

"Yeah. They were definitely teamed up."

"And how do you know that?"

"Simple. He said so."

Kikuoka was surprised. He stood up. "What? He did?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Are you sure?"

The man stopped twirling his fidget spinner and started to grin. "Oh yeah. I'll never forget it. He introduced his partner to us and, wow, she was hot. Klein is really brave and all, a great guy, and we all look up to him, and usually he's really laid back and chill, but when we were introduced to that girl, he just froze. Then he started babbling like a high school sophomore trying to ask the prom queen for a date, heh."

"Nevermind that. What did the Black Swordsman say about her? Did he give a name?"

"Oh yeah. He introduced her as Asuna, one of the members of the Knights of the Blood Oath. Most of us already heard of her, the hottie ice queen. I never saw her before. Man, she's a looker. What a bod, great hair..."
Kikuoka waved his hand to stop him. "Yes, yes, I'm sure. Now, please, just stop. Back up. Are you sure it was Asuna and not someone else?"

"Well, I don't know what she is supposed to look like. We don't have television or magazines down there, you know. But I knew her rep, and the girl fit the description I heard. She was wearing the KoBO livery and had the red hair."

"Did she speak at all?"

"Uh, yeah. She said that she was working with the Black Swordsman."

"Wait a moment please. I need to check my computer." The intelligence officer's hands flew at high speed on the keyboard. Several screens of text popped up. There were no pictures on the display except for a single image of a girl in a medical gel bed with red hair wearing a NerveGear helmet.

He started mumbling to himself. "Hmm. Doesn't fit our theories. she is a real person, so she can't be Kayaba.. maybe a doppleganger..?"

Sugimoto then explained what happened in the boss fight on Floor 74. Over the next few hours Kikuoka proceeded to ask him many more questions about Kirito and Asuna and their fight with Gleam Eyes. After that he went back with Sugimoto and carefully walked through the whole incident a second time. Then they went through it all yet again.

Eventually it was evening.

Kikuoka stood. "Well, thank you Mr. Sugimoto. You're been extremely helpful. We'll keep in touch."

"Phew, I'm bushed. Glad to be of help." He stood up as well. Then he added "Uh, I heard you say Kayaba's name earlier. You think that's him? Some guys do that, you know, pretend to be a girl online.."

"I am sorry, but I am not at liberty to discuss it. Thank you again, and please stay in touch with us." Kikuoka escorted him out.

Kikuoka was now alone in the interview office. He sat back down, then he looked at the image of the girl wearing the helmet.

He started tapping his pencil.

It was common for different high level players from different guilds to work together during a boss fight. Kirito had done it several times. Was Asuna just a temporary hook-up to take on Gleam Eyes? But such fights always involved several high level players, not just two.

Kikuoka's theory was that Kayaba would want to play the game himself. He would eventually sidle up to Kirito and become his partner. They would fight together during the rest of the game as a two-person team. Eventually, at a dramatic moment around Floor 95 or so, Kayaba would alter his avatar and reveal himself to Kirito in his real form. He would gloat and shame Kirito to maximize his anger and stoke his desire to beat the game, then he would challenge Kirito as the Final Boss on Floor 100.

The pair did take out the creature all by themselves. That was incredible. Or did Kirito just get lucky?

No, with Kayaba there was no such thing as luck. That dual-wielding sword skill was nowhere in
the game's specs, nor was it in the interview database. How did Kirito manage to suddenly whip out that impressive and unique skill? Kayaba must have somehow given it to him to ensure the win.

Asuna and Kirito playing as a duo fit the theory perfectly, and Kayaba pretending to be a girl would make the final reveal all the more shocking.

The key question was whether or not Kirito and Asuna were working together long term. If they were, Kikuoka thought, then that girl definitely had to be Kayaba. Kayaba could easily use the short-duration microwave beam to put the real girl into a reversible coma and send fake signals to the helmet LEDs to simulate brain activity, then take her place.

But why that girl? Why use her? Kikuoka looked at the image again. Yes, she was quite beautiful. She would be very noticeable, particularly to all those gaming otakus who lived in their parents' basements. The members of the Furin Kazin guild all knew her by reputation, although without the conveniences of modern television and magazines they didn't know what she actually looked like.

It made perfect sense. Kirito's partner would be flashy and well known. His partner being a beautiful girl would make that person even more notorious to everyone.

Kikuoka wanted to know more about their personal relationship. Based on Sugimoto's statement it seemed like they were strictly combat partners. That also fit.

Kayaba had to be Asuna.

He tapped his pencil some more.

It had to be her... But wait, maybe...

He needed to be sure. He pushed his mic.

"Nurse, please contact Miss Watanabe and tell her that I need to see her as soon as possible."

October 29, 2024.

Kikuoka waited for the steel door to slide open, then he graciously greeted his favorite interviewee.

"Miss Watanabe, good morning! Please come in. I have your tea ready."

"Good morning sir, and thank you." She sat and picked up the teacup.

Kikuoka resumed his seat. "Are you comfortable? Is there anything else I can get you?"

"No, this is fine, thank so you much." She took a sip of tea. "You said you needed to see me right away?"

He drummed his fingers on his desk.

"Yes. Some new information came in...

Sachi noticed that something seemed to be on his mind. "I see. How can I help?"

"Well, there's been some new developments. I've been up all night running cross checks. At first I thought we had something..."
"And now?"

"Well, now I'm not so sure..."

The previous night Kikuoka had scoured the Ministry of Information's SAO Incident databases for any and all information regarding Asuna Yuuki. He stayed up all night pouring through endless reports and interview transcripts. There were almost a thousand pages worth of material on her - various items that had referenced her either directly or indirectly. Asuna was very active in the game and had participated with many individuals on many floors.

The problem was that it seemed that Asuna and Kirito might have had crossed paths before. Possibly several times. There were many offhand mentions of their being on the same floor or in the same town. It happened too many times to be a coincidence. The information was frustratingly sketchy, and nothing was definite, but if they had several prior interactions - and it was starting to look that way, even going back as far as 2022 - it would weigh strongly against his theory about Kayaba. It was because Kayaba would have had no personal interest in Kirito back then.

Kikuoka knew that one way to disprove his theory would be if Kirito and Asuna had any sort of serious committed romantic relationship - for example if they were, say, living together or sleeping together. Kayaba was asexual.

"Miss Watanabe, I am sorry for getting you out of bed so early, but I still need to check some things with you, if you don't mind."

"It's quite all right."

"Have you ever heard of a player named 'Asuna'? She is a sword fighter."

"Hmm, no sir. Is it important?"

"Well, she is the first confirmed sighting of Kirito working with anyone since he worked with you. They were seen fighting a boss on Floor 74."

"High level players working together in a boss fight is not that unusual. Many will team up temporarily for that."

"Yes, I know. They might have just teamed up as one-shot combat partners. We still need to check it."

"I'm sorry, I don't know her. I wish I could help."

Kikuoka was thoughtful. "Well, maybe you still can. Hmm. Uhm.. Miss Watanabe, can I ask you a personal question? You don't have to answer if you won't want to."

"Personal?"

"Well, you know Kirito better anyone else in the game who has died. You told us how your death drove him into being a solo player, and we've confirmed that. It appears that your death while under his protection had strongly affected him as you feared it would, including that recording you made. We know he became obsessed with reviving you and he's been a solo player ever since. So, well, I'd like to ask..."

She looked down. "I know. I hate myself. I think about it every day. Every hour."

Kikuoka was the only person to whom Sachi had ever confessed about her obsession: that she
would devote the rest of her life to Kirito, to give of herself anything he wanted from her, no matter the cost to herself. She was determined to pay back her debt to him in any way he wanted, even though she knew she could never fully repay it.

Kikuoka sighed, "I know, I know, I know. We've talked about so this many times. Please, Miss Watanabe, don't keep holding it against yourself. It was an honest mistake. You were a young girl who didn't know any better."

She looked up sharply. "That doesn't fix it."

"Yes I know. All right.. Look, I'm sure we'll talk about this again some other time. But for now I need to ask you something. It might be important."

"Go on."

"Miss Watanabe, with all your demonstrated dedication and devotion to Kazuto at the hospital, and given the fact that you know him better than anyone, I'd like to ask you a question that, uh, well, will probably seem very personal for you. I need to know the answer, and I so very much don't want to hurt you."

"Go ahead. There is nothing you can do to hurt me that hasn't been done to me already."

Kikuoka's heart nearly broke. He had a daughter her age.

"Miss Watanabe, I.. well.."

"Ask your question."

"Uh, well, all right. Miss Watanabe, I need to ask you, do you think he will ever..." He hesitated.

"Yes?"

"Now, I don't want to upset you. You've been through so much already." He sounded indecisive. "Perhaps I shouldn't."

Her face showed steely resolve.

"Ask."

"Well, all right...

She waited.

"Do you think he will ever fall in love again?"

Then he quickly added, "In the game I mean, and I'm not implying that your relationship with him was anything but..

She raised her hand. "I understand."

"Yes, of course. I'm so sorry that I needed to ask you that. Please, take your time and think carefully before you answer. I wouldn't be asking this question if it wasn't very important."

She did not hesitate. "I already have an answer."

He looked at her expectantly. Her reply was immediate.
"No."

She went on. "I believe he will never fall in love with anyone. Not until he beats the game and defeats Kayaba. It is the only thing he cares about, the only thing he thinks about. Every day, every hour. I am certain of it."

Kikuoka was silent. Then he said softly, "I think you are probably right."

*Their psych profiles are so similar they could almost be the same person.*

"All right. Thank you. Again I apologize. I think we're done for today."

*They have exactly the same obsessive personality types. If he wakes up from SAO and latches on to her, oh my, look out. With their mutual obsessiveness I bet they would bond stronger than adamantium. It certainly would be something to see.*

Sachi leaned forward. She wanted to learn more about how Kirito was fairing. "Please, sir, tell me more about Kirito. You say they were combat partners?"

"Yes. The reason I asked is because if they have a long term team-up then we think she might give us a lead on Kayaba. She is high up in the Knights of the Blood Oath, one of the top two clearing guilds. Are you sure you never heard of her?"

"No sir."

"And you have never heard of any connection between Kirito and the Knights of the Blood Oath?"

"Again no sir, I'm sorry."

*Well, maybe there is no connection between him and the KoBO. Nothing else Kuradeel said was true.*

"Oh well, it's a pity."

"Why is it a pity?"

"Because if Kirito was affiliated with that guild it would help us enormously."

"I see. How would it help?"

"Well..."

"Please sir, I want to know. I want to help."

Kikuoka made a small smile.

*There is just no saying 'no' to that girl. She is so persistent.*

"All right." He leaned forward and lowered his voice. "What I about to tell you is confidential. You cannot tell anyone."

Sachi had been given an NDA to sign with the Ministry on a previous visit. "Yes sir. If you recall, I had signed a non-disclosure agreement with you."

"That's right. I am glad you remember that. Well, we think that Kayaba might try to get close to Kirito as a player character. It is based partly on the psych profile on Kirito that we built thanks to
your input. At first I thought he might have masqueraded as Asuna, but now am I beginning to doubt that. If Kirito joins a guild it will narrow down the list of suspects considerably."

"That's wonderful. I'm glad to help. I hope you catch him."

"Amen to that. Kayaba has damaged and sometimes devastated the lives of many thousands of young people, including yours. I am so sorry about what happened to you. Anyway, as I said, we are finished for today."

Sachi looked back on her sad and lonely life since waking up. Still, she felt that as bad as her life had been, what Kayaba had done to Kirito was worse.

She started to feel angry inside. She muttered, "If anyone deserves to go to Hell, he does..."

Kikuoka chuckled, "Actually, we all do."

"We do?"

He started to loosen his tie and sat back. "Yes. None of us belong in Heaven. Not even a sweet girl like you."

"Oh. But why not?"

Kikuoka finished removing his tie, then he put his hands behind his head and looked up.

"Because we don't rate, none of us. We all screw up and fall short. Even Moses messed up near the end of his life, which is why he was not allowed to enter the Promised Land."

"But sir, I can understand why bad people like Hitler might go to Hell, but why would everyone.."

He interrupted her. "Oh, Hitler is not there."

"He's not?"

"No. Nobody is."

"I don't understand."

"It's because it hasn't happened yet."

"What hasn't?"

"The event that drops us all in there, in Hell. Well, the ones left behind anyway."

"What event?"

He smiled again. "Ah, now that's a good question. The Bible is kind of vague about how it is going to happen."

Sachi leaned forward. "Please sir, I want to know."

Kikuoka relaxed and put his feet on his desk. "Well, it requires knowledge of Greek and gets technical, so for now let's just step back a moment. The first thing to understand is that Jesus liked to use very strong language when talking about God, very vivid imagery. He'd say things like "Why do you pay no attention to the plank in your eye?"* and "You blind guides! You strain out a gnat, but swallow a camel!"** He did the same thing when talking about Hell: "If your eye makes
"But He also chose his words very carefully. You see, back then everybody in Jerusalem knew what that Gehenna (Hebrew: Gehinnom) meant. It was a real place, a garbage dump that was right outside of town. It was a large depression just outside the city walls where where the people tossed their out their trash, and it fell and accumulated in the valley below. For hundreds of years all that garbage accumulated in thick layers of decaying organic matter that decomposed into methane gas. From the wall of Jerusalem you could look down and literally see all these little fires burning all over that valley, and those fires really were unquenchable. You can still see those fires today at big municipal garbage dumps, where pipes are stuck into the ground to burn off the methane gas.

"So, you are saying that Hell is like a garbage dump?"

"That's His metaphor, not mine. You see, it's the default place where everything ends up. God's junk pile. It's separation, isolation. I think that Jesus is using really strong language to literally put the fear of God in you. He is warning you that you really, really, really do not want to end up in that garbage pile."

"But where is it? And why aren't we there yet?"

"Oh, we're there all right. Right now. You and me. Everybody."

"Now I am really confused..."

"Sorry. You see, I think we're standing on it. The Bible says that Jesus comes back, and a bunch of bad things happen, then finally the Earth gets destroyed in fire. We don't know how it immolates exactly, but in my opinion the easiest way is with an asteroid - and not a particularly big one - a rock only 120 miles wide is enough to boil the seas and melt the Earth's crust entirely away."

"And then we all fall in? Plop, just like that?"

"That's just my hunch, based on the original text - you would have to dig into the Greek translation of 'cast' versus 'drop' among other things - but the point is that it's inevitable. All we need to do is to simply sit on our collective butts and do nothing. Sooner or later, whether you are alive or in your grave, eventually all that exists in this sad world, you, me, and everything else that remains on Earth will fall in to that burning cauldron of unquenchable magma."

"It sounds so depressing."

He made a small smile. "Well, I could go on to explain thermodynamic entropy and how it will eventually make the whole universe run down, and really depress you, but I won't. Look, just don't get hung up about it. The key thing to remember is that God loves us and wants a relationship with us."

She looked down. "If He does, I don't feel it."

He put his hand on her shoulder. "It's hard for you. I understand."

She pleaded with him, "But that's just it, I don't understand! Why did I suffer and die? Why was I brought back? Why is my life so miserable? Why are all these bad things happening to me? It makes no sense! There is no meaning to any of this!"

_That poor girl. If she is asking those questions then I suspect Kirito is too. The game must seem just_
"I'm sorry, I honestly don't know the answers to your questions. I wish I did. All I can tell you is that if you were brought back to life then I believe that there has to be a reason for it."

She sighed, "I just wish I knew what it was."

He pulled out her chair and helped her stand up. As he escorted her to the door he said, "Thank you for coming. If you need anything from me, anything at all, please let me know."

She turned and smiled, "I will. I appreciate you taking so much of your time for me."

"You take care of yourself. I'll be praying for you."

"Pray for Kirito too. He has lost so much weight and is so thin now."

"I will. And we'll do everything we can to find Kayaba. I promise."

"Thank you. Goodbye."

_that girl, she has such amazing gifts... she is so caring, so giving of herself. But her emotional baggage is just too heavy right now._

_Lord, I know You work on Your own timetable. Just please, let her know her purpose on this Earth. Keep her from harm. Protect Kazuto as well, and all other the victims of this tragedy. Please protect them all and show them Your love._

Midori walked into the kitchenette. Suguha was sitting in a chair eating a breakfast of cold cereal while flipping through a magazine.

"Good morning, Sugu."

Suguha mumbled something in response and kept reading.

Normally Midori would simply grab her coffee thermos and head out for the train station, but this time she stopped. She checked the time, then she sat at the kitchenette table next to her daughter.

"Sugu, dear, do you have a second?"

"Mmph?"

"Please, I'd like to talk with you for a moment. It's about you and Sachi."

That got Suguha's attention. She swallowed the glob of cereal that was in her mouth and put her spoon in the bowl. "What about us?"

"Well, you've been playing that VR game quite a lot.."

"Yeah?"

".. and you brought Sachi in to play with you, which I think is absolutely wonderful.."

"And?"

".. well, it's just that I don't see you two interacting much outside of the game."
Suguha thought quickly. "That's because we're both so busy. I have school and homework, prepping for my high school entrance exams, kendo club and stuff, and she has all her hospital volunteering with taking care of Kazuto and the other sleepers, doing all those household chores, and her own school studies. We don't have time for much else."

"Oh, I see. Well, I am glad at least that you two are finally good friends now."

"Yeah..." Suguha lied, "we're real good friends..."

"That poor girl, she needed a friend so badly. You are such a blessing in her life. She still has nobody but you. I think you two are just so adorable in bed together with your visors on."

"Yeah, in the game we're really close." That much was truthful.

Midori sighed, "I don't see much of her myself either. Are you sure she's gotten over the birthday party? I'm still so dreadfully sorry about that."

"She's chill. Just remember to always run things like that past me first. No more surprises."

"I promise, I won't. I just wish I could see more of her."

"Well, you are a busy person too."

"I know, and Minetaka is still in America on that merger negotiation."

Midori looked thoughtful. "Say, I tell you what. Please tell Sachi that she's always welcome to come visit me when I am working in my office downstairs. I know she loves computers."

"Okay, I'll be sure to tell her that."

"Thank you so much, honey." Midori gave her daughter a quick peck on the cheek and left.

Suguha sighed and looked down at her unfinished cereal.

_In ALO we are totally different people. We get along so great as Sylphs, and we really are best friends in there. But when she comes in to my room for a dive, she and I don't say a word to each other. Then afterward when she leaves, she just says, "Bye", and that's it. I don't say anything either, just "Bye". Why is that? I guess we are both still wary of each other. I do admit that when Kazuto wakes up I will not trust her around him because of her VRDP thing. I even confessed it at the campfire. But why is she so circumspect around me too? It's like she doesn't trust me either! Why not? I'm his sister! I'm his.. sister._

Sachi was standing with Leafa, Recon, and several other Sylphs in Daffodil Hall*9 while awaiting Sigurd's arrival.

Sachi whispered, "I'm nervous."

Leafa hushed her. "Shush."

The doors opened wide and Sigurd marched into the hall with his retinue. He wore heavy armor and a broadsword under a great green cloak. Upon his brow was a jeweled circlet of gold that made him look like a regal prince.
Sachi whispered to Leafa again, "I though you told me that Sylphs didn't have princes or royalty...?"

"I said shush."

Sigurd approached the group. He raised his arms to greet Leafa warmly. "Ah, Leafa! It is so good to see you again!" He braced her wrists in greeting.

Leafa braced his wrists in return. "Sigurd, it is good to see you as well. We have finished our mission and have eradicated all the sand wyrms from the Ancient Forest."

"You have? You have done well."

Leafa then added, "We do apologize for the tree damage. I hope you and Lady Sakuya will."

At the mention of Lady Sakuya's name Sigurd waved his hand in aristocratic dismissal. "Do not concern yourself about Sakuya. You had to destroy the forest to save it. It happens."

"Uh, yes..."

Recon sighed behind them.

Then Sigurd noticed Sachi. He smiled at her, "Well, well, who do we have here?"

Leafa introduced her. "This is Sachi, my new friend and companion."

Sigurd nodded his head slightly in greeting. "Hail and well met, Sachi. You have the honor and privilege of meeting the greatest Sylph in Alfheim."

Leafa rolled her eyes a little.

_What a blowhard._

Sachi asked, "You, sir?"

The question took Sigurd back. "Why, yes. I am the strongest, the fastest..."

"Oh, that has to be Leafa, sir."

"Pardon me?"

Leafa jumped in waving her hands. "Oh no, no, no. Nevermind her. She's new. She babbles. Just ignore her."

Sigurd gave Sachi a scowl and then turned to Leafa. "At any rate, the reason I summoned you here is that I would like to invite you to join my personal party."

Leafa asked, "Join you?"

"Yes. I want you to work with me under my direct supervision."

"Oh, I see. Well, I suppose I can discuss it with Sachi and Recon and..."

He interrupted her. "No, just you and Recon. I will not take her."

Leafa protested, "Sir, with respect, Sachi and I are a team. We work together."
Sigurd glanced down at the petite Sylph. "No. I don't work with noobs.

Leafa's eyes flashed in anger. "Sachi is not a noob! You should have seen her! When she's flying nobody can put a scratch on her!"

Sachi tried to calm Leafa down, "Hey, It's all right..."

Leafa ignored her and kept shouting at Sigurd. "You have no idea how experienced she is in playing VRMMOs! She has logged more dive time than any of us!"

Sigurd sounded skeptical. "Really? How so?"

Sachi grabbed Leafa's arm. "No, don't.."

But it was too late.

Leafa blurted out, "Sachi was in Sword Art Online for almost seven months! Nonstop 24/7! She has more VR dive experience than all of us put together!"

The room fell silent. A space formed around Sachi as people moved away from her.

Sigurd said softly, "Wait.. she's one of those crazy SAO people?"

"She's not crazy!"

"I don't understand this. I didn't think any of them played VRMMOs, not after something like that."

Leafa now realized that she had stuck her foot in her mouth, all the way up to her thigh. She started backpedaling. "Well, uh, this is all part of her rehab..."

Sigurd was skeptical. "Is it now?"

"Uh, yeah. I'm her, uhm, VR sponsor."

"I see. Well be that as it may, I'm not taking her."

Leafa stamped her feet. "You will take her or else!"

Sigurd arched an eyebrow. "Or else what?"

Leafa stammered, "Or else.. I will challenge you to a duel."

"You are challenging me? A formal challenge?"

"Yes, yes, I am."

Sigurd crossed his arms. "And what are the stakes?"

Leafa crossed her own arms in return. "If I win, you have to give Sachi the same all due respect and honors that you give me."

"Feh. And if I win?"

"Then I'll agree to work with you, alone, no questions asked."

He studied the pair. "Hmm, I'll have to think about it."
One of his retinue whispered in his ear. He nodded. "Meanwhile, I have other business to attend to." He walked out along with his retinue, not a few of whom gave disapproving looks at Sachi as they left.

After they were gone Sachi turned to Leafa. She was upset.

"Leafa, you should have kept quiet."

"Yeah, I'm sorry. He just pisses me off sometimes and I got carried away."

"Why in the world did you challenge him? If he's really the best.."

Leafa re-crossed her arms. "Oh, I think I can beat him. Besides, Sigurd just uses people like tools. He actually doesn't care about their backgrounds. Look, once he learns how good you are, I bet he'll take us both anyway."

"Still, you shouldn't have said anything."

One of the reasons Sachi had agreed to play the game with Suguha was not just to make friends but also to escape, if only temporarily, her walking curse of being labeled a VRDP. But the scarlet letter now followed her here to another world.

"Yeah, I know. I shot my mouth off. I'm really sorry."

"Please don't mention it ever again."

"I promise." She put her arm around Sachi's shoulder. "Look, we're pals, right?"

"Yeah."

Recon came up between them. "C'mon, let's go. We're supposed to meet Lady Sakuya next."

They left.

Lady Sakuya prepared to enter the main greeting hall of her estate. Her two assistants were just finishing fixing up her hair.

Previously she had her kitchen staff arrange a line of trays along a side table. The trays were positioned under a set of lattice windows overlooking her personal garden. They were filled with pastries and sweets. She knew that Leafa loved them.

She said to her assistants, "Let's begin."

The doors flew open and she strode in to welcome her favorite combat Sylph.

Then she stopped and looked on curiously at what has happening in the middle of her greeting hall.

She had expected to see Leafa standing at the side table stuffing her face with pastries like she always did. Lady Sakuya's tasty delectables were famous across all of Alfheim. And best of all? They had no calories.

Leafa was not stuffing herself with pastries. She was standing in the middle of the hall with Recon and another Sylph. She appeared to be in the midst of a heated argument with the other Sylph, a smaller girl with unusually long wings.
The argument had been going on for a while. Recon had given up trying to separate them.

Lady Sakuya heard Sachi finishing.

".. you have raw power, yes, but it takes more than that to make a good flyer."

Leafa barked, "Hah! I can beat you any day of the week!"

Sachi walked up close. "You think? With all that mass? And those big boobs?"

Leafa was incredulous. "B-Big boobs? Oh!"

Leafa shoved her face right up to Sachi's. "I can beat your scrawny little butt with one wing tied down!"

Sachi grinned back. "You want to make it interesting?"

Leafa returned her nasty looking grin with one of her own. "Yeah, let's."

"All right. Whoever loses has to scoop and clean Yaya's litter box for two months."

Leafa stared her down. "Oh, you are so evil."

"Heh."

Recon sighed, "Putting those two together in the same VRMMO really is the worst thing ever."

Sakuya leaned over and whispered to Recon, "What is a Yaya?"

Recon whispered back, "A terrible creature, mi'lady, one whose odiferous noxious emissions are like a poisonous fume. Truly most foul and vile. I have had the unfortunate experience of smelling those putrid emissions of lumpy ichor myself." He shuddered. "It is an odor I would not wish on my worst enemy."

The race leader of the Sylphs nodded with understanding, "My, my. I did not realize that those two had such an intense rivalry between them."

"I am afraid they do, mi'lady. It seems that they joyfully compete in everything."

"I see that. And for high stakes it seems."

"Oh indeed."

Meanwhile, Leafa and Sachi continued their impromptu mutual staring contest as they continued to grin evilly at each other.

The trio had left Lady Sakuya's estate and were walking back to the main town square of Swilvane. Leafa was grumbling to herself.

As they walked together Leafa turned to Sachi. "You fink."

"Hmm?"

"You worked that out with Sakuya ahead of time, didn't you..."

Sachi battered her eyelashes innocently. "Who, me?"
"Now I know you did. Argh! You are such a little stink butt!"

Recon said, "Hey, Leafa, it's your own fault. You agreed to let Lady Sakuya be the race arbiter and decide the layout of the race course."

"Yeah... a zig-zag spaghetti mess through the woods. Sachi, I hate you."

Sachi just kept walking while humming a pleasant tune.

As the trio entered the main square, another Sylph ran up to meet them. She was weirdly tall with long garish ears, tiny wings, and a strange outfit. None of the trio recognized the newcomer.

"Hi!"

Leafa peered at her, "Uh, do we know you?" The name above the newcomer's life bar read, 'Pookie'.

"It's me!"

Sachi asked, "Who are you?"

"I'm at the gaming store. The one by the Saitama Omiya train station."

Leafa looked at Sachi. Omiya was the train station nearest to the Kirigaya residence.

The strange tall Sylph went on. "Oh, I so loved playing these video games when I was young. Tomb Raider, Mass Effect, Super Mario Kart... She put her hands on her hips and did a pose. I was quite the gamer chick in my day, you know."

"Wait..."

"The store clerk at the VR store let me try on a visor with a free trial. Suguha, you've been playing this game for so long, and now with Sachi too, so I just had to drop in and say Hi!"

"You mean."

The gangly Sylph opened her arms wide. "That's right, it's your mommy!"

Leafa and Sachi turned and faced each other.

Then they started yelling in perfect stereo.

"GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Kagemune led the decoy party.

This time it would be different.

Previously, he and his squad of Salamander raiders had been wiped out four times in a row.

Each time it was the same: Their raiding party would spot a Sylph flying by itself over the Ancient Forest, easy prey.

His squad would approach it and then...
... they were all instantly dead.

The frustrating thing was that there was no warning. They couldn't figure out what was happening. There was no weapon or spell that could instantly obliterate an entire Salamander raiding party like that. Not even the legendary sword Excalibur could do that. The Great Sword of Power could kill them all one by one, yes, but at least they could see it happen.

It was like an invisible hand just swatted them all out of the sky.

After the second time, Kagemune sent a scout back to the scene of the crime. The scout returned and reported seeing hundreds of flattened trees in a circular pattern, all pointing away from the center.

What could possibly do that? Had the Sylphs discovered some kind of ancient artifact? A doomsday weapon of mass destruction? Or was it something not even in the Archives?

Kagemune reported his findings directly to Mortimer, the Leader of the Salamanders. Mortimer then ordered that two squads be sent out, one led by Kagemune and the another led by Mortimer's brother, Eugene, the strongest of the Salamanders.

The two squads flew in formation about a kilometer apart. Kagemune spotted the lone Sylph and signalled the other squad. Eugene ordered his squad to fall back to watch, and...

.. both squads were instantly dead.

Mortimer was enraged. More scouts. They reported finding two circles of downed trees, but this time the circles were half the size.

Eugene conferred with his brother, and they had Kagemune fly his squad out yet again, but this time Eugene followed them by himself. He flew low, with a cloaking spell, and stayed about a kilometer behind Kagemune's squad.

Kagemune sent a signal. Eugene used his spyglass to sweep the area ahead. He spotted the lone Sylph ahead of them.

He swept the skies with his lens, back and forth, up and down.

There! Up very high, two small objects, thousands of meters up. He zoomed the lens. He saw them, two Sylphs. But surely they were too far out of range to attack anything. Were they spies also?

Then he saw it. The pair shot down, and soon they were like meteors. He pulled away the lens from his eyes, which was fortunate because otherwise the flash might have blinded him.

He saw Kagemune's squad obliterated as the sonic boom thundered across the hills.

He nodded to himself and returned home.

"Leafa, this is getting boring."

"Stop whining, Recon."

Sachi scratched her head. "I don't get it. You'd think they'd learn by now..."

"Sachi, they're Salamanders. Big dumb idiots."
Recon piped up, "Nobody is that dumb."

"Look, we keep doing it until the incursions stop, okay?"

Sachi sighed, "Fine. Leafa, cloak us. Then let's go up."

Recon said, "It's too bad you can't stack Cloak with Protection From Falls. That would really drive them nuts. Invisible death from above, heh."

Leafa grinned, "Like I said, big dumb idiots. Sachi, we're cloaked, let's go."

"Leafa, here they come. Hmm, just one squad."

"Yep. Salamanders. Idiots 'R Us."

Sachi frowned. "I don't know... I don't like this."

"Let's just do it. I'm decloaking us."

Leafa began to cast the spell Protection From Falls on both of them.

Suddenly, a burst of orange flame exploded on Sachi's back.

She tumbled out of the sky.

"What...?" Leafa whirled around.

Eugene had already decloaked and was about 40 meters away. He roared a challenge and fired his flame lance again.

Leafa dodged and counter-attacked with a volley of needles. Eugene avoided them successfully.

Leafa quickly looked down and saw Sachi tumbling out of control.

"Sachi! I'm coming!" She raced down as fast as she could. Eugene followed, but Salamanders were the slowest flyers in the game. He soon fell behind.

"Sachi!"

Sachi felt the explosion on her back.

It was the first time she had been hit.

She was stunned. Her life bar plummeted to the red. She was disoriented and spiraling down out of control. She started to panic.

She saw the horizon whirling around her, spinning faster and and faster. Then she saw the forest canopy rushing up.

She knew that she was going to die.

No! No! No!

There was a burst of static as her visor's 3D frustum tried to adjust to the sudden discontinuity in her velocity vector at impact. Pixels exploded. There was red everywhere.
Then she saw it. The large sans serif font.

**YOU ARE DEAD.**

For a moment she thought she had lost track of time and was unconscious. She now seemed to be low on the ground. Prostrate? She could turn and see her surroundings. But...

She could not move.

What was happening? She noticed a strange red glow around her. She tried to look at her hands.

But her hands were not there.

Huh?

She tried to look at herself. All she saw was a small red flame that seemed to envelope her.

What?

*I am a remainder flame.*

*That's all that is left of me.*

*I am dead.*

Then she heard a noise.

Her impact had attracted something in the Ancient Forest.

She heard a strange barking noise, guttural and deep. Then two large black claws appeared through the bushes and pulled them apart.

Then she saw it. A grendel. It was three meters high, with a head shaped like a carnivorous dinosaur. It approached and loomed above her tiny insignificant sputtering flame.

The monster walked up very close to the flame and sniffed it. Sachi could see it's red eyes, feel it's corrupted pebbly flesh, and smell its sickening odor.

Her mind reeled. She tried to flee, but she couldn't move.

Meanwhile the monster contained to sniff at her flame. It pushed the flame away with its snout, causing it to pass right through a dead tree trunk and come out the other side. The monster then walked around the tree trunk and sniffed the flame again. Deciding it might be tasty, the monster opened its slobbering maw and consumed the flame completely. Its jaws snapped shut.

She had been eaten. The world swirled around her and went completely black as her flame went out.

Suguha logged out and quickly pulled off her AmuSphere visor. She turned and saw Sachi laying there next to her. The hand that she had been holding all this time was now limp and lifeless.

She pushed and pulled Sachi's shoulder. "Sachi? Log out. You need to wake up."

"Sachi...?"
She was lifeless.

Suguha jumped up and ran around to Sachi’s side of the bed. She lifted the petite girl's torso up to a semi-sitting position, then ripped the visor off her head and threw it away.

"Sachi!"

Sachi’s eyes were still closed. Suguha used two fingers to carefully open an eyelid.

The pupil was dilated and fixed, the cornea slightly clouded over.

Suguha let go of her limp body. It fell back on the bed like a rag doll.

"Sachi?"

She slapped Sachi's face.

"Sachi!?"

She slapped her face again, harder.

"SACHI!"

The girl did not move.

---

_I am dead._

Sachi felt nothingness, non-existence. Her body and spirit had been separated.

She was trapped in her own mini-universe. It contained just her, and only her, and nothing else.

_I am alone._

Previously she had been reborn into a second life after SAO, a sad and solitary existence, in a world that had despised her.

_I was always alone._

Now even that had been taken away from her.

There was a crushing sense of loss and isolation. Her solitary life as a VRDP was nothing compared to this.

Her memory of dying the first time had returned. She was able to recall how she had felt that first time: losing Kirito, losing her friends, losing everything she had ever loved.

Time passed of unknown duration.

Isolation.

Separation.

She was cut off from everyone and everything she had ever loved. And she had absolute certainty that she would never see any of them ever again.

Loss.
Darkness.
Blackness.
Torment.
She was Alone.

*Please!*

Nothing.
Silence.

*I need you!*

Darkness.
Blackness.

*Please...*

She despaired.
She was alone.
Forever alone.
And then...
And then...
She felt it.
It was here!
The light.

Light.
Everywhere, the light.
It enveloped her, surrounded her.

It was the same feeling that she had when she was protected before.

Light.

Nothing but light.
The light.

She breathed it in.

There was light. It was fluorescent.
Then a girl's voice. "Hey there."
A blurry face.

"Took you long enough."

The face resolved into focus. It was Suguha.

Sachi tried to sit up in her hospital bed. Suguha gently pushed her back down. "Wait for the doctors to check you out."

Sachi’s throat was dry. Suguha held out something. "Here is a sippy cup. Drink it slow."

Sachi drank the cool liquid. It soothed her raw throat. Suguha pulled away the cup.

Sachi rasped, "How long..?"

"Three days."

"What happened..?"

"You finally got hit in the game. One solid hit was all it took. That blast knocked you right out of the sky. You then crashed. I think the impact killed you."

"I was brought back to life?"

"No, I'm sorry, you weren't. I couldn't reach you within the one minute window to revive you. Your remainder flame must have went out. I searched but couldn't find you in the woods in time. I'm sorry."

"No, it wouldn't have mattered. A grendel ate me."

"Really? Eww, that's icky. I'm sorry..."

"But why was I brought back?"

"No, I couldn't find you."

"That's not what I mean." Sachi looked up at the ceiling.

*What is she doing?*

"Why did you bring me back?"

*Huh? Does she mean Kayaba?*

Suguha decided to ignore it. "Look, uhm, the doctor said you would probably wake up on your own. And you did. I'm so happy about that. I don't know what I'd do if you stayed comatose."

"He was right."

*She's babbling.*

"Sachi, look at me."

Her gaze turned back to Suguha.

Suguha knelt down at her bedside. "Sachi, I'm.. I'm really sorry. The game was a stupid idea. I thought it was a good way for us to bond, you know? Become friends? You're a such a big
Suguha was frustrated. "I know. But, it shouldn't have been that traumatic. Character death in ALO isn't supposed to be a big deal. You just lose some items, some stats, then a minute later you pop up back in Swivlave good as new. That's it."

"Sugu.. I died.."

"It must have been because of your time in SAO. It triggered you. Oh, I am so sorry, Sachi. Your death must have brought back all your memories of your final moments in SAO, when you thought you were dying for real."

Suguha dropped her head down. Tears started to make splatter marks on the tiled linoleum. "I.. I hurt you. I hurt you so bad. Oh, I'm so sorry, Sachi. I should have known better. What if you never woke up again? I could never live with myself."

"Sugu, it's okay."

Suguha pounded her fist against the bed frame. "No, it is not okay! I'm an idiot! What the heck was I thinking to put a visor on you? Sachi.."

"Really, it was okay."

"What? No it wasn't!"

"You helped me. I think I was supposed to die."

Suguha stopped crying and looked up at her, wiping her face. "I don't understand."

"You're right. I remember now. What it felt like. To die. It must have been what the others felt when they died in SAO. They forgot their memory of it because of the death trauma, but the feeling remained inside them. No wonder some of them are so mentally disturbed..."

"Hey.. are you okay..?"

Sachi looked up at the ceiling again. "I remember."

Suguha saw that Sachi's blue-green eyes had that strange look again, deep and unfathomable. The last time it had unnerved Suguha, but this time it was different.

This time her eyes were not piercing. Her face.. what was it?

Calm, serene. At peace.

Suguha held her hand. "Sachi, look at me. I'm sorry. Just know that whatever the heck happened to you in there, from now on you are not alone. Forget about Kazuto for now.. I am going to try to be your friend, for real. I mean it. I'm here for you."

Sachi gently touched Suguha's face and placed her second hand over Suguha's. "I know."
Suguha gripped Sachi's hand tighter in return. "I really mean it. You won't be alone anymore. I promise, I will do my best to be your friend, your real friend, here on the outside. I will make sure that you are never alone, ever again."

"I know."

Suguha began to break down. "I'm so sorry.. I'm..

Sachi gently hugged her. Suguha grasped the back of her hospital gown tightly in both hands.

They stayed in that embrace, in silence, for a long, long time.

The Progress lab on the RECT corporate campus was 16 meters below ground level. In the underground lab a tall reedy man with narrow black-rimmed eyeglasses checked the monitor. He was wearing a white lab coat. A stockier man stood next to him.

The thin man asked, "Are we ready?"

The heavier man replied, "Yes sir. We can grab control the moment they try to shut the mainframes down."

"The helmets of our selected subjects will immediately switch to full lethality mode?"

"Yes sir."

"Good." It was Sugou's last-resort option in case the authorities discovered him.

Then he rubbed his chin. "He is out there somewhere..." He turned. "I don't want him getting in to our system, no matter what."

The stocky man showed him a tablet with a list of data items on it. He said, "Sir, our server farm is now completely locked down. We did a TCB Orange Book Class A scrubdown. It's a formal security model via mathematical Type Enforcement*. The expense was rather significant."

"Good. I don't care about the cost. And the I&A system?"

"It uses three-factor authentication, dual biometrics, SHA3 at 16384 bits, Elliptical Curve Diffie-Hellman, Galois/Counter Mode, the works. Then we shimmed it with extra proprietary ciphers. The reference monitor underneath it is beyond state of the art. We even ran an AI scan on the source code you provided us. There is no way he can get in. Heathcliff is locked out. Guaranteed."

"Still, you can never be too paranoid with him..."

"Sir, with this in place it won't matter what he does. The authorities are close to nabbing him anyway."

"Yes, they are. And we will help see to that won't we? Send the authorities an anonymous tip perhaps? Carry on." The underling left the lab.

The thin man was now alone in the room. He pushed a button under the monitor, and the image on the screen shifted.

It now displayed a closed-circuit view from an infrared camera of a private locked hospital ward. The room contained a single medical bed with a female patient with red hair wearing a NerveGear helmet.
"Yes, my dear..."

He looked at Asuna's sleeping form.

".. you are already mine."

The villa was high in the mountains, almost inaccessible. Attached to the building was a small microwave dish. Inside a man woke up on a medical bed.

A woman in her late 20s helped him remove his NerveGear helmet. As he pulled it off he sighed, "Still unsatisfactory progress with the biosapients. The MHCP001 development is interesting, but I need more organics."

He turned and asked the woman, "Have they tracked the link past the egress point?"

The woman said, "No, but it's only a matter of time now. There are only so many jabbers we can exploit."

He shook his head. "Unfortunate. Some of the biosapients' exoselves are degrading too. Particularly the primary." He sighed. "Well, the experiment was due to end soon anyway."

"But Aki, this is your life's work..."

"I know. It can't be helped. We'll just collect whatever data we can. The players in the assault teams took longer than we expected to clear the lower floors. Even with my help they were too slow. Too timid."

"They thought they'd die. Can you really blame them?"

He ignored her. Instead he asked, "What about RECT?"

The woman looked down. "It's why I revived you. We have a serious problem."

"Which is?"

"Sugou's TCB Orange Book Class A efforts finally paid off. He found everything, every back door, including the sidebands, even the direct volume writes to bypass the filesystem."

The man pinched his nose. "Kirito might be obsessed with beating me, but that Sugou is a bloody monomaniac compared to him. I don't know why I didn't fire him before he walked off with the source code."

"The amount of money he must have spent on the Class A design must have been incredible. He already closed and deleted your Heathcliff ALO account, and Oberon is now using three factor I&A."

"So, we have nothing on the inside anymore?"

"Nothing. We are completely locked out."

"You mean..."

"No inside help from us. If anyone gets stuck in there, we can do nothing to help them. We can't even create a passive apparition in there."
"So there is nothing we can do?"

"Nothing, nothing at all."

A/N:

* Mt 7:3, Lk 6:41

** Mt 23:24

*** Mk 9:47-48

*4 Mt 24:35, Mk 13:31, Lk 21:33

*5 2 Pe 3:7

*6 Rev 21:1


*8 LN Vol 1

*9 LN Vol 3

*10 US Patent 20080141338 A1
Quis Custodiet Ipsos Custodes?

The two girls still had their arms wrapped around each other in their long embrace. Eventually there was a knock on the hospital room door.

Suguha pulled away from Sachi and sat back down in the visitor's chair. As she did so she grabbed a fistful of tissues from the side table and wiped her face off. Meanwhile, Sachi put her head back down on her pillows and smoothed over her blanket with both hands. She quickly winked at Suguha, who had already placed her own hands in her lap as if nothing had happened.

The door opened a crack and someone peered in. "Can I come in?" It was Midori.

Sugu got up. "Hi, Mom. Good timing. She's up. We've just been chatting a bit."

Midori tentatively entered the room. When saw the petite girl with her head propped up on the pillows she gave a sigh of relief. "Sachi, you're finally awake. Thank heavens."

Sachi smiled. "Hi."

"It is so good to see you back among the living again. How are you feeling?"

"I feel just fine."

"That's excellent." Then Midori looked at her daughter. "Sugu, could you please come outside with me for a moment?" The request caught Suguha by surprise.

Suguha stood up, and as she did so she gave Sachi a questioning look. Sachi's face became impassive. Suguha silently left the room with her mother.

They were standing alone in the hallway. "Mom, what's the matter?"

Midori tried to find the right words to say to her daughter. "Sugu, on Wednesday evening when the ambulance took Sachi away I told them that I would notify her parents. I had to look up Mrs. Watanabe's telephone number in the phone book. There was no answer, so I went over to her apartment but nobody was home. I knew that Mrs. Watanabe worked several jobs, so I decided to go home and try again early the next morning, but there was still no answer at her door. I left a note. I went back today and the note was still there, so I finally gave up and called the prefecture's Child Welfare Council* to ask how to get in contact with her parents."

"Then what happened?"

"Instead of giving me the information I had asked for, they came over to the house while you were at school - two case workers. I was questioned closely for over an hour about Sachi. It wasn't pleasant."

"Mom..?"

"Sugu, they told me that her mother has been a chronic alcoholic for years. The case workers want to take Sachi into protective custody. Mrs. Watanabe will likely be institutionalized."

Suguha stared at her mother in disbelief.

Midori sighed, "I should have known. Sachi never talked about her mother. Whenever I had asked if I could meet Mrs. Watanabe, she always said that she was out working."
She looked down. "I think that was true at first. I know her father had abandoned them both when
Sachi was very young, and her mother worked several jobs to get by. According to the case worker,
when Sachi was about six years old her mother had received an inheritance from a distant relative.
It was a small annuity paid monthly from a bank trust. The annuity was enough to cover the rent,
utilities, some food, but not much else. It seems that her mother then quit working and drank away
the remainder of the check each month. And so from age six on, it looks like Sachi had basically
raised herself. Her father refused to have anything to do with her."

Suguha tried to absorb the information. "She was always alone..."

"I'm afraid so. The annuity paid for the apartment, but other than that Sachi was on her own."

"But Mom, how could the authorities let her live like that?"

"Well, I don't think they or her neighbors knew. And with thousands of other VRDP cases for the
authorities to deal with, I think she just fell through the cracks. Or maybe she just fooled them -
forging her mother's signatures on school documents. I don't know."

Suguha tried to imagine what Sachi's life must have been like before SAO: Wake up, brush your
teeth, go to school, come home, make something to eat, go on the computer for a bit, go to bed,
and do it all by yourself with your mother passed out the whole time. She might have gotten a
glimpse of her mother every few days if she was lucky.

*Is that why she was so distant with me outside the game? Was it because that was how she herself
had grown up?*

*She was never close to anyone, not even her own mother. How can anyone live a life like that?*

The pair walked down the hall to an alcove that had some chairs and a picture window overlooking
the quad below. Suguha walked to the window to gaze out at the falling raindrops as her mother
approached her from behind.

"Sugu, please try not to be upset about what happened. You shouldn't blame yourself. ALO was
truly a blessing for her. It let her forget her troubles in a fantasy world. She delighted in it. You
both did. It was probably the same reason she had dived into SAO, as a form of escape. The way
she grew up it is no small wonder she liked to lose herself in computers and video games so much."

Sugu said softly, "It's true, she was happy." Then she thought of SAO.

*Sachi, SAO had turned your world upside down. Instead of escaping your troubled world you were
trapped in a far more terrifying one, a world full of horrible monsters, pain, and death.*

*Kazuto must have seemed like a savior to you in that awful place - the first person in your life who
ever cared for you.*

Suguha felt it again, that pang of fear.

She starting speaking to distract herself. "Mom, I still feel responsible. I should have been her
friend in the real world, not just in a make-believe one. I never asked her how her mom was doing.
It never even occurred to me..."

Midori tried to console her daughter. "It's okay, honey. She was very guarded about her personal
life. I should have caught it too."

"But, Mom, what is going to happen to her now?"
Midori leaned against the wall and looked out the window. The rain was still falling. "Well, I suppose she will be taken by the authorities and be sent to stay with her father. He lives somewhere in Osaka. It's possible we might not ever see her again."

Suguha shook her head. "No, he won't."

"He won't? How do you know that?"

"You said it yourself, he refused to take her. Otherwise he would have done it already."

Midori looked thoughtful. "Hmm. You know, I think you might be right. The case worker had told me that with her mother being institutionalized the bank trust would be legally hers. Her father can't touch it."

She pushed herself away from the wall. "You are right, he won't take her."

Suguha and her mother looked at each other.

Then Suguha turned her head back towards the window.

Midori quietly approached and embraced her daughter from behind. "You know what we have to do, honey. She doesn't have anyone else."

Suguha was now again facing the window, looking out at the rain. A moment passed.

Midori said softly, "Suguha, it's your decision too. We need to agree."

Suguha kept looking out the window. "She'll stay with me."

Midori smiled, then gently lowered her head on her daughter's shoulder. "Thank you, honey."

Suguha kept watching the rain with her mother's chin on her shoulder.

Her mother lifted her chin. "You know, we've always been a patch-work family."

The rain kept falling.

"It's who we are. It's because family isn't biological, it is of the heart."

Suguha whispered to herself, "A patch-work family."

Midori heard her. "Yes, that's us. I haven't talked to Minetaka yet, but I am sure he will agree too. We'll get started on the paperwork to become her legal guardian beginning Monday."

Suguha turned. "Mom, wait, I don't understand. Do you mean she'll become my.. my.."

She couldn't say the word.

Midori completed it: "Your sister?"

"Mom?"

"Well, that will be up to her. However, I expect she will decline any sort of formal adoption. If we legally adopt her then she would lose her bank trust. Also, I think she likes her independence."

Suguha felt a sudden sense of relief. "Yeah, you're right. She won't let herself be adopted. She's too independent."
Midori misread her feelings as disappointment. "Honey, it's all right. Just think of her as a sister in your heart, the same way you think of Kazuto as your brother in your heart. You have told her that Kazuto is really your cousin, yes?"

Suguha shook her head absently.

"Oh. You haven't? I thought you would have told Sachi that by now, that and he and you aren't really siblings. I assume it is because you want to ask for Kazuto's permission first?"

The rain fell.

"Yes." She was lying.

"Quite proper. After he wakes up I am sure that he'll agree and you can both tell her together. Family should have no secrets between each other about something like that."

The raindrops fell. "No.. they shouldn't."

"Good. I'm glad we are all in agreement. Well, let's go back and welcome your new step-sister, shall we?"

Suguha silently fell in line behind her mother and they returned to the hospital room.

Sachi was laying alone in her hospital bed staring up at the ceiling tiles. She could hear the rain that was falling outside behind the closed window blinds.

She was not paying attention to the sound of the falling rain outside. It was because she was busy mentally playing out the conversation that she knew had to be taking place just outside her hospital room.

She closed her eyes.

*It would be a big imposition on Suguha.*

*I'm old enough to stay in the apartment.*

She thought some more.

She came to a decision. She opened her eyes.

*Kirito, you need me.*

She knew what she had to do.

*I have to stay by your side.*

Inside the Kirigaya home, life was back to normal again. Despite the new living arrangement nothing had really changed much in their day-to-day lives since Sachi had moved in. She was still doing most of the chores, Suguha was still prepping for her high school entrance exams, and Midori was still working 12 hour days researching and writing her IT magazine and newsletter articles.

Sachi had switched her hospital volunteering schedule back to late afternoons and evenings, the same schedule that she had before she played ALO with Suguha every day. With Suguha still in
middle school it meant that they now rarely saw each other except at bedtime.

For the time being, Sachi shared Suguha's double bed by mutual consent. The two girls had discussed rearranging the furniture in the room and putting in two separate futons to give themselves more space between them. Neither girl had even considered the idea of Sachi sleeping in Kazuto's empty room, even though it was right next door to Suguha's. It was because Kazuto's room was considered by everyone to be sacrosanct, a shrine dedicated to his return.

One evening Suguha was busy scooping out Yaya's litterbox downstairs by the furnace when Sachi came bounding down the steps. She had just returned from the hospital. She stopped and saw Suguha scooping the box. She decided to needle her a bit.

"Having fun, Leafa?"

Suguha stood up. She was holding a small bag of extremely toxic and hazardous non-nuclear waste at arm's length. She held her nose closed with her other hand.

"Oh yoo nare snooooh fuummy."

Sachi grinned, "Hey, it's only until Christmas."

Suguha let go of her nose. "Yeah. Now get out of my way!" Suguha ran upstairs and out back to the garbage can as fast as she could.

It was past 2 a.m. and Suguha was snoring softly. Meanwhile, Sachi stared up the ceiling while laying next to her in the double bed. She couldn't sleep. She quietly got up, put on her robe, and went downstairs to get a glass of milk to drink.

As she finished her milk she noticed a faint glow of light coming up from Midori's basement office. It was not at all unusual because, like many computer geeks, Midori was a chronic night owl. Her office door was open, so Sachi decided to go down and keep her company.

She found Midori leaning back in her high-backed office chair seemingly lost in thought. Her tiny home office was cramped. It was stuffed with stacks of papers and books, some precariously close to tipping over. Next to Midori's hopelessly cluttered desk was a 6-color cartridge Canon proofing printer, and below it was a top-of-the-line Dell Precision XPS tower that was connected to a 100GBASE-T switch. On the walls were photos of her family, including a stern one of Suguha's imposing grandfather holding a shinai in front of the dojo that he had built next door to their home.

Sachi lightly knocked on the open door to get her attention. Midori leaned forward in her office chair and welcomed the interruption. "Oh, Sachi, do come in."

"I'm sorry if I disturbed you. I couldn't sleep."

Midori offered Sachi the folding chair that was leaning against the wall behind the open door. "You're timing is perfect. Come, sit with me."

Midori Kirigaya was the senior editor for a major trade publication that covered Japan's burgeoning computer industry. Her expertise was in computer and data security, and she was always happy to share her thoughts aloud with the younger female computer geek. Sachi would often sit attentively and watch the editor's hands fly over her keyboard. She would listen with interest as Midori chatted about the cloak-and-dagger world of computer hackers (called the 'black hats') and the people who tracked them down (the 'white hats').
Most of her chatter went right over Sachi's head. Midori had found that by simply talking aloud to Sachi as she typed merrily away that she could better organize her own thoughts as she composed her articles, and Sachi was more than happy to oblige.

Sachi asked, "So what are you working on tonight?"

Midori rubbed her eyes. "Well, I'm in the middle of writing a feature piece for our quarterly IT security insiders newsletter, which has a very select, very limited clientele. I don't dare tell you how much our publisher charges for just one issue."

"Wow, so this is insider stuff?"

"Oh, this is inside as you can get, honey."

Sachi was fascinated. "So what are you working on?"

"I am writing an article about how advanced stealth hypervisors are now being used by the black hats to evade anti-virus detection using hardware virtual acceleration and state cloaking. These new computer viruses are getting really nasty."

It was all part of an ever escalating war that had been going on since the earliest days of personal computing, going all the way back to the DOS viruses of the 1980s over 40 years ago. The cycle was always the same: The black hats would come up with a novel way to infiltrate computer systems, then the white hats would develop a countermeasure to stop the threat, then the black hats would invent something more sophisticated, and the cycle would repeat again.

It all began with signature detection: the anti-virus software would simply scan a potentially unsafe file for byte patterns against a table of known viruses that were stored in a database within the installed AV package. To counter this, the black hats had started to slightly modify their viruses so the signature would no longer match and then release new variants. In response to this, the white hats soon became adept at quickly capturing new virus variants in the wild using online honey pots in order to update their databases and distribute them out to their customers.

The next step the black hats took was to encrypt and compress their payloads using so-called 'packers' and 'unpackers'. Unpackers were software stubs that decrypted the virus payload upon launch. Each time the virus infected a new machine, the virus would re-encrypt itself with a different initialization vector (IV), causing all the bytes in the payload to be randomly scrambled to new values. This defeated passive signature detection.

The unpackers were common software items that were also used by legitimate apps such as games and proprietary software containing trade secret algorithms. They used unpackers to prevent reverse engineering and the theft of their valuable assets. For this reason the AV software couldn't just detect the unpacker to trigger an alert.

So the white hats invented a new method: Run the unpacking algorithm themselves within their own AV software, then intercept the entry point into the main virus payload and freeze the app. The AV software could then inspect the frozen app's memory contents for suspicious byte signature patterns.

The war then escalated: polymorphic viruses. They could re-write themselves on the fly using complex algorithms while adding huge amounts of dummy code that never got executed. Each run was different. The AV vendors had to modify their detection engines to figure out these algorithms, but the polymorphism became more and more sophisticated.
The white hats eventually realized that signature detection was becoming a losing battle. They concluded that it was simply not possible any more to detect such sophisticated viruses prior to their execution.

So the white hats took a new approach: They would monitor the operating system itself. Whenever a new app launched for the first time the AV monitor would shim the app's calls to the operating system (for example, to open a file for writing) so it could track the app's activity as it manipulated the surrounding environment. Suspicious patterns of activity (such as attempting to modify an OS executable file) would trigger alerts and be blocked.

The black hats soon stole this idea and started to write their own shims. They would lie about what the virus was actually doing and prevent user-mode AV from triggering. In response the white hats began to write kernel-level shims that intercepted the system call jump tables within protected kernel memory itself.

Of course the black hats responded and did the same thing. This prompted OS vendors like Microsoft to digitally checksum all the system call tables inside the kernel itself, a method they called 'PatchGuard'. PatchGuard was an extremely sophisticated monitoring system that would checksum the page tables (and checksum itself) to prevent any sort of tampering.

The black hats struggled with PatchGuard. Microsoft would quickly learn about whatever new trick was being used to evade it and then would rapidly release a new Windows Update to counter it. AV vendors did the same for their own products. Meanwhile, Microsoft added a requirement that all kernel loaded software be pre-approved by Microsoft's Windows Hardware Quality Labs (WHQL) and be signed-off by Microsoft with a tamper-proof digital checksum that they added. Windows was then modified to block the loading of all unsigned kernel code. Meanwhile, PatchGuard did periodic sweeps of kernel memory in case something tried to sneak in some other way.

Hackers could no longer tamper with kernel memory.

The black hats were losing.

In the meantime, the CPU hardware vendors like Intel and AMD were busy adding hardware virtualization to their 64-bit processors, which allowed one OS to run a second OS inside of itself. This was called a virtual machine (VM). VMs soon became very popular and were a handy feature that let businesses run legacy apps on their servers, or create isolation walls between external Internet facing websites and internal database servers, or set up virtual server farms without buying additional hardware. VMs soon became ubiquitous and led the way to the creation of the Cloud.

With VM technology the good guys now had a new powerful weapon to use against the black hats. They could now inspect and dissect a virus in their labs without the virus being aware of it. Previously the only way to inspect and reverse-engineer a virus was through the tedious inspection of the suspicious code (which was useless for polymorphic viruses anyway) or to actively debug them while they were still executing. In response, the black hats added new methods to detect attempts at reverse engineering their malware using user-mode debuggers like OllyDbg or kernel-mode debuggers like WinDbg. When a virus detected a debugger in use, the virus would change its behavior or simply do nothing to frustrate the white hat.

But with a VM there was no longer a debugger to detect. It looked like a pristine system. With this weapon the white hat analyst could now dissect the virus at their leisure. The VM could even lie about the clock value so the virus would think it was running at full speed without interruption. Using VMs in this way, the AV vendors were now able to quickly dissect new viruses and push out new revisions of their detection systems, often on the same day.
The white hats were winning again.

In response the black hats rolled up their sleeves and they invented the Red Pill, named after a scene in the film *The Matrix* where Neo was given a choice: Take the blue pill and nothing would happen - he would just wake up back in the fake reality of the Matrix and forget that anything had happened to him, or take the red pill and he would wake up for real and discover that he was actually living in a simulation.

Red Pill exploited an obscure machine instruction in user mode whose behavior would change subtly whenever OS was running inside a VM. On a real machine the Interrupt Descriptor Table (IDT) address was always located at a certain fixed address in kernel memory. By necessity a VM had to virtualize the IDT using a shadow table that was stored at a different address. The SIDT instruction revealed the address, and SIDT happened to be a legal instruction to execute in user mode, even though it was useless in that mode. The Red Pill exploited that fact to detect that their virus payload was running inside a VM. The hackers now had a way to thwart reverse engineering using a VM.

And so, over the years, the war went on. In the mid-2010s high speed networking had became ubiquitous, which let the white hats download AV updates to their business customers and even to home users in real time. What was worse for the black hats was that the AV software could now upload suspicious new software back to the labs of the AV vendors, also in real time. When a user clicked to run a new app for the first time, it would pause for 5-20 seconds while the AV vendor quietly uploaded the entire app up to their labs where they would automatically run some very sophisticated analyses using highly proprietary algorithms on large dedicated servers that had a tremendous amount of compute power. Microsoft soon added the same tricks to Windows itself, a feature they had called 'SmartScreen'. Even worse was the fact that the black hats could not see what was going on in the labs. They no longer had a way of learning what was triggering the detection of their handiwork. They were locked out.

It was a strong defense.

The white hats were winning.

And then...

And then came the worst of them all, the Blue Pill. It had shocked the white hat community like nothing that had ever come before. It was the first stealth VM hypervisor.

The Blue Pill was the hacker's way of tricking the OS the same way the blue pill did in *The Matrix*: If Neo took the blue pill he would he simply go to sleep and forget everything that happened, then reawaken back in the fake reality of the Matrix. He would live his life blissfully unaware of the fact that he was actually living inside a simulation.

In principle, the Blue Pill was theoretically unbeatable. It had caused a panic among the white hats. Suddenly the tables were turned, and the white hats had to scramble quickly to find a way to detect if the user's protected OS was actually running inside a hacker's stealthy VM. What was worse was that the latest Intel and AMD processors had added hardware VM emulation, which meant the old Red Pill trick no longer worked. Something more subtle was needed, which of course the black hats then soon countered...

... and the war continued like this up to the present day.

Midori had finished her explanation and rubbed her eyes.
"The black hats are getting so good at detecting VMs now..."

Sachi had been resting her chin in her hands while listening to Midori. "You know, it sounds like the war will never end."

Midori sighed, "It won't. And the stakes now are higher than ever."

It was because major segments of the US military and intelligence infrastructure, including the US Cyber Command and the Concepts Analysis Agency (CAA), were now deeply involved in the battle. It was a battle that involved not guns and bombs but bits and bytes. Stopping the offensive cyber weapons being developed by Iran, North Korea, and China had become in many ways just as crucial to worldwide peace and stability as stopping the use of nuclear weapons.

Midori pinched her nose. "The latest processors virtualize everything perfectly now. The white hats asked the hardware makers for it so they could analyze uploaded viruses without detection. But of course the black hats then did the same."

Sachi brought her head up.

"Hey, I get it."

"You do?"

"It's a game of capture."

"Capture?"

"Yeah. If you can capture the other guy's system inside yours, you win."

Midori mused for a moment. "Capture, yes. That's the name of the game all right. You enwrap the other side's software environment inside your own. You get their system running in yours, and once you do that, you win."

Midori smiled at the girl. "It's an old trick, too. It goes back to the 1990s, maybe even earlier."

Midori then explained how back in 1995 Microsoft had written a web browser called Internet Explorer. It had copied all of the features of the dominant web browser at the era: Netscape Mozilla. Microsoft dedicated an untold number of software programmers and testers to the task of creating it. The amount of money Microsoft had spent was incredible. Soon Internet Explorer did everything that the Netscape Mozilla browser did. It even lied about its identity being Mozilla. It was made 100% compatible. Then it extended Mozilla and added even more features. IE rapidly overwhelmed all competitors and soon became the dominant web browser from 1998 on, grabbing more than 70% market share at one point.

"I see. So the goal is to take over the other side's system by wrapping it in your own."

"Yes."

"And with a stealth VM, whoever owns the admin rights on the captured system will think that they still have total control, that they are god. They still are, but now with a stealth hypervisor there is a now a god even more powerful than they are, one that exists completely outside the system. Call that person an, I dunno, an 'overgod'."

Midori asked, "An 'overgod'?"
"Yeah. It's because you have captured and wrapped that other system in a web of your own. You control it just like a spider wrapping up a struggling insect in its cocoon of silk. The insect is still alive but is now totally at the spider's mercy. The 'overgod' has total, absolute, and final control no matter what anyone with administrator privileges might possess within that system, no matter how high and mighty they are. It is because, like the spider, the overgod is outside the system."

"Mmm."

"They are outside it, above it, beyond it. The overgod is untouchable."

Midori sighed, "Yes. And that's the problem right now. The white hats are really panicked about these latest stealth hypervisors. No anti-virus detection software, no matter how well written or well designed, can defeat something like that from the inside. Once a stealth hypervisor takes control, the good guys are basically toast. Game Over."

Sachi realized something. "Hey, can I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"It works both ways, yes? The good guys can do it too, right?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so. Both sides are always copying each other's new advances in the never-ending battle."

"So tell me, why didn't the Ministry of Information do that with SAO?"

"With SAO?"

"Yeah. Capture it, then fool it and make it think that it was still in control."

Midori thought a moment. "I see what you mean. Clever. Well, I don't know the answer to that. I suppose the reason might be because the authorities couldn't gain physical access to the SAO mainframe."

"No access?"

"The stealth hypervisor has to boot first, you see, ahead of the main operating system. It needs to do that so it can prepare the 'spiderweb', so to speak. If the main system successfully boots first and gets control of the physical hardware, then it is already too late. It can execute a CPU instruction to disable the VM hardware in such a way that only another reboot can unlock it again. In fact most modern operating systems already do that as a security measure."

Sachi nodded. "If the insect flies away the spider can't entrap it in its web."

"That's right. Also, with SAO there are 6000 human minds plugged in. That has to be factored in too. If the mainframes were forced to reboot it would probably trigger the helmets."

"So how do these stealth hypervisors get inside, anyway? How do the bad guys sneak them in?"

"Well, there are two basic ways. First, you simply gain physical control of the computer and insert a USB stick or bootable DVD that contains the stealth hypervisor. Then you boot it. The other way is to trick someone with administrative rights inside the target system to run the malware with their privileges turned on. The executable object includes a small virus payload that overwrites the master boot record and the initial loading sequence on the boot disk to slip in the stealth hypervisor code ahead of the main operating system. The next time the system boots it gets captured by the
"So how do you stop something like that?"

"Well, the white hats invented a hardware fix called the Trusted Platform Module (TPM) chip. The chip contains the digital signatures of all well known proprietary operating systems like Windows, and it will refuse to boot the computer unless the digital signature matches. The TPM chip self-destructs if you try to tamper with it, just like the NerveGear helmets."

"That sounds pretty secure."

"Ah, but the free software Linux community objected. They were adamant that the end user should always have the final say over what was run on their personal computers, and that included free public operating systems like Linux. So the CPU manufacturers added a way to insert new digital signatures if the user wanted to boot something other than Windows."

Sachi sighed, "Let me guess..."

"You are right. You see? The war never ends."

Sachi yawned loudly.

Midori chuckled, "Did I cure your insomnia?"

"Yeah. That was really interesting, and you gave me a lot to think about, but I feel really zonked now. I'm going to bed."

"Well, I put my publisher to sleep too a lot."

They both laughed.

Midori kissed her on the cheek. "Good night, honey."

"Goodnight." She left.

Midori then closed the door to her basement office and sat back back down.

She sighed and leaned back in her chair again. Her shifted field of view was now centered on the cinderblock basement wall above the flat panel. There a small poster was affixed to the wall. She read the poster again.

*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*

She nodded to herself and went back to finishing her article.

A few days later Sachi was in the hospital doing her volunteer work. She had finished her rounds and was now in Kazuto's private ward sitting in her customary chair next to his bed. She lovingly watched his face for several minutes, then she settled in her chair and re-opened the book she was reading, a Japanese translation of a memoir by C.S. Lewis entitled *Surprised by Joy.*

She was quietly reading in the silent room. Then she thought she noticed something.

She looked around, then checked on Kazuto. After a minute she went back to her book.

Another minute later she caught it again, the barest flicker of motion out of the corner of her eye.
She looked around again, then she stood up. She leaned down close to Kazuto's impassive face. She peered at it carefully.

Her intuition told her that something was wrong.

Then she caught it, down near the foot of the bed. The blanket shifted very slightly. A small twitch in his leg.

She slammed the emergency call button.

Sachi greeted Midori and Suguha in the waiting room of the surgical section of the hospital.

Midori asked anxiously, "How is he?"

"Still in surgery. He threw a blood clot in his leg."

"Oh no..."

Sachi tried to reassure her. "They are doing everything they can for him. All we can do is pray."

They waited.

An hour later the surgeon came in to the waiting room and removed his mask.

Midori ran up to him. "Doctor..?"

The surgeon explained, "We ran a full body CAT scan. A blood clot had developed in the femoral artery of his right leg. It looks like it had started a few days ago, but we were able to save the leg. He's going to have a lot of difficulty walking on it after he wakes up, but I think with time and physical therapy he should eventually regain full use of the leg."

"Oh thank heavens."

"There's more. In the CAT scan we spotted a fresh blockage in the right temporal lobe of his brain. We immediately injected TPA and we were able to dissolve it before it did any permanent damage. We think it must have happened within a minute of Miss Watanabe hitting the emergency call button. It was probably something from the leg clot that got thrown off."

Sachi nodded. "Yes. I saw his leg twitch."

"Well, it was very fortunate that you spotted that, young lady. After another 5 minutes or so and he would have suffered irreparable brain damage."

Midori hugged Sachi. "Thank you. Thank for being there."

Suguha came forward too. "Hey, you did good."

Sachi was self deprecating. "I was just doing my job."

Midori released her embrace. "Kazuto is so blessed to have you in his life."

She then put her arm around the petite girl. "Thank you."

"Really, anyone could have spotted it."

Suguha gave a small smile, then she turned to face the window.
Present time. S-F Day.

Kazuto was sitting in bed listening to Sachi's tale. She was just finishing up.

"... and that is why I'm living with your family. Your parents are my legal guardians now."

"Stop. Let me get this straight. You are now living with us?"

Sachi looked at him a bit sheepishly. "Your mother insisted. I hope you don't mind...?"

Kazuto blinked his eyes trying to absorb all the information that Sachi had just dumped on him.

"Uh, yeah, it's okay. Wow, that's a lot to take in. Can we back up for a moment?"

"Sure."

"Let's go back to the beginning. You died in the game, then you woke up, and you have been taking care of me ever since?"

"Yeah."

"But that's..."

"17 months."

"That's amazing."

"Kirito, I've been with you every day. Watching you. That blood clot was a close call. You almost died."

She sighed to herself. "You and I are going to need to do a lot of rehab on that bad leg to get you up and walking unassisted again."

Kazuto pulled the blanket aside and looked at his legs. The right one looked like a plucked chicken leg compared to his left one. He tried to raise his right leg and winced at the searing pain in his thigh. He replaced the blanket.

"I see what you mean. Oh, my real name is Kazuto by the way."

"I know."

He understood. She would always think of him as Kirito. He decided not to press the point.

He was still trying to come to grips with the situation he was in. "Okay, so your mom was institutionalized. Then my mom took you in, and now you are now living with us."

Sachi said brightly, "Yep! Don't worry, I'm gonna take good care of you. I'll be there for you every step of the way. Just think of me as your live-in helper. I'll be staying in the room right next door if you need anything. Just knock."

"Just knock?"

"Oh, I forgot. You can't walk. Silly me. Just yell my name from your room. I'll hear you and come running."

"Uh, sure."
She thought a moment. "Hmm. I'll get a bedpan to place in your room. Don't worry, I'll clean it."

"Wait, a bedpan?"

"Kirito, just look at you. You're in bad shape. We have a lot of rehab work to do. Have you seen yourself? Wait a sec..." Sachi opened her pocketbook and pulled out a small makeup mirror. She gave it to Kazuto.

He took the mirror and inspected his face. He was stunned. He almost didn't recognize himself. He slowly touched his sunken cheekbones.

She's right. I look terrible. Oh man.

Asuna, do you look this bad too?

Don't freak out. It'll be okay. I don't care what you look like. You could look like a shriveled prune for all I care. I love you.

You'll be shocked when you see me too. Hmm, maybe I should do a bunch of rehab first. Get my body back in shape. I'm sure Sachi will be happy to whip me like a drill instructor if I ask her.

No. I can't wait for that. Asuna, I need to see you now. I don't care what either of us look like.

Hey, I have an idea. You and I should take a photo of us together looking like cadavers. We can use it to scare small children, heh. It would be great memory. We could look back on it and laugh.

Asuna I'll find you. Then we will get out of these hospitals and we'll do Sachi's rehab program together. We'll get our bodies back in shape together. We'll do our sit-ups on the gym floor, you and I, side by side, as Sachi stands over us with a whip, heh.

Man, that girl has changed. She's so bossy now. And, yeah, she's pretty.

Bossy and pretty - hey. Asuna, she kind of reminds me of you early in our relationship. You remember? I'm not kidding. Man, I was always so terrified of you whenever you got in a bad mood, heh...

Sachi said something but Kazuto wasn't listening.

Sachi bounced in her chair. "Isn't it great?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, it is."

"Look, just think of me as your step-sister. Okay, technically I'm not formally adopted, but I don't mind if you call me that. Your mom says I'm your 'sister at heart'."

My sister at heart.

I already have one of those.

"I guess that sounds nice."

"Sugu is going to be there for you too. She has a full school course load and exams are coming up, so she won't be able to spend as much time around you as me, but I'm sure she will want to help you out too."

"Yeah, that would be great."
"I've been thinking about your rehab for a long time. Frankly I thought you'd be a VRDP basket case and we'd need to first work on your mental state for at least two weeks. But I must say, mentally you seem to be in really good shape. Are you sure you died?"

"Yeah, Asuna died too."

"Well, I'll find her for you as soon as I can. I already checked the hospital's roster and she is not in this facility. Don't worry, if she wakes up with a bad case of VRDP syndrome and she panics, she'll still be okay. I promise they will take good care of her, wherever she is. These people are experts now. They've been doing it for years."

"Okay, just so we find her."

"Kirito, we will, I promise. You can check on your team partner as soon as you get discharged and we can locate her. Once you're out of here I'll find a wheelchair and I'll push you there myself. I know how loyal you are to your team mates."

*She doesn't know.*

Then Sachi stopped talking. She just looked at him.

Kazuto grew concerned. "Sachi?"

A tear formed on her face. "I'm sorry. I'm kind of emotional right now..."

He raised his arm and touched her. "Hey, it's all right."

She wiped the tear with her sweater arm. "Dang it, look at me. I'm getting blubbery. I probably look like that scared kid to you again..."

"No. No, you don't. You look great. Really."

She sniffed and recomposed herself. "Kirito, I really missed you. I did everything I could to take care of you, and now you're back. I'm so happy right now."

He tried to sit up. "Sachi, look. I'm sorry. I failed you."

"Lie back down. It's okay, really. Look, I'm fine now, see?"

"No, it was all my fault. I promise I'll try to make it up to you somehow."

She looked at him with a benevolent smile. "You already have."

Then she added, "Don't worry about anything. We have a lot of work ahead of us. I'll give you everything you need."

He looked at the smiling girl. She was so happy. Her face was shining like a beacon.

He looked at that face, that smiling beatific face, and it convicted him.

*Look at her. She acts so grown up now, but she is still so sweet, so innocent. How could I possibly hurt her again?*  

*And she has all that determination now, that drive. She must be acting strong for my sake. She's doing it for me.*
She's doing it all for me...

Argh!

Now what? Do I just say "Oh by the way, that girl Asuna I mentioned? We are actually lovers. I married her in the game. We lived together as man and wife."

If I say that to her, I might as well run my Dark Repulser right through her chest. It would probably do less damage.

Sigh...

Gah! What do I do?

I need to talk to someone who knows Sachi, and do it fast.

Who?

Mom?

Sugu?

Hmm, yeah, Sugu. I expect she knows her pretty well, I bet. 17 months. Sure she does. They are probably acting like real sisters now.

Good grief, they share a bedroom together. Of course Sugu knows her. They probably share a half hour of pillow talk every night before going to sleep. What do girls talk about in bed, anyway?

Sugu, I'm sorry. I had treated you pretty shabbily before SAO. I need to make that up for you.

I need to reconnect with you again, like when we were young. I owe you that.

Yeah, that is what I'll do. Sugu, I'll patch things up with you. Then I'll privately confess to you about my feelings for Asuna. I want to be able to talk to you about private stuff like that.

Sugu, you're my sister now, and brothers and sisters should be able to do that.

Yeah, I'll ask you, Sugu. Then you'll tell me what to do.

"Hey, Kirito, you home?"

Kazuto blinked his eyes again. It was because someone was waving a hand in front of his face.

"Oh, sorry. I'm sorry, Sachi, you were saying?"

Sachi gave him a look.

VRDP mental displacement? Or was he just daydreaming? Humph.

"I said, Midori and Sugu will be here any second. Is there anything else you want to ask me about before they get here? Or anything else you need?"

Yeah. Asuna, hang in there. I'm coming.

"Well?"

"Just that glass of water. You forgot it again."
Sachi jumped up. "Argh! Sorry!" She ran out.

Asuna, I'm coming.

A/N:


Sugou is smarter. In this story I was originally planning to kick Sugou's keister for being so stupid. "Asuna hates me! Her parents don't know that! Bwahahaha!" Seriously? But I wanted a more interesting story than just doing cheap humor, so I changed my mind. In this story Sugou will be smarter. He also knows that Kayaba is still alive, which will raise his paranoia level up to 11.

Kazuto was also acting pretty dumb in his quest to rescue Asuna. In fact everybody was. It seems absurd that Kazuto and Suguha did not realize that they were playing the same VRMMO together side-by-side in adjacent bedrooms for days.

Up until now I have been following the major events in the original story pretty closely, but this will soon change. In this story the characters are less dense and Sachi being around will churn the pot even more. This will change the direction of the story. I have dropped several hints in the story about the direction that the ALO arc will take, so it shouldn't come as a surprise if you have been following the story closely.

I do admit that I sometimes digress in my more geeky sections. If they bore you too much, just scroll past to the next section.

Anyway, we are now back to real time. Kazuto is awake, and the plot is finally going to start moving again. Yay!

As always, thank you for reading.
-HuuskerDu

A/N Update:

- In a note in chapter 3 I had indicated that I had changed the planned ending from a sad one to a better one. I will make that explicit here: This story will have a happy ending.

- In my stories I often put the characters through the emotional wringer: Tension rises, emotions get punched up, and the drama is increased. The resulting roller-coaster ride can be stressful if you have a strong emotional attachment to the characters. This is why I don't mind telegraphing the fact that this story will have a happy ending. (I did the same thing with The Heart Connection and After Ragnarök.)

- I enjoy doing plot swerves and shifts (HC and AR had big ones). At any time the story might suddenly turn sideways and go shooting off in a different direction, so be ready for it. (It's called AU for a reason.)

- The characters in my stories tend to figure things out faster than in canon, but they often jump to the wrong conclusions because of it (this has been happening a lot in this story).

- The mistaken identity plot in ALO is very hard to maintain with the introduction of Sachi. Three people need to be in the dark instead of two. Sachi knows Kazuto is Kirito and Leafa is Suguha, so if the Spriggan says his name she is going to spot him right away. If Sachi says her own name
Kirito will spot it too. The whole mistaken identity plot was mainly a way to pull an Oedipus Rex stunt on poor Suguha and push her into a very emotional confession scene. (I loved that scene, BTW.) The mistaken identity plot is simply too hard for me to pull off here given the situation, and we can hit similar emotional beats in other ways. (See also: Plot Swerves.) Dumping the mistaken identity plot also clears the board so we can bring in other SAO players like Griselda, Klein and Agil.

-H
Takeshi Yamashita opened his eyes in the medical bed. He heard noises all around him, but everything was still just a blur. After a minute he was able to sit up. He felt an incredible urge to scratch an itch on the back of his neck, but he was unable to reach it due to the helmet, which he slowly pulled off. The IVs were still inserted into his left arm.

He looked around in a daze. He could still hear a huge commotion but his eyes could not focus yet.

After another minute his vision slowly cleared, and he could see dozens of beds like his own stretching off in both directions. Each one contained a patient, and they were all waking up.

He blinked his watery eyes some more. Was this a dream? He soon decided that it was real. And that meant...

Yes! The game ended! I'm out of prison!

He whooped, "Yahoo!"

A man in another bed yelled back to him, "Right on, dude!"

I was stuck in that stinkhole for what seemed like forever. I'm free!

He ignored the pandemonium that surrounded him as he quickly began to think.

Hmm, what should I do first? Let's see...

Step one: Cash in the joint life insurance policy.

Step two: Use the money to take a nice long vacation far away from here. Okinawa maybe?

Step three: While on vacation find a sweet young thing and give her my sob story.

He dropped the helmet on the floor and laid back down in the bed. He crossed his arms behind his head and smiled as he started to daydream.

Yes, my dear, I had tragically, tragically, lost my dear devoted wife in SAO. Oh, I had fought valiantly to save her, but the horrible death game took my dear devoted wife away. Yes, it was so tragic. No, we had no children - I don't even have that legacy to remember her by. Such a terrible tragedy. I must soldier on somehow.

His smile grew.

How long ago did my wife die, you ask? Over a year ago. Yes, my mourning period is over now. Yes, I am ready to move on with my life. It is what she would have wanted.

Alas, what is a lonely wealthy widower like me to do? Oh, you aren't married either?

Heh. I should go on 2-3 vacations maybe.

His memory was slowly returning. He then remembered something else.
Wait, I forgot something.. What was it...

Schmidt. And Yolko and Caynz. Crap, how could I forget them?

He frowned and began to think furiously.

Think, Takeshi, think!

Okay, Schmidt is weak and I manipulated him pretty easily. He's just as guilty as I am. I could threaten to have him arrested as an accessory to murder or something. I know it wasn't technically murder but he's pretty gullible. Yeah, he'll cave again.

It wasn't illegal, right? Of course not. It was a death game: kill or be killed, survival of the fittest. I had no choice. I'll claim self defense if I have to.

Hmm, Yolko and Caynz are still going to raise bloody hell. That could be a problem.

Well, it is their word against mine. If they try to contact my new sweet young thing to warn her about Griselda, I'll just tell the little darling that those horrible people from SAO are lying. Who's to say different?

You see, my new darling, Yolko had lusted for me and was jealous of my wonderful wife. Of course I rejected her improper advances. I'm a man of integrity. Yolko then flew into a rage. After I rejected her she fell in love with Caynz and convinced her to join in the vendetta.

Or I could say that Caynz was sleeping with my lovely wife, and Yolko wanted Caynz for herself so she killed her.

I could make up 100 different stories like that.

Hey, this is fun!

Let's see, how else can I spin this...

As his memory continued to re-integrate he remembered something else.

Crap, the Black Swordsman and that bitch! I forgot about them!

What was her name again, that Blood Oath chick? They were both high level big wigs. Ugh, that could be bad.

Wait, they were big wigs only inside the game, right? This is real life. They're just ordinary kids now. I can handle them. It's still my word against theirs.

Oh well, I probably have a few days to work out my story. I can just cash the policy and go to Okinawa in the meantime and find a sweet young thing who wants to comfort me.

Hmm, I should be okay I think. But as a last resort I might need to recruit some Laughing Coffin members again. Gotta be careful though - murder in the real world isn't as easy as in a VRMMO.

Let's see, what else...

A harried looking medical technician came up to his bedside. He raised his voice to address him over all the surrounding noise. "Mr. Yamashita? Are you awake too?"

Takeshi sat up in his medical bed. "Yep! You don't need to worry about me. I feel great, doc."
The technician made a checkmark motion on his tablet with his finger. "Oh good. As you can see we are pretty swamped right now. I'm just doing SMART triage. Your vitals look good so I'll be marking you down as green. Fortunately, almost all the patients seem to be doing as well as you."

"Almost?"

"Four haven't awakened yet, and their WAN LEDs aren't blinking either. Possible malfunctions. I'm sorry but they take priority."

"Oh, I understand. I'll wait."

"Good. It might be a while before someone can attend to removing your IVs. I hope you don't mind. Please don't remove them yourself."

Grimwald looked around the room at all the whooping and jumping and high-fiving. "Seems the others aren't listening to your instructions."

The med tech gave out exasperated sigh. "No, most of them aren't. Still, we have to ask you to please not remove the IVs. You don't want an infection."

Takeshi nodded as he laid himself back down. "I won't. I'll be a good boy and just lie here all nice and quiet until things calm down." He folded his hands. "I got nothin' else better to do."

"Thank you for your cooperation, Mr. Yamashita. Your wife will be here shortly." The med tech turned to leave.

Takeshi sat up and grabbed the med tech's arm before he could walk away. "Excuse me?"

The med tech rechecked his tablet. "Your chart says to notify your wife, Yuuko Yamashita, correct?"

"What?"

"Well, to be honest we haven't actually notified anyone yet, but with the awakenings being broadcast all over the news media it seems that all the families are coming in on their own. I expect that your wife will probably be here any minute."

"My wife? No, wait! Your chart has to be wrong!"

"Sir?"

"My wife, she was killed in the game over a year ago!"

"Oh? Let me check." He used his finger to flick around on his tablet.

"Ah, you are right. She was killed in SAO on October 24, 2023."

Takeshi whispered, "Oh thank heavens." Because of the surrounding noise the med tech failed to hear him.

The med tech smiled at the patient. "You played together as husband and wife, how nice. Well, you two will certainly have much to catch up on."

"What? Wait, she's dead!"

"Oh no. She is listed as your primary contact. The information is up to date."
"But.. but people die when they are killed!"

At that moment a voice could be heard behind the med tech.

"Takeshi, is that you..?" A woman in her late 20s with brown hair and a slender build wearing a business pantsuit was now standing behind the med tech.

The med tech smiled again. "Ah. Excuse me, but I have several other patients to attend to. Good day." He moved away to check on the next patient. Yuuko Yamashita quickly took his place at the side of the med bed.

"Takeshi? Oh, I waited so long for you to come back." She bent over and lovingly wrapped her arms around him.

He was frozen in abject fear.

She misinterpreted his reaction as shock. She let go and pulled back. "I know. I must seem like a ghost. They lied. We simply woke up."

He kept staring at her. She kneeled at his bedside. "It's okay, honey. You aren't dreaming."

No..

She lovingly touched his cheek as he continued to stare. "I know, you must be in shock. Don't worry, I'll stay here and take care of you. I won't leave your side until they discharge you, then I'll take you home. I promise we will never be apart ever again."

No..

"We spent a year living in different worlds. Now we have a life to build together, again."

No..

"Takeshi, don't worry, I stayed faithful this whole time. There were other wives with husbands trapped in the game who eventually left them. I organized a wives support group that meets on Tuesdays. It saved a lot of marriages."

No..

She held his hand as she continued to kneel beside him.

"So tell me, what happened to Griselda? They still haven't told me how I died. You must have investigated. Did you find out anything?"

No..

"Takeshi? Can you hear me?"

She waved her hand in front of his face.

"Takeshi?"

She jumped up. "Help! There is something wrong with my husband!"

I. Am. So. Dead.
After three hours of hugging, crying, and rejoicing with Suguha and Midori, the Kirigaya family matriarch finally had to bid her step-son adieu for the evening. She left him in the care of her daughter for the rest of the night. Suguha promised her mother that she would join her back at home before midnight. Midori explained that she had a critical deadline to meet, but she promised that she would return as soon as possible tomorrow morning in order to spend more time with her step-son. She also said that she would bring a fresh change of clothes for his expected discharge tomorrow.

Kazuto was sitting up in his bed holding a plastic cup of water. Two more plastic cups - both empty - were still standing on a small tray that had been placed on the nightstand next to him.

He had previously sent Sachi out on a second errand that he knew would require several minutes to complete.

Suguha and Kazuto were now alone in the private room. She came forward and tentatively sat in the chair next to his hospital bed.

She said shyly, "So hey.."

He gave her a gentle smile. "Hey."

It was the first time they were alone together in two years.

He gazed at her in silent admiration.

*Man, that little scrunt has really grown up.*

Suguha started to fidget in her chair.

Kazuto tilted his head. "Sugu, what's the matter? Something wrong?"

She said bashfully, "You're looking at me."

"Huh? Oh, I guess I am."

Kazuto finally said, "Hey, stand up. I want to see you."

Suguha obliged and stood up a bit awkwardly.

"Turn around."

She did a 360 until she was facing him again.

*Whoa. She's stacked.*

If Kazuto's eyes had previously lingered a second too long in appreciation of Sachi's new bustline, his eyes positively boggled at Suguha's much more impressive measurements, which were quite apparent despite her attempt to hide them under her baggy black wool sweater.

He stared in admiration at her stunning post-pubescent triumph. "Sugu..."

She clutched her sweater. "Hey! What are you staring at?"

He realized what he was doing and he quickly averted his eyes. "I'm sorry!" His face started to turn
red.

The nerve of him, just like those pervy boys in my school. So typical.

Kazuto continued to turn away in embarrassment.

Wait, he's blushing.

He's blushing because he was looking at me.

At me...

Her own face warmed. Suguha released her grip on her sweater.

After a moment she said shyly, "It's okay if you look."

She caught herself and quickly added, "Uh, it's only okay because you were surprised, that's all. So you get to gawk just once, just this once! That's it, you understand? Once!"

He declined the opportunity to resume his stare. Instead he said, "That was rude of me. I'm really sorry. Please, just sit."

She sat down quickly. "Okay."

"Let's talk."

She tried to find something to say. Eventually, Kazuto decided to fill the dead air. "Sugu, all I meant to say is that the last time I saw you, you were just a little scrawny about this high." He raised his hand to a level that was about a full head-length below her current standing height. "I just got surprised, that's all."

"I know."

"Really, Sugu, you look great."

She said nervously, "Uh, hey, you look great too..."

She caught herself again. He looked like a cadaver. "Uh, no! Wait, I mean you look great at being, uh, alive.. Yeah, alive. Considering everything you went through..."

She's really nervous. Can't blame her.

Suguha looked down her front in embarrassment. She started to fiddle absentlly with one of her sweater buttons.

Now she's fidgeting. Is it because she's not sure where she stands with me?

She still doesn't know the reason why I pulled away from her.

When I had discovered she wasn't my sister, I got distant. Mom never told her.*

She looks so anxious. This is all my fault.

I need to calm her down. I want to reconnect.

What do I say...?
He decided to flatter his step-sister some more.

"Sugu, you know, you look incredible now. Man, to think that my scrawny little sister turned into you."

Her heart leapt in response.

"I mean it, Sugu, you look really amazing. I bet all the boys in school are chasing you now, heh."

Suguha's world started to spin.

**He thinks.. he thinks.. he thinks I'm...**

*I feel dizzy...*

She put her hand to the side of her head to stabilize the room.

Kazuto grew concerned, "Hey, you okay?"

She recovered quickly. "I'm fine. Uh, what were you saying?"

"I said I bet the boys in school are all chasing you now."

She waved her hand. "Oh don't be so silly. There's only one boy and he's a pest."

"A pest?"

"Please. Like I have any time for boys anyway."

"Well, if that kid bothers you, let me know and I'll put him in his place."

"Pshaw, he's already in his place. Believe me, you don't need to worry about him."

"Uh, okay."

After a moment she started twisting her sweater button some more.

Kazuto decided to change the subject. "So, you have a roommate now?"

She looked back up at him. "Oh, yes."

"It still seems incredible to me that Sachi is alive. So tell me, what is she like now?"

Suguha leaned forward. "Oh, she's just the sweetest thing. She's really quiet and kind. Around the house she has been Mom's perfect little helpmate, and Mom just loves her silly."

"So she's still pretty quiet and shy then?"

"Well, yes and no. When she's with me we have this rivalry thing going on. Don't worry, it's just for fun. We goof around a lot. We love to compete, race, make dares with each other, you name it."

She chortled, "We really bounce off each other, you know? Sometimes we get a little crazy when we try to top each other. We do stuff we'd never do alone."
"Heh, that sounds fun. Maybe I can join in."

She blinked her eyes. He didn't notice.

"So, you two do any kendo battles yet?"

Suguha quickly recovered again. "Uh, no. I offered to teach her, but she said she never wants to hold a weapon ever again."

"I guess I can understand that."

"She won't play violent video games with anyone either. The only video games we play together are racing games like Mario Ultra Karts or running through obstacle courses like Donkey Kong Wild Leap. Then it gets intense, heh."

"I see. So, she will get competitive when she's with you, but otherwise she's still quiet and shy the rest of the time. Interesting."

Suguha thought a moment. "Well, yes and no..."

"No?"

"Well, she's really protective of you, for starters."

"Huh. I did notice that she was pretty bossy with me. Is that normal?"

"No. I've never seen her act that way before."

"I bet it is because I'm awake now."

"Yeah. And she was ready for it, too. She's been telling me for months about all of her big plans for you. She's been studying for an LPN certificate and doing volunteer work with VRDPs as part of it, with a focus on PTSD and physical therapy and stuff. I think it's all part of her grand plan."

"Grand plan?"

"You'd have to ask her about it."

"So anyway, you two share a bedroom. What's it like? Lots of pillow talk?"

"Actually no, not really. We both are really busy during the day. Usually I just crash. She doesn't come in until after midnight."

She frowned. "She complains that I snore." She crossed her arms and harumphed, "I do not!"

"You don't? Wait, I remember."

Suguha sighed and uncrossed her arms. "Yeah, you caught me. She even secretly recorded me on her smartphone and played it back in front of Mom, with video and everything. She's such a little stinker."

"Heh. So no bed talk, then?"

"No. She's a night owl - like I said, she always stays up past midnight. She'll sometimes hang out with Mom in her office for a bit. She only comes to bed after I'm already asleep."
Kazuto leaned back on his propped-up pillow. "Humma. From what you're telling me, it sounds like you two are getting along really well. That's great. Hey, it's kind of like I'm gonna get another sister, you know? That's pretty cool."

Her face changed. Kazuto saw it.

"Sugu, what is it now?"

She rocked back and forth in the chair. "Uhm..."

"Yeah?"

She looked indecisive. "Well..."

"What is it? Tell me."

"Ugh, this is so hard..."

"Go on."

"I guess we do act like sisters a lot, but..."

"But?"

"Well, there is something you need to know about her."

"Like what?"

"Uhm... well... please don't tell her, okay?"

"I won't, I promise."

"Well, it's just that... I think that Sachi is, well... she's a little off in some ways."

"A little off?"

"It's hard for me to put it into words..."

He waited for her to continue.

"Dang it..."

"Sugu, you can tell me. We're family."

"Well, like I said, she's off. It's... it's you, I think."

"Me?"

"Ugh, this is so hard... Look, I'm not trying to badmouth her. She really is a nice girl, and we have tons of fun together, but, uh, well, you need to be careful around her."

"Careful? How do you mean?"

"I dunno. I just have this worried feeling about her. Not before, now. Now that you're awake."

"What kind of worry?"
Suguha wrung her hands. "I.. I don't know.. just something.."

"Can you give me an example maybe?"

"Well, okay, like what if one night you wake up and she's sleeping right next to you again?"

Kazuto considered that. "You really think that might happen?"

"I.. I don't know! But that happened in SAO, and she's so focused on you.. I'm worried."

Kazuto considered it some more. "No, I don't see her doing that. She's not scared anymore. There's no reason."

"But.. what if she does?"

He shrugged, "Well, if that happens I will order her to knock it off and then I'll talk to Mom about it. Sound good?"

"Uh.. yeah."

"Sugu, I honestly don't understand why you have such a big worry about her and me. But okay, I tell you what: I will keep an eye on her for you, and if she starts to do something, you know, weird, I'll tell her to stop whatever weird thing she is doing, and I'll let you or Mom know. Okay?"

Suguha looked relieved. "Okay. Thank you so much. I just wanted to warn you."

She wrung her hands again. "Look, I really feel awful about saying bad things about her behind her back. And I really do like her, and we really are good friends now, and we have lots of fun racing each other and stuff, and I know it makes me sound like I don't trust her, because I do trust her.. well, ugh, except for, uhm, maybe what I mean is that I trust her with me or with Mom... anyway, it'll take a load off my mind if you just be careful."

Kazuto looked at his step-sister.

Why is Sugu so bent out of shape about Sachi and me? What's her beef?"

"Okay, look, this is obviously really bugging you, so I gotta ask this... Sugu, are you saying that - hypothetically speaking - that you think that Sachi is bad for me if I somehow got into a relationship with her? And remember, I'm talking hypothetically here?"

"Uhm, well.."

"Why would she be bad for me?"

And it's not like that would ever happen anyway, not when I have Asuna."

Suguha grew frustrated. "I.. I don't know! I just get this really worried feeling whenever I think about it. I don't know how to explain it.."

He raised his hands. "Okay, okay, I get it. You have some kind of feminine intuition that warns you about her getting too close to me. She sets off your antennas, and you get a bad vibe. I know girls have a sixth sense about this stuff. Okay, fine. I'll be on my guard, okay?"

She smiled meekly. "Okay."

She leaned forward. "Please don't tell her. I feel horrible even mentioning it to you." She looked
down. "Maybe I'm just being weird."

He tousled her hair playfully. "You're always weird, Sugu."

She grabbed her hair. "Stop that!"

"Fine, sorry. Sheesh."

Then she said demurely, "Hey, you haven't messed with my hair since."

He completed the thought. ".. since I was 8?"

"Uh huh."

He smiled. "Well, maybe I should start messing up your hair again."

She returned the smile. "But then I get to mess up yours back."

He snorted. "Right. Whenever we did that we always started fighting, and Mom always got mad at us."

"Hey, I only fight with a shinai now. You get out of line and I'll whack you."

"Oooh, scary. So I guess no hair mussing then?"

She said softly, "You can muss up my hair..."

"Mmm?"

"... but only if I get to muss yours."

He grinned.

"Deal."

A half hour had elapsed and Suguha looked at the clock on the wall. "I wonder why Sachi isn't back yet?"

Kazuto was finishing his last glass of water. He was glad that the catheter was still plugged in to a very personal part of his anatomy so he didn't have to go to the bathroom.

Suguha stood up. "You want me to go find her?"

"Hmm, yeah, you better check."

"Okay." She left.

Kazuto was now alone in the room for the first time since he woke up. He sighed and put his head back down on the pillow as he looked up at the ceiling.

Well, it looks like Sugu doesn't know Sachi as well as I thought she might, at least not when it comes to me. They don't share any pillow talk. That's when girls talk about boys.

Hmm, Sachi's skewed sleep schedule... is she doing that to avoid any bedtime talk?

They fool around and play together, but they aren't sharing any private stuff or personal stuff the
way real sisters would.

Dang it. I was hoping Sugu would give me a read on what Sachi is thinking about me. Sachi’s been sitting in that chair watching me for 17 straight months. What was she doing all that time? Daydreaming? Running fantasies in her head?

And if she was - and I don’t see why she wouldn’t be - how am I gonna explain Asuna to her?

Hoo boy. Awkward.

Is she going to wig out?

How will she react?

I gotta figure her out, and fast. What is a ‘VRDP’ anyway?

You’d think after 17 months Sugu would have her figured out by now. Hmm, if Sugu doesn’t have a read on her, maybe Mom does?

Or maybe I should I ask Asuna for advice? Maybe she can just talk to her privately? Explain things to her, you know, woman to woman?

Eh, Asuna can get pretty prickly sometimes. I’ve certainly had enough dinner knives thrown at me to realize that, although when whenever she threw them at me I usually deserved it.

Asuna can be really kind too, especially to those who are vulnerable or have been hurt, and Sachi will definitely be hurt...

Well, I’ll set it aside for now. I just need to find Asuna. That’s all I want.

I need to see her again, spend some time alone with her.

Hmm, I’m going to need to introduce myself formally to Asuna’s family, and she needs to be introduced formally to mine.

Asuna, we are going to have a *lot* to talk about family-wise, and not just about Sachi.

Yeah, we’ll talk about everything privately, just you and me, Asuna. I’ll check with Mom too, and together we will get this all figured out.

The door opened and Sachi and Suguha returned. They were whispering to each other as they walked in. Sachi spoke up, "Sorry it took so long, Kirito. That was quite a list."

"Find any of them?"

"Yeah, we found two. I was worried I'd need to pull some strings to get them out tonight, but I didn't have to. They were already downstairs signing the release paperwork." She grinned, "It seems that Nurse Aki had already frog-marched them both out of the public ward and downstairs to the Discharge Office."

Kazuto asked, "Nurse Aki?"

"Kirito, I have seen Nurse Aki single-handedly tackle a delirious 130 kilogram level 68 linebacker VRDP and hog tie him to the floor with a saline line all by herself. That guy is lucky to be alive after the stunt he pulled on her. Anyway, after they are both done with their discharge paperwork I
expect they'll be back up here again in a few minutes. I just hope they don't run into Nurse Aki again."

Kazuto tried to look more grateful than bewildered. "Uh, thanks."

Soon there was a knock and two young men came in. They were in the middle of a heated discussion. The large black man was saying to the man wearing the bandana, "Hey, why you always pushing that swordmaker chick on me?"

The man with the bandana replied, "I'm just sayin' that you two have a lot in common, that's all. You're both entrepreneurs, you both sell weapons. And besides, I think she has a thing for you."

"Dude, you know I'm married, so knock it off."

"Hey, from what you told me I think that wife of yours is married to that cafe, not you."

"Shut up, man. We're here."

They then both looked up and saw Kazuto in the hospital bed.

"Dude!"

"Kirito, my man!"

They both ran over to his bed, ignoring Sachi and Suguha.

The large black man said, "Aw man, Kirito, you look like [bleep]. What happened to you?"

Kazuto was staring back at them. "You guys look fine.. how come..?"

Sachi spoke up. "His body was undergoing cellular breakdown. It's still really rare among the SAO victims, about 1 in 1000 so far, but the doctors said it was going to spread rapidly if you all stayed under much longer."

Kazuto said hopefully, "So, Asuna..?"

Klein backslapped Kazuto. "Dude, I'm sure your ice hottie is still a hottie, don't worry."

Kazuto sighed with relief.

*Ice hottie?*

Suguha and Sachi looked at each other.

Agil and Klein were now noticing the two girls, who were standing next to each other away from the bed.

The man wearing the bandana stood up and liked what he saw. He quickly sauntered over to greet the two girls. The other man followed behind.

"Well, well. And who might you lovely ladies be?"

Both girls unconsciously clutched their sweaters like a stereo picture.

Sachi finally spoke for herself and Suguha. "Oh, uh, hello. My name is Sachi. This is Suguha."

The large black man waved. "Andrew Gilbert Mills. Call me Agil. Pleased to meet you."
The man wearing the bandana swept his arm across his front and bowed in an extravagant gesture of greeting. "My name is Ryoutarou Tsuboi. In SAO my handle is Klein. I'm a close personal friend of Kirito."

Sachi smiled. "That's wonderful. Me too."

He stood up. "Huh? Really?"

Sachi felt pleased with herself. "Yes. I was Kirito's first partner. I mean, I was with his first team partners."

Klein raised an eyebrow at the cute girl. "I see. You were his first 'partner'..."

She nodded, "Yes, his first after Day 1. Nice to meet you."

Before Suguha could introduce herself next, Agil whispered to Klein, "First?"

Klein turned and said, "Kinda young, don't you think?"

Agil hushed him. "Lower your voice."

Suguha glared. "Excuse me, what are you two men talking about?"

Agil was still addressing Klein. He sighed, "She must be another one."

Klein agreed. "Man, how many does he got?"

Suguha yelled, "Hey!"

Klein turned to face Kazuto. "Dude, really, what is with you? You go around collecting cute chicks like shopping coupons?" He shook his head. "I am going to need a phone book to keep track of your harem..."

Kazuto quickly replied, "No! It's not like that! And Suguha is.."

But it was too late. Suguha was already riled up. "'Cute chicks'?"

Sachi had her arms crossed. "'Harem'?"

Agil tried to describe the situation to the two annoyed girls on his behalf. "Well, you see, Kirito has got a bit of a thing with the ladies. You aren't his only ones."

Suguha said testily, "So how many 'ladies' does he have?"

Klein rubbed his chin. "Well, I don't know exactly how many he's collected up to now, but let's see, there is Silica, Liz, you two chicks, and of course..."

Kazuto yelled, "No! It wasn't like that! I just teamed up with them!"

Suguha glared at Kazuto "Argh! Here Sachi and I were worried sick about you wandering around SAO all by yourself, but it turns out that you were just playing Casanova with a bunch of 'chicks' the whole time!"

Kazuto was waving his arms. "No! I wasn't! I really did play solo! Honest!"

Sachi knew that it had to be a misunderstanding on Klein's part, so she leaned over and whispered
something to Suguha, who was still fuming.

Whatever Sachi had whispered to Suguha seemed to backfire. Suguha hissed back, "How can I believe you now?"

"Sugu, the VRDPs lie all the time. Please, don't listen to them..."

"You're one to talk. You're one of them yourself, Little Miss First Bed Partner!"

"Sugu, please, that's not fair."

Suguha whirled and faced Kazuto, "How many more were there!?"

Klein was stunned. "His first...?"

Suguha was inchoate. "Your 'chicks'? Your 'harem'? So it turns out she was not the only girl to share your bed?"

Kazuto was panicking. "No, wait! Stop!"

"And she was only 14 at the time! How could you!"

Klein's jaw was now hanging wide open.

Kazuto waved his hands and yelled, "No! She's wrong! Don't listen to her!"

Klein yelled, "DUDE!"

Agil shook his head sadly. "Oh man, Kirito, you have a lot to answer for. That is *so* not cool."

Meanwhile, Kirito was still waving his hands wildly as he continued to protest his innocence. "No, no, no! You don't understand! It wasn't like that!"

And so it went.

It was now nearing midnight and Agil and Klein had long since left. It had taken over an hour, but Kazuto and Sachi had finally managed to calm Suguha down and explain the misunderstanding. There were apologies all around.

Suguha had school the next morning and finally had to leave to get home before midnight.

Sachi was again sitting alone in her chair. "I'm really sorry about that."

Kazuto sighed, "It's all my fault. I should have explained it better before she flew off the handle."

Sachi tried to reassure him. "No, that Klein person just caught us all off guard. I know you didn't do anything wrong."

"Dang it, I was just patching things up with her too."

She smiled kindly at him. "You did your best, I'm sure. Although I must admit I'm a little surprised how touchy she is about you being around other girls."

"Well, she's my sister. She just feels protective of me."

Then he looked at Sachi carefully. "Same as you."
She didn't catch his careful gaze and simply nodded.

He added slowly, "But you didn't freak out like Sugu did."

She shook her head. "It's because I know you. I know you are nothing like that. Suguha needs to be more trusting of you..."

She looked down. "... and of me."

Kazuto remembered what Suguha confided in him, that she did not trust Sachi around him.

He sighed, "Yeah, she has trust issues. I see that now."

They both sat in silence while thinking about Suguha.

He finally said, "Anyway, Sachi, it is really great to see you again. You know, when I look at you, still alive, I still think I'm dreaming sometimes."

She smiled.

"And you've changed so much. I don't mean just the way you look, I mean you're, well..."

"I'm not that timid little girl anymore?"

"No, you're not. I'm really proud of you."

She smiled demurely. "Thank you."

She was exhausted from the day's events, and her guard started to drop.

A tear formed in her eye. "It's been hard..."

Kazuto sat up some more. "Hey, you want to talk about it?"

She wiped her face with her sweater arm. "No, not right now. Besides, it's getting late."

"I understand. Still, I'm so amazed when I look at you. You are more confident, more mature. Well, except when you mess around with Suguha, heh."

"Oh, she told you about that?"

"Yeah."

"About how we raced...?"

"Yeah, Super Mario Ultra Karts. I gotta watch you two next time."

"Oh." He had misunderstood. She was tired and didn't feel like correcting him.

More time passed.

Eventually Kazuto said, "Uh, Sachi?"

"Yes?"

"Look, I really need to get some sleep."
"Yes, I know."

"Sachi, I'd rather you not watch me sleep, okay?"

She looked distracted. "I wasn't planning to stay. It's just that.."

"Hmm?"

"I was going to wait until they got here, then leave..."

"As soon as who got here?"

Sachi frowned. "Well, I'm a little confused. Why haven't they come to talk to you yet?"

"Who?"

"The government. Why has no one from the Ministry of Information come here to ask you questions about Akihiko Kayaba yet? I know that Mr. Kikuoka very much wants to catch him, and he had told me he desperately wanted to talk to you the moment you woke up. I was expecting to see him come through that door hours ago."

Kazuto mentally kicked himself. "Hey, you are right! Why haven't any government goons come to grill me yet? They should have by now."

Sachi protested, "Mr. Kikuoka is not a goon! He is a nice gentleman. Still, what do you think it means?"

"Hmm, if nobody is grilling me to try to find Kayaba it must mean.."

She nodded. "They already found him."

He looked at her. "Or they think they have."

---

**S-F Day. JSDF Regional AFB.**

Two great Sikorsky Chinook CH-35E Super Stallion helicopters rose into the air and headed north. The company commander was sitting in the jump seat next to Seijirou Kikuoka in the lead helicopter. Both were wearing Special Operations combat uniforms.

The commander had to yell over the noise of the rotors. "Lieutenant Colonel, this is our ops plan." He handed the steel-encased data tablet to Kikuoka. "The surrounding mountains limit the villa to only one exit, here." He pointed. "I don't see any way he is going to escape."

Kikuoka yelled back, "Don't underestimate him. Remember, we want him alive."

"Yes sir. So how did you MINFO folks find him?"

"Watanabe's intel was spot on. It turned out that Kirito really was as strong as she said when she peeked at his popup display, and she was also right when she had predicted that his personal drive and determination would make him become the best solo player. So when Kirito got forced into Asuna's guild, we zeroed in on Heathcliff and it was all over. That player had no real name or location. The god of that universe had simply wanted to experience first hand what it was like to play his own game. Watanabe's indirect psych profile worked. After that all we had to do was find Heathcliff's VPN link and trace it."
"That's it?"

"Not quite. We still couldn't find the right circuit. We did a process of elimination on the data streams of all the players, matching them all with passive data taps on all the 100GBASE-T switches, counting bytes in and bytes out. We measured every single byte leaving the Argus building and matched it with every single byte entering every helmet."

"And?"

"They balanced perfectly. Every byte to every single player, all 6149 of them, was accounted for exactly. Every single byte! But we knew there were 6150 players, not 6149. So where the heck was player #6150?

"We knew he wasn't hiding inside the Argus building by checking the water usage. All the data egress points were accounted for, so we searched for hidden outgoing microwave beams, inductive taps, everything we could think of. It drove us crazy."

"So how'd you find it?"

"We finally got an anonymous tip, sent to us using one of Kayaba's old public keys."

Kikuoka showed the message to the commander. It contained just four words:

Check the wires again

"Uh, I don't follow, sir."

"It was so simple. Kayaba was using a jabber circuit. It was why we could never find his VPN link out of the Argus building. It looked like a dead wire with a loose connection, just random static. The average office tower has dozens of them: wires chewed by rodents, water damage, getting accidentally cut, you name it. His trick was that his VPN wasn't framed with IEEE 802.3 link layer headers, or with a sync byte, or even a stop pulse. It didn't even have Vcc for grounding! It was just an ungrounded dead wire spewing what seemed like random noise. No amount of network snorting would have found him because we had only checked the live wires."

"I never understood that stuff, sir. I'm just glad we found him."

"Well, the man is a freaking genius. We never would have found it without that tip."

"So who do you think sent it?"

"The message used one of Kayaba's old public keys, so it had to be someone who was close to him in the past. Our analysts think it was probably one of his former grad students. The psych people think she might be a jilted lover."

"Heh, it's always a girl that brings 'em down, isn't it?"

Kikuoka remained silent. He looked out the helicopter window.

Yes, it was a girl all right.

He was thinking of Sachi.

Little lady, I owe you one.

The military helicopters flew into the night.
A/N:

* See episode 22. It is hard to believe that Midori had never told Kazuto that she had informed Suguha two years prior. Instead he had to learn it two months later from Suguha herself. (The LN tries to justify it saying that Suguha told her mom to 'hold back' saying she wanted to tell him herself - stills seems kind of long though.)

A/N Update:

At this point in the story, Kazuto has been awake for less than 10 hours. He still is trying to get his bearings while trying to wrap his head around the fact that Sachi is alive, and he has no idea what is going on with this girl other than the fact that she had watched him for 17 straight months (in LN Vol 3: *He had visited her [Asuna] for three straight days*. Kazuto couldn't even go one straight week), so he assumes - not unreasonably - that Sachi is infatuated with him somehow. He is worried that she might be living out some kind of deluded romantic idyllic fantasy daydream that she has been playing in her head the whole time she has been watching him, so he wants to talk to somebody about her to get a read on her before he says anything. Note that Kazuto had waited a full month before he told Suguha (LN Vol 3): *It was about a month ago [December (the narrative is from January)] that Kazuto had told her he'd found his beloved in that other world.*

He will soon learn that VRDPs are said to be mentally unstable, and that according to common lore they could snap with little or no warning. This will make him even more hesitant and increase his desire to learn more about Sachi before he says anything. In questioning Suguha, she was not able to give him the information he needs. Mom doesn't know Sachi’s inner thoughts either. Nobody does. So he will soon resign himself to watching her day by day (they live together) and try to figure her out himself. He doesn't know yet that he will never figure her out just by watching her, and that instead some unexpected event will have to happen to force the issue. (Oh, like that would ever happen... /s)

As always, thank you for reading.

-HuuskerDu
The following afternoon Sachi returned to visit Kazuto in his private room. She had already been there that morning with Midori before going out on her mission to try to find Asuna. Suguha was at school and said she would return as soon as school let out.

Sachi knocked once and then quietly entered Kazuto's room. It was nearly 3 p.m. Midori had already left. Sachi looked tired.

Kazuto sat up. "Hey, did you find anything about Asuna like I asked?"

The petite girl sat wearily in the chair next to him. "Yes, I did."

"Well?"

"Hmm. Are you sure she was still in the game yesterday?"

"What? Of course. I told you yesterday that we died together on Floor 75, remember?"

"Uhm, yeah, about that..."

"Well, what did you find out? And why did you take so long?"

It was because the government had stopped publicly reporting on the number of remaining sleepers after the initial batch of 2000 had woken up two years ago. Earlier that morning Sachi had gone out to try to meet with Kikuoka but his assistant said he was unavailable. Sachi then left a message, saying that she was asking him to fulfill his debt to her. The assistant said that she would forward the message, and after an hour's delay Sachi finally received via e-mail a spreadsheet with the names and hospital locations of the players who had woken up.

She looked at her tablet. "I'm sorry, Kirito, but her name is not on the roster of the remaining players."

Kazuto sat up sharply. "What!? That's impossible."

"Kirito, I scanned the whole list several times, all 5848 names are on this spreadsheet on my tablet, including yours, see?" She showed her tablet to him. "Asuna is not listed. Are you sure you got the name right?"

"Yes! The name is Asuna Yuuki. And that list has 6149 names, not 5848."

"How do you know that?"

"Kayaba told me. He said 6147 players were logged out as soon as I cleared the game. Asuna and I then woke up about two minutes later. That makes 6149."

"Uh, no, it's 5848. I double-checked the list myself."

"Kayaba told me that 6147 other players logged out!"

"Well, he lied then. It's 5847."

"But why? He told me that everyone had logged out. Why would he lie about something like that?"
"Maybe he had a reason to mislead you?"

Kazuto was thinking hard. "No, he didn't. Kayaba was a creep but he always played fair. He wouldn't lie about something like that. Especially not to me."

Sachi asked, "Why not to you?"

"Because I was his favorite lab rat. No, something else must be going on..."

Sachi leaned forward in her chair. "Kirito, I'm sorry, but this is the whole list. These are all the players who woke up yesterday. Are you are saying that..." She did the math in her head. "... 95% of them woke up and 5% didn't?"

Sachi had a bad thought.

What if 5% of the helmets were defective? Oh no..

Kazuto's train of thought came to the same conclusion. He suddenly grabbed Sachi's wrist. "Tell me, has anything like this ever happened before? Did anyone who was confirmed killed in the game ever fail to wake up?"

Sachi frowned and looked down. "Hmm, let me think..

Kazuto's eyes grew desperate.

His grip on her wrist tightened. "Please! Tell me!"

Sachi tried to pull her arm away. "Kirito, let go. You're hurting me."

He released his grip on her wrist. "Oh, sorry... Just please..

She gently picked up his own hand and held it in her own. Her small hands were warm and soft. "Kirito, they all woke up. I've worked with hundreds of VRDP cases and talked with a dozen other case workers, and I know that they all woke up."

"All of them?"

"Well, in a few instances there was a short delay before they were noticed, but yeah, they all woke up."

He asked, "A few instances? Like 5%?"

"No, just a handful. In rare cases the VRDP response to the death trauma is so severe that it results in catatonia, which can be difficult to distinguish from the normal in-game dive state. The only indication is that the WAN LED stops blinking. With 6000 patients to watch it sometimes doesn't get noticed by the staff right away."

Sachi thought of Keita, who was still sitting listlessly on his porch every day watching nothing.

She kept trying to reassure Kazuto. "I really doubt that is the case here. When you died and cleared the game you woke up with zero symptoms, so I expect that Asuna should have no symptoms either."

"Then why have 5% not woken up?"

Sachi grew frustrated. "I don't know!" She tried to think. "The game never logged out so many
people at once before. Maybe there is a backlog or something?"

Kazuto nodded. "Maybe. It could a temporary hiccup in the system with the logout process. Still, I'm worried about Asuna. Sachi, I know this is asking a lot, but can you please pull some more strings try to find out what happened?"

Sachi stood up. "I will. I'll contact Mr. Kikuoka again. He and I have a good relationship so I think that he would be more than happy to let me know what had happened to her. I haven't been able to reach him yet today, only his assistant."

Kazuto leaned back. "I bet it's because he's interrogating Kayaba right now."

Sachi looked thoughtful. "Hmm, you might be right." She knew of Kikuoka's Javert-like obsession with tracking down Kayaba.

Kazuto crossed him arms. "Good. He'll drag it out of him, by hook or by crook."

What Kazuto and Sachi did not know was that, after the three JSDF assault teams had tossed in the flash-bang grenades and had barged in to the mountain villa, that they had found that the villa was empty. A thick layer of dust was on the furniture and window sills and it was obvious that no one had been inside it for at least a year. The assault teams had then proceeded to methodically demolish the villa, tearing out the ceiling tiles, pulling out the wall plaster, and ripping up the floorboards, until eventually they found a small electronic box hidden within an outer wall in a second floor bedroom. A coaxial cable ran through the wall to the outside and went up along the side of the villa. The cable was painted the same color as the exterior making it invisible from a distance. The cable ran up the side of the villa to a small microwave dish that was carefully hidden under an eave that was not visible from either the ground or from the air and that was pointed towards another villa on an adjacent mountainside that had a similar microwave dish four kilometers away.

Kikuoka had then exploded with a stream of curses while the JSDF commander tried to reassure him, explaining that Kayaba was now on the run and that it was only a matter of time before they caught him.

Sachi stood up. "Let me check some more. I'll be back as soon as I find out something."

Kazuto nodded, "Thank you." Then he held her hand again. "Really, Sachi, thank you so much. You are such a life saver. I don't know how I can ever repay you for this."

She gently moved her own hands to wrap hers around his. She smiled, "Like I said, you already have."

Kirito, I have a plan for you.

She kept gazing into his eyes for several moments.

Eventually Kazuto cleared his throat, causing her to shift out of her reverie.

She blinked her eyes. Ugh, no daydreams! I need to focus!

She quickly made her apologizes and got up to leave.

Kazuto then looked down, lost in his own private thoughts.
As Sachi walked down the hall toward the main nursing station she began to think again of her plan for him. It looked like one step of her plan, Kirito's psychological VRDP rehabilitation, would not be necessary. Mentally he seemed to be just fine.

She was not particularly worried about Asuna. Sachi knew of Kirito's tendency to worry about his teammates. It was classic Kirito. No doubt he had promised to protect Asuna, just like the promise that he had made to herself, but he had failed to keep his promise, just like he had failed with her. Asuna died right in front of him like she herself did in the treasure room with the rest of the Moonlit Black Cats. After that terrible experience he had withdrawn from everyone and everything and became obsessed with reviving her, going so far as to engage in a mad solo quest to seek out a rare resurrection item just to try to bring her back.

No doubt this was the same thing. His concern for Asuna was to be expected. It was natural, really. Kirito's obsessive personality had caused him to latch on to her death, one that he blamed on himself, and so he felt that he had to see her alive again, to reassure himself that she was in fact okay. Sachi felt that his obsessiveness would cause him to become focused, laser-like, on the object of his failed promise until he was satisfied that she was safe and out of danger.

But was his teammate okay? The other SAO victims who had awakened on S-F Day seemed to be doing just fine, so Asuna was probably just fine too, right?

But where was she? And why was she not on the list of awakees?

Sachi spotted Nurse Aki standing at the counter of the nursing station. She was looking down at a monitor screen and frowning. Sachi ran up to her.

The tall nurse glanced up and smiled at Sachi's approach. "Oh, hello, Sachi. I was looking for you."

"You were?"

"Yes, we are transferring the remaining sleepers to a secure facility. We could use some help getting them loaded downstairs."

Sachi sighed. "So it's true then. Some of them didn't wake up..."

"Yes, we have fifteen cases so far. They weren't noticed right away because of all the commotion. I spotted the first one yesterday, a young boy who wasn't waking up. His WAN LED on his helmet was dark like all the rest. But then something strange happened."

"Which was?"

"I saw the WAN LED start to blink again, but more slowly. The boy remained unresponsive. I gave orders to search the remaining wards and the others were soon found. It looks like they are still somehow connected to the mainframe in some kind of semi-conscious dive state."

"But why?"

"Nobody knows. My guess is that bastard Kayaba has something to do with it."

Sachi recalled what Kirito had said, that Kayaba had told his favorite lab rat that all 6147 had indeed been released. She said quietly to herself, "I'm not so sure about that..." She made a mental note to inform Kikuoka. Then she looked up at Nurse Aki again. "Do you know where they are taking them?"
"No, the government won't say where."

"Why not?"

Aki looked a bit exasperated. "I think it must be political. Look how happy everybody is." She pointed at the throng of visitors and patients still milling about the hallway as the release process continued. "I think the government does not want to throw a wet blanket on all the happy celebrations."

Sachi understood. Then she pleaded, "Please, I need to know where they are going. I promise won't tell anyone."

Aki sighed, "Like I said I don't know. Why don't you go downstairs and help with the loading? Maybe you might find out something?"

Sachi’s eyes brightened. "Good idea. Thank you!" Sachi ran to the elevator.

Later that day Kazuto was officially discharged from the facility into the care of Midori. Suguha had arrived from school just in time to ride with them back home. Sachi was still missing.

The hospital had offered Kazuto a medical transport to send him home, but he insisted he didn’t need one. Instead Suguha pushed his wheelchair to a waiting taxi that Midori had called. Midori and Suguha both helped transfer Kazuto into the back seat of the taxi while the attendant folded up the wheelchair and stored it in the trunk.

Suguha sat in the back of the taxi with her step-brother. Midori sat up front. Kazuto was exhausted and was soon snoring softly in the back seat, sitting up with his head down against his chin.

Suguha glanced forward and saw Midori looking out the taxi window, so she took a chance. She gently pulled Kazuto’s sleeping form towards herself until he was propped against her side. He shifted slightly but did not wake up. Then she leaned against him and put her head on his shoulder, and she closed her eyes in peaceful bliss.

And she began to daydream.

The next morning Kazuto awakened in his own bed.

He sat up groggily, then turned to look at his alarm clock. Why didn't the clock's alarm go off? *Ugh, I'm late for school. Gotta hurry and get dressed...*

He tried to stand up when a shooting pain ran up his right leg. The leg buckled out from under him and he crashed to the floor.

His memories came flooding back with the searing pain:

SAO.

Heathcliff.

Death.

Clouds.

A kiss.
As he tried to sit up someone quickly opened his bedroom door and ran over to his fallen form.

He saw that it was a girl.

_That's right, Sachi._

"Kirito! You okay? No, don't stand up."

"My name is Kazuto..."

"I know. Be quiet and let me check your leg." Sachi palpated his thinned right calf and right thigh. "Hmm, looks okay."

She bent over him. "Let me get you back in bed." She crouched down further behind him and began to lift him up by his armpits. He was so thin and emaciated that it was not difficult for the petite girl to haul him in to bed. She re-fluffed his pillow and tucked it under his head.

It was only when she began to pull the bed covers over his prostrate form that Kazuto had finally realized that he was completely naked.

"Gaaahh!" He grabbed the bed sheet and pulled it up to his chin like a shield.

Sachi sighed complacently, "Don't worry, Kirito. It's nothing that I haven't seen before."

"Uh, really?"

Sachi finished tucking him in. "Relax. I inspected your catheter for infection just about every day."

"You did?"

She sat next to him on the bed. "Look, I'm training to be an LPN, remember? This goes with the territory. I checked your catheter and dozens of other guys every day, not just you. I'm quite used to it."

Kazuto tried to absorb the information. "Oh..."

Sachi decided that now was probably not the best time to also tell him about the weekly sponge baths that she had given him.

She stood up. "I'll make you a nice breakfast and bring up a tray. You want anything else in the meantime? Something to read maybe?"

He looked at her shyly from under his blanket. "Uh, no, thank you."

She turned to leave.

Then he remembered something.

He sat bolt upright. The bed sheet flopped down to a precarious position but he didn't care.

"Sachi, stop! Wait!"

"Yes?"

"Tell me about Asuna! Did you find her?"

Sachi paused, then she turned. She sat on the bed again.
Her face was carefully composed.

She said softly, "Yes."

The previous day she had bluffed her way onto one of outgoing the medical transports that carried the remaining sleepers from the facility. She road inside the vehicle to a private secure hospital that was about 20 miles away in the city of Tokorozawa in Saitama prefecture.

When she got out of the vehicle she saw several over medical transports and ambulances offloading other victims in the fenced-in parking area. She checked that nobody was watching her as she walked away from the parking lot, then she changed course and headed to the main entrance of the secure building. She quickly waved her hospital ID at the guard as she marched through the checkpoint. With all the commotion she was able to successfully slip past the distracted guard without getting caught. Once inside she found and grabbed an unattended vase of flowers and walked up to the nursing station to inquire about Asuna Yuuki, claiming that she was making a flower delivery.

Kazuto prompted her. "And you saw her..?"

Sachi's composure started to fail. "Kirito, I'm so sorry..."

He saw the tears forming on her face.

A minute later.

He was crying in her arms like a baby, naked and inconsolable.

Three days later.

Sachi pushed his wheelchair out of the elevator and on to the 18th floor*.

No visitors were allowed in the private hospital except for immediate family. It was because no one in SAO had died, and so the government had become embarrassed about the remaining 300 sleepers – who had perhaps 6 to 18 months left – and so they were kept out of the public eye.

With Aki's help Sachi was able to push through the paperwork to get herself transferred over to Tokorozawa Hospital. Her resume was impeccable with her long experience with handling SAO victims and her government clearance. It made it a relatively easy task, and three days later she had her official credentials and keycard as a volunteer at Tokorozawa.

Asuna was in a private room on the secure 18th floor (South Hall).

Sachi pushed Kazuto's wheelchair up to the pale green door.

There was a dully glowing nameplate on the wall, 'Yuuki, Asuna'.

Sachi swiped her keycard.

The door unlocked.

They went inside.

A/N:
* LN Vol 3. In the anime Asuna's hospital room was on floor 12, but Kazuto had stated in LN Vol 3 that the elevator doors opened on floor 18 so I am assuming that for this story.
Sachi pushed Kazuto's wheelchair into Asuna's private hospital room.

She saw that Asuna looked as if she was peacefully asleep, the same as she looked the previous day. Unlike Kazuto's gaunt visage there was no sign of cellular decay or consumption on her sleeping face. Her cheeks had a healthy faint rose tint, and her red chestnut hair flowed out from under the helmet and across her pillow.

Sachi wheeled Kazuto to her bedside. He remained quiet.

Then he turned.

"Sachi, can you please wait outside?"

Sachi made a quick bow. "Certainly." She walked back out to the hallway and silently closed the door behind her.

After a moment she heard a sob.

_He needs his privacy._

Sachi discreetly walked down the hallway and out of earshot. She waited by the elevator.

Five minutes passed.

As she waited she imagined what must be going through his mind. _He failed her. He didn't keep his promise to protect her. He's probably beating himself up right now. It's happening all over again, just like it did with me._

She sighed to herself.

_That poor girl. His team partner is laying right there in front of him, and yet she is literally a universe away._

_Ugh, this will hurt him so badly. This will hurt him much worse than when I sent had him that dumb Christmas letter. There's no closure for his grieving this time. As long as she is breathing his failure will hang over him like a sword..._

_Then what? The doctors say that the remaining sleepers have maybe 6-18 months before the cellular breakdown causes their bodies to decay and quit working. What will happen to Kirito now if, week after week, month after month, he watches her body slowly desiccate and waste away, until at the end it is only a husk...?_

_No. I won't let that happen. I won't let him destroy himself._

_How can I help heal him?_

_What should I do?_

Ten minutes passed.

She had already resolved not to say anything to him for now. She knew that any soothing words that she might utter now would only sound patronizing; it might even make him angry.
Five more minutes passed.

Kazuto quietly exited the suite. He saw Sachi down the hall standing by the elevator, looking down and muttering to herself with her eyes closed. She did not notice him approaching.

He stopped and waited a moment, then he decided to get her attention.

"Let's go." She nearly jumped out of her shoes when he spoke.

One look at Kazuto's defeated face was enough to confirm her worries. She pressed the Down button and walked behind the wheelchair. When the door opened she rolled him inside without saying a word. She knew there would be no conversation on the way home.

As the elevator went down the muzak played overhead.

*To everything, turn, turn, turn*
*There is a season, turn, turn, turn*
*And a time to every purpose under Heaven*

*A time to be born, a time to die*
*A time to plant, a time to reap*
*A time to kill, a time to heal*

The doors opened on the main level.

Sachi was startled again. She was startled for precisely the same reason as before:

A wheelchair appeared in front of her that she did not expect to see.

It was Nurse Kurosawa, and she was frowning.

*Oh no. I'm caught.*

Kurosawa's arms were crossed as she sat in her motorized wheelchair facing the elevator.

"Ms. Watanabe, can you please come to my office for a moment?"

Sachi was frozen in abject fear. She knew she could not remain on staff after something like this.

But first she had to find someone to take care of Kirito. He was looking down at the floor, lost in his own world.

She stuttered, "Y-yes ma'am. If I can please first..."

Nurse Kurosawa interrupted her. "You can bring Mr. Kirigaya with you and leave him outside. As I said, this will only take a moment."

It was hopeless. Kurosawa already knew who Kirito was.

Sachi felt miserable. Here she was, caught red-handed violating hospital policy, and it was only her second day. What made it worse was that she was caught by the infamous Nurse Kurosawa.

Kurosawa was the second highest ranking RN in the hospital, having newly arrived from Tokyo General Hospital where she was the senior RN in charge of the long term care needs of over 1000 SAO victims in one of Japan's largest medical facilities. She was now in charge of all of Japan's remaining sleepers who were being gathered here at Tokorozawa. The previous day she had
briefed her fifty new medical staff. Like herself, they were guest workers who had volunteered from several hospitals in the Tokyo-Yokohama region and who were hastily gathered together to help take care of the remaining sleepers.

Yesterday Kurosawa had arranged a brief impromptu meeting in the main training room with the new guest workers, including Sachi. She had thanked them for volunteering on such short notice. She told her new staff to treat each sleeper like they would their own family. She then read aloud from a list of instructions on a clipboard that was previously given to her: Tokorozawa Private Hospital is a for-profit research hospital, so the guest staff must stay out of the secure research areas of the building that are marked with either a red nameplate or red doorframe. Access to those secure areas would be permitted only for the permanent authorized staff who possess a red keycard. She then read from the clipboard that only immediate family members are to be allowed visitation, and that the news media are to be excluded from entering the hospital.

She looked up from the clipboard. "Remember, these patients are mostly children. None of them deserved this fate. I want you to take care of them as if they were your own children. Please, treat them with all of the compassion and mercy that you can give. These patients are here now because Tokorozawa is the most advanced hospital in Japan for conducting leading-edge memory care research, so please pray that a cure will be found to allow them to awaken and rejoin their families. Your job is simple: Take care of them until that time. You are dismissed."

Kurosawa then motioned to Sachi to stay behind. Sachi became nervous as she watched the others leave. She was certain that Kurosawa had pulled her aside because she was the only SAO volunteer who was also a VRDP. She thought that Kurosawa was going to give her the usual depressing secretive we-do-not-trust-you talk that she had endured so many times before (sometimes behind her back). She was afraid that Kurosawa might even dismiss her and send her packing right then.

As Kurosawa approached, Sachi tried to muster a speech. She started to explain how she had no record of anti-social or improper behavior and no record of any disciplinary actions. As she did so, Kurosawa raised her hand to silence her and simply smiled.

Kurosawa then told Sachi that she trusted her despite her VRDP status. Furthermore, she said that if any of the other staff ever cause her problems or trouble with her being a VRDP to tell her and she would deal with it personally. As she said it, Sachi caught a glimpse of her scowling visage.

Sachi felt sorry for anyone who fell under her disciplinary wrath.

Then Kurosawa's face had brightened again, and Sachi thanked her profusely for her support. Sachi quickly warmed up to the senior RN despite her formidable personality, which was otherwise belied by her rather advanced age and her wheelchair condition.

Two years ago, Kurosawa had come out of disability retirement to help deal with the SAO emergency. Her years of experience in dealing with the aftermath of major natural disasters had made her the go-to leader in managing large scale emergency medical situations like this one, with both doctors and administrators wisely deferring to her judgement on how to quickly do triage and handle the setup for accepting a large number of patients in a short amount of time. Thanks in part to her efforts not one SAO victim was lost that first day, nor indeed were any lost since.

Kurosawa, who on S-F Day had felt that her two-year mission was finally accomplished, was getting ready to re-retire when she received a phone call from the Ministry of Health asking her to please lead a new medical team at Tokorozawa to take care of the remaining SAO victims until a way could be found to safely awaken them.

Nobody had died under her watch so far, and she was determined to keep that perfect record, so she had wearily agreed while promising to herself that she would never give up on any of the children
that remained under the SAO curse.

And now she sighed again, because one of the new guest staff had already violated a hospital rule that she had announced herself less than 24 hours ago.

Sachi followed the senior RN in shameful silence to Kurosawa's temporary office. She had never guessed that the first person to face Kurosawa's wrath at Tokorozawa would be herself. It was a small windowless room in a hallway off the main lobby that was originally a storage room. As instructed, Sachi parked Kazuto outside the room and closed the door behind her. Sachi saw some unopened cardboard boxes and a few folding chairs, no decorations. Kurosawa motored herself behind a folding table that doubled as an impromptu desk. A laptop was open on the desk/table.

Sachi tried to explain "Ma'am, I am so sorry. You see.."

Kurosawa raised her hand. "Please stop." She took off her eyeglasses and rubbed her tired eyes. "I realize that you still don't know me yet, and this is only your second day working here, but still, you should have come to me first."

Kurosawa clasped her hands on her desk. "Ms. Watanabe, I know all about Kirigaya. In fact he's rather famous in certain circles. He was spotted the moment you wheeled him into the main lobby. I was informed about him before you had reached the top floor."

Sachi looked down with shame at her foolishness.

Kurosawa continued, "Although my clearance level for access to MINFO files is somewhat limited, I do know Kirigaya if only by reputation if nothing else. Most people here do." Kurosawa left out the fact that she also had other unofficial ways to get information out of MINFO if she felt she needed it.

Twenty minutes ago Kazuto could be seen sobbing at Asuna's bedside in a video window on Kurosawa's laptop. Meanwhile she had pulled up another window next to it that contained Asuna Yuuki's redacted file.

Twenty minutes later she leaned forward to address Sachi. "I did some checking, and I now realize that you had the best of motives for what you did." She was not more specific. "And I know you are new here so I suppose I can give you some leniency. But even so, you should have still come to me first instead of sneaking Kirigaya up to her hospital room like that."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I take it her parents don't know?" Kurosawa was thinking back to what she had seen on the room camera.

"No, I am sorry that I did not ask for her parent's permission first before bringing a visitor."

Apparently the VRDP girl had misunderstood. From watching Kirigaya's pitiful breakdown on camera Kurosawa felt that she had a pretty good idea about his feelings for the sleeping girl.

Well, now was not the time, and Kurosawa was not 100% sure anyway. Besides, she was already busy up to her eyeballs in getting all the new patients moved in and situated in their wards.

"I see. Just, please, do not let this happen again. Dismissed."

Sachi jumped up and bowed deeply. "Yes, ma'am! Thank you, ma'am!" She left and closed the door behind her.
Kurosawa remained at her desk looking at the closed door, then she looked at the three computer windows that were still open on her laptop screen: Asuna's sleeping form, Asuna's file, and Kirigaya's file. Kurosawa was getting ready to close the three windows but something in the back of her mind nagged her. She continued to look at the computer screen.

She was thinking. She started to tap her finger on the table.

Sachi Watanabe must have known that she was risking her job. So how did Kirigaya manage to convince the VRDP girl to sneak him in like that? Did Kirigaya give her a sob story? Or did she simply take pity on him? And how did they meet?

Where was this plan hatched? Where did it happen? He woke up a few days ago so assume it happened at his bedside and that she was taking care of him.

She pulled up Watanabe's file in a fourth computer window and started to scan it: Photo, personal info, CV. The CV confirmed that she had worked at the same facility that Kazuto was in.

Kurosawa nodded to herself as she continued to read Watanabe's file: Her home address in Saitama, the names of her legal guardians (Minetaka Kirigaya and Midori Kirigaya), her school record...

Wait.

Kirigaya?

She quickly went back to the window with Kazuto's file and compared it. His home address and other contact info were redacted for security reasons, but the blacked out street address had the same length as Watanabe's street address. So did the blacked out names of his parents.

What in the world..?

Kurosawa pulled off her eyeglasses again and pinched her nose.

She really didn't have time for this, not with a myriad of far more important issues that she needed to deal with. She still had to get all the new patients settled into their wards, and she still needed to investigate some early reports of unexpected friction between the permanent staff and the guest staff.

She felt the beginning of a migraine headache starting as she put her eyeglasses back on. She then closed the four windows on her laptop and headed with determination to the main wards.

Next morning.

Sachi brought Kazuto's breakfast tray up to his bedroom door. She knocked on his door and waited a few moments. She did not hear anything so she let herself in. The door was not locked so she didn't need her key.

Sachi saw that Kazuto was still wrapped up in his blanket facing away from her. The blinds were closed and the room was dim. The dinner tray that she had left him the previous evening was still untouched.

Sachi removed the old tray and put the breakfast tray on the stand next to his bed. She then opened the blinds and let sunlight stream in. "My, it is such a beautiful day don't you think?"

She then turned to face him. His eyes were still closed.
"Kirito, it is after 9 a.m. It's time for you to wake up and have your breakfast."

No response.

"Kirito, I know you are awake. You aren't fooling me. You need to eat something. Your body needs the nourishment."

Finally his eyes opened and he spoke.

"Go away."

Sachi stood her ground. "I am not going away. She walked back around the bed to the tray and picked up the chopsticks to hand to him. "Please, you need to eat."

"I don't want any."

"Please."

"I said go away."

She sighed and turned to leave. "I'll be back in a bit."

Kazuto finally sat up in bed. "Sachi, wait."

She turned and walked back to his bedside, "Yes?"

"Please, take me back to see Asuna again."

Sachi made a mental sigh. Not good. Not good at all. This will only make things worse.

She said calmly, "Kirito, I don't think that's a good idea right now. Maybe later..."

He grabbed Sachi's wrist tightly. "Take me! Take me now!"

She saw the blazing determination in his eyes. It was an expression that she had not seen on his face since their shared battles in SAO.

She realized that he wasn't going to take no for an answer, so she relented to his demand.

"Fine. But eat your breakfast first."

Sachi wheeled Kazuto up to the front desk in the main lobby. One of Kurosawa's assistants greeted her and told her that Kurosawa was busy in the wards upstairs, but she explained to Sachi that Kurosawa had already approved Kazuto Kirigaya's visit to see Asuna Yuuki that day. Sachi wondered how Kurosawa already knew they were coming.

The ritual repeated itself: Sachi swiped her green keycard at the green door and Kazuto went in alone. Sachi waited by the elevator. This time it took 30 minutes before he returned.

She saw his face. He looked even more defeated than he did the last time, if that was possible.

He was taken home. Again he had refused to eat and stayed in bed the rest of the day.

Next day. 5:15 p.m.
Suguha had just returned from school. She crossed paths with Sachi, who was preparing to leave for her evening shift at the hospital.

She sat and began to unpack her knapsack at the kitchen nook. As she did so, she asked Sachi the same question that she had asked her yesterday.

"How is he doing?"

Sachi looked dejected. "Not good. He's getting worse in fact."

Suguha stopped unpacking and sighed, "Ugh, it has to be that Asuna girl."

"Partly, but I think it is more than that..."

Before Suguha could ask what Sachi meant by that remark, she spotted a large welt on Sachi's right cheek.

"Sachi? Your face! What happened?"

Sachi shrugged, "He wanted to see Asuna for a third time."

"And?"

"I said no."

"No?"

"I told him I would take him to see Asuna again only if he started eating his meals and doing his PT."

"Good idea. So how did he react?"

"He threw his bedpan at me."

"What!?"

"It hit me in the face."

Suguha was shocked. The bruise was large. "Really? I don't believe it! He would never hit a girl like that!"

Sachi touched her sore cheek.

"No, he wouldn't. You are right."

"What in the world is wrong with that guy?"

Sachi hesitated, unsure if she should tell her or not.

Suguha pleaded, "Sachi, please, tell me... What's wrong?"

Ducker, sullen and listless. Tetsuo, outbursts of aggression. Sachi, refusing to eat.

Kirito had all three.

Sachi said quietly, "You are right. Kirito would never do that..."
Sachi then took a deep breath.

"... but a VRDP would."
Early the next morning the three female members of the Kirigaya household were huddled together at the kitchen nook. Sachi rested her chin on the counter top next to a teacup that had been filled with black tea and was now mostly empty. Midori had just finished drinking her second cup of strong black coffee. Neither one had gotten enough sleep last night, but the three of them needed to meet and this was the only time they could do it together. Suguha was busy wolfing down the last of her bowl of cereal before getting ready to leave for school.

Sachi had already explained to them her diagnosis of Kazuto's condition.

Midori put down her coffee cup. "Are you sure? Kazuto seemed fine when I first saw him, chipper even."

Suguha pushed away her now empty cereal bowl and wiped her face clean with the back of her hand. "Mom is right. I talked to him privately, and I never saw him so relaxed and happy."

Indeed. She had not seen him so happy since they were young children, back when then they had played and frolicked together outside under the shining sun, laughing and yelling, rolling and wrestling in the grass, jumping and grabbing sticks to whack at each other with their pretend shinais.

When Kazuto was ten years old something had happened, and he became sullen and withdrawn from his sister. At first Suguha was worried that she had done or said something wrong so she tried to be extra nice to him. As a peace offering she bought him his favorite food, teriyaki chicken burgers. But her brother threw the plate of food in anger across the room, then he went up to his bedroom and closed the door behind him.

Suguha ran up to Kazuto's locked bedroom door and apologized over and over, begging him to please open the door, saying that she was very sorry for whatever she did, but he ignored her.

After that incident he had spent most of his time alone in his room. It was there that he had built his first personal computer using some spare parts that he had found in Midori's basement office: an old boxed motherboard with an outdated CPU, a leftover bare hard drive, and an unused empty ATX chassis. When Midori came home that night she was surprised to see him working so diligently on his new project. She decided to let him keep the spare parts and allowed him to continue with his project. She encouraged his new hobby, even tutoring him to learn some rudimentary computer programming. Using his newly built PC he had then quickly dived into the world of online gaming.

The years passed by. He remained civil with Suguha, but he always kept himself apart and stayed emotionally distant from her.

After S-F Day, Suguha had replayed over and over in her mind the wonderful bedside conversation that she had Kazuto on that day. When Kazuto first awoke he had been so caring, so gentle, so loving. She knew that whatever had happened during his two years in captivity inside of SAO had changed him, and very much for the better.

In Suguha's mind that bedside talk on S-F Day seemed magical. Night after night she had lain in bed with her eyes closed and imagined all the new and wonderful conversations that she would now soon share with him just like that one, and how they would become close again, very close, as she fell into a peaceful sleep.
Sachi sat at the breakfast nook thinking. Finally she said, "Yes, I understand your objections. He was indeed happy that day. I saw it too. However, I believe that..."

As Sachi continued to explain her theory about the cause of Kazuto's depression, Suguha gritted her teeth. She was already miffed how during the first couple days Sachi had monopolized all of Kazuto's waking hours, fluttering around, dancing attendance on him. Because of Sachi's constant ministrations Suguha had not had an opportunity to have another wonderful private conversation with her dear brother without that annoying girl always hovering within earshot.

One night Suguha had tried to sneak in to Kazuto's room to talk with him, but Sachi was a light sleeper and had caught her. After that Sachi kept Kazuto's bedroom door locked at night, explaining that he needed his sleep and must not be disturbed. The next day Sachi had taken Kazuto to see Asuna, and Kazuto completely crashed.

Suguha thought *This is all her fault. If she is right about her theory then she should have known better.*

It was because Sachi had just explained her theory that Kazuto was suffering from a potentially dangerous post-wakeup mental condition called 'VRDP syndrome'. The symptoms of VRDP syndrome included depression, withdrawal, paranoia, anti-social behavior, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), and strong agitation when exposed to certain emotional triggers. Until his condition improved he could have no visitors, both for their safety and his own. She said that the Ministry of Health had a well-established protocol for dealing with VRDP syndrome and that she was an expert at applying it. She explained that ultimately only time would tell if he would ever get better. She further explained to them that they needed to be prepared for the fact that VRDP syndrome had no cure, and that he would probably suffer from it to a greater or lesser degree for the rest of his natural life.

Suguha shook her head vigorously. "No! I don't believe you! My brother is not mentally ill! He was perfectly fine that first day!"

Midori chimed in, "Sugu is right, honey. He was fine when he woke up. I saw it too."

"Yes, but.."

"Aren't the worst symptoms always right when they wake up?"

"Well, yes.."

"And have you ever heard of an SAO victim die and wake up with no symptoms at all?"

"Well, no..

"Well?"

Sachi sighed. "It had to be a delayed reaction. It's the only explanation."

"Delayed?"

"Yes. Don't you see? His death happened under extraordinary circumstances. He had just defeated Kayaba and cleared the game. He won! He must have been running on a huge endorphin high that masked or suppressed the VRDP symptoms. In the meantime he was still worried about his battle partner. When he found out what happened, that she was still stuck in the game and he couldn't protect her, his latent VRDP syndrome flared up and he completely crashed."
"I see."

"He has all the symptoms. It's a textbook case."

Suguha asked, "So you think that Asuna girl was only a trigger?"

"Yes, it's happening all over again, the same thing that happened with me. He failed to protect her so he crashed with guilt and remorse. He thinks he failed a second time, so he flips out and goes beserk and attacks Kayaba and he dies - somehow taking Kayaba with him and clearing the game. Then he wakes up unexpectedly. He thinks, 'Hey! I'm not dead! I cleared the game! That means Asuna woke up too! I didn't fail her!' Woo hoo!

"He wakes up from SAO and sees everybody running around celebrating his victory. But what is the very first thing on his mind? Is he celebrating too? No, he is not. The first thing on his mind is, 'I gotta find Asuna!' Naturally, he is worried about his team partner. When he finally does find her he is crushed a third time because he failed to keep his promise to her after all. He thinks, 'Not again! Not another girl I failed to protect! Not another girl who trusted me!'. And so it triggered him and he crashed, showing all the classic symptoms of VRDP syndrome."

Sachi sported a large bandage on her right cheek. Midori looked at Sachi's injured face thoughtfully. "Hmm."

Suguha wasn't buying it. "No, my brother is a not VRDP! He is not one of those nut cases!"

Sachi looked away in embarrassment. Midori's eyes frowned at her daughter. Suguha tried valiantly to correct her blunder: "Oh, sorry, Sachi. I just mean that Kazuto is not a VRDP, that's all, not like you. Uh, wait, that didn't come out right. What I meant is that he isn't one, and you're not like them either. Well, okay, maybe you're kinda OCD about offering to help everybody all the time but that's not a bad thing..."

Midori put her hand on Suguha's shoulder to stop her from talking. "Sachi, dear, I'm sorry, she didn't mean to say that. We know you are just fine." Midori then ordered her daughter to apologize, but Sachi waved it off as unnecessary.

Sachi made a weak smile. "It's quite all right; I'm used to it."

Midori then put the discussion back on track. "All Sugu meant to say is that she disagrees with your diagnosis. Honestly, I do too."

"But what else could it be?"

Midori leaned back in her chair. "Kazuto is such a sensitive boy. More than you might think. He has never relied on anyone but himself. It's just who he is. He always blamed himself if something went wrong. Sachi, you told me how much he cared for you and tried to protect you in the game. I believe that you are right, that he is blaming himself for his failure to protect this girl, and I agree with you in that I think he does need time to heal. I think the best way for you to help him do that is to just be there for him. Eventually he will open up to you. Then listen to him."

"Yes, I will."

"Thank you, dear."

Suguha turned to her mother. "Mom, but when can I..?"

Midori again put her hand on her daughter's shoulder. "Sachi knows how best to take care of him."
She knows what happened better than anyone, so for now I think we ought to just let her handle it.

Suguha stood up and put on her knapsack. Facing away she said, "Yes, mother." She left before Midori could hug her goodbye.

Sachi stood up too, so Midori decided to give Sachi the hug instead.

"It will be all right, honey. I'm sure my boy will get better soon."

Sachi sighed as she watched Suguha close the front door behind herself without looking back.

She said quietly, "I think she blames me..."

Midori pushed back her hug in surprise "You do?"

"... and she might be right."

"Sachi, whatever do you mean?"

"I should never have taken Kirito to the hospital to see Asuna. I was a fool."

"Nonsense. You did exactly what he asked. You can't blame yourself for that or what happened afterward."

"No, I should have anticipated his reaction. Dang it." In frustration she slapped her own face. She winced forgetting about the cheek bandage.

Midori made a smile and re-embraced her. "Just look at you, blaming yourself for not protecting him. Honestly, I think you two are so alike sometimes."

Now it was Sachi's turn to push back the hug. "You think so?"

"Yes, I do. That's why I know that if anyone can heal him, I know it will be you." Midori used her thumb to gently wipe away the tear that was starting to form on her step-daughter's right eye.

Sachi laid her head on Midori's shoulder. "If I can, I will. I promise."

"I know you will."

The days passed. Sachi consulted her long term plan, which had allotted up to 14 days for Kazuto's initial mental VRDP rehabilitation.

On the seventh day she brought in his breakfast tray like she always did, but this time after opening the bedroom blinds to the morning sun she sat on the edge of his bed.

She waited.

He was still huddled under the bed covers with his face facing the wall, pretending to be asleep.

*I think he is ready now.*

While sitting on his bed she said quietly, "What happened to Asuna wasn't your fault."

As expected there was no response.

She had rehearsed her speech several times. She took a breath and tried not to sound nervous.
"It wasn't your fault when it happened to me either."

Another measured breath.

"Don't you see? The fault was mine, not yours."

*Breathe normally.. out.. in..*

"Kirito, you did not hurt me. *I* was the one who hurt *you.*"

That got his attention.

He turned in bed to face her. "That's ridiculous."

*Good, it's working.*

She looked him in the eyes. "You saw the Data LED blinking on her NerveGear helmet, yes?"

"So?"

"And you know what that means, right?"

He slowly nodded. "Mental activity."

"Exactly. So you know she's awake in the game, right?"

"Uh, I guess, yeah."

"Correct. She's awake, right now, feeling, wondering, thinking."

Kazuto's eyes widened in realization. "She's awake.."

"Yes. So how do you think she is feeling right at this moment?"

"Uh.."

"Happy? Sad? What?"

"Hmm.. scared probably."

*Good. Keep going.*

"And?"

".. and wondering what happened."

"Very good."

"But Sachi, how can anyone possibly know what is going on in there? It's just a blinking LED. That's it. There is no way to monitor what is happening inside her mind, you know that."

"Actually, you are wrong."

"Okay, then tell me, what is Asuna thinking right now?"

Sachi leaned in conspiratorially and whispered in his ear, "Would you like to know?"
Kazuto sat up straight and grabbed her shoulders. "Yes! Tell me!"

Okay, here we go...

"Well I'll tell you. She knows what happened on Floor 75, and so do you. You were there fighting alongside her, remember? She got herself killed while you were both fighting Kayaba. But she knows that she actually didn't die after that battle, so she knows that you didn't die either. Now she is wondering where you are. She is asking herself, 'Where is Kirito?'"

"Where am I? But where is she?"

"Exactly! She is searching all over the game to try to find you. And at the same time, she knows that you are beating up yourself for what happened, blaming it all on yourself."

"She does..?"

"Yes! Don't you see? That's the last thing she wants!"

"But how do you know..?"

Sachi jumped up and pointed a finger at him accusingly.

"Because, you dummy, that was the last thing *I* wanted!"

She got herself worked up. "Kirito, I was worried sick about you for 17 months! I know exactly how she feels. She is running around right now looking for you in the game, trying to find you, fretting about you, worrying about you, just as much as you are fretting about her!"

He put his head in his hands at the realization. "My god, I think you might be right."

"Of course I'm right! Right now the best neurological experts in Japan are at Tokorozawa Hospital working day and night to try to revive her, and just look at you, all gaunt and looking like a living cadaver. When she wakes up how do you think she is going to react when see's your pathetic frail body?"

She knelt down on the floor at his bedside and held his hand. "So please, don't keep doing this to yourself. Stop punishing yourself. Stop hurting yourself."

"No... no..."

"Don't you see? All you are doing is hurting her too."

"No... I didn't realize."

"So get up, mister. Get out of bed. Not for yourself. Do it for her."

"Yes, yes.. Sachi you are right." He put his hands on her kneeling shoulders. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize."

She looked up again at him, this time with smiling tears. She said shyly, "And maybe do it for me?"

He smiled back at her. "Okay."

She looked down demurely. "Thank you."
With her head bowed down before him he gently stroked the hair on the top of her head.

"You know, you've been way too good to me, way more than I deserve."

She kept her head down. "I just do what I can."

He put his hand under her chin and raised up her head. As he did he saw her bandaged cheek.

"My god, how do you put with me? You must hate me."

She put her hand around his. "I could never hate you."

He patted the bed next to him. "Sit here with me." She did as instructed. She was feeling more than a little nervous now that her objective was completed.

"You comfortable?"

"Uh, yeah.."

"I owe you so much. If it wasn't for you I probably would never have gotten out of this bed."

He then surprised her with a big hug. "Sachi, thank you."

She was stunned as he held her, her eyes open wide.

He kept saying, "Thank you.. Thank you so much.."

And he kept repeating those words she began to relax. It felt so natural, so right. She could feel a warmth spread within her. She remembered Midori's words.

If anyone can heal him, I know it will be you.

He kept holding her in his thankful embrace. After several moments she decided that it was enough and she gently pushed him away, then she laid him back on his bed.

She had a gleam in her eye. "Better get your rest while you can."

He noticed her coquettish smile. "Hmm?"

With exaggerated motions she primly moved the meal tray back next to his bedside. She then she leaned over him and said coyly, "Eat well, you're going to need it."

Before he could say anything in response, she turned and skipped gaily out of the room while humming a pleasant tune.

Okay, what is that crazy girl up to now?

Early the next morning Kazuto was awakened by the loud 'beep beep' sound of a truck backing up. He rubbed his eyes and opened the blinds. Outside he saw Sachi in work pants and a gray hoodie waving her hands behind a big delivery truck as it was backing up the wide driveway towards the dojo. On the side of the truck was stenciled Hashimoto Gym Rentals. He then saw a second delivery truck parked on the far side of the driveway apron and several men carrying large boxes into the old building.

Hoo boy. It looks like somebody got a hold of Mom's credit card...
He used the bedpan and then he ate the breakfast that was waiting on the bedside tray. He munchon a piece of toast as he sat back and he watched the commotion continue outside. 

He made sure to eat everything on his meal tray that day. It because he knew that tomorrow would be his first day of intense PT workouts under Drill Sergeant McSachi. 

_Asuna, I am going to let that girl whip my body into shape. I'll work as hard as I can and I won't complain about it. That way when you wake up I won't scare you when you see what I really look like. _

_So please stop worrying about me. I know that Sachi will beat the [bleep] out of me, but I'll be just fine._

_I'm doing it all for you._

_I know you are alive and looking for me._

_We will find each other._

_I promise._

That same morning Nurse Kurosawa was in her temporary office talking on the phone with an official at the Ministry of Health. She heard a brief knock on her open door and held up her hand. A moment later she said goodbye and hung up the phone and looked up. In the hallway she saw an orderly waiting to enter. 

"Come in." 

As he entered she noticed the ID badge that was hanging from a lanyard around his neck. It had a red border indicating that he was part of the permanent staff. 

The large man said, "Ma'am, here is the information you asked for." He handed her a data tablet. 

"Oh, thank you." Kurosawa accepted the tablet and put on her reading glasses. She inspected the text on the tablet, scrolling it down with flicks of her finger. It was the list of names of the permanent staff that she had requested the previous day. 

"Hmm, this list too short." 

The orderly said, "Is it, now?" 

She scrolled the list up and down re-checked it. "Yes, it is." 

The large man shrugged, "Hey, it is what it is." 

She thought his attitude was rude and on the edge of being insubordinate, so she gave him a sharp look. She then decided against admonishing him and only dismissed him, asking him to close the door behind him. 

She again looked him over as he turned to leave. He was rather rough looking even for an orderly, unshaven, with muscular arms. 

When he had stretched his arm out to hand her the tablet she had briefly spotted a tattoo hidden under his tunic sleeve. She only got a glimpse of it. It seemed to be shaped like an elongated box. It was wider at one end, with a pair of red smiling lips superimposed on top of it.
After the orderly had left she checked the tablet for the name that she saw on his ID badge. As she guessed it was not there.

Her frown deepened as she looked at the closed door.

The next morning Kazuto was rousted by a kick on his bed frame. "Get up, sleepy head. Up, up, up!" Then he heard a loud noise by his ear, phweeee.

He sat up groggily and covered his ear. "Ow."

He frowned as he looked at Sachi. She was wearing white socks, blue gym shorts, and a grey tank top. The whistle that dropped from her lips was tied to a white cord around her neck.

She tossed a set of underwear, shorts, t-shirt, and socks on his bed. "Put these on, then come outside!"

He was grumpy. "You know very well that I can't walk."

Sachi then pulled out a pair of long steel arm canes that she had previously hidden under his bed and tossed them on top of the pile of clothes.

"After you get dressed, you can put these on to walk around. From now on you get no wheelchair time at home or in the dojo. I will wait out in the hall for you to get dressed. You have exactly three minutes, then I'm coming back in to drag you out ready or not. So get moving!" She marched out.

He sighed as he looked at the steel arm canes.

_Asuna, I think I'm in hell._

Later that afternoon Suguha came home and immediately ran up to Kazuto's bedroom to see him. Sachi was expecting her and blocked her path. "Sorry, Kirito is exhausted and crashed out. You can see him tomorrow."

She saw that Sachi looked rather sweaty and tired.

Suguha folded her arms and said dryly, "I hope you didn't kill him."

Sachi made a tired grin. "Not yet. Give me time."

Suguha made her own grin. "Can I help?" There was no school tomorrow.

"Sure."

_The next morning._

"Up, maggot, up!"

Kazuto wearily rousted himself.

_Oh come on, I'm a 'maggot' now? This is going too far._

He rubbed his tired eyes. As his eyes cleared he saw a girl standing next to him. She was wearing
white gym shorts, a blue tank top, and a ball cap.

His eyes widened in recognition.

It was Suguha.

Then he noticed Sachi standing next to her.

Wait, both of them?

The two girls were grinning, with Suguha looking particularly eager.

Kazuto then spotted that Suguha was holding her shinai.

Oh crap. Double crap.

November 18, 2024. Dojo.

Sachi escorted Kazuto to the parallel bars, which were set at roughly the level of his armpits. "I'm going to lift you up. Ready?"

Kazuto nodded. "Yeah. This time I'm going to walk the full length and back again."

Sachi was dubious. "I don't know if you're ready for that."

"I want to try it."

"Well, okay, as long as I spot. Warn me if your arms get tired."

"Got it."

Kazuto took off his steel arm canes and handed them to her, keeping himself upright with his good left leg while leaning back against her on his right. She dropped the canes on the mat, then gripped his forearms from behind.

She said, "You ready?"

"Go."

"1..2..3.. Up!"

Sachi grunted and pulled him up, with Kazuto pushing up with his good left leg. He grasped both bars, arms straight, with his feet about a half meter off the ground. He then concentrated and began arm-walking. He released his left hand, then his right.

Left, right, left, right. He reached the end of the parallel bars.

"Kirito, that's great! Now turn. Don't worry, I got you if you slip."

"I won't."

"Just go."

Kazuto pushed hard with his right hand and turned to grab the left bar. Then he did it again with his other arm. He was now facing the opposite direction.
Left, right, left, right. He was about two hand grips from the starting point when his arms started to
give out. Sachi managed to grab his forearms just before he dropped, preventing a nasty fall.

"Whoa, careful, Kirito. I told you to warn me. I almost missed you."

"Sorry. I thought I could make it."

"Hey, you almost made it. I bet tomorrow you will go all the way."

He smiled at her. "Yeah."

Sachi tried to be as encouraging with Kazuto as she could. He was happy that she had permanently
dropped her fake drill sergeant act on the previous Sunday. It was because Suguha had taken the
act too far.

"Now lie flat on the mat, legs extended. I want to check your leg strength."

"Okay." He laid himself prone on the mat with his face looking up at the ceiling rafters.

Sachi kneeled and placed her hands over his right thigh, leaning in to hold it down using the weight
of her body.

"Now lift as hard as you can."

"Unnghh..."

"Okay, that's good. Stop."

Kazuto relaxed.

"Yes, there is definite improvement in your leg strength."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I'm proud of you."

She stood up. "You ready to take a break?"

He sat up. "Yeah, let's take 5."

Sachi walked to the bench to grab some bottled waters. She tossed one to Kazuto, who caught it
and opened it.

He drank deeply as she sat down next to him on the mat. Sachi splashed some of the water on her
face to cool down.

He is really progressing well. He'll be out of those steel arm canes fairly soon.

After five minutes she pulled him up and handed him the arm canes. "You think you can walk
another six laps today?"

"Yeah. Let's go for ten laps this time."

"Okay, if you think you are up to it. Just tell me before you collapse again."

"I will."
"Up." She lifted him up and handed him his arm canes, which he quickly put on. She lightly held his right arm as together they hobbled past the leg press, cardio machine, rings, and the free weights, to the start of the indoor running circle that started at the entrance of the dojo and went around the inner perimeter of the building.

She tied her own left leg to his right like they were competing in a three-legged race. "Remember, we're for going for distance, not time. Just let me know if your leg is going to give out before we tip over."

"Got it."

"Ready?"

He dropped the arm canes.

"Let's go."

Together they hobbled around the dojo. They moved together in sync at a walking speed. Sachi carefully judged how much support to give his right leg with her left leg at each step. After eight laps his right leg suddenly buckled.

It had happened enough times that she was more-or-less ready for it. As he fell towards her she rolled to take the fall so that she was underneath him for his protection. Even though she was mostly ready for his fall she still managed to bang her elbow on the hardwood floor.

"Ow, dang it. Kirito, I told you to warn me!"

He rolled off and sat up. "Sorry."

She untied the cloth strips. As she did so she grumbled, "If I didn't know you so well, I'd think you were doing this just to get physical with a girl."

He blushed slightly. "I said I'm sorry. Look, I'll try to give you some more warning next time."

"You better. This is becoming a bad habit."

She moved him to the mat, then jumped up and wiped the sweat off her forehead. As trotted away to fetch the arm canes and water bottles he watched her from behind.

When she trotted back she noticed that he was still looking at her. She grinned, "Hey, you managed to get a girl all sweaty again. Congrats."

"Very funny."

She sat next to him on the mat and handed him a water bottle. She looked at the clock. "It's getting late, let's call it a day."

He flopped back on the mat. "Let's. I'm wiped out."

"I'm beat too. You did really well."

She flopped on the mat next to him. There they rested in silence, looking up at the ceiling of the dojo, laying side-by-side, just like they did the day before.

And the day before that.
Sachi closed her eyes.

The plan is working.

If anything it is running ahead of schedule.

First step: Mental rehab.

Second step: Physical rehab.

Third step: ...

"Hey, Sachi?"

Sachi broke out of her silent reverie. "Yeah?"

She saw that his head was turned towards her. "Uh, can I ask you something?"

She sat up. "Like what?"

He sat up too. "Well, uh.."

"Go on."

"It's just that you've been doing so much for me, waiting on me hand-and-foot, feeding me, putting me to bed, cleaning my bedpans, doing all this PT rehab..."

She shook her head. "No, no. We've talked about this. I don't want anything in return."

"But.."

"No, and it's not just because I don't want anything, it's also because we..")

He finished her sentence. ".. are family now, yeah."

She smiled. "Yeah."

"Well, okay, right. So, if we are family now, can I ask you a question?"

"Like what?"

"Uhm, well, family shares things... personal things."

"Yeah, they do."

"You never talk about yourself. I heard some things from Mom and Sugu..."

She looked down. "Oh. I see."

"Look, if it's private you don't have to say anything."

"No, I understand. I'll answer any question you want."

"Oh? You will? Good, I'm glad. Okay, the thing is, well, I thought that, since we are now sweat-buddies and all..." He laughed. "What I really mean is that since we are family now, maybe you and I can, uh, you know.."
"You want me to open up with you a bit?"

He was clearly embarrassed. "Uh, yeah. Is that okay, Sachi?"

"It's perfectly fine. In fact, I've been waiting for you to ask me."

"Oh? You were? Waiting for me..?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Because I didn't want to burden you with my own problems. You were still busy dealing with your own personal issues. My plan was to get you mentally and physically back in shape first."

"Oh. Uh, I guess that makes sense. Sugu did tell me you had some kind of plan for me."

Yes, I do have a plan for you.

"Sachi, tell me about yourself."

"So, what do you want to know?"

"Tell me everything."

Third step: Sharing.

Sachi laid back down on the mat and crossed her legs while looking up at the ceiling.

"You ready? This might take a while."

He laughed, "We only have the rest of our lives."

She laughed too. Yes, we do.

She put her hands behind her head. "Well, as you know, my father abandoned my mother before I could remember. She became an alcoholic. When I was six she started to receive a monthly bank annuity, an inheritance that she got from a distant uncle. Her alcoholism got really bad after that. She quit work, then she sent me out on errands to buy groceries and stuff. She only went out herself when she had to, mostly to buy booze."

"So you were neglected as a child?"

"Honestly, I never felt like I was. And she never hit me, or abused me, or anything like that. She just basically left me alone while she was passed out in bed all day. I went to school on my own. The years passed, and then..."

An hour later Suguha poked her head in. "Hey you idiots, it's dinner time!"

They both sat up. Kazuto yelled, "We'll be right there!"

"Hurry up!" Suguha went back to the house.

Sachi smelled under her armpit. "Ugh, I stink." She pulled Kazuto up. She held her nose. "Ugh, you stink even worse."

He ignored her jibe and simply hugged her.
"Kirito..?"

"Sachi, I'm so sorry. I knew you had lived a hard life, but, wow, I didn't realize..."

"It's okay, really."

"No it isn't. I took you for granted."

"Nope. I focused on your recovery, that's all."

She gently stroked his back. "Do you know what you can do to make me happy? This. This makes me happy. Just being with you, helping you, it's all I want."

"Sachi.."

"It's fine. Like I said, I was going to tell you my life story when you I thought you were ready for it. Then I would wait until you asked me. Now you did."

He let go of his embrace. "I'm still so sorry.."

She smiled. "Hey, it's all in the past. Let's focus on the here and now. Okay?"

_I'm such an idiot. I should have asked her sooner. I had no idea her life was so miserable. No wonder she dived into SAO._

_How do I make it up to her?_

Then she grinned, "Race!"

"What?"

"First one to the house gets the bath before dinner!" She ran off to the house.

"Hey, no fair!" He hobbled after her.

That night he wasn't able to sleep. He stared up at the ceiling.

_I need to tell her._

On his own he had gone on the Internet and researched VRDPs: Mentally unstable, unpredictable, obsessive, sometimes with surprisingly strong or violent reactions to stress or negative stimuli.

_Is that true? I know the Internet isn't always accurate._

_For now let's assume it is true. Question: Is she obsessive? Yes, she is definitely obsessive about taking care of me. Assume that's a symptom. Sugu told me about her Cinderella act. That fits the profile too._

_And she always calls me 'Kirito' no matter how many times I ask her to stop. That's definitely not normal._

Yes, she definitely has some issues.

_The question is, is she doing all this purely out of a sense of duty to me? A sense of loyalty, to repay her perceived debt, all because she thinks she hurt me with that Christmas letter? If so I need to be really careful._
I bet she would do anything I ask.

Anything at all.

Even...

Ugh! No! Bad Kazuto!

So what are her own feelings? Her own secret wants?

I have to know before I can safely tell her about Asuna.

If Sachi is just being subservient to me only out of her sense of loyalty, duty, obligation, or whatever, and if it is nothing more than that, then she ought to be happy for me when I reveal my secret about Asuna.

She just wants me to be happy, yes? Finding Asuna would make me really happy, so she would naturally want that too, right? She might even feel relieved.

But what if she has her own private or secret feelings for me, wanting me, wanting me for herself?

She told me her life story and I still don't know her true feelings.

Does she even know herself?

And if she does harbor private feelings for me, how will she react when she finds out about Asuna?

It could be really bad.

I need to know!

Maybe I should test her?

But how?

It has to appear perfectly innocent.

Let me think..

Hmm, yeah. Let's try that.

November 19, 2024. Dojo.

Sachi wiped her brow. "Kirito, ready to walk six laps?"

"Yeah. Same as yesterday, we go for ten."

Sachi sighed, "Fine. But tell me before you crash this time."

"Right."

She tied his right leg to her left like they were in a three-legged race.

"Let's go."

Together they hobbled around the dojo. They moved together in sync at a walking speed. Sachi
carefully judged how much support to give his right leg with her left leg at each step. Just after completing seven laps his right leg suddenly buckled.

As he fell towards her she rolled to take the fall so that she was underneath him for his protection. She managed to avoid banging her elbow on the hardwood floor.

But this time he didn't immediately roll off of her.

He panted, "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"I'm glad."

Their bodies were still pressed together.

She waited.

Then she closed her eyes.

Kazuto rolled off her. "Sorry. Ouch, I think I bumped my head."

She jumped up. "You did!? Let me check."

She carefully inspected his head for bumps or contusions. "You look okay."

He rubbed the back of his head. "Yeah, I'm fine. Sorry."

She pulled him up. "Let's take a break. I'll get your canes and the waters."

He watched her as she trotted away.

She closed her eyes.

She was waiting for me.

But why?

Did she think I was testing her, that I was checking to see if she was willing to cross the line?

Well, I was.

If she had opened her lips, even slightly, I would know that she had her own private feelings for me.

But she didn't. She was just waiting.

Did she catch me testing her?

I think she did.

Dang it. I didn't learn anything.

He continued to watch her as she tossed him the water bottle.

At the end of the training session they both laid on the mats side by side, exhausted, just like they
did every day.

They both looked up at the ceiling.

Finally it was Sachi who turned her head and spoke.

"Kirito? Can I ask you a question?" She sat up.

_Ugh, she caught me. She knows._

_She's gonna ask why I was testing her._

_Crap, I'm going to have to explain about Asuna. I'm not ready!_

He sat up and was very nervous. "Uh, yeah, sure, ask away. Anything."

"Kirito, how come your friends only visit when I'm working at the hospital?"

Since S-F Day, Klein, Agil, and his other SAO friends had always visited Kazuto in the evening. The reason was that Kazuto had arranged to make sure the visits were always when Sachi was not around.

He thought quickly. "Well, you see, most of them either go to school or work during the day so the only time they can all visit me is during your evening shifts at the hospital."

"I see. I guess that makes sense. I was just wondering because I never get to see your friends."

"Sorry about that. I didn't know you wanted to meet them. They all gather regularly at the Dicey Cafe. Maybe when I'm finally rehabilitated we can go down there together and I can introduce you to the gang. I'm sure Sugu would like to come too."

"Yes, I would like that."

"Let's plan on it then."

_Good, that bought me some more time._

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**Friday, November 22, 2024**

Lt Colonel Seijirou Kikuoka was walking quickly down the hallway of MINFO headquarters wearing his JSDF military uniform. An assistant ran up to him and handed him a manila briefing folder as he entered his private office. He quickly sat down and read the new report.

After pouring through thousands of hours of video surveillance recordings from every airport and every seaport in Japan, Kayaba had finally been spotted leaving from Narita Airport on a Garuda Indonesian flight with a female companion. She was identified as one of his former graduate students. Kikuoka looked at the enhanced video surveillance photo, which showed Kayaba wearing a heavy coat, a wide brimmed Panama hat, and a false beard. The pair were spotted because his companion was not disguised.

The pair were seen disembarking from the flight at the Soekarno-Hatta International Airport in Jakarta. They then took a local flight to Balikpapan in Borneo.

There the trail ended. Beyond Balikpapan was a thousand square miles of nearly uninhabited rural semi-jungle with few roads, fewer amenities, and no data connections whatsoever.
All signs pointed the same way: Kayaba was going off the grid. He had taken out of SAO whatever it was that he wanted, and was going to play with his new toy by himself in the middle of nowhere. Allowing himself to be tracked to Borneo was his way of saying that he wasn't going to be a threat to anyone and that he was done with the outside world.

But Kikuoka was not done with him. Inspector Javert grit his teeth and his face darkened.

He picked up his phone.

"Get me a plane ticket to Indonesia."

---

**Sunday, November 24, 2024**

Suguha wearily climbed down the steps and stumbled into the kitchen half awake. She was still wearing her pajamas. Sachi had already left to go buy groceries. Kazuto was still crashed upstairs in bed recovering from the previous day's PT workout.

Midori was sitting in the breakfast nook enjoying a coffee while watching a video on her tablet. Suguha tried to ignore the audio as she searched the refrigerator to try to find the leftover KFC from yesterday's dinner.

A man was speaking. "The Hubble Ultra Deep Field** image is incredibly important. When NASA aimed the world's most powerful telescope at an empty patch of sky the size of a grain of sand at arm's length, a patch that seemed utterly empty and devoid of any stars or galaxies or anything else, it captured an image of over 10,000 galaxies, each with hundreds of billions of stars. That image should be physically impossible."

A woman, possibly the interviewer, asked, "How do you mean 'impossible'?"

Suguha poked her head deep inside the refrigerator.

"Where is that leftover KFC?"

"Well, you have to understand the mathematics of it. It has to do with something called the alpha opacity function, a concept familiar to video game designers. In a 3-D video game, every object or texel is assigned an RGBA value: red, green, blue, alpha. The alpha value determines the the opacity of that the object or texel at that point. This determines its transparency: 0.0 is fully transparent, and 1.0 is fully opaque, typically scaled on integral values from 0 to 255. Video games are of course discrete, not continuous, simulations and therefore the RGBA values either quickly saturate - go to 1.0 - or remain at 0.0, nothing in-between.

"You see, achieving partial transparency that doesn't enfog the player is incredibly hard, and many video game designers simply cheat and create a fake fog that kicks in at a fixed distance. Creating a 3-D simulation over unimaginable distances while still revealing interesting objects at those distances is practically impossible."

"So you're saying it is probably not random."

"Ah, there is the chicken bucket."

"The opacity gradient has to be inconceivably precise to be able to see such interesting details on literally the far side of the universe. For it to be merely random would be like hitting the Power Ball Jackpot. And you can't hand-wave it away with the Anthropic Principle either."
"So, in your opinion, the fact that we can see all those lovely swirling galaxies is not a coincidence?"

"No, it is not. And they shouldn't be 'swirling' either."

*Hey, who ate all the drumsticks?*

"How do you mean?"

"The pinwheel structure of a galaxy is mathematically impossible. Spiral galaxies simply shouldn't exist. Computational physicists have tried for decades to create computer simulations that would create a long-term pinwheel structure of a typical spiral galaxy and it just doesn't work, at least not without cheating. It always smears into a blob."

Suguha rolled her eyes while trying to ignore the audio.

*Everyone in this house is a geek. Mom, Kazuto, Sachi. Why am I the only normal one?*

"Then dark matter (DM) was discovered. Why does dark matter exist? There's no reason for it. It definitely exists - gravitational lensing reveals it everywhere in the cosmos - but there's nothing in the Standard Model that explains it. It's just there. But why? It's only use seems to be for creating interesting structures like beautiful pinwheel galaxies that we can actually see at cosmological distances."

"But why is it like that?"

Suguha sat on a chair at the breakfast nook and ate a cold chicken breast with her fingers.

The man's voice was getting excited. "Exactly! Don't you see what this means? The Hubble Ultra Deep Field is the 'smoking gun', so to speak. The fact that miraculous photo exists, that the Universe seems to be carefully crafted so that we as humans can actually see all these amazing, beautiful, and glorious galaxies by the billions, strongly implies that someone or something..."

Suguha rolled her eyes.

*You want to see a miracle?*

Suguha picked up another piece of cold chicken as she tried to tune out the annoying video, which Midori continued to watch with keen interest.

".. and then there is dark energy (DE). Now that is really exciting too. I think the reason it exists is because it creates conditions for..."

*The miracle is how my geek mother ever managed to marry a normal guy and make babies.*

Suguha dug into the chicken wing.

---

*Sunday, December 1, 2024*

Sachi was sitting on a bench in the dojo watching Kazuto practice kendo with Suguha.

Kazuto was standing at attention holding a wooden bamboo *shinai*.

He was now able to walk unassisted, although he was still not yet able to go long distances. Sachi had suggested the idea that they practice kendo together, saying that Kazuto was now ready for
more advanced physical training. Both siblings agreed it was a great idea and Suguha ran to get her gear. Suguha had finished in the top ten at the last national competition for middle schoolers. It was her passion and she loved it.

Suguha stood facing him. Both were wearing a face mask with a keikogi shirt over a hakama skirt. Sachi stood and moved between the combatants. They bowed formally at each other.

Sachi yelled, "Hai!" and quickly stepped away.

She saw Kazuto immediately assume the stance that she had seen him use so many times in their shared battles in SAO: He moved his left foot forward, right back, and he held his shinai low with his right hand with his left capped against the hilt.

Suguha stopped and stared at him. "Kazuto, what the heck are you doing?"

"Hey, this is my own personal style."

Suguha shook her head in disbelief. In keeping his shinai low like that he had left his head wide open and unprotected. She was about ready to charge with a one-shot killing blow, but something about his demeanor stopped her. He seemed to be supremely confident and relaxed despite the weird pose, as if he had been doing it for years.

She was still wondering about it when Kazuto suddenly charged, sliding low and bringing his weapon up. He wasn't particularly fast but the motion had surprised her. She dodged and returned the attack but missed him. He was surprisingly limber with his unorthodox moves.

Kazuto swung behind her and attacked again, but missed as Suguha rotated away. It was close. The only thing that saved Suguha from Kazuto's sneak attack was her reflexes and her instincts.

She was now angry, and she decided not to hold back and she charged at him. Kazuto tried to do a sharp turn to avoid her attack, but his bad leg threw him off balance. She took advantage of it, using her shinai to whack him with full force right on the top of his head.

Kazuto crumpled to the floor. Sachi jumped up and ran to him, yelling "Stop!"

Suguha gasped and knelt down to him. "Kazuto! Are you okay?"

He sat up seeing stars. Sachi pulled off his mask and checked his head for signs on injury.

"That smarts." He looked at Sugu. "Wow, Heathcliff has nothing on you."

Sachi checked him. "You seem okay." She sounded contrite. "It was too soon to try this. I shouldn't have suggested it."

"Eh, it was fun."

"Kirito, you need at least a couple more weeks to build up your leg strength before you try that again."

Kazuto sighed, "Yeah, you're probably right." He pulled off the gear.

Suguha picked up his mask and offered it to Sachi. "You want to try it?"

Sachi shook her head. "No, I couldn't. Not after what happened.. you know." After dying in ALO she had told Suguha that she never wanted to hold a weapon ever again.
"C'mon. It's fun. It's not serious. It's just a bamboo stick."

"I'd rather not..."

Suguha decided to tease her. "Well, you are a smart girl. I mean, if you had actually fought me I'd kick your ass to Mars. I can understand why you're such a coward."

That got Sachi's hackles up. She stood up.

"Oh really now?"

Suguha shrugged nonchalantly, "Of course. What can I say? You would be pathetic. A total noob."

Sachi crossed her arms. "Want to make it interesting?"

"Hmm?"

"Help me practice, and train me after school until you think I'm ready, then..."

Kazuto ham-handedly tried to intervene. "Now, ladies, please."

Both girls whirled and yelled, "Shut up!"

Suguha turned back to face Sachi again. "And then?"

"We do a match. The loser cleans Yaya's litter box every day... until school ends in April."

"Oh, you are beyond evil."

_Yow. They are taking it up to another level._

Both girls grinned evilly at each other. Kazuto watched in shocked disbelief at the mutual staring contest.

Suguha kept her stare. "Deal."

Sachi bent over and donned Kazuto's gear and picked up the pole.

Kazuto asked, "Uh, so what should I do in the meantime..?"

Sachi turned, "Go away. We're busy here."

"Yeah, get lost."

"Sheesh." He left.

The days passed. Sachi continued her evening rounds at the hospital, spending most of her time tending to the sleepers in the main wards.

She was unable to look in on Asuna very much. It was because she was not assigned to that floor. She had tried to submit a request to be reassigned to the 18th floor, but it was denied with no explanation.

One day she saw one of the permanent staff wheel an SAO patient out of the main wards. She was curious, so she followed him. She saw that he was headed toward one of the red restricted areas.
She walked alongside the orderly. "Where are you taking him?"

He frowned at her. "Research."

"Oh I see. What kind of research?"

"None of your business." He swiped his red keycard at the red hallway doors and pushed the medical bed inside. The red doors closed behind him.

Sachi shrugged off his rude behavior. As a VRDP she was used to it.

Friday, December 20, 2024. 7:05 a.m.

Suguha ran huffing and puffing back to the house. She had forgotten her homework assignment. She figured that if she ran fast enough that she might still be able to catch the 7:20 train at the Saitama Omiya station and still make it to school only about 15 minutes late.

Suguha zoomed upstairs and flung her bedroom door open. There she saw Sachi next to her futon on her knees looking at the floor. She had no time to ask Sachi what she was looking for and just yelled, "Homework! Homework!"

"Next to your computer."

Suguha grabbed her notebook and stuffed it into her backpack. "Why didn't you say anything? You could have at least texted me!"

"I was still sleeping and I didn't know you needed it."

"Gah!"

Sunday, December 22, 2024

The four members of the Kirigaya family were assembled in the dojo for the big match. Midori and Kazuto were standing on the sideline cheering along the combatants. By mutual agreement Midori was rooting for Suguha and Kazuto was rooting for Sachi.

Midori yelled, "Sugu, you can do it!"

Kazuto whooped, "Sachi, let her have it!"

The match had been going for several minutes. Kazuto marvelled at Sachi's speed and reflexes. Suguha was physically larger and stronger, and with her powerful legs she was faster than Sachi when charging in a straight line. Sachi did not have Suguha's raw speed, but with her smaller size she could zip and twist and fly around her opponent like a falcon, scoring hits from behind, flying away before Suguha could strike back.

Kazuto was amazed at Sachi's skill. Suguha was forced on the defensive, crouching, backing away, trying to find an opportunity to lunge with a decisive blow.

_Sachi is amazing. I would love to see her fight Asuna in a VRMMO. The Falcon versus The Flash._

Suguha had changed tactics, going on the defensive, doing feints, causing Sachi to dodge and twist. They were both getting tired, but Suguha had more stamina.
Suguha exploited it. She forced Sachi to expend more energy, wearing herself out sooner.

Suguha's tactics were working. Sachi was slowing down. Eventually Suguha was able to score a killing blow to Sachi's neck. Sachi staggered and fell to her knees.

Suguha pulled off her mask. "I win."

The battle was over. Midori and Kazuto ran down to the fighting duo, with Midori hugging Suguha and Kazuto hugging Sachi.

Kazuto whispered in Sachi's ear. "You were awesome."

Sachi was exhausted and could barely stand. "Four months of litter duty..."

Kazuto offered, "Hey, I'll help you do it."

Sachi pushed him away and managed to stand straight despite her exhaustion, tall and proud.

"No. I am a warrior. It is my burden. I will bear it alone."

Kazuto grinned at Sachi. He had never seen this side of her before. He had no idea she loved being so competitive.

Even though the match was all in good fun, he thought that if Sachi ever fought a serious battle like that inside a VRMMO game - without SAO's levelling-up system which unfairly artificially boosted abilities and skills - that her unique fighting style would make her a formidable opponent.

*The Falcon versus The Flash? I could never match Asuna's speed or her accuracy in battle. It would be a fast and exciting fight - offense versus offense - but Asuna has more raw power so she should win.*

*The Falcon versus The Black Swordsman? I'm pretty sure I could beat her. I would have to use Sugu's tactics though. It would be a slow, difficult, grinding battle, but ultimately I think I could wear her down.*

*But what if Sachi had more energy than me? More endurance? Heh, I would be screwed.*

The foursome returned to the house. Midori wrapped her arm around her step-son as they watched Suguha and Sachi walk ahead of them. The two girls were laughing, poking each other, shoving each other's shoulders, and generally acting like a pair of unruly five year olds.

Together, mother and step-son watched the two step-sisters tussle back and forth.

Midori spoke quietly.

"You know what?"

Kazuto turned his head.

"Know what, Mom?"

"We really are a family."

Kazuto smiled.
"Yeah."

A/N:

* See LN Vol 3.

** See The Hubble Ultra Deep Field in 3D by Deep Astronomy on YouTube.
Truthful Revelations

Monday, December 23, 2024. Early evening.

Kazuto was sitting on a stool at the kitchen nook next to Suguha. Laid out on the counter in front of them were several math worksheets, a spiral notebook, and an open math textbook.

Suguha threw down her pencil in disgust. "I give up. I'll never pass this test."

The pencil began to roll off the counter top as Kazuto leaned over to grab it. "Sugu, it's easy."

He scooped up the pencil and began to write with it in her notebook. "Watch me. When you have an improper fraction like that you simply need to factor out the whole number and remove it from the fraction. Reduce the fraction like this so that remaining numerator is smaller than the denominator..."

Suguha snuck a peek at her step-brother as he wrote.

What a geek. He actually enjoys this stuff.

Ah, the joy of proper fractions.

He was now leaning in close to her as he wrote. In response Suguha leaned in too, pretending to want to get a closer look at Kazuto's writing. Their shoulders were now touching.

She started to daydream.

I should take him out somewhere. Just the two of us.

But where?

Shopping at Cocoon City maybe?

Oh yeah. He desperately needs new clothes.

Her head remained propped on her hands as her mind continued to drift.

We'll go out together, just Kazuto and me. We'll go out on a nice quiet evening when that girl isn't around.

His leg is still too weak to walk long distances, so I'll offer to push his wheelchair. Hmm, maybe if he has trouble trying on clothes I should offer to help him in the changing room?

Oh, that's too embarrassing!

Maybe if...

Eventually Kazuto saw the dreamy look on her face. He stopped talking.

"Hey, Sugu, you paying attention over there?"

She sat up. "Uh, yeah. The joy of fractions. Keep going."

This is so perfect.

"...then you need to remove the whole part of the fraction. The way you do this is by reducing the numerator..."

Being together like this, mmm.

I should tell him.*

"... so that by the reducing the numerator by the correct number of multiples of the denominator it becomes less than the denominator..."

Yes, this is perfect. Except for her. If only...

Kazuto had stopped talking again.

Suguha suddenly realized that he had caught her spacing out again. She quickly pretended to carefully study the worksheet. This time Kazuto wasn't buying it.

He put down his pencil. "Sugu, what's with you? You haven't heard a word I said."

"Oh sorry."

He swiveled on the stool to face her. "Something on your mind?"

She sat up and looked at him guiltily, then she turned her face away. "Nothing, really."

He knew her better than that. "C'mon, tell me." He waited.

"Well, uh..."

"You've been floating on cloud nine all day."

"I have? I guess so."

"So what is it?"

"I'm just happy, that's all."

"Happy?"

"I guess I'm really jazzed because... well... because of."

"Because?"

She said quietly, "Of you."

"Because I'm back?"

She said shyly, "Uh huh."

"I'm glad. You know, I missed you."

"I missed you too."

Suguha was looking at him with a bashful smile.
She's doing it again.

She had given him that coy and shy smile several times since he had awakened. At first Kazuto thought nothing of it, but she had done it enough times now that it was starting to bother him.

He was feeling uncomfortable, so he tried to change the subject.

He rubbed his shoulder. "The recovery sucks though. All that PT, the strength exercises, it's a killer."

"Well, I think it's paying off. You look absolutely great."

"I do? Thanks, Sugu. Sachi says I'm doing really well with the workouts."

Suguha's face fell and she turned away. "She did? Oh, that's nice."

He crossed his arms. "My, do I detect a hint of jealousy there?"

She glared at him. "That's ridiculous. Why should I be jealous?"

He joked, "I dunno, maybe because I get to be all hot and sweaty with her every day in the dojo? Heh."

"That's not funny!"

He got serious. "Look, Sugu, I understand. We spend hours doing PT every day together. Meanwhile you're stuck at school so we don't get nearly as much face time. I get it."

"I am not jealous!"

He leaned back in the chair. "Wow, she is really bent out of shape about it."

"Honestly, Sugu, you have nothing to worry about."

Suguha looked at him suspiciously. "Then why does Sachi still keep a private key to your bedroom?"

"Huh? No idea." He started to chuckle. "You think she's going to try to crawl into bed with me?"

"What? Of... of course not!"

"Ah, I know why. She's trying to keep you from sneaking in."

"Oh, just stop it!"

He looked at her. She was genuinely upset.

"Sugu, this is really bugging you. Why?"

Suguha started to fidget. "Uh, I dunno... maybe... maybe it's because I still don't trust her. With you."

"Seriously? After all this time?"

She glanced around. Midori was due to come home from work any minute. Sachi had already left for her hospital shift.
Finally she said quietly, "No, I don't."

Kazuto was perplexed. "C'mon. You don't have to worry about us."

Suguha leaned forward in earnest. "Kazuto, she's obsessed with taking care of you. And she's so sweet, and caring, and pretty and... and ..."

"Sugu?"

She whispered, "How can you not.. you know.. with someone like her?"

"You mean fall for her?"

She fidgeted again. "Uh huh."

Kazuto became thoughtful.

"I see."

*Sugu is right. If it wasn't for Asuna, would I have fallen for Sachi?*

*Sachi really is nice, caring, smart, pretty..*

*And on the mat she had closed her eyes.*

*She was waiting.*

*She was waiting for me.*

*Was I tempted?*

*I mean, man, heh, that was like the start of every teenage boy's fantasy ever: Eye closed followed by a kiss, going deeper, hands moving, her letting me take her..*

*Ugh, Stop it! Stop thinking like that!*

*Think of baseball! Dirty gym socks! Yaya's litter box!*

*Asuna, I'm being tested.*

Suguha poked him. "Hey, you listening?"

Kazuto blinked his eyes. "Uh, say that again?"

"I said, back when you were still in the hospital Mom had you two practically betrothed like she had your wedding all planned out already."

"That sounds like Mom, heh."

"I'm glad she stopped doing that after Sachi moved in. But the point is, Sachi has a long-term plan for you. She told me that. She was busy creating it in her head the whole time she was sitting watching you in the hospital."

"I know: Her LPN training, my mental rehab, my physical rehab.."

"Yeah, and what's next on her agenda? What if the next step in her plan is for her to work on your feelings? To get you to.. you know..?"
He scoffed, "That's ridiculous. She would never manipulate me like that."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I am! She doesn't have a selfish bone in her body. She just wants to take care of me, that's all. And she doesn't want to receive anything in return."

Kazuto was shading the truth a bit. He never saw any indication that Sachi had any kind of ulterior motive, but he had to admit that he still wasn't 100% sure.

Sugu bounced in her chair. "But don't you see? That's not normal. Nobody is that selfless! It has to be a trick!"

Kazuto tried to reassure her. "Sugu, you need to relax. You don't have to worry. And even if Sachi tried to manipulate me, it will never work. I don't have those kind of feelings for her. I really don't."

"You don't?"

"No, I don't."

"Good."

She smiled shyly at him. "I just want you to be careful around her, that's all."

"Hey, I get it. You're just watching out for me. Being protective of your big bro."

Suguha rolled her shoulders and looked down.

"Maybe I am. Sorry if I'm being weird."

"No, I'm glad you looking out for me."

Then he smiled at her. "Thanks, Sugu."

On a whim he mussed up her hair.

She giggled, "Hey!"

"I think it's neat that I have such a great sister. You're pretty cool."

She looked up at him.

Again she gave him that shy smile that was both bashful and coy.

"I think you're cool too."

After a moment they both looked away. An awkward silence followed.

Finally he yawned.

"I'm tired."

She yawned too. "Me too."

He rubbed his eyes. "Let's take a break?"

"Good idea."
Kazuto jumped off the high chair and padded over to the fridge to grab a can of soda. He opened it as he entered the living room and sat on the couch. Suguha grabbed a second can of soda and sat close next to him. It was time for the news so he pointed the remote at the TV and turned it to NHK.

A man was speaking on camera. The text at the bottom of the screen read, "Remaining SAO Families".

"Hey, check it out." Kazuto turned up the volume.

A politician was standing at a lectern in front of several anxious looking people. A text caption appeared underneath his image, Diet Member Morita Ueda.

"... standing behind me are representatives of the 300 remaining families, many of whom live in my district, whose loved ones are still trapped inside of SAO to this very day. This sad fact was only acknowledged by the government publicly yesterday, after weeks of refusing to answer questions from the news media, from the public, and from the National Diet. It is an established fact that the government has deliberately suppressed until now any information regarding the status of the remaining victims, or even that they existed. It is for this reason that I speak on behalf of the remaining families who have been stonewalled..."

Morita Ueda was a leader of one of the major opposition factions in the National Diet. The fact that he was an ambitious politician who had an eye on reaching higher public office was well known. "This unconscionable delay was no doubt a failed attempt by the current administration to hide their embarrassment in allowing this terrible tragedy to continue. Therefore we demand that..."

Midori entered through the front door. She was wearing a business pantsuit and carrying her laptop case. She looked tired.

"... and so my committee in the National Diet will continue to press for an investigation of the current administration's irresponsible failure to...

Midori went to the kitchen and grabbed a can of ice tea from the refrigerator, then she sat next to Suguha. Ueda was still talking on the TV screen.

Kazuto turned down the TV volume. "Mom, you look bushed."

Midori took a sip of cold tea. She sighed, "It was one of those days. Endless phone calls, meetings. I didn't get any article writing done at all."

She gestured with her can of tea at the TV screen. "That's why."

Kazuto sat up and looked at the TV. "Really? How come?"

She explained, "Yesterday the government lifted the media gag order about the remaining players who are still stuck inside of SAO. The government had no choice, really. Too many families were loudly complaining to keep it a secret any longer. My publisher and I have been wrangling with the Ministry of Information to try to get permission to write about it for weeks, the tech angle."

"The tech angle?"

"There are so many questions. Why did some of the NerveGear helmets fail to release their owners? Why are five percent of the players still stuck inside SAO? Is the Argus building still guarded with booby traps, or are the mainframes accessible now? And if they are, what is the government doing to try to rescue the remaining victims?"
Kazuto nodded. These were questions that he wanted to ask too. The day after he awoke Kazuto had been perfunctorily debriefed by a harried and nameless MINFO official. The official would not answer any of Kazuto's own questions about Asuna, and he was angry that he had to learn about Asuna through backchannels. It was for that reason that Kazuto had refused to sign any non-disclosure agreements with the government. He had no compunctions about later telling his mother about his dreamlike experience in meeting Kayaba in the clouds and talking with him.

His mother smiled as she recalled his disclosure. "I've been sitting for weeks on your big scoop, that Kayaba had destroyed Aincrad and that he didn't know about the remaining five percent. However, my publisher has been really nervous about printing it, legal-wise, so we sat on it. Yesterday the government dropped the media blackout order but I'm still going to report that the scoop came from an anonymous source. Partly it's because your name is still being redacted by the government, but the real reason is because I don't want a bunch of press reporters laying siege to our home."

Kazuto nodded again. That would be the last thing he wanted too.

She added, "Also, it would be a bit awkward for me to reveal that the source for my big news scoop was my own son."

"Yeah, I can see that."

She went on with her explanation. "This afternoon my publisher and I had another long conference call with the Argus caretaker team about the story I wanted to write. The negotiations were unexpectedly difficult."

"Caretaker team?"

"RECT Progress, the company that bought most of the assets of Argus at auction."

Midori explained that in 2023, after Argus was sued out of existence by the flood of lawsuits that were filed on behalf of the victims' families, the assets of the company were auctioned off by the courts to pay the damage claims, including the computer mainframes in the basement of the Argus building that were running SAO. Most of the assets were scooped up in bid by a competing VRMMO company named RECT Progress, a wholly owned subsidiary of RECT Ltd.

The Argus servers had been running non-stop 24 hours a day since 2022, and they needed significant maintenance and refurbishment. Nobody else wanted them. It was not only because they were old, but also because they were untouchable until the SAO victims were released. For this reason RECT Progress was able to grab the servers with a lowball bid.

The asset purchase also gave RECT the ownership rights to SAO's base application software layer, called the Cardinal System. It was believed that RECT could not exploit their new software assets until they could gain access to the Argus building and download the source code. However, less two months after the auction, RECT had announced their own competing VRMMO system that was based on Kayaba's original basic design.

Experts in the IT community had wondered about this. There was speculation that RECT Progress might have had some prior backroom dealings with Argus in the past, but nothing was certain.

RECT's marketing department then heavily promoted their new VRMMO in several advertisements, highlighting the fact that it was based on SAO with several new built-in safety features. Given the fact that nobody had actually died in that game, the ads drew a lot of attention. SAO was quite popular with the gaming community, with many wishing they could join the
adventure. The ads hinted that this was the next best thing.

"Our publisher is negotiating with RECT to do a big feature cover article on their new Full Dive Environment. RECT wants us to highlight the new safety features in their gear and basically give them a bunch of free publicity for their VRMMO. In return we want the scuttlebutt on what's going on with the Argus servers and the remaining sleepers."

Kazuto asked, "What have you found out so far?"

"I am afraid not much. There's a rumor that the security barriers around the Argus building went down on S-F Day, but no one will confirm it. The building is still cordoned off. Since RECT now owns the servers you would think they should know, right? But our negotiations with RECT have been really difficult. They kept citing government restrictions and would not tell us anything."

Suguha announced she was hungry and left for the kitchen.

Midori smiled at her daughter and then went on with her explanation. "As I said, the government gag order was dropped yesterday, so my publisher and I have been busy on a conference call with RECT all afternoon trying to hammer out an agreement for a major article. We are promising them a big cover splash page featuring their Full Dive gaming system in exchange for some tidbits on what's happening with the remaining SAO sleepers."

She sighed, "I don't know why they are still being so obstinate. My publisher finally had to end the conference call, telling the head of RECT Progress that there would be no feature article unless he reconsidered his position and revealed something to us about what's happening with SAO."

Kazuto thought, "Hmm, you would think they would want all that free publicity. Why won't they talk about it?"

"I don't know. It's a pity. With Kayaba gone the head of RECT Progress is probably world's foremost expert on Full Dive Environments. I would love to get an interview with him. An exclusive interview like that combined with what you told me about Kayaba would be a huge scoop."

"So why are they being so tight-lipped about it?"

"I'm guessing that RECT might be getting some heat from somewhere inside the government to keep it quiet, possibly for political reasons, even though the SAO Glitch is not officially a secret anymore."

"Well, if you get that interview I want to be the first to know. I gotta find out what happened to Asuna."

"Of course dear. I'm so sorry about your friend." She sighed, "Right now the SAO Glitch is the number one topic on the IT boards. All the experts want to find out what is going on. What we need now is more information."

She tried to reassure her step-son. "Don't worry. If I can find out what happened to your friend, I will."

"Thanks, Mom."

They both turned back to watch the news conference on the TV.
Wednesday, January 1, 2025, 12:15 p.m.

Sachi picked up a lunch tray as she entered the hospital cafeteria. She was working a double shift because of the holiday. The cafeteria was crowded, with many family visitors taking advantage of the time off from work and school to see their loved ones.

She found an empty table and sat with her tray. There were open seats available at the tables occupied by the other staff members, but she did not try to sit with them. With her VRDP status she knew the others would be put off if she had the temerity to sit close to them.

As she sat Sachi saw Nurse Kurosawa roll in. Kurosawa collected her tray and looked around. Sachi tried to remain inconspicuous but Kurosawa had spotted her sitting by herself, so she rolled over to greet her.

"Hello, Ms. Watanabe. Do you mind if I join you for lunch?"

Sachi was nervous. She stood up.

"Not at all, ma'am. Yes, please sit with me."

Sachi cringed at her dumb remark. "I mean not sit! I mean yes!"

From her seat in her wheelchair, Kurosawa looked up pleasantly at the nervous girl. She saw that Sachi was wearing a pleated skirt below a pink sweater and a white blouse underneath. On her cuffs were small brass cufflinks in the shape of intersecting half-ellipses. Around her neck was lanyard with her photo ID and green keycard. The keycard was the same color as Nurse Kurosawa's.

"It's quite all right, dear, think nothing of it. Sit down and enjoy your food."

Sachi did as she was told. Meanwhile Kurosawa unfolded her napkin and gestured at the large picture window near their table. "Just look at that. Isn't it marvelous?"

Sachi looked out at the scenic vista. In the distance she could see a pair of billowy cumulus clouds just kissing the top of the cone of Mount Fuji. Above it the higher cirrus clouds slowly swung their horse tails in the sky. Viridescent forests climbed up the foothills of the great dormant volcano, met by pure mountain streams that flowed down and fed them from the melting snow pack. The streams merged into a meandering river that shined with silvery sparkles as it lazily flowed away to the horizon.

Kurosawa leaned in and confided, "I love the view from here. It is even more glorious at night when the moon and the stars shine over it. Truly breathtaking. It's almost as if someone or something is showing off their handiwork, don't you think?"

"Yes, it is quite beautiful."

Kurosawa broke apart her chopsticks. She smiled indulgently while Sachi nervously looked down at her plate. "I tell you what, Ms. Watanabe. Why don't you and I dispense with formalities. At this table we are just friends having a nice little chat. Is that all right with you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You can call me Akira if you like."

Sachi shook head head. "Oh no, I couldn't do that. It wouldn't be right."
"May I at least call you Sachi?"

Sachi nodded. "Yes, ma'am. Please, call me anything you like."

Kurosawa smiled again pleasantly. Previously she had read Sachi’s government file, including her medical history. It was mostly un-redacted except for the parts pertaining to her interactions with Kirito.

Kurosawa asked offhandedly, "So, I am told that you are living with the Kirigaya family now?"

Sachi nodded. "Yes. The Kirigayas took me in after my mother was institutionalized. It was very kind of them."

"I am sure it was."

Sachi unfolded her napkin. "I would like to again apologize for taking Kirito to see his friend without your permission."

"Oh, you can forget about that. Now that I understand the situation I can see why you did that for him. Honestly, if I was in your shoes I would have done it too."

Sachi looked down. "No, I shouldn't have done it. It hurt Kirito terribly."

"Pshaw. You shouldn't blame yourself. You didn't know."

Sachi leaned forward. "Oh, but I did. That's why I feel so bad about it."

"You do?"

"Yes. The same thing happened with him and me. I should have anticipated it."

Kurosawa paused. She said carefully, "So how are you two dealing with the, uh, situation?"

Sachi said cheerfully, "We are getting along quite well. I am helping him with his daily PT and strength exercises."

"That sounds wonderful." Kurosawa now realized that the girl still did not know about Asuna. She decided that it was better to not pry any further.

Kurosawa picked up a rice omelette and bit into it. She said idly, "So, how do you like working here at Tokorozawa?"

Sachi replied, "It's fine. It's pretty much the same as where I worked before."

"I see." Kurosawa then added dryly, "By 'the same' I assume you mean they are ostracizing you here just like they did there."

Sachi sat up. "Oh, uh..."

Kurosawa sighed. The few deliberate snubs that Kurosawa had spotted she had dealt with personally, but the prejudice against VRDPs ran deep. Sachi herself never reported anything, and Kurosawa did not press her.

Kurosawa said cheerfully, "You know, they give me the same treatment, actually."

Sachi was surprised. "They do?"
"It's just a bit more circumspect."
Sachi smiled. "You do seem to be a nice person."

"Why, thank you. I think the same of you."

Kurosawa picked up some rice in her chopsticks and mused while looking at it, "It's just the way people are."
Sachi admitted that was true.

"I must say you're dealing with it very well. Few VRDPs have volunteered to work in the wards like you have. None have lasted more than a couple weeks."
Sachi understood. Few could weather such withering scorn and rejection.
Kurosawa confided, "I read your full file, so I know how difficult it's been for you."
That surprised Sachi. "You have?"

"Yes. Oh, I am sorry if you think I invaded your privacy."

"No, I don't mind you reading my file. You're my superior, after all. It's just that if.. if you know.."
Kurosawa said sympathetically, "You've had a difficult life. I understand."
Sachi looked down. "It's been hard."

She looked up again. "I just don't get any of it."
Kurosawa correctly guessed the reason for her remark. "You are thinking, 'I didn't do anything wrong.'"
Sachi was becoming upset. "That's just it. I didn't."
Kurosawa said indulgently, "It's all right. Feel free to vent all you want."

"Then please, explain it to me. I try to be a good person. Why did all these bad things happen to me?"

"Fair enough question." She glanced down at her wheelchair. "I admit it's one I've sometimes asked myself."

"Then please, tell me why?"
Kurosawa put down her chopsticks. "Hmm, all right, let me think a bit."

She thought a moment. "Well, first recognize that you are not alone when you ask that question. I lost my own mother when I was six. Like you, she was my only family. After that I spent years in a so-called 'orphanage'. It was horrible. Then I was lucky enough to be taken in by a large foster family, something that happens to very few children in our country."
She chuckled at the memory, "We were a wild bunch."

Sachi wondered if she might have a relative who worked at MINFO but decided that now was not the right time to ask.
Kurosawa went on. "Anyway, later I ended up in this chair, a hit and run driver. I looked back on my sad life and asked myself the same question that you just did, the same question that has been asked by men and women from the beginning: Why does God allow so much suffering in this world? Even to good people? Why does He allow accidents, illnesses, natural disasters?"

Sachi leaned forward. "Yes, why? I want to know."

Kurosawa leaned back. "Well, the truth is, I don't have a fully satisfactory answer for you."

Sachi looked a bit disappointed.

"But I tell you what, I will try to answer your question the best I can, is that all right?"

"Yes, thank you ma'am. I appreciate it."

"Hmm. Let me think a bit more..."

Sachi waited.

"Here it goes. Now, please understand that this is only my personal view on the subject. Don't take my word as gospel."

"Of course, ma'am. I understand."

"Well, let me see. First of all, let me ask you a question: Assuming there is no God, what kind of world you would like there to be? Would you like a world that was a utopia where there was no pain, no labor, no hills to climb? Nothing to accomplish? No obstacles? No challenges?"

"Well, uh.. no.."

"Now, pick any human trait or quality that you admire."

"Uhm, courage."

"Courage only exists in the face of adversity. Whether it be war, serious health issues, or a threat to oneself or another. In a utopia there would be no need for courage. Now pick another."

"Compassion."

"Compassion only exists where another is in pain or in need. Otherwise there would be no need for sympathy, no empathy. Or how about healing? Healing can only exist where there is sickness or injury. We can keep doing this endlessly. Sachi, don't you see? No good quality of mankind can exist without suffering in the world. We have to understand and accept this."

"I see. I have heard this is a basic Buddhist teaching."

"Indeed. It is one of Buddhism's most central concepts, called dukkha. The Buddhist's response to suffering is basically, 'Yes, life sucks and then you die. So deal with it.' This is why Buddhism teaches that we ought to detach ourselves from worldly desires in favor of spiritual ones. I do respect Buddhism in that regard, but as a Christian I know there is far more to it than that.

"You see, I believe we suffer because we live in a fallen world, one caused by our deliberate and willful separation and rebellion apart from Him. It is also why I believe that it is through this suffering that we will be ultimately be reconciled with Him. You can categorize the kinds of suffering that we endure into three different types, what I call 'The Three Cs'."
"The three Cs?"

"Yes. Corrective, constructive, and controlling."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Well, can you guess the meaning of the first one, corrective?"

Sachi tried to think. "By 'corrective' I assume that you are mean to the bad things that can happen to us because we did something wrong."

"That's right. I am referring to the bad things that can happen to us as a direct consequence of our own willful, negligent, or foolish actions. Things that are our own fault. For example, when a chain smoker gets lung cancer. Or when a driver doesn't wear his seat-belt and flies through a windshield. It is our own fault that these bad things happen."

"I think I get it. And the second, constructive?"

"These are the bad things that happen in your life that temper or mold your character, that change you, that make you a wiser or a better person for it." Kurosawa looked at Sachi sympathetically. "It happens to all of us, and it includes even things that actually kill your body, even though the Lord will never put you in a situation beyond what your spirit can bear."

"I think I understand." Then Sachi took a chance and said, "And it includes the reason why you are sitting in that wheelchair."

"Yes, my, that's rather perceptive of you." Kurosawa started eating again.

Sachi leaned forward and asked. "But ma'am, I'm still unsure about that last one, 'controlling'. From what you've said so far I think I have a glimmer of what I think you mean, but I still don't really get it. I don't understand why God would allow things like terrible disasters to occur, like massive earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanoes, and such."

"Another fair question. Hmm, give me another moment to think on it." She continued to eat.

After a minute Kurosawa put down her chopsticks and sat back. "Again, please keep in mind that these are just my own opinions and should not be taken as gospel."

"Of course."

"Well, what is mankind's oldest sin? It is to try to become like God, which is what the serpent said in his lie to Adam to induce him to eat of the Tree. We do it all the time. We try to become God, to replace God. We do it over and over. We do it every time we try to create a utopia based on so-called 'scientific' principles. And it doesn't matter if it is a workers paradise, a Volksgemeinschaft, a Nietzschean dictatorship, or any other form of secular society that rejects God. These attempted utopias have always failed, and they always will."

"One reason they keep doing it is because the 19th century German secular philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said, 'God is dead, and we have killed him.' He said that God could be replaced. All that was needed was the will and the power to do so."

"So you are saying that God has to keep reminding us who's the boss?"

Kurosawa smiled. "More or less. I think our endless attempts to replace God are one reason why natural disasters are periodically allowed to happen to us. God needs to kick down our little anthills
once in a while, you see, to remind us who is really in charge."

"But why did all that rebellion and suffering have to happen in the first place? Why couldn't we all just be happy living together with God up in Heaven right at the start?"

"Ah, another excellent question. Well, I think it is because God is trying to make a point."

"A point?"

"You see, I think that all of human history is basically a demonstration exercise."

"A demonstration exercise?"

"Yes."

"But for who? Himself?"

"No of course not, silly."

"Then for who?"

An overhead speaker sounded.

_Nurse Kurosawa, please report to Ward A._

Kurosawa put down her chopsticks. "Oh dear, so much for our nice little lunch chat." She wiped her face with her napkin.

Sachi stood up. "Thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to visit with me, ma'am. I really appreciate it."

"Oh, think nothing of it. Maybe we can do this again sometime." She waved Sachi down. "Go sit down and finish your food."

Sachi sat back down as Kurosawa began to move her wheelchair away from the table.

Kurosawa then slowed, paused, and turned her chair back towards her.

"Sachi, can I give you one final piece of advice?"

"Of course."

"Just remember, no matter what happens, you are never alone."

Kurosawa motored away to the exit.

Sachi picked up a battered shrimp and bit into it thoughtfully.

_I am never alone._

_____________

_January 6, 2025. Chiyoda, Tokyo._

A short man wearing a dark business suit sat by himself in a small booth at the back of the lunch cafe.

After a minute another man sat in the adjacent booth. He was tall and thin and wore black-rimmed
eyeglasses. They were sitting back-to-back, facing away from each other.

Ueda spoke quietly. "This is foolish. Why do we have to meet like this?"

Sugou pushed up his eyeglasses as he continued to look away. "I don't trust anything electronic."

"Fine, whatever. Is it ready yet?"

"Not quite, but we are making excellent progress."

"My benefactors are becoming impatient. We need to see results."

"You'll get them."

"We better."

"Don't worry, you will, and soon."

Friday, January 10, 2025. Early evening.

Midori came home very excited. "I got it! I got it!"

Sachi had already left the house for her shift at the hospital. Kazuto had just finished a hot bath and was wearing a bathrobe while sitting on the couch. He was reading a brochure from the Ministry of Education regarding a new mixed-grade school that was being set up for SAO returnees. Classes were tentatively scheduled to start in late April.

Kazuto put down the brochure and stood up as Midori ran up to him.

She was breathless. "I got it!"

"Got what?"

"An interview, a tour, everything!"

"An interview?"

"I got an exclusive one-on-one interview with the head of RECT Progress! It will be just me and one photographer. Our magazine is going to be the first to actually see the Argus mainframes! What a scoop!"

Kazuto shared his mother's excitement. "Really? Wow, that's great!"

"I gotta prepare. Sorry, no dinner. Order some takeout, will you?"

Midori ran downstairs to her basement office.

Kazuto smiled as he picked up his tablet. He opened the web page for the local pizza delivery service and placed the usual order, then he closed the page.

In the kitchen he poured himself a cup of tea.

Holding his teacup, he walked outside to the back yard and looked up at the darkening sky.

Asuna, this is wonderful news. We might finally get some answers.
Saturday, January 11, 2025. Early evening.

Sachi was standing on a sidewalk in front of a restaurant in the Okachimachi shopping district. She had taken a train from the Saitama Omiya Station to Okachimachi, then she walked the four blocks her final destination. She read the lighted sign above the entrance to the food and drink establishment: The Dicey Café.

She had taken the day off from work because she wanted to meet with Kirito's SAO friends and compatriots, the SOARs. She knew that the best chance of meeting them was on a Saturday evening at this location.

The SOARs. Officially the 10,000 players who had been trapped in SAO were all designated the same way by the government: Virtual Reality Displaced Persons, VRDPs. However, it soon became apparent that the 6000 players who had survived were different than those who had perished in the game. The ones who woke up together on November 7, 2024, had never tasted death, so they were not traumatized by it. The survivors all seemed to be well-adjusted and showed no sign of mental disability from their experience in SAO.

People soon called them the SAO Survivors or the SAO Returnees. The appellation 'VRDP', which had such a negative connotation in the mind of the public, did not seem to apply to these people, the heroes who had jubilantly celebrated their freedom on S-F Day. A government press release had used the acronym 'SAOR' to refer to the SAO Returnees. The media soon flipped it around to the more pronounceable SOAR - the SAO Over Achieving Returnees - and the name stuck.

The VRDPs were loners, isolated, unemployable, possibly dangerous. The SOARs were heroes, socially well adjusted, friendly, gregarious, popular.

VRDP soon became a stigma that was reserved only for those who had died.

Although the SOARs did need some counseling and support to help them smoothly re-integrate back into society, the fact that they woke up together as group made it much easier for them to quickly establish friendships and social connections. A special school would soon be established for them, the SAO Returnee School, and it was expected that many of the returnees would enroll in order to remain together as friends. Of course, the VRDPs were invited to attend the new school too, but it was expected that few would take up the offer.

Sachi took a deep breath. She opened the door and went inside the café.

The place was noisy and crowded. She saw a large black man working behind the counter. She recognized him as one of the men who had visited Kirito on the first day. She tried to remember his handle.

Agil.

Sitting on a stool across the counter from him was a man wearing a bandana.

That has to be Klein.

Nervously, she crossed the floor towards them.
As she approached the counter she passed by a table where two girls age 14 and age 17 were having an animated discussion.

The younger girl said excitedly, "Liz, you gotta try it. It's totally cool!"

The older girl was doubtful. "But it's all fairie stuff. I liked my weapons gig better."

The younger girl replied, "You can still do that. I checked it out for you. You can be a leprechaun and make stuff: weapons, cool gadgets, anything! The promo they got going will let your skill stats carry over too."

"My skill stats will carry over? Really?"

"Yeah! Everybody's will! It's all part of the promo. You see..."

Sachi passed another table. A man and woman in their late twenties were seated together. The woman was wearing a wool business pantsuit over a starched white ruffled blouse and a Colonel Saunders tie. Her brown hair was wrapped tightly in a neat bun with a short pony tail. The man was wearing round John Denver glasses and a brimmed hat. His clothes were rumpled and he was slouched in his chair with his head down.

The woman said crisply, "We're going to do this together. Just like the marriage counselor said."

The man said humbly, "Yes, dear."

Sachi reached the counter. The man standing behind the counter turned and greeted her.

"Oh, hello, miss. Please, have a seat."

Sachi sat at the counter on a tall stool. As she did so the man behind the counter apologized, "I'm sorry that all the tables are full."

She looked around. "This place is pretty popular."

He grinned. "Yeah. We bought out the laundromat next door last month, knocked out a wall, and we still need more room."

Sachi then noticed that the man sitting on the stool next to her was looking at her closely.

Agil saw the man's stare and frowned at him. "Hey, Ryou, don't scare the lady."

Agil turned to Sachi and winked. "Heh, you can ignore him. TV interviews, autographs, and he still strikes out." He turned to face him. "Ain't that right?"

Klein picked up his drink, took a sip, and said melodramatically, "Alas, what can I say? The life of a celebrity is a lonely one."

He then lowered his drink and peered at Sachi again. "Say, have you and I met somewhere before?"

Agil was about to intervene when Sachi said, "It's quite all right." She turned to face Klein. "Yes, I think we have. My name is Sachi Watanabe. We met at Kirito's bedside when he first woke up. It's nice to see you again."

Agil and Klein both looked at each other, their eyes wide.
Klein crowded in close to Sachi as they both stared at her. She tried to lean away from them.

Klein yelled, "It's.. it's you! You're Kirito's VRDP homegirl!"

Agil put a beefy hand on Klein's arm. "Dude, keep your voice down."

But it was too late. The conversation at the nearby tables slowed then stopped. Everyone was looking at her. Sachi slouched on the stool and stared at the countertop as she tried to make herself disappear.

Agil tried to explain. "Uh, sorry about that, miss. We hardly ever get any VRDPs in here." He sighed, "We try. Free drinks, free food. Look around. Everybody is friendly, see?"

Sachi nervously raised her eyes. She saw that the nearby diners were smiling at her. Many gave her a small friendly wave.

The 14 year old girl that was sitting at the first table jumped off her chair and ran towards Sachi. Her hair sported twin pigtails tied with pink ribbons.

The girl hopped on the stool opposite Klein.

"Hi! Hi! I'm Silica!" The other diners returned to their meals.

Sachi was still feeling very nervous. "Uh, hello?"

The girl grinned, "My real name is Keiko Ayano. Can we be friends?"

She smiled, "My name is Sachi Watanabe. And yes, I would be happy to be your friend."

"Cool!"

Klein tilted his head. "Huh. That's weird."

Sachi turned, "What is?"

"You."

"Me?"

"Kirito told us you didn't want to meet us, what with you being a VRDP and all."

"Huh? He said that?"

"Yeah. That's why we only visited your place when you weren't around. He said that's what you wanted."

Sachi stared at him in disbelief.

Kirito lied to them. He lied to me.

What is going on?

Suguha and Kazuto were at home sitting at the kitchen nook, eating dinner together. Midori had phoned earlier to say she would be working late.

Suguha slurped up a river of cooked noodles. "Kazuto, this is good. You're a great chef."
They were eating from paper cups that Kazuto had put in the microwave. Kazuto gave her a sardonic thanks.

Suguha swallowed the carbohydrate blob and then poked her chopsticks back into the cup. "Too bad Sachi isn't here. She never gets to have dinner with us except on Sundays."

Kazuto rolled up a ball of noodles on his chopsticks. "That's because she's working the evening shift at the hospital. You know that."

"No, not today. She took the day off."

Kazuto put down his chopsticks with the noodle ball still wrapped on them. "Huh? She did?"

"Yeah. She went to meet your weird friends at the Dicey Café in Okachimachi."

Kazuto became alarmed. "What!?"

"She invited me to come along, but I figured I'd be the third wheel so I stayed home."

Kazuto stood up. "No! Tell me she didn't!"

Suguha tilted her head. "What's the problem?"

Kazuto was starting to panic. "Crap! Crap! Crap!"

He grabbed Suguha's shoulders. "When did she leave?"

"Uh, about 20 minutes ago..."

"My leg, I can't.. Sugu, you gotta stop her!"

Suguha was starting to get concerned. "Stop her? What's the big emergency?"

Kazuto clenched his fists and looked down. He came to a decision.

He sat back down and pulled himself close to his step-sister.

"Sugu, there is something you need to know. I should have told you sooner."

She looked at him expectantly.

"It's about Asuna and me. You see."

Klein went on. "I mean, it's understandable with you're being a VRDP and all, so we obliged and stayed away."

Silica looked over at Klein. "Kirito's a stupidhead. Don't listen to him. I like Sachi. She's nice."

Agil addressed Sachi. "I remember you now. You were the girl standing next to Kirito's sister just after he woke up, right?"

"Yes, I was."

He chuckled. "Sorry about the misunderstanding. We should have known better."

"About what?"
"About Asuna."

Klein shook his head sadly. "Man, that is such a shame."

Agil replied, "Yeah. They were so close..."

Sachi asked, "Close?"

"I mean, they got married and all. Bought a house. Lived together as man and wife, even had a kid. That's about as close as you can get."

Klein piped up. "I still can't believe they had a kid together. Say, how is that even possible?"

Agil replied, "That was just a rumor. I think the kid was adopted."

"You sure?"

"Like I said it was a rumor. I never saw the kid."

Klein turned. "Hey Sachi, what did Kirito tell you about that?"

But it was too late.

Sachi was gone.

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A/N:

* Suguha's mother had told her that she and Kazuto were cousins shortly after the SAO incident began. After Kazuto awakened Suguha had asked her mother to hold back, explaining that she wanted to inform Kazuto herself (LN Vol 3).
Sachi stumbled out of the restaurant and ran blindly down the sidewalk. Somehow she turned into a side alley where she finally lost her balance. She careened blindly into a stack of empty cardboard boxes next to a garbage dumpster, causing her body to rebound against the dirty brick wall like a rag doll.

She flopped backwards and slid slowly down the brick wall with her back against it, eventually dropping to the floor of the alley.

She clutched her stomach in great pain as she doubled over. She felt like she had been shot. Physiologically it wasn't far from the truth in terms of her bodily reaction to what had just happened. She ended up in a fetal position laying on her side, her eyes staring at nothing.

Suguha was running down the sidewalk from the cafe, having been told that Sachi had fled from there only a few moments earlier. As Suguha ran she glanced down the side streets and alleys on both sides of the main street. After a couple blocks she reversed direction and ran the other way, her eyes sweeping everywhere. She soon ran past an alley where she noticed what looked like a clump of dirty discarded clothes piled next to a garbage dumpster.

With a foot poking out.

Suguha peered. It looked as if a body was simply tossed against the brick wall next to the garbage dumpster. She ran towards the faux clothes pile and skidded to a stop next to the body underneath.

Sachi was curled up on her side. She looked dead.

Suguha dived down and cradled Sachi's head.

"No.. no."

"Sachi?"

The petite girl was staring at nothing, eyes wide, catatonic.

"Sachi!"

Suguha dropped down and sat next to her in the dirty alley, cross-legged, with Sachi's head cradled in her lap. She gently wiped the matted hair out of her eyes.

"It's me, Sugu. I'm here. You're going to be okay."

Sachi was frozen and still looked dead.

"Just breathe, will you? Please? Breathe!"

Sachi suddenly heaved in a gasp of air.

She's alive, thank heavens.

The psychologically gunshot girl stared into space, her breathing shallow and rapid.

Suguha spoke quickly, "I'm here. It's me, Sugu. Just stay on the ground. Don't get up."
Sachi struggled weakly. "No."

"I know, I know. Me too. I'll kill him. For both of us."

"Not what I mean.. shock.. don't raise my head.."

"Sachi?"

"Blood draining.. lower my head, raise legs..."

Suguha suddenly realized that Sachi was giving her life saving medical instructions. She immediately complied with Sachi's LPN training and carefully shifted her head off her own lap and laid it back down on the alley floor. Then she removed her sweater and tucked it under Sachi's head as a thin pillow to protect against the dirt. Next, she ran to the pile of cardboard boxes, picking a small sturdy one, inserting the box under Sachi's calves, elevating her legs.

Suguha then ran back to Sachi's prostrate head and sat cross-legged.

"Did I do it right?"

"Uh, yeah.."

Suguha waited for the shock to subside.

After a minute Sachi said softly. "Sugu, thank you."

**Why am I even here?**

**Why am I even alive?**

By now Suguha's anger was rising. "I'll kill him. I will absolutely kill him."

Sachi spoke, whisper soft. "No, don't..."

"And why not?"

"Because it's me. I know it."

"No it's him. That selfish jerk. It was two months ago!"

Sachi grabbed one of the cuffs on Suguha's sleeve with both hands, pulling her head closer. "No, It's me. I'm certain of it."

"Sachi.."

"Just tell me, somebody, anybody, please tell me..."

"Tell you what?"

"Sugu, tell me, what is wrong with me?"

"Nothing is wrong with you! I told you, it's him!"

"Then why does my stomach hurt so much?"

Suguha looked up at the darkening sky, her anger rising even more. As she did so she whispered up at the sky, "How could he do that?"
She pounded the pavement with her fist while still looking up. "That bastard. How..? It was two months!"

Sachi clutched her stomach again. "Sugu, tell me, why do I hurt so bad?"

Suguha looked back down and touched the prostrate girl's cheek.

"Sugu, I know I'm crazy. I really am. There's no way I could feel like this about Kirito and not know it. How could I not know this about myself?"

Suguha's anger flashed again. "You're not crazy!"

Sachi said with resignation, "Of course I am."

"No you are not!"

"But, Sugu, how do you know that?"

Suguha knew the answer. She closed her eyes to build her courage. Then she opened them again. "You love him, right? More than anything, right?"

"Yes. Yes. I love him more than anything. But how could I not know? It means I'm crazy, right? I just had a VRDP psychotic break. It's textbook."

"No, you're not crazy. You wanna know why?"

Suguha was resolute. She stood up. She then looked down at Sachi with her both fists clenched tightly. "Because I know exactly how you feel. You want to know why that pain in your belly is there.."

"Sugu?"

".. it's because I have it too!"

"What..?"

She took a deep breath and roared, "I LOVE HIM TOO! THAT'S WHY I KNOW HOW YOU FEEL!"

Suguha collapsed to her knees, wiping the tears away. "I sat there at his bedside for years, same as you. I daydreamed about him, same as you. I wanted him, same as you. All while suppressing my feelings, same as you."

"Sugu, that can happen between siblings sometimes. You just have to.."

Suguha shouted her down. "No! No, you idiot! I love him! Yes, like that!"

"But I don't understand...?"

"Don't you see? Kazuto is not my brother!"

Sachi was stunned speechless.

Finally she whispered, "Sugu?"

"Look, Mom told me just after Kazuto got trapped in SAO. Mom's sister died when Kazuto was
one year old and so Mom and Dad legally adopted him. They didn't tell anyone. He later figured it out on his own when he was 10. That's when he withdrew from me and from everybody else."

"Oh Sugu, I'm so sorry.."

"Don't you see?", she sniffled, "We really are rivals. We both want him. And the same way. It's not a VRDP thing. It's us. We want him. We were just both in denial."

Suguha grimaced, "Sachi, my stomach hurts too. It hurts so bad. I can't stand it."

Sachi forced herself to sit up. "Come here."

Suguha complied. The two girls embraced each other on the floor of the alley.

Then they both began to cry, rocking back and forth on the ground, consoling each other as much as they could.

"Sugu?"

"Yeah?"

"Let's be real sisters."

"Sachi..?"

"I'm going to ask Midori and Minetaka to adopt me."

Suguha pulled away, "But you'll lose your bank annuity..."

"I don't care. I don't need that kind of independence. Not anymore."

The clouds had parted and a faint moonbeam now shined into the alley, bathing them both in a subtle turquoise light.

"Okay. Let's be sisters."

Sachi sniffled and smiled. "Imouto*, I love you."

Suguha did the same. "Onee-chan**, I love you too."

Sachi sniffled, "Now let's cry."

"Yeah." Suguha snorted a ball of mucus up her nose. "Let's." She clamped onto Sachi and they began to bawl together.

And so there on the floor of that dirty side alley in the Okachimachi shopping district, with absolutely no one else watching except for the moonbeam shining upon them, the two sisters of the Kirigaya family sat and cried, loud and long, in each other's arms, well into the night.

And they stayed that way, holding each other, until they could cry no more.

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Next day. Dojo.

Kazuto was lying prostrate on one of the padded exercise mats in the dojo, staring up at the rafters of the wooden ceiling. The early morning sun rose over the adjacent rooftops and peeked through a window and illuminated the rafters. He was wearing his gym clothes.
Sachi silently walked in wearing her usual gym outfit. She laid down on the mat close to his side. She did not look at him nor did she say a word.

He finally spoke as if to himself, still staring up. "I should have told you. I have no excuse for.."

While also looking up at the rafters she interrupted him. "No, stop. It's me. I'm the idiot."

"Sachi."

"You were just trying to figure me out. You were worried that I'd totally flip out, that I'd go crazy and have a psychotic break if you told me. Well, I did. You were just trying to protect me."

She smiled to herself as she studied the knot holes on the wood ceiling. "That was why. It's who you are."

"Sachi, you're not crazy."

She sighed, "I know that now. I was just deluded. I had fooled myself into thinking that I would feel happy for you if you happened to find another girl. Well, you did. And that's wonderful. I had promised myself right at the start that I'd follow your path wherever it went, go along with whatever you decided, whatever choice you made, and that I'd accept it, and that it would make me happy.

"I had decided that if you had chosen someone else I would accept it. And if you had chosen me? I would have loved you with everything I had, with as much passion as much as I could.

"It's why I never gave you a hint about my feelings for you. Not once. I'm not sure why I had originally decided that, really, but now I think it was maybe because you were always such a gentleman to me. You never took advantage of that scared young girl sharing your bed, looking at you, gazing into your eyes under the covers. Not a single touch. If you never gave in to temptation, then how could I do any less?

"Because of that I had completely suppressed my feelings for you. I had even hid them from myself. Oh, I knew that 14 year old girl had puppy eyes for you, and I knew that some small part of me had still had those childish feelings inside, but my mature self had dismissed those feelings.

"I knew you would never make a move on me. But that was okay. I was prepared to wait. It was one of the reasons I loved you, I think, because I knew you would never cross the line with me, or with any other girl, at least not until you were an adult. Or so I thought.

"That was my grand plan: 1) Mental rehab, 2) Physical rehab, 3) Private sharing, and 4) Wait.

"You were so broken in SAO that I was certain you would never fall in love with anyone in the game, nor after that, probably not for years, maybe never. And so for that last step in my plan I would wait as long as I could. Years if needed. I had refused to let myself be adopted by your parents so it would not become a barrier between us. My plan was to enroll with you in the SAO Returnees School even though I knew that almost no other VRDPs would attend. And then for the next three years we would share high school together. I would walk with you to school every day, sit in class with you, each lunch together, go home together, do homework together, and always stay by your side. Eventually you would decide and I would be happy.

"But then you did something that wasn't in my plan. Somehow in SAO you overcame your brokenness. You fell in love inside the game.

"And I should have been okay with that, you know? I had convinced myself all I wanted was for
you to be happy, no matter what choice you ultimately made, and that I had wanted nothing more.

Her eyes teared up. "I was soooo wrong about myself. I had thought I had promised myself that I would be okay with it, but honestly, I didn't know."

Kazuto turned and said softly, "Sachi, I don't know what to say. I hurt you so badly. I should have told you sooner. I am so, so, sorry."

Sachi sat up. "I knew you'd say that. And yes, you owe me an apology."

He looked down. "I do. I really do."

She leaned over. "Yes, you do. So I am going to collect on it..."

"Sachi?"

"...right now."

Without warning, Sachi suddenly rolled herself on top of him, their bodies pressed together. She leaned in, grabbed both Kazuto's cheeks, and gave him a fierce kiss right on the lips. His eyes stayed opened wide. Then just as quickly she rolled off him again.

Before he could react she said, "Apology accepted."

She sat up. "I'm done now. From now on you're my onii-chan."

"Wuh..?"

"Don't worry, Kazuto. I still love you, and I always will. But I will love you like a sister and not as your lover. Midori has already started the paperwork for my adoption. In a couple months my name will change from Sachi Watanabe to Sachi Kirigaya."

Kazuto was speechless.

*There, I did it.*

*Because I love you so much.*

*I know the dreams will keep happening.*

*My stomach will still hurt.*

*And I know I can't control my feelings.*

*But what I want is not what you want.*

*That is why I am doing this.*

*Because I love you.*

"Yes, I know your name is Kazuto, not Kirito - I've broken through that particular mental block. Don't worry, I plan to still call you 'Kirito', but now it will just be my pet nickname for you as your older younger sister."

Kazuto was still trying to reboot his brain when Sachi jumped up from the mat. She brushed herself off.
"Kirito, you still need to talk to Sugu. She is as mixed up as I am about you. Yes, she knows. She knows that you are not her brother, which is why for the past two years she was in the same state of denial as I was. Now, she sometimes doesn't express herself verbally very well, so please do me a favor and take everything I just said to you and explain it back to her, okay?"

Kazuto was still being overwhelmed. "Bwuh."

She stood over him. Kazuto finally started to sit up.

"No, stay on your back." Sachi pushed him down so he was flat on his back again, looking up at the wood rafters.

Sachi turned and yelled in a loud voice towards main door of the dojo, "Sugu! It's your turn!"

Sugu peered cautiously inside, also wearing her gym clothes. Sachi walked over to meet her.

Sugu asked nervously, "Did you."

Sachi gave her a gentle push. "Yep. Go on."

Suguha complied and started to slowly walk over to the mat to were Kazuto was.

Just before Sachi left the dojo she turned and said brightly to Kazuto, "Onii-chan, this is your lucky day. You're getting a twofer!"

Sugu stopped and whirled back, her face red. "Sachi, stop it!" Then she fidgeted, "I dunno if."

"Sugu, go for it. He's ready."

Kazuto sat up again. Sugu still looked unsure of herself and was still fidgeting badly.

He understood. He quickly stood up and gently escorted Suguha to the mat where she sat cross-legged facing him. Meanwhile Kazuto laid back down on the mat again and looked up at the wood knots. He took a deep breath and started to explain. "Sugu, I have no excuse. Sachi told me what happened, how you feel. I am so, so, so sorry..."

Sugu stared down at mat, still sitting. "No, it's my fault. I should have told you that I knew. I know what Sachi said about you and me, she explained it and everything, but I still know those feelings were wrong. I really should have told you..."

"No, Sugu, look..."

Sachi quietly closed the door to the dojo. She smiled to herself as she imagined in her mind's eye how that conversation was going to continue.

She knew that from now on she would need to share her inner feelings with Suguha, and Suguha with her. Each night they would sit in bed together and talk things out, sharing a bond that only real sisters could have.

While walking down the short path to the house she looked up at the beautiful sky.

It was because it was another glorious day in the land of the living.

Every day was a gift.

_Sir, is it over now? Am I done?_
As she entered the house Yaya gave her a cheerful meow. She bent over to pet the cat, then she realized something and did a mental facepalm.

*Dang it, I forgot to clean the litter box!*

She sighed and held her nose as she went downstairs to the basement. The litter box was a disgusting mess as expected, but this time it was far more messy than usual. It was because Yaya had earlier knocked Sachi's old NerveGear helmet off the shelf again, and this time it fell right into the litter box.

*Ugh, you little stink butt!*

She picked up her old helmet, her one and only souvenir of her time with Kirito in SAO, and started to clean off the clumps of litter and other unmentionable detritus as she glared at the happy cat, who walked away.

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*Monday, January 13, 2025.*

Midori was standing next to her magazine's best photographer in the basement of the Argus building five levels below street level. The photographer was snapping pictures madly with his 35mm digital SLR, the camera making a fake whirring noise with each still photo taken.

Midori peered across the red velvet ropes that blocked access to the five Argus server computer cabinets. She noted the small LCD screen and USB service port on the front of each one. *Hmm. Those are Microware servers. Pretty old.*

Doctor Nobuyuki Sugou chuckled, "Well, yes, I suppose they are. As you know Microware went out of business last year. Even so, with their double redundant power supplies, triple error-correcting code [ECC] memory system, and array of code-synchronized Xeon processor pairs, they are still some of the most reliable servers in the world."

"True. Expensive too."

"Yes, they were quite expensive for their day. But you have to understand that these servers have been running non-stop, 24/7, since 2022 and they now need significant maintenance and refurbishment. The Argus design was rather conservative in terms of its hardware configuration, and these servers were in fact already rather staid in lacking modern features when they were commissioned in 2022. I think this particular Microware model was chosen because of its conservative design and well-proven track record for robustness and non-stop reliability. Today they might fetch perhaps 10% of the original value on the aftermarket."

"But these machines are famous. Have you ever considered their value as collectables? Their historical value?"

Sugou smiled, "Oh yes. I am sure that if we put them up on eBay we could get a pretty penny for them. But alas, we cannot touch them until those poor children are finally freed."

Midori looked at the servers. She felt badly for the children still stuck inside. "It is so sad that 300 young minds are still trapped in there somewhere."

She returned to address her interview subject. "Doctor Sugou, let me ask you the one question that has been on everyone's mind in the IT world, in the government, and in the families of those still trapped inside: Given that you are the world's foremost expert on the Full Dive Environments, second only to Akihiko Kayaba himself, and given the fact that you probably know as much about
these systems as anyone alive, can you please explain for our readers just what happened here?"

Sugou crossed his arms. "Well, to be honest we are still frankly in the dark. As you know, Kayaba had written a self-destruct routine that was inserted into the Cardinal System for the mainframes to erase their RAID storage arrays the moment the game was cleared, a process that takes only a few minutes. But for some reason the servers stopped running the erasure program about halfway through. Nobody knows why. And we don't know what data was deleted versus what data was left still running in there now."

"But why did they stop erasing themselves?"

"Well, I think it is obvious that Kayaba had something to do with it. He used those poor ten thousand souls as human guinea pigs for two years. Now there are only 300 left. Our best guess is that he has moved on to some smaller, more focused, phase in his human research testing where he needs only 300 research subjects instead of 10,000."

"Subjects for what?"

Sugou shrugged, "Nobody knows."

"So basically you think Kayaba is still up to his old tricks then?"

Sugou nodded. "Oh yes. That evil man needs to be caught and punished for his crimes, and those poor children need to be freed. That is why our company is working so closely with some of the best neurological researchers in the world at Tokorozawa Hospital. The hospital is located right next door to our RECT Progress main campus, which makes it convenient for us to closely collaborate and cooperate with the research staff on a daily basis. We simply want to help these lost souls in every way we can."

"I see." Midori decided now was the best time to lay her scoop on him. "But Doctor Sugou, the latest reports have Kayaba hiding out somewhere in the jungles of Borneo, a region with no data access."

Sugou chortled. "Ah, never underestimate that bas- that man. He can find a way."

"Well, sir, with respect, I have received a highly reliable report from an anonymous source that Kayaba did not in fact know that the remaining 6149 players were not all released from his control on S-F day. He had no idea that 300 were left behind."

That statement threw Sugou badly off his stride.

"W-What? Excuse me?"

"Akihiko Kayaba did not know about the SAO Glitch."

"Wait, how can you possibly know that? Who told you that?"

"All I can say is that the report came from an impeccable source."

"Who!?"

"I'm sorry, but I have to preserve my sources. Rest assured the report is 100% accurate."

Sugou was starting to lose his cool. "That's absurd! Of course Kayaba knew! How couldn't he? He knows everything! He always does!"
Midori tilted her head.

*Just look at him. The man is losing it.*

Sugou realized what was happening and quickly recomposed himself. He adjusted his eyeglasses. Meanwhile, Midori tried to get the interview back on track. "Well, I admit that your rather energetic reaction is understandable given the fact that you had worked so closely with Doctor Kayaba in the past as one of his main research assistants. That means that you probably knew him as well as anyone did, yes?"

"Oh yes, I did. That is why our new Full Dive Environment has such comprehensive new security and safety features. Not just in the halos themselves but in also in the game code."

"Your advertisements claim that ALO is completely unhackable. Is this true?"

"It is. Even Kayaba himself can't breach our new TCB Orange Book Class A Type Enforced basal software layer. The security reference monitor [SRM] is beyond the state of the art. In addition we've run AI scans, done formal proofs on the source code, it's unbeatable. I can tell you with 100% confidence that nobody is going to ever cheat their way into beating our game."

"But isn't all this extra security rather expensive?"

"Oh, most definitely."

"But why spend so much money on it? Why are you applying all of these hard-core security measures just to protect a game?"

Sugou smiled, "Well, we just want to give our players the best gaming experience possible. We do that by creating a VRMMO that is guaranteed to be both fair to play and safe to play. In our system no player can hack their stats, guaranteed. And there are no possible exploits to defeat quests unfairly. Also, the neurological safeguards in our AmuSphere halos will absolutely ensure - unlike the old NerveGear helmets - that no one can possibly be harmed mentally or physically while playing our game. For example, we have special pain absorber circuits with fail-safes built right into the halos that prevent a player from experiencing any sort of actual debilitating pain no matter how much damage their avatar receives."

"I see. Interesting. And your efforts appear to be paying off. You must be happy that ALO is now the number one ranked VRMMO in the Japanese market."

"Oh yes, all our efforts are indeed paying off. SAO has been a great boon to us as well in terms of giving us publicity for our new system."

"It certainly has. I see that in some of your literature you are using the term 'SAO/ALO' for your FDE. Is this an attempt to leverage the immense and almost mythical popularity of SAO inside the gaming community?"

Sugou chuckled again. "Well, that term is coming from the marketing department, not me, so you will need to ask them. It is true that ALO had started off using SAO's base Cardinal System, but we have since re-written and/or re-inspected every single byte of code and have reworked it so carefully that it might as well be an entirely new design."

"Fascinating."

Sugou checked his watch. "Oh I'm sorry, our time is up. My, how time flies. If you will excuse me I will need to attend to my next appointment."
Midori glanced over at the photographer. "Tomoya-kun, did you take all the pics you need?"

The photographer nodded. "Yes, ma'am. Got some great shots."

Midori bowed to her interviewee. "Thank you, sir, for taking so much time out of your busy schedule to talk with us today."

Sugou was magnanimous. "Oh not at all, and you are very welcome. In fact the honor is mine. I am a big fan of yours, Ms. Kirigaya."

Midori blushed a bit. "You are? Oh, thank you so much."

"Come, let me escort you out."

As she walked out with the tall thin man in the white lab coat, Midori was secretly ecstatic.

*What an exclusive! This cover article will be our biggest one yet!*

*ALO's security is ridiculously tight, even more than compartmented military. Talk about overkill.*

*The security budget has to be crazy high. Kayaba has certainly made the man paranoid. He seems to be a control freak too.*

Midori shook her head.

*I didn't get much info on the SAO Glitch. My son's scoop shook him pretty badly, though. There is something definitely not right about that man.*

---

*Friday, January 18, 2025. 7:15 p.m.*

A week had gone by since the incident at the Dicey Café. As the days passed the hole in Sachi's heart was gradually being filled. Mostly it was due to her living her daily life in the Kirigaya family household - for it was there that, for the very first time in her otherwise sad life, she had felt a real sense of belonging on an emotional level, of closeness, of being a part of something greater than herself. The pain in her chest was still there, only diminished, for she knew that her heart was covered by emotional scar tissue that would never fully heal.

She had resolved to continue serving Kazuto in whatever role he wanted for her, for she knew that her love for him would never change. However, there was one other aspect of her feelings toward him that did change: It was that she would not hide her love for him anymore. But she had resolved that it would be a platonic love, a brother-sisterly love, not unlike what she had experienced with him in her days in SAO.

Or so she thought.

---

Kazuto was sitting on the couch with Sachi and Suguha close on either side of him. Each held a video game controller. It was because, at Midori's request, Sachi had taken the evening off from working at the hospital for what Midori called "Family Night". Midori had her own controller and was sitting on the floor to the side.

The four family members were playing Mario Ultra Karts, and the competition was fast and furious with all four of them wildly mashing buttons and rotating air wheels in making mad drifting turns around a track made of pink marshmallows.
Sachi picked up a Boomerang Flower and chucked it at Sugu's kart, causing it to spin out of control.

"You fink!" Sugu retaliated by flinging a Piranha Plant back at Sachi's motorcycle. It missed and hit Kazuto's truck instead.

"Gah! Sugu you hit me!"

Meanwhile Sachi hollered back at Sugu, "Blue shell in your face!"

Midori lowered her controller and smiled at her three children as they continued to play together. Sachi's adoption paperwork was now well underway, and soon 'Sachi Kirigaya' would be enrolled in the SAO Returnee School along with Kazuto.

Yes, we really are a family.

"Sugu, stop pigging the stars!"

"Mom, move! Get out of the way!"

Midori continued to lovingly watch her children as the highway mayhem rolled on.

The next day Kazuto would ask Sachi if he could visit Asuna in the hospital again.

What he did not know was that it would be for the very last time.

---

_Saturday, January 19, 2025. 1:45 p.m. Tokorozawa Private Hospital._

Sachi escorted Kazuto into the main lobby of the hospital. He was now walking unassisted except for the use of a wooden cane that he held in his right hand, something that he only resorted to using when walking long distances.

Sachi and Kazuto approached a pair of greeters who were standing behind the visitors' desk in the main lobby. The two young female staffers were both wearing green ID badges. Because of Nurse Kurosawa's standing order Sachi did not call ahead to say they were coming.

The greeters immediately recognized Kazuto. As he approached with his cane they whispered excitedly to each other. The first girl, an attractive brunette, quickly adjusted her hair clip. The second, a tall blonde, pulled her uniform taut across her front. Both stood ramrod straight.

The first girl said brightly, "Good morning, Mr. Kirigaya!" The blonde chimed in, "Good morning!"

Sachi replied politely, "Good morning." Kazuto said nothing.

The first girl read her computer panel. She looked sad. "Oh, I am so sorry, but Asuna Yuuki's family are currently visiting with her now. If you could please wait in our lobby..."

She paused as the information on her screen spontaneously changed. Her face brightened again. "Oh, nevermind. It says you can go right up now."

Sachi wondered about the sudden change.

*Ir I bet the parents want to meet Kirito. It would probably be good for him.*
Sachi said, "Thank you."

Both girls' eyes briefly met the others', with the second girl fidgeting. The first whispered to the second, "Come on, just ask him."

Kazuto and Sachi began to turn to leave when the blonde mustered her courage and spoke up. "Uh, Mr. Kirigaya, sir?"

Kazuto turned back and spoke for the first time. He said wearily, "Yes?"

The second girl hesitated. The first girl silently egged her on again. Finally the second girl said nervously, "Uh, may I ask you a question?"

"Sure, go ahead."

Sachi pushed the button inside the elevator to go up to floor 18. She was a bit piqued. "That was against the rules."

It was because both greeters had been excitedly shouting "Thank you!" while clutching their freshly signed autograph pads.

Kazuto looked up at the elevator floor numbers incrementing slowly.

He grumbled, "They totally ignored you."

Moments earlier they had walked away from the desk, and Sachi could feel the greeters' disapproving looks behind her back, their eyes asking each other how in the world could the famous Kazuto Kirigaya, aka Kirito, the heroic game clearer of SAO, could possibly consort with such a lowly specimen of the fairer sex - and a VRDP no less - particularly when so many better specimens were readily available like themselves.

Kazuto had already torn up the small slip of paper with the blonde's cellphone number written on it. Sachi sighed, "I'm used to it."

Kazuto growled again, "Well I'm not. And frankly, I am getting sick and tired of this snubfest all the time. You deserve a lot more respect around here."

"It's okay."

"No it isn't." He turned to face her. "Honestly, Sachi, I think you are the best girl in this whole hospital."

No, I am not. Besides, there is...

He caught himself. "Uh, I mean the best staffer of course. Asuna is.. Wait, that did not come out right. I just mean."

Sachi interrupted him. "I understand." She decided to change the topic. "Asuna's family is upstairs, and it looks they know we are coming. I think they want to meet you."

"I guess so. Ugh, I'm a little nervous now."

Sachi reassured him. "It'll be okay. Just be honest with them about your feelings for her, and tell them her feelings for you. Do those two things and I'm sure you'll be fine."
He looked at her guiltily. "Even tell them about, you know, the cabin?"

"Yes, if you want. They probably know something about it already if they are expecting you."

"Okay..."

She grinned, "And if that doesn't work you can always just brag to her parents what a great catch you are, that you are the famous Kirito, the Black Swordsman of SAO, defeater of Akihiko Kayaba, the guy who has fangirls throwing themselves at him everywhere, and that their daughter should be thankful just to be breathing the same air as you, and.."

He interrupted. "Har dee har har."

They reached the green door. Sachi swiped her green keycard and the door to Asuna's room opened. Inside she saw an older man who was probably Asuna's father. He was talking to a younger man who was facing the window. From Sachi's angle his face was not visible.

Wait, does Asuna have an older brother? I never checked.

As usual Kazuto went inside alone, leaving Sachi behind. She walked back to the elevator to wait.

25 minutes later

"Kirito! Kirito! Can you hear me?"

"Uh."

"You're still in the hospital. You passed out in the hallway. Are you all right?"

"Asuna."

"Kirito, what happened in there?"

Then he remembered.

A leer.

Sniffing of hair.

We will be married in a week.

Never see her again.

Monday, January 20, 2025. 1:45 p.m.

Kazuto was still upstairs in his black depression. Like before when he first discovered Asuna's condition, Sachi had decided it was best to simply wait a few days until Kazuto was ready to come out again. Meanwhile she decided to catch up on some badly overdue schoolwork in her Independent Study class and was sitting at the breakfast nook doing homework.

Sachi knew that Kazuto's first meeting with the Yuuki family yesterday had obviously gone very badly for some unknown reason. At the front desk the greeters confirmed that Nurse Kurosawa's standing orders allowing visitation had been revoked. The greeters both looked like whipped puppies. Sachi later learned it was because some senior administrator had caught the pair on
camera asking for Kirito's autograph and the administrator was very unhappy about it. Nurse Kurosawa was busy and unavailable.

Sachi was tapping digits on her data tablet to finish a math assignment on the binomial theorem. Her smartphone chimed.

She stood. "Hello?"

"Sachi-chan? Hi, it's me Agil. From the Dicey Café. You remember?"

Sachi back sat down. "Oh yes. Andrew Gilbert Mills, isn't it?"

"My friends call me Agil. And you're definitely a friend of mine. A friend of all of us here, actually."

Sachi smiled to herself. "Yes, I have a lot of friends now thanks to you."

"Think nothin' of it. You're officially part of the gang."

"Thank you so much. So, Mr. Agil, what can I do for you this afternoon?"

"Well, uhm, you see.."

"Mr. Agil, sir, if you are apologizing to me yet again for what happened last week at the cafe, I can assure you.."

"Oh, no.. I mean yes! I mean, I do wanna apologize again, but that's not why I called you. Well, it's not the main reason, anyway."

Sachi tried not to sound testy but the man needed to get to the point. "Now Agil."

"Okay, okay. I'm calling because I found something."

"You found 'something'?"

"Yeah, it's something you need to see."

"What did you find?"

"Uh, not sure yet. I'd rather not say on the phone. It has to do with Kirito and what happened with Asuna. Can you come to the cafe? Don't worry, I'll feed you right."

"I suppose I can come over. But why not invite Kirito to come too?" She knew that Kazuto was in no condition to go anywhere at the moment, but she still felt obligated to ask on his behalf.

"Because I'm still so mad at him doggin' you that night that I'd probably punch him before I could stop myself. Don't worry, I'll get over it. Say, did you know he still hasn't apologized to anybody here yet?"

"No, I didn't."

"Anyway, what with Kirito's bad leg and all, I figure it's too far for him to try to walk here from the train station on his own, so I thought I'd call you first."

"About what?"
"I think I found somethin', maybe somethin' big. You need to see it."

Sachi was now interested. "I'll be right over."

Midori came home from work around midnight. She was more than a little tired. She slowly trundled down the steps with her laptop case to her basement office and closed the door behind her.

Shortly afterward she heard a knock.

"Mom? Can I come in?" It was Sachi.

Midori opened the door and gave her daughter-to-be a wan smile. "Certainly." Sachi sat next to her.

"My, what brings you down here tonight? I'm afraid I'm not doing anything interesting for you to watch on the computer."

"Mom, I have a puzzle for you."

"A puzzle?"

"Here." She handed Midori the USB stick.

"Hmm?" Midori plugged the stick into her PC and brought up an Explorer window. "It's just a single data file, one big static 2-D TIFF image. Ugh, it's terribly blurred."

"I know. Can you fix it? Make it sharp?"

Midori sighed, "Oh honey. You've watched too many CSI shows. Or is it Star Trek TNG? I forget."

Sachi didn't catch the reference. "Are you saying you can't sharpen it?"

"No, I can't, not the way you mean. Sachi, my dear, you can't simply 'enhance' a blurred digital image and expect to magically make it crystal sharp. Oh, you can mess with it a bit, do some edge enhancement, contrast enhancement, rotate the color palette, and maybe highlight some particular feature or other, but you can't create information that is not there to begin with."

Sachi looked dejected. "Oh."

Midori panned the image around. "What am I looking at?"

"It's an in-game snapshot from Alfheim Online. The image is of the Top of the World Tree."

"Alfheim Online? Isn't that the VRMMO that you and Sugu played so much last year?"

"Yep."

"But I thought you didn't play it anymore?"

"I don't. This is a blow up of a large HD in-game print-screen image that was taken by some other player who did a multi-stage rocket boost to get up high enough to grab this one blurry snapshot. I really need you to enhance it, right here." She pointed.

Midori panned the mouse to the area that Sachi was pointing at and zoomed in. On the screen she
saw what looked like a big blurry birdcage shaped object. Midori peered closely at the screen. The birdcage seemed to contain a standing winged bird. Or was it a person with wings..?

"Hmm."

Midori's fingers flew on her keyboard at high speed. "A lot of times we get a snapshot photo from a paparazzi with bad motion blur that we want to publish in our magazine. Sometimes we can fix it, sometimes we can't. It all depends on the motion vectors integrated over the time domain. If the smear is linear enough. Let me see."

Midori's macro keystrokes had activated some rather expensive Photoshop modules that she used in advanced imaging work. A dozen different menus and windows started to pop up everywhere on the screen. Sachi was fascinated at the complexity.

She leaned forward. "What are you doing?"

"Well, if the motion vectors are simple enough and if the speed of the blur is constant it just might be possible to do something with a de-gaussian filter. It's kind of tricky though. You have to keep guessing the matrix until it resolves. Takes a bit of an artists' touch to pick the right anchor area too."

"A de-gaussian filter?"

"It's a special type of Photoshop filter that uses something called a discrete cosine transformation [DCT] combined with a deconvolution filter. If the motion blur is linear you can sometimes work it backwards, reconstructing the original RGB pixel information along the smear path. In a special case like this, with a steady smear path, the information actually *is* there if you can input the correct direction and speed of the original smear. You just have to walk the path and assign a predicted pixel value to a particular anchor point, like this, then write a 3x3 matrix to deconvolve it, like this..."

More fast typing.

*Please, let Mom figure this out.*

Midori smiled. "Ah, there. Wait. Oops, let me try again. Yes, there."

The subsection of the image was now crystal sharp. Midori sat back. "Now will you just look at that. I'm pretty good, eh?"

Sachi gasped.

It was her.

The girl in the image had long elvish ears and wings, and she wore some kind of a fairie costume, but it was definitely Asuna.

"Let's confirm." Midori's fingers flew again and a set of web browser windows came up. She focused on an image of Asuna that was in the public records. She lined up the two faces.

Sachi gasped again.

Midori pushed her chair back in astonishment. "The ears, adornment, and clothing are different, so is the lighting angle, but.. oh yes."
It was true. Other than for the various fairie accoutrements the girl in the birdcage was a dead ringer for Asuna.

"My word. But Sachi, how do we know it's really her in that cage?"

"Well, we know that Kayaba had modified SAO on Day 1 so that everybody looked the same as they did in real life. And right now ALO has a big promotion going on to attract SAO players, where ALO will copy over your SAO skill stats and you get to keep your avatar's appearance except for the race-based changes."

"So you think."

"Yeah. It's definitely her."

Sachi turned. "But Mom, what does it mean?"

Midori shook her head in disbelief. Then she read the description under an old public news photo. It was about a charity event in Osaka that was held by RECT Ltd. In the photo was the president of RECT Ltd, Shouzou Yuuki, who was standing next to his daughter, Asuna Yuuki.

Midori whirled in her office chair to face Sachi. "Asuna's family surname is Yuuki? Are you sure?"

"Uh, yeah. Is it important?"

"Is it important? Don't you see? It means her father owns RECT Ltd, the parent company of RECT Progress, who are the publishers of ALO!" Her hands flew again and more search results popped up. "Yes, RECT Ltd owns the hospital too. Dear heavens. It's all connected."

Sachi asked again, "Mom, what does this mean?"

Midori frowned and looked down. "I don't know yet. But I can tell you that something is definitely very wrong here."

"Should we call the police? Or maybe should I try to contact Mr. Kikuoka at MINFO?"

"Hmm, no, not yet. I had so many hassles trying to get that interview that I'd bet money somebody in the government is involved with this so-called SAO Glitch. We don't want to tip them off about what we've found yet. Not until we know for sure who we can trust. For now we need to keep this to ourselves."

"Got it."

"Sachi, you told me about your hospital superior.. Kurosawa was it? About how much you liked her? Do you think you can trust her?"

Sachi nodded. "Yes. I do. I trust her."

Midori generated a printout of the sharpened image and handed it to Sachi. "Okay, let's take a chance. Go and show this pic to your boss.Warn her that the government is likely involved somehow. Then follow her instructions. Just keep me in the loop."

"Right."

"Meanwhile I am going to discreetly work on some contacts that I have. I'll try to get something by the end of tomorrow."
"Thanks, Mom. Should I tell Kazuto?"

"Hmm, not yet. If we tell him now I know that my boy will just go charging off to the hospital and raise a ruckus."

"You think he'll do that?"

"Oh yes." She went on to explain. "Kazuto is in love, dear, and love can make us do foolish things without thinking. That's particularly true given his current condition. No, let's just you and me get this figured out. Quietly. Then we'll have a family-wide meeting and decide what to do next."

"I want to tell Sugu too."

"Why, dear?"

"Because we promised each other. We're real sisters now so we won't hold secrets from each other."

"Fine then. Just make sure she keeps it to herself for now."

Early the next morning Sachi knocked on Kazuto's bedroom door with his breakfast tray. As expected he did not answer. She sighed and used her key to unlock the door.

When she entered she almost dropped the tray.

It was because Kazuto was laying peacefully on his bed, fully clothed, hands clasped together, with a NerveGear helmet on his head.

His PC was still turned on, with all three panels lit up brightly. Across the three panels she saw a copy of the same blurred image that she had given Midori the previous night. The image was zoomed in on the birdcage and the person inside. Agil had apparently e-mailed the image to him.

Sachi put down the tray. She hollered, "Sugu! I need help!"

Suguha ran up the stairs, still trying swallow a glob of oatmeal. "What's up?" Then she stopped and stared at Kazuto's prostrate form. Sachi pointed at the three panels. Suguha ran up and looked at them.

"Oh, no. Sachi, tell me he didn't.."

"He did."

Suguha did a facepalm. "Idiot."

Sachi sighed, "Me? You? Mom? The gang? No, he just goes charging off all by himself. Romantic? Yeah. Smart? No! Doesn't he realize this isn't SAO anymore? He's not stuck in there! There's a whole world covering his back!"

"Yep, he's an idiot. I'll PM Recon. We'll need his reconnaissance skills to find Kazuto in case he stupidly wandered off somewhere on his own. Say, do you know if he ever played it before?"

"Don't think so."

Sachi and Suguha trotted next door into their shared bedroom. Suguha tossed an AmuSphere helmet at Sachi, who deftly caught it and put it on her head as Suguha did the same. Both girls quickly lied down on their respective side-by-side futons and clasped each other's fingers.

Simultaneously they both said, "Link start!"

And the world went away.

A/N:

* Translation: My younger sister.

** Translation: My older sister.

*** Translation: My older brother.
Something was wrong. Instead of being gently deposited at the Spriggan capital of Zigurrat, Kirito found himself tumbling wildly. He felt a surge of electricity course through his body as his viewing frustum continued to glitch in front of him with bursts of random pixels. After a few seconds the image stabilized and he saw that he was falling right out of the sky. His height was tremendous. As he fell he saw no sign of the great step pyramid of the Spriggan capital city, nor did he see any other artificial structures anywhere on the horizon. Instead he was falling towards what looked like random countryside.

He tried to stabilize himself. As the ground rushed up he caught glimpses of great trees, and a large conifer loomed up at him. He tightly closed his eyes and shielded his head with his arms just before impact.

His body glanced off one of the larger branches, then another, then another. His final velocity was sufficiently low to avoid serious injury, and he ended up rolling off the last branch into tall soft grass, face first. Even though he had lost only a handful of hit points the crash had still stung his face, neck, and shoulders even with the pain absorbers running at max.

Ouch!

His head had gone all the way into the soft dirt. After a moment of him doing a humorous impression of a headless upside-down statue with his arms and legs akimbo at odd angles in a completely ridiculous pose, he finally began to move and managed to pull his head out and sit up.

He spat out a tuft of grass that had entered his mouth. "Bleh."

He started cleaning his teeth and gums with his finger. He was more than a little appreciative that none of this was real. After spitting out the last bits of dirt and grass he finally stood up and looked around to see where he was.

He saw that he was standing in what what arborologists called a climax forest: The trees looked ancient, covered with moss, mistletoe, vines, tendrils, and other parasitic plants that had smothered the tree trunks and wrapped the branches in tight strangleholds. The soil was rich and deep, filled with centuries of decayed organic matter that had fallen to the forest floor.

The woods had a mysterious and dark sense of beauty to it. He could hear the faint calls and hoots of strange birds and other wild creatures high up in the trees. He saw golden drops of honeydew falling from the branches of the great old trees, shimmering, dripping onto the vines that drank up the liquid thirstily, in a place where everything was alive and was either competing furiously to grab the sunlight or to feed upon those that did.

Where the heck am I?

He decided to check his map. He lifted his right hand and made a swiping motion in the air with his index and middle fingers to bring up the menu. Nothing happened. He tried it again. Then he tried swiping with his left hand and it worked.

He tapped on the menu: Info - Map. A colored map of Alfheim appeared in the air before him.

Hmm, the map looks pretty simple. Nine race capitals in a circle on the periphery, the World Tree in the middle. Easy to remember. I see my locus symbol on the map. Oh, that's just great. I'm in the middle of nowhere.
Yep, the World Tree is right in the center as expected. Wait, how far away is it? Let's see here..

Huh? This map doesn't have a distance scale? Seriously? Argh!

Without a scale of distance this stupid map is totally useless! How can you plan a quest, count the travel days, or allocate supplies and stuff if you don't know how far away your objective is? Who designed this stupid map anyway?

He gave up on the map. Instead he tapped Info - Skills.

Lookie that. My skill proficiency values really did carry over from SAO just like the promo said they would: Sword Skill=1000, Martial Arts=991, Fishing=643.. That'll help a lot.

Hmm, Dual Sword Wielding is missing. A few other skills also. Oh well, maybe they just aren't applicable in this game.

He tapped on Inventory and started to scroll down what he saw was a rather short list.

Looks like I have basic starter items: A beginner's sword, a couple low-level healing potions, some rations, not much else.

He scanned the inventory list again, half hoping that his most cherished inventory item from SAO, Yui's Heart, was still with him. He flicked to the bottom of the list again. Nothing. He tried scrolling down again, this time firmly pressing his finger on the list and dragging it up hard.

There was a stutter, then something jerked up from the bottom edge of the display and appeared at the very bottom of the inventory list:

MHCP001 ?? ? ? ?? ?

Yes! She's here!

Back in SAO, Kirito had briefly grabbed GM access to the Cardinal System just before Yui's deletion, where he had commanded the admin hub to download Yui's data into a deactivated and compressed game object called "Yui's Heart", a small blue crystal teardrop*. He then transferred the object into the local cache memory of his NerveGear helmet.

He was immensely relieved that Yui had survived the destruction of Aincrad. But what were those question marks? He tapped on the object to open it.

An error message popped up.

System Error: Cached link points to missing system storage. Link deletion required. Tap Ok to continue.

No! What happened?

Was she damaged?

Wait, it's a dangling pointer. She's just missing.**

Kirito nodded to himself. He should have realized. Even when stored in compressed form the amount of data that was required to encapsulate the world's first self-aware A.I. must have been truly enormous. When counting all of the thousands of synaptic connections of each of the trillions of axonal neurons in the human brain and their possible targets to other axons, the human brain itself contained over a petabyte of information. Yui was smarter than any human, so her
uncompressed data must have been even larger than that. Even in highly compressed form it was still enormous [100 TB], far too large to fit in the local cached memory of a NerveGear helmet. When Kirito had stored her game object in the local cache memory of his helmet he did not realize that he had stored only a pointer to the static memory address of the game object that was still inside SAO.

He sighed. He had hoped that Yui could join him on his quest to find Asuna.

But alas, it was not to be.

Was she still alive? Midori's interview had revealed that the auto-deletion of Aincrad had mysteriously halted about halfway through so there was a good chance that Yui was still in there somewhere. The game-clearing program would have unpacked her data so that it could be inspected for proper sorting before the deletion phase had begun. She might have escaped.

But if she did manage to escape somehow, where was she?

He sighed again and looked up at the dim sky that peeked through the dense canopy.

_Yui? Hello? Can you see me? Daddy's here._

_Mommy is here too._

_If you can't help me, at least I hope you are watching._

_I am going try to find Mommy now._

_I miss you so much. I miss Mommy too._

He tapped on 'Ok' to delete the broken link, then he looked in direction that the map told him to go. He took a deep breath as he prepared to start on his journey.

_Yui, did you send me to this spot to help me find Mommy? If so, thank you._

_I'm going now. Please join us if you can. And if you can't reach us, Mommy and I will go find you._

_We'll all find each other so that we'll all be together again._

_I promise._

He knew that the edge of the forest was close by, perhaps only a couple hundred meters north of his current location. He ran down a slope toward the brightening sunlight.

A minute later he was through. Before him he saw an endless grassy plain that stretched far off into the distance. Nearby a foot path connected to a simple rutted dirt road that meandered down toward the foothills beneath the World Tree.

The World Tree.

He saw it, arching up, up, and up, in whorls of pearl and white, rising literally out of sight into a swirl of billowy clouds.

But how far was it? The map did not say.

He squinted at the Tree and the clouds near the top, trying to figure out how to tell how tall the whole thing actually was. If there are regular clouds forming at that altitude it couldn't be that tall,
could it? He knew that, except for the wispy faint horsetails that sometimes appeared in Earth's stratosphere (20,000 meters), all of the clouds on Earth topped out at around 7000 meters. Only the great dark thunderhead of a furious cumulonimbus storm cloud rose higher, and the sedate pillowy clouds surrounding the Tree's apex looked nothing like that.

The Tree dominated the skyline. He used his fingers like a protractor with his index finger pointed forward and thumb pointed up to measure the angle. He figured the top of the Tree was at about 15 degrees elevation by his reckoning.

He bought up his menu and tapped on Other - Tools - Calculator.

Assume the Tree is about 7000 meters high. $\tan(15\text{ degrees})$ is about 0.27, so the distance is about 26 kilometers.

*Hey whaddya know, I finally used my high school math trig for something useful.*

*Hmm, 26 kilometers, I can make that in a day even on foot if I walk fast. Easy.*

Unfortunately for Kirito he had made several key mistakes:

First, he did not realize that large objects often appear deceptively close, particularly when there is no sense of scale for comparison.

Second, ALO's computer generated clouds were not like Earth's clouds. They were programmed to appear at that height.

Third, ALO cheated and made the Tree look at least 15 degrees tall from any vantage point in Alfheim regardless of distance. Kirito did not know that the map was actually much larger, where a central object even 7 kilometers high located in, say, the English Midlands, would appear only as a small dot on the horizon from the vantage point of Wales or the cliffs of Dover. And that was assuming Alfheim was laid out perfectly flat and not on a globe in which case it would be below the horizon and not visible at all.

*Yep, this is easy.*

Kirito did not just start walking, however. He knew that he was supposed to fly to get there, not walk. It was the whole point of ALO.

*Those hills will prevent me from walking there. Gotta fly to get over them.*

Again he was wrong. He did not know that the Highlands rose higher than the maximum flight ceiling, forcing players crawl underneath them through the Lugru Corridor.

*Well I guess I need to start flying then. It will be much faster anyway.*

*Now, how do I do this..*

He opened his menu and looked for a 'Fly' button. There wasn't any.

*Must be a command phrase.*

He stood up tall and straight facing the tree. He raised his right fist skyward and yelled, "Fly!"

Nothing.

"Flight!"
"Go!"
"Soar!"
"Up!"
"Up, up and away!"
"Wings!"
"Air!"
"Shazam!"

Still nothing.

It was because in his mad rush to save Asuna he had skipped over the 30 minute flight tutorial, and so he did not know how to summon the flight controller into his hand [make a gripping motion].

He tried flapping his arms up and down like a bird.

He bent his elbows and tried flapping like a chicken.

He jumped as he flapped like a chicken, yelling all the phrases again.

He tried laying on his stomach, arms and legs extended like Superman, and repeated all the phrases yet again.

Nothing was working.

Aw crap. I gotta log out and do the fly tutorial.

He opened his menu and tapped on Logout. When he did so a message appeared:

**Warning:** You are not in Spriggan territory, in a safe inn, nor in a safe campsite. Logging out will cause your avatar to remain behind and be vulnerable to attack. Are you sure (Yes/No)?

Kirito groaned.

Crap! If I log out now my avatar will be a sitting duck!

*If I die here I'll lose my super-high skill proficiencies. I'll also be booted all the way back to the Spriggan capital and according to the map the capital is at least twice as far away from the Tree as I am from here.*

Double crap!

Then he remembered that the SAO/ALO promo was a one-shot deal. If he rolled another new character it would just be a regular one with none of his special skill stats.

*I can't re-roll either. Triple crap!*

He sighed.

*Oh well, I better start walking then.*

And so he started trudging down the hill towards the World Tree, on foot.
Sachi and Leafa materialized in the the main square of Swilvane. Recon ran up to meet them. He was panting hard. "Leafa, what's the big emergency?"

Leafa said testily, "My lovesick brother. He decided to go charging off to the World Tree all by himself."

Recon was surprised. "Huh? He did? But that's the final quest. You need an army of top-level players to even have a chance. How many game hours does he have?"

"Zero."

"What?"

"I know, I know. I think I'm going to start calling him Kirito-baka."

"Right... Anyway, you want me to find him using my tracking skills?"

"Yeah. As much as I hate to admit it, we could really use your search ability here."

"Glad to help! Okay, uh, so where do I start?"

Leafa and Sachi looked at each other. They had no idea where to even begin.

Recon asked, "Do you two even know his game handle?"

Sachi brought up her menu. "Good question. Let me guess..." She rapidly scrolled down the game roster. "Yep, he is using 'Kirito' again. Oh look, he's a Spriggan."

Leafa made a face. "What? A Spriggan? That's a terrible choice. They're worthless except as treasure hunters. Spriggins are just a bunch of thieves, tomb raiders, and pirates. Mediocre fighters too. Kirito should have picked a Sylph for speed and agility, or maybe a Salamander for raw power. Why did he do that?"

"Black coat. Duh."

Leafa smacked her forehead. "Of course. He wants to look cool. What a doofus. I'm calling him Kirito-baka-double-baka."

Sachi checked her map of Alfheim on her menu. "Aw crudbuckets. Look at this. The Spriggan capital, Ziggurat, is on the opposite side of the World Tree."

Leafa and Recon looked over Sachi's shoulder at the map.

"She's right." Recon pointed, "It's on the far side of the continent."

Leafa yelled, "Idiot! That's about as far away as you can get from here!"

Sachi turned to face her. "Hoo boy, what do we do?"

Recon asked, "Is there any way to contact the Spriggan capital from here?"

Leafa thought hard. "Hmm, Lady Sakuya's Moon Mirror should do the trick. She could contact their leader, Blackbeard, and ask if he's over there. And if not, as the race leader his roster should tell him which territory Kirito is currently in."
"Should we go find Lady Sakuya now?"

"Boy, I hate asking her. If she calls him then she will owe that fat smelly pirate a favor, and she
won't like that one bit."

Sachi asked, "Any way we can we PM him directly?"

"Nope. Only if you are already on his Friend List. Otherwise, no way."

Leafa made a sigh. "He's not contacting us. He's not friending us. That idiot. I think I'm going to
start calling him Kirito-baka-triple-baka."

Sachi tried to think.

"Hey, I have an idea. Why don't we send a friend request to him?"

Leafa's beamed at her. "Yes! Why didn't I think of that?"

Sachi replied, "Don't get too excited. It's not that simple. Remember, PMs are restricted. They only
work when both parties are not in certain places: Not in dungeons, not during quests, not during
combat, and other restrictions that I don't remember."

"He's probably at the capital so it shouldn't be a problem, right? I think neutral territory is okay too
if he's not fighting or anything. Try it."

"Okay."

Sachi brought up her menu and pulled up her player roster. She scrolled down to Kirito and tapped
it. Minimal information appeared: Name, race, and a small picture of the avatar. She tapped on the
name and a popup submenu appeared. She tapped on 'Send Friend Request' and confirmed it.

"There it's done."

"Hope he sees it."

Kirito was panting hard as he ran. The Tree wasn't getting any closer even though the edge of the
forest was now receding well into the distance.

Suddenly his menu popped up on its own.

**Friend Request: Sachi. Do you accept (Yes/No)?**

He stopped running and bent over wheezing. He tapped *Yes.*

{ Sachi: Kirito? You there? }

He tapped out a reply.

{ Kirito: Yep }

**Friend Request: Leafa. Do you accept (Yes/No)?**

Again he tapped *Yes.*

{ Leafa: KIRITO YOU IDIOT! WAIT FOR US! }
Leafa was tapping furiously on the her air keyboard, uttering vile curses as she did so.

{ Kirito: Sorry, I gotta get to Asuna as soon as possible. I'll just walk until you catch up. }

{ Leafa: NO! STOP! YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT YOU ARE DOING! }

Recon was incredulous. "He's walking? Really?"

Sachi sighed, "It's like he has tunnel vision or something."

Leafa was still muttering curses as Sachi remembered Midori's words.

*Kazuto is in love, dear, and love can make us do foolish things without thinking. That's particularly true in his current condition.*

Sachi knew that without Leafa or herself to guide him that he would inevitably fail in a mad suicidal rush that would almost certainly kill him before he got anywhere near Asuna.

*Kirito needs me. I have to stay by his side or he will never get there.*

{ Sachi: Pay attention. You need to stop and meet up with us so we can give you flight training. Then you can get going a lot faster. }

There was a pause as Kirito considered the logic of Sachi's proposal.

{ Kirito: All right. Fine. But like I said I'll just walk for now. You catch up. }

{ Sachi: Kirito, just stop. Where are you anyway? }

{ Kirito: Not at Ziggurat. Middle of nowhere. Just trees and grass. }

Leafa was incredulous. "Huh? How did that happen? He's supposed to start at the race capital."

Sachi thought a moment.

{ Sachi: Describe your location as precisely as you can. }

{ Kirito: I just exited a big forest and am now in a grass plain. I see the World Tree straight ahead. }

"Hmm, Ancient Forest?"

"Probably, but we need to be sure."

{ Sachi: Kirito, face the World Tree. Now imagine a clock face on the ground around you with you standing at the center. The little hand is pointing at the sun and the big hand is pointing at the World Tree. What time is it? }

{ Kirito: About 8 o'clock. }

Leafa glanced at the setting sun going behind the Amethyst Tower just outside of the main square.

She nodded, "Same here."

Sachi agreed. "Same azimuth. That clinches it. He just left the northern edge of the Ancient Forest."
The senior Sylph sighed in relief. "Good. He's not very far away from us."

Sachi continued to look up at the sun. "Leafa, we are going to be losing sunlight soon." The faint glow of the Blue Moon could be seen in the early twilight. "From the looks of it the moon will set in about three hours after sunset. It will be too dark to fly after that."

"Okay, the northern edge is about three and a half hours from here. We'll fly until moonset and then camp until sunrise. Our downtime shouldn't be more than an hour." It was because nights in Alfheim were only four hours long.

{ Leafa: Kirito, we should reach your position in about four and a half hours. You are in neutral territory so you can't log out safely, so just sit tight. Use your Spriggan illusion spells to hide yourself if you have to until we get there. }

{ Kirito: But I can't just sit here! }

{ Leafa: Suck it up buttercup. Just hide and wait. }

{ Kirito: I want to keep going. Don't worry, I'll be careful. Signing out. }

Leafa furiously typed out 'WAIT!' but it was too late. Kirito had closed the connection before Leafa could finish the response.

Leafa shook her fists up at the heavens. "Kirito, you are so baka! Baka, baka, baka!"

Sachi calmed her down. "C'mon, forget it. We need to get going." She noticed that Recon was leaning against a pole, half asleep. "And don't forget Recon."

"Oh just ignore him. He'll only slow us down. We already got Kirto's location."

"No, we still need him. Alfheim is a big place and we only have a general idea where Kirito is. We will need Recon's tracking skills to pinpoint him, especially if he's using illusion magic to hide from a monster or something."

"Okay, okay, fine." Leafa gave Recon a kick in the butt. "Hey, sleepyhead, let's go!"

The sun had long since set and the Blue Moon was rapidly dropping out of the sky. Leafa and Sachi were now sitting together at a campfire, a designated safe spot. Recon said he was tired and had already logged out. He said he would return at sunrise, about an hour from now.

The two sisters were camped inside a large round wooded clearing. They were sitting on a fallen log, one of hundreds that had fallen in a circular pattern during one of their earlier kinetic dives on the Salamanders.

That was four months ago. To Sachi it seemed like an eternity now.

The two fairies continued to watch the flames dance before them as they sat.

Sachi huddled down, wrapping her arms around herself.

Leafa asked, "You cold?"

"No, not really." If anything the night was on the warm side. "It's just that I.. I don't like this. This place."
Leafa asked, "The forest or the game?"

"Both."

Leafa understood. "Bad memories huh?"

They were camped not far from the location of Sachi's second death. After that experience she had vowed that she would never wear a halo ever again.

Sachi pulled her arms tighter together and huddled down even more. She could almost feel the monsters surrounding her, watching her, from the tree line. It was a feeling she had not had since Kirito protected her from the monsters in SAO.

Leafa moved herself closer, encircling Sachi's shoulders in her arm. "Don't worry, I'll protect you from any monsters. You won't die again in here. I promise."

Sachi turned and made small smile. "Thank you."

Leafa hesitated. "Still, if something should happen, do you think you can handle it? Otherwise maybe you shouldn't have dived..."

Sachi interrupted, "No, I have to be here." She sat up straight. "I can handle it. Kirito needs me."

Leafa understood Sachi's determination all too well. She knew that whenever Sachi had made up her mind about something like this that she could be just as committed and obsessive as Kazuto.

_Hmm, if those two ever went at loggerheads against each other I wonder which one would blink first?_

Leafa dropped the suggestion and sighed, "You're right. He needs me too. Both of us. He's a babe in the woods right now."

"Totally."

Leafa picked up a stick and poked the fire.

The fire dance continued as the fairies gazed into it.

Finally Leafa asked quietly, "How's your stomach?"

Sachi touched her midsection gently. "Still hurts."

"Me too."

Sachi lowered her head.

Leafa studied her. "Anything else?"

Sachi looked up again at the campfire.

There was a pause.

Sachi finally admitted, "Leafa, I am so messed up."

"Wanna talk about it?"

The smaller Sylph sighed, "I dunno.."
Leafa leaned in. "Hey, we share everything now, right? No secrets. Something is bugging you. I can tell."

*Should I tell Sugu?*

*No secrets. We did promise.*

"Sugu, you have to swear never to tell anyone. Especially not Kirito."

"Okay, I won't. I promise hope to die. What is it?"

"Well, uh.. well.. uhm.. oh, this is hard.."

"Go on."

"Well, you see I had a dream."

"A dream?"

"A dream about Kirito."

"What kind of dream?"

"A bad one."

"How bad?"

"Really bad."

The petite Sylph's eyes fell in shame.

Leafa pulled back in surprise. She turned on the log to face away from her.

Sachi saw her sister's emotional withdrawal from herself. She jumped up. "Sugu, I'm sorry!"

Leafa was now facing the opposite direction away from the campfire.

Sachi went on, "I try, I really do. But I can't help it!"

Sachi sat back down next to her facing the same direction. "Sugu? Please don't hate me."

Leafa made a wan smile. "It's okay. If you say you can't help it I believe you. It's probably just your VRDP thing, right?"

"Maybe? I dunno.. I'm still sorry."

"Hey, I understand."

They both continued to watch the campfire. The embers danced in Leafa's eyes.

*No, Sachi, it is not your VRDP thing.*

*And I know why.*

Unlike Sachi, Suguha wasn't ready to confess just how deep her crush actually was.

*You think you have dreams? So do I.*
You feel guilty about it? Well, I've done worse than you.

Suguha remembered her times alone in her bedroom thinking of him. She was relieved that it hadn't happened in a while, not since their 3-way confession in the dojo. She was not sure why it stopped, but maybe it was because she had confessed her feelings, and in his gentle rejection of her she knew that he would never reciprocate that way, so the fantasy no longer matched reality.

Leafa decided to change the subject. She opened up her menu and looked at the real time clock that was embedded in the title bar on the right side.

"Mom should be coming home from work soon."

Sachi remembered that Midori had announced that she was going to do some investigating and report back. "Oh, that's right. I forgot. I should log out and touch base with her. See what she found."

"Good idea."

"It might be a while depending on what she dug up. Leafa, if I'm not back by sunrise go on ahead and I'll catch up."

"Right."

"And make sure you take Recon with you."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever."

Sachi logged out.

When Sachi awoke from her dive her first real physical sensation was the touch of Suguha's hand, the same as always. She gently unclasped their interlocking fingers as Suguha continued to lay unconscious on her own futon, her AmuSphere's LED lights still blinking away.

They had always logged off together, but not this time. Sachi kneeled near Suguha's head and whispered some words.

Please find him. Protect him.

She got up and checked on Kazuto, then she went downstairs to the main level. She spotted Midori's coffee thermos in the kitchen sink.

Oh good, Mom is home.

Sachi ran down to Midori's basement office door. She saw that it was closed. A light was streaming out from under it.

She was just about to knock on the door when she heard two people talking in hushed tones. One was Midori, and the other was an older man whose voice she did not recognize.

"This is dangerous. They're both sociopaths. That man could kill you without batting an eye."

"But Reo-kun, what other choice do we have? We can't go to the police."

"No, you are right about that. But don't do this yourself. Let me do it."
"I can't possibly ask you to..."

"You have family, I don't. You're on his radar now along with your son. While your son is inside, that man could easily grab him as another hostage, do anything to him, use him as leverage against you. I'm just an old fisherman now. I don't care if they get me."

"No, Reo-kun, you don't have to do this. This isn't your battle."

"Ah, but it is. I had helped create and design that terrible prison, remember? I am as responsible as anyone. Doing this is the least that I can do to make amends."

"But.."

"No, it's settled then."

There was a pause.

"If I don't get the chance to ever see either of you again, please give Minetaka my regards."

She sighed, "You can do that yourself when he returns. Reo-kun, I can't in good conscience ask you to do this."

"It's already decided." Sachi heard a chuckle. "You know, sometimes I think Minetaka doesn't know how lucky he is..."

"Reo-kun just stop it, you old sweet talker you."

"Well it's true, isn't it? He won over the White Angel."

"Reo! I wish you white hats would stop calling me that. It's so embarrassing!"

He ignored her as he rambled on, reliving the past. "Oh, I remember how much competition he had. It was when I first saw you in that CS programming class that I was auditing when I was 35. You were the only young woman in a lecture hall with 180 other young male Computer Science students. I so enjoyed watching them dote attendance on you, hovering around you, flattering you like in a reverse harem anime show, heh. And then you blew them all off for an economics major at another university!*** Oh the heartbreak of so many young men."

Sachi heard her mother's half-hearted plea to halt the flattery. "Just stop it, you silly old man."

"Hey, a man my age lives mostly in his memories. Anyway, like I said, I'll do it. No arguments. You just be careful. That man at RECT is another sociopath like Kayaba. He is probably watching the White Angel like a hawk right now."

Sachi decided that she had eavesdropped enough. She knocked on the door. "Mom?"

Midori recognized her voice. "Sachi! Come on in! You are just in time. I have an old friend here that I'd like you to meet."

Sachi slowly opened the door and peered in. She saw an old man sitting in a folding chair next to Midori. He appeared to be in his fifties, mostly bald, with gray tufts of hair around his ears. His square eyeglasses contrasted with his egg shaped head.

Midori spoke from her own office chair, "Sachi, let me introduce you to Reo Fujiwara, the senior telecommunications engineer for Tohto Broadband Connection Ltd."
Fujiwara immediately stood up and bowed as he smiled pleasantly at Sachi. "Semi-retired. Delighted to meet you."

As he rose back up he appraised the teenage girl. He grinned, then he turned to address his former classmate from decades ago. As he did so his eyes twinkled. "Midori-chan, you did not tell me that you were hiding another beautiful angel in your home!"

Midori waved him off. "Sachi, don't listen to him. He's a dirty old man."

He winked at the girl. "That's right, I am."

They were both joking of course. Sachi did her own appraisal of him in return. She was able to see past his scurrilous and playful banter, and in his placid gray-green eyes she saw a kind and gentle soul, a man who was at peace with himself and the world.

"My, my, three beautiful angels living under one roof..."

Despite all of his fummery Sachi immediately took a liking to him. She felt that she could implicitly trust him, the same way she had felt about Nurse Kurosawa.

Midori resumed the introductions. "Reo-kun, let me introduce you to my daughter-to-be, Sachi Kirigaya."

Sachi quickly corrected her. "My name is Sachi Watanabe. It won't change until the adoption paperwork is formalized. But please, just call me Sachi."

"Nice to meet you, Sachi. You can call me Reo, or call me Nishida, my SAO handle."

Sachi pulled out a second folding chair for herself and everyone sat down. The fit was tight so they kept the door open.

Midori went on to explain, "Reo-kun's telecommunications company was the primary subcontractor that implemented SAO's WAN network for Argus. He was one of the senior engineers who designed the network and its security infrastructure before he was trapped in the game."

Fujiwara explained briefly about what he had done, and how he was rather proud of the fact that his triple-redundant WAN network design had stayed up running non-stop for two years without a losing single minute of downtime. Midori chimed in that it was because of his efforts, in part, that nobody had died in the game.

Sachi was impressed. "Thank you so much, sir. I'm sure all of us who played SAO are in your debt."

He looked down. "All I did was unwittingly help to entrap you poor children. Once we were all locked in together I knew there was no way of getting out again."

Midori tried to console him, "Reo-kun, stop blaming yourself. You didn't know."

Sachi changed the subject. "Sir, did we ever meet in SAO? I don't recall."

"No. I never left floor 22 once I found that great fishing lake. Took up fishing there, favorite hobby, not much else. Played out my Old Man and the Sea fantasy, heh. I knew your step-brother pretty well."
Sachi leaned forward with interest. "You did?"

"Oh yes. He actually caught that dang fish. Dunno how he did that."

He sat back in his chair and reminisced, "I think he was retired himself at that point. He moved in with his family. Great guy, great wife - she was gorgeous, just gorgeous. Kid was cute as a button. They bought this nice little wooden cabin down the road from me and settled down."

He stopped when he noticed that Midori's eyes were shouting at him to stop talking.

He sat up again, a bit confused. "Oh, uh, sorry?"

Sachi said softly, "No, it's quite all right."

Sachi's hand unconsciously moved itself to her stomach.

My plan.

I was going to wait.

I was going to stay at his side forever.

He'd become an adult with me. Then he'd realize his feelings, and then I would have joyfully given myself to him.

Home, family, children..

Living in our home together, walking together in the sunlight, hand in hand, our child riding on his shoulders, laughing. Making love in the moonlight..

Growing old together.

And now that will never be.

Midori correctly guessed Sachi's thoughts and quickly spoke.

"Oh honey, I'm so sorry. I knew that Nishida had fished with Kirito, but I didn't realize he and Asuna were staying at that cabin in the same place."

"It's all right."

It was now Midori's turn to quickly change the subject. "Sachi, dear, I'm glad you are here to meet Reo-kun. He and I have been talking and we think we might have a plan to rescue Asuna. Well, part of one anyway."

Rescue Asuna?

Sachi nodded as she waited to hear the start of their plan.

They both explained that, although their plan was still very much in its early stages, and even with the computer hacking part already fully fleshed out (and with Nishida confident that it could be done), that much more information still needed to be gathered before they could try to save Asuna. They told her that her own part might be the key to rescuing her.

Rescue Asuna.
And then, as she absorbed the information..

She hated herself for her next thought.

*What if I failed?*

*No one would know.*

She bitterly hated herself even more for the awful, awful, thought that came next.

*Asuna could die. Or she might never wake up.*

The awful, terrible, thoughts kept coming into her head, unbidden.

They were like her other thoughts, the ones in her impure dreams with Kirito. No matter how hard she tried the bad thoughts kept coming, and they simply would not go away.

*Stop it! Stop it!*

*Get out of my head! Get out!*

*Please, just get out!*

Someone gently touched her shoulder. Sachi was jolted back to reality.

She saw that Midori was now standing over her as she sat in her folding chair. They were alone now. Apparently Midori had sent Fujiwara out of her office.

"Sachi? Dear? Wake up."

Sachi looked up at her. "Mom?"

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine now."

Sachi closed her eyes. She prepared to put on a false mask for her mother. When she was ready she opened them again. "I must have triggered. Silly me. It's just that VRDP thing. Don't worry about it."

"Oh Sachi, I feel so terrible. Please, my darling, please forgive me."

"Mom, you didn't know." Then she added, "Sorry for spacing out like that. Uh, maybe you can explain again to me what I need to do?"

"All right."

Midori sat back down again. "As we explained, right now we need to gather more information. Thanks to Tomoya's close-up photos of the Argus servers, and with Reo filling in the details on how the network operates, I think we have the computer part pretty much nailed down at this point. The problem now is that we need more information on the hospital side. And for that we need an insider."

"Me."

"I won't lie to you, honey. It could be dangerous."
"I know. I'm ready."

"Even so, let's be sure about this, make sure you understand the risks. I want to go over it all with you carefully."

Midori then proceeded to give her detailed instructions over the next several minutes.

".. don't do anything on your own. Go directly to your boss."

".. remember, RECT owns the hospital. Their campus is right next door."

".. watch out for bugs."

".. and try to find out how Asuna's father is involved in this. That part doesn't make sense."

After Midori had finished giving her daughter her instructions she went on to discuss other things, work out ideas, and ponder on the unanswered questions regarding Asuna's fate. Mostly she was talking to herself at this point. Sachi continued to listen intently.

After an hour Midori was done. Both of them yawned. Midori checked the time. "Oh my, sunrise already? Well, no rest for the weary."

She yawned again. "I'll have to go back to work in an hour. Sachi, why don't you take a bath? You should be able to take one and still get to the hospital before Kurosawa comes in."

"But then you won't get one. Let's do a bath together, save time."

"You sure?"

"Of course. You're my Mom."

Midori hugged her. "Okay."

Sachi was originally planning to rejoin Leafa at the campsite, but that opportunity had long since passed.

Well, Leafa, I guess you get to train Kirito-baka-triple-baka on your own. Good luck. I'll join you as soon as I can.

Leafa yelled at Kirito again. "No! You're over-throttling the controller!"

"Look, can we just drop the controller already? It's not working."

She summarily yanked him up from the ground again by his armpits. This time she didn't bother to wait for him to brush off the dirt from his coat. "Now pay attention this time."

Kirito had watched closely when Leafa had first picked him up and carried him into the air to show him how it was done. She had flown with him like Christopher Reeves holding Lois Lane next to him in Superman (1979) as they soared together in the most romantic part of the film.

Leafa took Kirito up into the air again. Recon followed behind, his breath taken away.

Normally Leafa was haughty, and even rude, with everyone around her. Particularly with him. But when she was in the air like this? She changed.
When she flew she was different. She became one with the wind, soaring magnificently, effortlessly graceful, like the greatest of eagles.

Recon watched her dreamily from behind as she gracefully held Kirito aloft.

*She's my angel.*

Leafa was holding Kirito's right arm as they gained altitude.

He said, "Look, I think I got it now. Let's forget the controller."

She continued to hold him up. "Kirito, you'll need it until you are proficient. Just keep watching me."

"I said forget it."

"Kirito, don't be so stubborn."

"I don't need it. I want to try flying without it."

"You don't need it? Okay, fine, show me!"

Leafa dropped him without warning. He rapidly plummeted out of the sky.

"Gaah!"

Kirito spun around crazily, then he righted himself like a parachutist, falling flat into the wind, his arms and legs splayed out wide.

He closed his eyes and concentrated.

*Wings...*

Then he opened his eyes again and dived.

Recon was aghast, thinking that Kirito was going to crash into the ground hard again, but this time he didn't. Just before impact he pulled up with a beautiful rising curve, twisting gracefully, with tiny sparkles of light trailing from his broad black-gray wings.

"Yee hah! I got it!"

He spun and twirled in the air. Leafa whooped and joined him, spiralling around him, twisting and intersecting, their paths traced with gossamer trails of light. "Yes! Woo whee!"

Kirito did the same as they both shouted with laughter and joy. Then Leafa captured him. Together they oriented themselves upright in mid air, facing each other, holding each other by the arm and waist as if they were two elegant ballroom dancers rotating gracefully on an invisible ballroom floor. Leafa smiled at her dear brother as they slowly revolved around each other, and he did the same. Suguha was inwardly glad that Sachi was not here to see it.

Recon sighed again as the pair slowly drifted to earth in their mutual embrace.

*So beautiful.*

They landed.
"Kirito, you're ready."

"Yeah. Let's go."

"Want a break?"

"No. Asuna is waiting for me."

"Right. Lugru Corridor then."

The pair took off at high speed. Recon yelled, "Hey, wait for me!"

And so, the Fairie Dance had begun.

It was 8:00 a.m. Sachi was just about to knock on Nurse Kurosawa's office door when it opened unexpectedly.

Kurosawa said, "Oh, hello Sachi. My, you are early today."

"Hello. Uh, yes, I am."

"So, what brings you to my office so early in the morning?"

Sachi remembered what Midori had said about bugs. She thought quickly. "I want to discuss changing my work hours."

"You do?"

"Uh, yes. Working evenings means I spend too little time with my new family now, particularly my Mom and sister. I want to change that."

"I see. Well, I came in pretty early myself. Haven't had breakfast yet. I was just going to the hospital cafe to get a nice omelette. Would you like to join me?"

"I'd be delighted."

Sachi was sitting on a small park bench with her bento box in the hospital garden. The garden was located in the back of the main building, a quiet and serene place for contemplation and for privacy.

Nurse Kurosawa unfolded her napkin, then picked up the chopsticks that were on her lap breakfast tray. She joked, "If I nod off just poke me. I'm afraid I did not get much sleep last night."

Sachi looked down, "I didn't get any sleep either."

"Oh?"

"Had some things on my mind."

"I see."

Kurosawa took a chance. "It must be hard with him so close, sleeping next to you just a few doors away."

Sachi’s head snapped up. Apparently Kurosawa knew. She decided to be honest. "Yes, it is."
Kurosawa realized that other matters were pressing. However, she also knew that this might be her only opportunity to help the poor girl with her personal struggles, so she decided to continue.

"You love him, yes?"

Sachi confessed, "Yes, I do."

"I see. And how exactly do you love him?"

"How?"

"Is it storge, philia, eros, or agape?"

"I am afraid that I don't understand those foreign words."

"I'm sorry, I thought you knew about The Four Loves, the greek words for the different kinds of love found in the New Testament."

"I'm sorry, I don't."

"Well these are the four greek words for love that appear in the original text of the NT. They are usually translated as 'love' in English, or 'koi' or 'ai' in Japanese. Briefly, storge is the innate familial love between parent and child or other direct biological family members. It is the lowest form of love. Animals have this, and it is instinctive for them.

"The next level is called philia, the love shared between close friends in a shared bond based on common values or interests. Unlike storge it is voluntary, not biological. Philia can run deep, for example in the close friendship between David and Jonathan in the Bible, or between Frodo and Sam in The Lord of the Rings. The city of Philadelphia in the United States is named after it, 'The City of Brotherly Love'.

"The third kind of love is called eros, which means intimate or romantic love. It is not necessarily sexual, though it often is.

"The fourth and highest kind of love is agape [ah-gah-pay], which refers to a kind of selfless or self-sacrificing love that exists regardless of changing circumstances. It is the kind of self-sacrificial love that Jesus gave us on the Cross, and it is the kind He expects us to give each other and to Him in return.

"Now, there is actually an even higher kind, a fifth kind, called in greek [redacted]. As far as I know it was first described in detail by a 21st century monk named R.W. Kropf who lived in the Stella Maris Hermitage in rural Michigan. His treatise, The Five Loves, was posted at StellaMar dot net back in 2002 but is no longer available on-line.

"I was only able to contact Kropf a couple times by e-mail. Since then I suspect that he has moved on to glory, which is a pity because his writings on the Bible at StellarMar dot net were some of the most incredibly deep and profound commentaries on His Word that I had ever seen, and they all seem to be gone now.

"Anyway, I suspect that you have loves number 2 [philia] and number 4 [agape] for Kirito. Am I correct?"

Sachi said that she was indeed correct. She loved him like a brother, and she would do anything to save or protect him.
"And what about number 3 [eros]?"

Sachi looked down again. Then she looked up. "I know, I know. It's awful. It happens in my dreams. I can't help it. I try, I really do. I feel so terrible."

"I see. And with Kirito sleeping right next door to you the physical temptation must be quite strong."

"I know, it must be. Why else do I keep having these awful dreams?"

"Have you acted on those feelings?"

"No, of course not."

"Then don't feel guilty about it."

"Huh?"

"You are just resisting temptation. Sachi, it is okay. What you are feeling is perfectly normal."

"I don't understand."

"We are all tempted by something at one time or another. Even Jesus was tempted.*6"

"Really?"

"Yes. He was fasting in the desert for 40 days and nights. He was literally starving. You see, temptation is an objective force that acts upon our inherent weaknesses and vulnerabilities. It's an external force. So when Satan tried to coax Jesus into turning stone into bread, it said nothing bad about Jesus nor His character. He was simply exposed to that particular temptation at that particular time.

"It is how we react to our temptations that matters. An alcoholic should be neither criticized nor punished for the urge to take a drink. On the contrary, he should be supported and lauded for fighting it successfully. What matters is whether he actually takes that drink, whether we give in to our temptations.

"The best way to defend yourself is to call upon Him for support."

"I see. Thank you. That makes me feel better."

Kurosawa picked up her chopsticks and starting eating her food again. "So, why did you come to my office, Sachi? I know it wasn't just to change your hours."

Sachi glanced around furtively to make sure no one was watching, then she pulled out the screen shot of Asuna from her pocket. She unfolded it and showed it to Kurosawa.

Kurosawa put down her chopsticks and put on her reading glasses. She studied the image closely. "Explain this to me."

Sachi did so in detail, including much of what Midori had told her.

Kurosawa removed her reading glasses and looked down for a moment. Then she looked back up and sighed, "I knew that something fishy was going on right from day 1. The permanent staff were acting oddly. Many of them have terrible bedside manners, haughty, lording over my own staff. They kept taking the children over to the red side, ostensibly to do research on their mental health.
or to find ways to release the helmets. But whenever I asked to escort one of the them over there I was summarily and rudely denied access. Here I am, the third highest ranking administrator in this hospital, and they were deliberately keeping me out of the loop!"

"Have you tried contacting the Ministry of Health? MINFO? Mr. Kikuoka?"

"I made some discreet inquiries, called in some favors. Unfortunately my step-brother is out of the country right now and isn't reachable. What I did find out was that some faction of the government seems to be involved, but I'm not sure which one.

"What worries me the most is that the permanent staff are acting like they are untouchable. It is as if they know that they have some kind of trump card. It is not hard to guess what that might be."

"The 300."

"Right."

"Hostages."

"Probably."

"My Mom suspects that too. It's why she wanted me to contact you."

"Smart woman. I'd like to meet her and compare notes, but not here."

Kurosawa's face showed grim determination. "One way or another we will get to the bottom of this."

"Ma'am, please, be careful. I overheard Mom. She said they might kill anyone who got in their way."

"Hmm. I found a bug in my office, removed it, and it reappeared again the next day. It was as if they were challenging me to do something about it."

Kurosawa sat up with resolve. "Well, I don't care. They can't harm me, no matter how hard they try to intimidate me."

"But ma'am..."

"No, let me show you why." Kurosawa then raised her hand and grabbed a fistful of hair on the top of her head. She pulled and her wig came off.

She was bald.

She smiled at Sachi, "You see, in my own way I am untouchable too. Stage 4 myeloproliferative neoplasmosis." She put her wig back on. "It's why I retired as soon as I could after S-F day. I came back only because these children have about 6-18 months left, same as me, and I had promised myself that I would never let any of them die before I do, not even one."

Sachi was shocked into silence.

"It's all right, my dear. I'll be going Home soon. At my age I'm looking forward to it actually."

"Home?"

"Heaven, my dear."
"Heaven."

Kurosawa looked wistful. "Yes, I try to imagine it sometimes..."

Sachi was curious. "What is it like? Do you know?"

Kurosawa was indulgent with the inquisitive girl. "Let me ask you a question first. Tell me, what do you think Heaven is like?"

Sachi thought a moment. "Well, I know that on TV cartoons they show everyone laying around on fluffy white clouds, doing nothing but relaxing all day, maybe strumming a harp or something?"

Kurosawa laughed long and loud. "Haha! They couldn't be more wrong."

"They are?"

"Oh yes. Go read Revelation 5. Everybody is doing something. Everybody is active. It's a busy place. In Heaven you get put to work. I admit that some of it might seem a bit cliche, like singing hymns in the heavenly choir, but it will still be really interesting. Some people will go to work in other mansions, maybe get assigned roles in physical worlds, perhaps as spirits, perhaps as something else. Some of the roles will be quite powerful. Take Revelation 2 for example. It describes the saints helping Christ to rule 'with a rod of iron'. The greek word is poimanei, which is derived from the word for a shepherd, poimen. Paul uses the same word in Acts 20:28 to describe overseers. So apparently some people in Heaven will be given positions of considerable authority and power."

"Wow."

"Well, like I said I am looking forward to it, to finally be able to see Him face to face. That's why it doesn't matter what they do to me now because they can't hurt me.

"The problem right now is that I'm under constant electronic surveillance, so I can't sneak around or do anything on the computer to find out what they are up to. You see, they are screen-scraping and keylogging my computer too."

"Ma'am, I can do it for you. Nobody is watching me."

"True. They only monitor you when you are with Kirito. Still, there is no way I could possibly ask you."

"Ma'am, I said I'd do it."

"But Sachi, is your mother okay with.."

Sachi interrupted, "She said she would put it in your hands. She is in their crosshairs too. Look, we need to save Asuna, those 300 children. And we are the only ones who can do it."

Kurosawa sighed again. "You are so brave. Your mother is too." She looked down in apparent silence for a minute, then she nodded to herself and came to a decision.

"We'll take the chance together. If they catch you maybe you can bluff them. Wait an hour, then go to your shoe locker."

"Got it."

"Sachi, we can never meet again like this, not at the hospital. It will be too dangerous for you."
"I understand."

"We will need to arrange for a new meeting location. Your mother too, and everyone else involved in our little conspiracy."

Sachi thought a moment. *Agil.*

"I know the perfect place."

An hour later, Sachi opened the door to the women's locker room, checked the hallway, and stepped out. She was wearing red scrubs. Around her neck was a red ID badge and a red keycard that she had found in her shoe locker. The ID badge was for one of the permanent staff who happened to not be on duty that day and whose face and hairstyle looked a bit similar to Sachi's.

She then walked out with purpose and headed for the elevator. She pressed the button to go up to one of the main wards on floor 4. She intended to loiter somewhere and wait for one of the orderlies to wheel a medical bed with an SAO patient down to the red doors that were near the loading dock in the back of the hospital. Sachi had seen it happen several times.

The elevator opened and Sachi started to enter it, but she was blocked by an orderly pushing out a medical bed. She quickly lowered her head and mumbled "Excuse me" and she stepped back to allow the orderly to exit the elevator.

The orderly gave her a quick frown, then he proceeded to push the medical bed down the hall.

Under the NerveGear helmet she saw thick flowing red hair. Sachi suppressed a gasp.

The orderly continued to leisurely push Asuna's medical bed down the hall in the direction of the loading dock. Sachi pretended to enter the elevator, then as the door was closing she hit the Door Open button and she popped out again and started to follow from a discreet distance.

She turned the corner and saw the orderly swipe his red keycard to open the red doors, which then closed behind him. She counted to 20 and then walked to the red doors herself. She swiped her red keycard with the camera watching and went inside.

Inside was a small vestibule for a second elevator and stairway going down. The elevator doors were already closed. She took the stairs.

The stairs went down about 10 meters to a landing. She saw a fire door which was not locked. There was no other exit from the area so she went through the door. She was now standing at the start of a long lighted underground hallway that ran between the hospital and the RECT Progress campus that was on the other side of the highway. She could hear the faint muffled sounds of vehicle traffic overhead.

Far down the corridor she could see Asuna being wheeled along. She walked briskly down the tunnel to try to catch up. Another permanent staff member passed her in red scrubs, but he was so engrossed with playing Angry Birds on his smartphone that he did not even look up.

In the distance she saw the orderly stop with Asuna's medical bed at a pair of large red double doors at the end of the hall. He swiped his keycard and went inside. Meanwhile, Sachi turned and entered a women's restroom nearby and waited until she could hear the orderly walking back to the hospital. She peered out and saw him receding back to the elevator vestibule, then she turned and walked towards the double doors.
She took a deep breath, swiped her keycard, and went inside.

She was now in a large white room that sprawled away into the distance for at least 50 meters. She saw a dozen medical beds, each with an SAO victim, connected to a pylon that showed brain readouts, ECG charts, and other neurological information.

On a nearby workbench she saw several USB data sticks, each about an inch long. On a whim she grabbed one and stuffed it into one of the pockets of her scrubs.

The pylons were large enough for her to hide behind them, so she crept forward, moving from one pylon to the next, until she saw Asuna's bed only a few meters away. It was not yet connected up.

She saw two techs standing on either side of Asuna's bed. Both were corpulent and ugly, with each one wearing gaudy purple scrubs with smocks that covered their bloated bellies and lower halves.

The techs stood over Asuna's supine body as Sachi listened and watched from her nearby hiding place. They were facing away and did not see her peeking around the pylon in their direction.

The first tech said, "She's a nice one, ain't she?"

The second tech leered over her and stroked her hair with a gloved hand. "Oh yeah."

He then moved his hand down to Asuna's gown to pull it open.

Sachi almost jumped out at him right then. She had to use all of her willpower to hold herself back.

Fortunately before anything indecent was showing the first tech had pushed the hands of the second tech away from Asuna's front and closed her gown again. "No, don't. The boss said this one is special. He might walk in."

"Aw. Well, we got plenty of other ones we can play with, right?"

Sachi pulled out her smartphone and pressed the Record button.

The first tech chuckled, "Heh, yeah." Then he joked, "Hey, maybe we can program one just for you? A personal pet to cater to your every whim?"

The second tech raised his open hand. "Yeah! We should do that! High five!"

The first tech did not complete the high five and frowned at him. "I was just kidding you idiot. We both know it doesn't work that way. It's not hypnosis. Besides, even Krell the Magnificent himself couldn't hypnotize any girl enough to make her love your ugly mug."

"Feh."

"Remember, it's subtle. It has to be. We're gonna eventually be targeting world leaders, right? Those guys are surrounded by smart and loyal lackeys who've known them for years, so it has to be undetectable even to someone who knows the target really well. Even family. That's why all we do is insert one simple idea, a single suggestion, that's it.

"We do it like in the film Inception [2010]. Make the target think he thought of it himself." (In that film the brain hackers had inserted an idea into the head of a billionaire oil magnate in order to convince him to agree to sign an oil distribution contract with the businessman who paid for the brain hack.)

"That's why you can't just force a girl like her," he gestured at Asuna, "to suddenly fall in love with
you. Love is complex emotion tied to thousands of memories and experiences, and there just ain't no way we can do all that. Even our new advanced memory edit ability - which Inception did not have by the way - can't do that. The best we can do is change one concrete memory or event. Just one. That's all."

"Bah."

The second tech then plugged Asuna into the pylon. It lit up with status displays and charts that included a rotating computer-generated image of her brain.

"The instructions say one hour of inception."

"Hmm. Just one? Pretty minimal. Wonder what he's feeding into her."

"Don't know and don't care. I'm hungry. Lunch?"

"Sure."

As the purple pair of techs waddled off together to the far exit door the first tech said, "Too bad I couldn't play with her."

The second tech slapped the back of the first, "Don't worry! I'm sure we can find somethin' else here for yah, all nice and tasty."

"Aw, I'm tired of dolls. I like 'em moving and feisty..." The doors closed behind them.

Sachi came out of her hiding place. She was so conflicted. She had wanted to just yank out the data cable right out of Asuna's pylon, but she knew that it might hurt her, and it might also set off a bunch of alarms. They had said 'pretty minimal' so maybe whatever they were doing wasn't that terrible? She wondered if she should instead just give her audio recording to Nurse Kurosawa and ask her what to do next.

While she was still pondering her next move, a strong arm suddenly grabbed her from behind.

She froze.

Slowly she turned and saw a big burly orderly gripping her upper arm.

The large hairy man growled, "What the hell are you doing here?"

With his arm extended she saw the tattoo peeking out from under his half-sleeved tunic. She recognized it. It was the orderly who had challenged Nurse Kurosawa regarding the permanent staff roster.

Sachi was now looking into the eyes of a member of the Laughing Coffin Guild, a man who in SAO had gleefully killed six young players without remorse..

"Well?"

.. and soon she might be number seven.

A/N:

* See episode 12.
In the original version of this story, the reason Yui was missing was that Akihiko Kayaba had taken MHCP001 out of SAO just before Aincrad was destroyed. He had compressed her egg of data down to a small 100 TB M.2 NVMe SSD (about the size of a cigarette lighter) and smuggled it with him to Borneo in order to further study her, the world's first self-aware A.I. He saw in her the culmination of all of his many years of research into emergent phenomena (cf Chapter 1). He brought with him enough processing power to activate Yui’s Heart and had awakened her and put her in a standalone server in a jungle hut with a gas powered electric generator. There I had set up a series of 1-on-1 philosophical discussions between the childlike AI, who was more intelligent than any human, and the creator of SAO. However, after sketching out the first dialog I had become worried that the talks might become too digressive and would take too much time away from the main story, so the whole side plot was eventually dropped. Instead, Yui is simply missing for reasons as yet unexplained.

*** You think this is partly autobiographical because of my bio? Whatever gave you that idea?

*4 See The Four Loves on Wikipedia.

*5 See my story The Fifth Kind of Love (FFN). If you don't want to read the whole thing you can just spoil yourself and jump to Chapter 27, The Heart of Sunshine, where I explain what [redacted] really is and describe it in detail.

*6 Mt 4-11, Mk 1:12-13, Lk 4:1-13

*7 Based on recent discoveries in cosmological physics and quantum mechanics I have written a technical description of how I think Heaven might work (a higher reality that is more 'real' than our own). It is a one-shot fic based on the SF film Interstellar (2014) called The Dying of the Light.
A large hairy orderly had accosted Sachi, his beefy arm clamped on her shoulder. With his arm extended out she could see part of a tattoo peeking out from under his half-sleeve tunic, a rectangular box with gaudy red smiling lips superimposed on top. When Kurosawa had seen that partially exposed tattoo she did not know what it had meant, but Sachi did. She immediately recognized him as a former member of the Laughing Coffin Guild, the most notorious player-killer guild in SAO, whose amoral and psychopathic members had gleefully murdered other players simply for fun and sometimes for profit.

The LC member growled, "What the hell are you doing here?"

Sachi was caught. She knew that she would be searched so there was nothing for it.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out the USB stick and showed it to him.

She looked annoyed. "I was ordered to fetch this for Doctor Sugou."

The large orderly glanced at her ID badge. Sachi was standing in shadow, backlit. He squinted at her, then shrugged.

"The big guy? Oh didn't mean to the bother you. Just don't loiter in here, okay?"

She said in a condescending tone of voice, "May I go now? You know that Doctor Sugou is not a patient man."

"You said it. Get moving. Believe me, you don't want to make him upset."

Sachi gave him a frown and then turned to leave. With her face turned away she dropped the mask and let out a huge mental sigh of relief.

But just as Sachi was ready to take her first step towards the exit and her freedom, the big orderly placed his large hand on her shoulder again.

With supreme mental effort Sachi tried quickly rearranged her facial features to put back on her annoyed-look mask. She turned back while saying in an exasperated tone of voice, "Yes? What is it now?"

The big orderly leaned in close to her face.

"No! He is checking my ID badge!"

But instead of checking her badge he simply whispered quietly, his ugly mug only an inch away from her own face, "Please don't tell him I stopped you, okay? That guy is scary."

Sachi pulled back and said haughtily, "Well, I suppose I can overlook it this time. Just don't do it again."

The huge orderly jumped up straight. "Yes ma'am! Thank you ma'am!"

"Humph." Sachi turned back toward the tunnel exit and left the lab.

As soon as the doors closed behind her she slumped backwards against them and clutched her chest to try to stop her heart from jumping out. She then stuffed the USB stick back into her pocket and
Suguha pulled off her AmuSphere halo and tossed it aside as fast as she could. She jumped and ran out of her bedroom and into the hall.

In the hall she crashed right into Kazuto, who had also ran out of his own room.

"Out of my way!"

"Sugu, move!"

They raced each other to the end of the hall. Because of Kazuto's bad leg Suguha was able to stay a half step ahead of him. She reached the bathroom door, opened it, and slammed it shut behind her.

Kazuto moaned as he crossed his legs, then he started jumping on one foot.

"Gotta pee! Gotta pee! Gotta pee!"

After what seemed like an eternity he heard a flush. He counted to 5 and then flung the bathroom door open. Suguha had barely finished pulling up her drawers. "Hey!"

"Out!" He grabbed her and he not so gently pushed her into the hall as he jumped inside, the door slamming behind him.

In the hallway she fumed at the closed door as she finished lifting up her overalls that were down around her legs, pulling the them up and replacing the straps back up on her shoulders. She barked at the closed door, "Hentai baka!"

She marched back to her bedroom in a fury. While mumbling curses to herself she pulled open her bottom dresser drawer and rummaged under a messy pile of D cup bras until she she found what she was looking for hidden in the back. She pulled out a large bag of fig newtons, tore it open, and grabbed a fistful from the package. She started stuffing her face with them.


Kazuto saw the package in her hands. "Say, can I have some?"

Suguha tightly clutched the package to her bosom. "No yoof cahn naht, yoof puhvehrt!"

"Fine, whatever." He went downstairs to find something to eat.

Suguha and Kazuto were now sitting across from each other at the kitchen nook. Kazuto had just returned from his exploration of the fridge and was slamming the last of the prepackaged vanilla shakes down his throat as he sat on the stool.

When Suguha had ran out to pee she didn't even notice that Sachi had already returned and was dead asleep on her own futon. Sachi had apparently completed her own mission at the hospital. By mutual consent the two biological cousins continued to let her sleep upstairs.

Suguha's eyes were bloodshot due to her own lack of sleep, and Kazuto wasn't in much better shape. She moaned, "Kazuto, we gotta get some rest."

"No, I want to keep going."
"Oh c'mon, Lugru is tough enough as it is even when you are fresh. We're wiped and we need to rest. And I still need to find you a better sword than that stupid toothpick you were holding."

"I already friended Lisbeth and PM'ed her. She told me she's bringing her two best swords for me."

"Really? Two swords?"

"Uh huh. While you were scouting around I tried picking up a second sword that I found next to those dead imps. I swung it around a bit along with my starter sword. Yeah, I can do still dual blades."

"Cool. But isn't Lisbeth a Leprechaun?"

"Yeah."

"That means she is coming from the far side of the map, right? We won't meet her until we get to Alne."

"Probably."

"Okay, that's really great and all, but meanwhile we still need to deal with whatever boss might be lurking in those tunnels. And Sachi still needs to catch up to us from the Ancient Forest campsite."

"No, I don't want to wait."

"Kazuto, come on. Just switch off your Asuna beacon for a second yah? Everybody is converging on Alne right now. It's gonna take a while for them all to gather there."

"But.."

"Look, you have a zero chance of saving her until the cavalry arrives, so just chill. Otherwise you'll just get yourself killed and get tossed back to Ziggurat and lose your proficiency stats, and we'll lose at least another day sitting on our butts waiting for you to fly back from Ziggurat again."

Kazuto groaned.

"Kazuto, just be patient. We need to plan this out carefully like Mom said. This is a war, remember? Before Sachi crashed she left me a text note on my smartphone that she's bringing in some bigshot from the hospital to help. Mom is bringing in some heavy firepower too. The meeting is scheduled for tonight, so let's just get some rest. I'll text Sachi so that when she wakes up she'll read it and fly to our campsite just outside the Lurgu entrance. After the meeting you and I will join up with her and we'll press on together through Lugru to Alne. When we get there we'll sack out at an inn until everyone else catches up, then we'll all go together as a team to rescue your girlfriend - probably sometime late tomorrow morning or afternoon, okay?"

Kazuto put lowered his chin on his hands. "I guess..."

"Good. I'm crashing, bye." Suguha staggered upstairs like a zombie, and she flopped on her futon, belly first, without bothering to close the bedroom door. As she did so she saw that Sachi was still passed out on her own futon, still wearing her nurses-helper outfit with her checkered skirt flared open and her white blouse partially unbuttoned with a small transcept necklace tucked underneath where the left side of her bra was showing, and with her open left palm laying on top of her still fully covered right breast as her breathing slowly moved the hand up and down. Her pink sweater laid nearby in a rumpled mess.
Sachi's right arm had rolled on the floor between the two futons. Suguha, laying on her stomach and still dressed in her overalls, moved her own hand out to clasp Sachi's unconscious fingers between her own. She then dropped her face down into her own pillow, face first, and in seconds she was snoring loudly.

Kazuto walked past them towards his own room. He smiled inwardly as he saw his two sisters laying together holding hands, totally disheveled and dead to the world. He then entered his room, closed the door, locked it, and laid down in his bed. He tried to sleep but he couldn't. As he lay awake he idly picked up his NerveGear helmet that was sitting on the nightstand next to his bed, turning it around in his hands as he studied it. It was scratched and nicked, stained, and smelled faintly of mildewy body oils that he knew would never fully wash out.

He had spent one-eighth of his life wearing that helmet. Before the SAO Incident, Argus had shipped more than 200,000 NerveGear helmets all over the world for use in various VRMMOs. Given the notoriety of SAO they had since become collectors' items, sometimes fetching as much as 150,000 yen on eBay for one in mint condition in its original box. The government had previously tried to confiscate them all, but it simply wasn't possible with so many of them out there. They eventually gave up trying.

One of the reasons so many people had kept the helmets (besides their monetary value as collectables) was that many fans of SAO had believed that the alleged ability of the helmets' microwave transceivers to overload and actually kill someone was completely apocryphal. After all, nobody had died in SAO. The helmets had never killed anybody. Because of that fact many people believed that Kayaba had simply been bluffing the whole time.

What they did not know was that, after a year of failed attempts to disassemble a helmet without it spontaneously self-destructing, MINFO had finally been able to disassemble and dissect one without it's internal battery frying all the electronics first. They did it by freezing one in liquid nitrogen (-200 degrees Celsius), then while it was still frozen they sliced it open with a diamond circular saw. Upon inspection they confirmed that the low power microwave transceiver that was ostensibly used only for transmitting neurological information to the subject's neocortex could indeed be overloaded and cook someone's brain, even though it had never actually happened.

ALO was based on the same Cardinal System and network protocols as SAO so the old helmets were compatible. Officially all NerveGear helmets were banned from use, but sometimes people still surreptitiously used them even though they lacked the new safety features of the newer AmuSphere helmets (such as automatically logging out any player who had fallen asleep in the game).

Kazuto knew that Asuna was waiting for him. He was strongly tempted to put the helmet back on and go charging through Lugru on his own. But he knew that Leafa would be furious with him, and he didn't really know the actual exit route through the tunnels anyway.

He sighed and closed his eyes and finally tried to go to sleep.

5:30 p.m. Dicey Cafe.

Outside the cafe the yellow fluorescent sign was turned off. A paper 'Closed' sign was on taped on the main door. Inside people were already gathering.

The three oldest members of the conspiracy had already arrived a full hour earlier for a pre-meeting. They were seated around a circular table way in the back.
Klein had also arrived early and had nonchalantly seated himself at a nearby table within earshot. He faced away and pretended to look out a window as he slowly drew his drink, trying to eavesdrop on the primary conspirators at the rear table who were talking in hushed voices.

Seated around the table were three people: A balding man who appeared to be in his fifties, a thin middle aged woman with brown hair (who still looked rather attractive in Klein's opinion), and an old woman of undetermined age who was sitting in a motorized wheelchair wearing a nurse uniform.

Midori leaned forward with her arms crossed on the table. She frowned and shook her head sadly. "That USB stick is our biggest problem. It's his trump card."

Kurosawa asked, "Do you think he'll actually use it if he's cornered?"

Nishida sighed, "Yes. Yes I do. The JavaScript file was named "PlanR dot js".

"Plan R? Are you sure?"

"That clinches it, don't you think?"

"Unfortunately yes, I think it does."

Midori asked, "I'm sorry, but could someone please explain to me what 'Plan R' means? I don't get the reference."

Klein continued to listen. The old man was apparently a movie buff because he quickly explained it. "The reference comes from the film Doctor Strangelove [1964] by Stanley Kubrick. It's named after the SAC B-52 bomber attack plan that was carried out by the head of SAC Bomber Command, General Jack D. Ripper, when he went insane and ordered an all-out nuclear bombing attack on Russia. Plan R was the letter of the classified document that he had ordered the B-52 pilots to execute. He sent the plan letter, R, via an encrypted radio command to each bomber's AN/CRM-114 Discriminator, a one-way transmission. The pilot of each bomber then unlocked a small secure document vault inside of his cockpit and pulled out Plan R and read it."

"And Plan R is..."

"Doomsday. Nuke everything. Fry all the helmets, kill everybody." Nishida sighed, "I suppose he could have named it 'General Order 66', but I guess Sugou likes Kubrick better than George Lucas."

The table was silent. Klein was now frozen in his seat as he began to realize just how high the stakes really were.

_Kill everybody?_

He finally had to turn around. He addressed the table from the back of his own chair. "That guy wouldn't really do that, would he?"

Kurosawa looked at him. "Yes, I think he would."

Midori chimed in. "He's a sociopath. You should have seen him during my interview. He was barely able to control himself."

"Oh man..."
Midori wondered, "It is wise to let this get out?"

Kurosawa said softly, "I don't think we have a choice. The young volunteers that we brief tonight deserve to know what is at stake."

Nishida agreed.

Kurosawa addressed Nishida. "From what you've told me it sounds like you intend to hack his system and grab complete control, although I confess I don't understand the technical the details of your 'Operation Overlord'. Let me ask you a question: Once you grab control, can't you simply disable Plan R so he can't use it?"

Nishida and Midori both shook their heads. Midori asked him, "You want to try explain it to her or should I?"

"You better do it. You're the tech writer, not me."

"Right." Midori then addressed Kurosawa. "Okay, let me try to explain the problem as simply as I can." She thought a moment. "Hmm, I'll need to first explain a few technical concepts about computer networks. Stop me if you can't follow and I'll back up."

"Very well. Please proceed."

"Let's begin. The NerveGear helmets all have installed in them something called a Network Interface Card, or a NIC. The term comes from the PC world back in the 1990s, where you could buy and plug in a rather expensive optional add-in circuit card into the PC's motherboard to give your PC high speed network communications capability. The back faceplate of the card had a socket in it for plugging in a tap to a shared round coaxial Ethernet network cable. Today the NIC is actually just a tiny chip, not a card, and the network socket is just a RJ45 phone jack that is permanently soldered to the back of the PC or laptop - or in this case to the back of the NerveGear helmet - but the concept is still the same.

"All NICs have a tiny processor that is listening constantly to all the data traffic that is flying by on the shared network cable, including the traffic destined to other NICs on the same network, or in this case the same 4-port 100GBASE-T switch that is installed next to each SAO medical bed. Every packet of data that flows through the switch has a six byte pre-amble called the Media Access Control address, or MAC address, that begins each data packet. You can think of it as the phone number for a particular destination NIC. Each NIC has a unique matching 6-byte hardware MAC number hardwired into it, and you can't easily change it. The number is unique to each NIC. When the NIC sees a packet flying by that contains its own assigned MAC address in the pre-amble, it grabs the data packet and reads it, then it forwards the data on to the main processor inside the NerveGear helmet.

"Every NIC also listens constantly for a second particular six byte value, a special fixed code consisting of all binary ones (FF:FF:FF:FF:FF:FF). This is the called the broadcast MAC address. Every NIC that sees it will grab the packet and process it no matter what.

"What Plan R does is inject a single broadcast packet into the 100GBASE-T switch. It doesn't matter from where the packet originates on the Internet. Every helmet will see it almost instantly, and Sugou can send it from anywhere. He can send it from any device, a smartphone, a random tablet inside a coffee shop, or even an old 1981 IBM PC located in Brazil. No special privileges or protocols are required to send it.***

"Inside the data packet Sugou inserts a special personal code, his own private magic 256 byte..."
numerical sequence, that he embeds somewhere randomly inside the data packet. It doesn't matter where. It could be embedded inside a picture, a web page, an audio stream, doesn't matter. It could be anywhere. If the NIC sees that 256 byte code anywhere in the data packet it triggers a special action.

"This is actually a standard feature in modern NICs, called Wake On LAN [WOL***]. The NIC is always running even when the power is otherwise turned off. When the NIC sees the magic WOL packet it commands the NIC to turn the PC's main power supply back on. This is how a business can turn on/off a hundred PCs after the employees go home. All it takes is a single broadcast packet and boom, they all turn off. You can also use WOL to remotely power on your work PC from home.

"We inspected the executable scripts in Sachi's USB data stick, and we now know that Sugou is planning to use the WOL hardware feature of the NerveGear NICs in order to broadcast his special code to every helmet. Inside the stick we found three executable JavaScript files, each sending a different code: PlanF dot js, PlanC dot js, and PlanR dot js.

"Plan F sends the freedom code. It releases the helmets. This is what we think Kayaba had broadcast to everybody on S-F day. Somehow Sugou had blocked it or reprogrammed the code on 300 helmets so they ignored it. We're not sure how.

"Plan C sends the coma code. It puts the player into a permanent dreamless coma state, at least until it is countermanded by another code. This is what the helmets would execute automatically if somebody tried to tamper with or forcibly remove a helmet in SAO.

"Code F countermands Code C, waking the player up and releasing the helmet.

"Plan R sends the death code. It cranks the microwave transceiver up to 100 watts and cooks the brain in less than 10 seconds. As far we know Code R has never been triggered."

Kurosawa asked, "So, am I to understand that the USB stick that Sachi had found contains these three critical codes? That seems rather surprising to me. Sachi told me that she had picked up the USB stick from an unattended table inside the memory lab. I did not think that Sugou's security was that lax.

Midori shook her head. "Oh believe me, it isn't. Those three critical 256 byte codes were not found on the USB stick. The JavaScript file simply prompts you to type in a URL, which Sugou presumably types in himself. I doubt that anybody else in the world knows what that URL is. The URL for that web page contains the 256 byte code somewhere inside it. That deadly web page could be sitting anywhere, on any web server on the planet, even a on a totally unsecured web server on the opposite side of the world. I bet that Sugou probably has a hundred of those USB sticks scattered around too.

"All Sugou has to do is grab one and walk into some random Starbucks coffee shop or a McDonalds anywhere on the planet. He can then just plug in the stick, run Plan R and type in his memorized URL when prompted, press the Enter key, and boom, 300 children are dead within 10 seconds."

Klein asked, "Why not just block the broadcast packets? Or just unplug the helmets from the net?"

It was obvious that Klein had not thought it through yet. Nishida patiently explained it to him.

"Simply blocking or unplugging the helmets from the network won't work. That was tried right at the beginning during the first days of the SAO Incident. All it does is trigger the helmets. What's
worse is that when Sugou grabbed control he had also switched all the helmets from Code C to Code R, full lethality mode*4. That means the result will be even more catastrophic.

"We can't just filter out the 'bad' packets either. We don't know the code. It can appear anywhere in the packet in any form: image, audio, web page, SNMP update, anything. We know that the helmets are receiving periodic pings from random IP addresses on the net, each with a varying encrypted keep-alive nonce followed by a bunch of random garbage bytes. We know that if those keep-alive packets stop coming in the helmets will trigger. Any one of those keep-ones could slip in Code R at any time. We have no choice but to allow them all through to keep the helmets from triggering."

Klein muttered, "Crap."

Kurosawa nodded. "I see the problem. Capturing ALO won't help."

Midori sighed, "No, it won't. Plan R is his trump card."

"So the goal is..."

"Keep him distracted. Keep him 100% focused on something else. Keep him so obsessed, so focused, so zealously zeroed in, that it doesn't even occur to him to log out and run Plan R."

At that moment Kazuto, Suguha, and Sachi walked into the cafe.

Midori smiled broadly at her children, and she waved at them.

The trio saw her and approached the table. Their timing was perfect.

Klein saw them approach. He laughed long and loud.

"Hahahahaha! Gosh, I wonder what that distraction is going to be?"

And Midori smiled again.

The meeting for the ALO Grand Conspiracy had begun.

About 40 young people were present in the cafe. They had filled up all the tables and were now seated quietly facing the main counter. Standing in front of the counter were Midori, Nishida, and Kurosawa (seated). Kazuto, Sachi, Suguha, Agil, and Griselda stood next to them.

Agil played host. Suguha looked nervous. Kazuto looked determined. Griselda had a stern and eager look. Sachi’s face was deceptively impassive.

Agil was holding a microphone that was plugged into the cafe's karaoke system. He made introductions for everybody, which took about 5 minutes. Then he said, "Okay, people this is it. You know the stakes. And you know why we have to do this." He addressed Midori. "Ms. Kirigaya, since this battle involves you and your family more than anyone, why don't you begin?"

Agil handed the mic to Midori. She said, "Thank you Mr. Mills. All right, I will now give you the high level overview of our battle plan. After that, Nishida will explain the computer part, then Nurse Kurosawa will explain the hospital part, and finally Griselda and Leafa will explain the ALO part. Then we will split up into working groups at our separate tables, and each group will huddle together and hammer out the tactical details for their part of the plan."

Midori turned to Nishia. "Reo-kun, to get us started why don't you briefly explain to our dear
friends how our little plan was first hatched?"

Nishida said, "My pleasure." He took the mic. "Our plan is called Operation Overlord." He turned and smiled at Sachi. "Midori-chan's lovely little daughter here was the one who first came up with the original idea." Sachi blushed badly and looked down in embarrassment. "So we gave her the honor of picking the name, and she picked Overlord."

Klein was sitting near the front. He stood up and asked, "Overlord? You mean that really popular anime, the one with that crazy overpowered lich lord skeleton guy, Ainz Ooal Gown with his overpowered helpers in his Tomb of Nazarick? I loved that show! Are we gonna become like them? Man, we are so gonna kick Oberon's ass..."

Nishida had no idea what Klein was talking about. "Uh, no. Overlord refers to something else." Klein sheepishly sat back down.

Nishida started to muse, "You know, the more that I think about it, the name Operation Overlord really does have lots of other nice meanings and connotations beyond the main one. Sachi did a good job picking it. You see, in the context of our plan the name not only includes a description of a key part of our computer attack plan, but it also alludes to the historical Operation Overlord*5 in World War II. We will be doing something much like what Eisenhower did in that plan on D-Day, when Eisenhower had set up General Patton as the fake leader of a huge fictitious invasion force to land in France at Calais, but he had the invasion force actually land at Normandy. When Hitler got the reports from Normandy he was certain that it was just a diversion so he moved all his Panzer divisions to Calais.."

Midori discreetly cleared her throat. Nishida caught himself, "Uh, sorry, rambling." He then continued his explanation, "Anyway, we will be doing a similar feint on ALO's ridiculously strong Class A Type Enforced security cordon that surrounds ALO. Rather simple really. The guy has a Maginot Line mentality. He thinks his security reference monitor [SRM] is bulletproof."

Klein asked, "Is it?"

"Well, yeah, it is. The trick is to do what Hitler's Wehrmacht did to France, when Hitler simply went around the Maginot Line. His tanks went around and his Luftwaffe flew over it. It was due to a lack of French imagination. Our boy Oberon doesn't think outside the box either, in this case his own system. That's why we aren't even going to bother to try to attack it."

Klein understood. "We're just gonna fly over it."

"Exactly, you see.."

Midori cleared her throat again. Nishida looked at her sheepishly and stopped.

She said, "You know what, Reo, why don't you just explain your part of the plan now? You seem to have to have started already."

Nishida was chagrined. "Sorry! Bad habit. Can't help it. This is so exciting for me, and a man my age doesn't get a lot of thrills like this anymore."

"Please, Reo-kun, just finish your explanation of your computer part. And do try to make it brief will you? We need to get these young people back home before midnight. Many of them still need to reach Alne before tomorrow afternoon."

"Oh. Right, right. Okay. Here it goes. I'll go quick."
He took a breath. "ALO has four concentric security rings. From outermost to innermost they are ring 4, ring 3, ring 2, and ring 1. Ring 4 is everything outside of the World Tree. ALO is hooked directly into the Argus servers, so it's a sitting duck. As long as we can log in to ALO in even the most minimal way, even as a noob player, we can take over ring 4 pretty much effortlessly. The only danger is if Oberon discovers he's been hacked and panics. His doomsday Plan R is the main obstacle."

Midori interrupted and explained Plan R to everyone.

The room went silent as a tomb.

Nishida waited a moment, then he continued his briefing. "You see the problem. Any hacks that we do have to be very discreet and low key, undetectable. It is critical that our boy Oberon does not notice what is happening around him.

"Ring 3 is the next target. It controls the player-accessible area inside of the World Tree where you will be fighting in the Grand Quest against the Guardian Knights. Ring 3 executes on a set of servers at RECT Progress that aren't hooked into Argus directly, so it will be harder to capture them. Before you start your attack I will be placing tracers on the Kirigaya kids and a few other key players. As soon they enter the doors at the base of the World Tree for the start of the Grand Quest I'll piggyback and start my run.

"Meanwhile you kids need to distract Oberon as much as you can. He will be watching you guys using remote monitoring from his bunker up in ring 1 at the very top. Now look kids, pay attention. I want you guys to make your attack on the Tree really, really, big. Flashy, lots of explosions, big magic and stuff. Make it epic, make it awesome. Hopefully he will be so distracted by your massive attack that he won't notice if I accidentally trigger an alarm for a couple seconds before I can squelch it.

"Here's the real problem though: You can't win. The vault door on the ceiling is impossible to open. It's unwinnable. If you fight long enough you'll all be killed, guaranteed."

Klein said, "Huh?"

"Sorry kid, but the Grand Quest is a lie. It's unwinnable by design. There are no Alfs beyond it. There is no floating city at the top. No reward. Nothing."

Klein stamped his feet. "What? Really? Oberon is such a griefer!"

"Indeed. What's worse is that I've looked at YouTube recordings of previous runs against the World Tree and ran the math on the spawn rate of the Guardian Knights. The higher you fly up in there, the faster they spawn. The Guardians will spawn at an exponentially faster rate the higher you go: At first 2 per second, then 50, then 200, then 1000, and when you reach within ten meters of the ceiling hatch they will spawn at the rate of tens of thousands per second. At five meters it is a hundred thousand per second. At one meter it is infinite. They will come shooting out of the walls so fast that the entire chamber will be literally packed with millions of them and you will all be crushed to death."

There were several murmurs around the tables. Some players members said "Cheater." "Griefer." Others said less charitable epithets.

Klein nodded with understanding. "Ah, I get it. The plan is that we just buzz around in there, blast stuff at the lower altitudes, and do it all flashy as we distract Oberon and buy you time. We have unlimited flight time inside the Tree so we can do it as long as you need. Eventually you hack ring
Klein looked around at the other tables. "Hey, it's only fair, right? We hack the cheater." There were several nods of assent.

Nishida said, "Nope."

His statement threw Klein off his stride. He turned and said, "Huh?"

"I'm not going to do anything in there to help you. Not a single thing."

"What?"

Nishida shook his head. "You said it yourself. Oberon will be closely monitoring everything that happens in there like a hawk. If I hack the Grand Quest he will spot it instantly, and he'll know his system has been compromised. Then he might panic and do Plan R. I'm sorry, but I will absolutely not open that unopenable vault ceiling hatch for you. Nor will I be giving Kirito any sort of magic cheat keycard to open it for him, nor will I do anything else to help him. I will do no such thing. Kirito will beat the quest himself, and he will do it fair and square."

"Huh? I don't get it."

"You are correct that you will need to buy me time so I can capture ring 3, but only so I can then proceed on to ring 2, nothing more. I won't do anything else in ring 3. The 300 children are being held at ring 2, so that's my primary target. When Kirito goes through the vault ceiling into ring 2 my tracer will let me piggyback in and I will start my attack on ring 2. Meanwhile Kirito will be keeping Oberon distracted to buy me time, probably in some kind of 1-on-1 confrontation or something. During that time I will try to free those 300 children while Oberon is kept distracted."

He looked at Kazuto. "Lad, you will need to him occupied as long as you can. Keep him monologuing, gloating, bragging about how he's god, yadda yadda. Piss him off, whatever it takes."

Kazuto crossed his arms. "That won't be hard." Then he asked, "But what about Asuna?"

Nishida looked down. "She's in ring 1, 18th floor." He looked at Nurse Kurosawa.

Nurse Kurosawa took her cue. "Right. My turn."

Nishida gave the microphone to Kurosawa.

"My name is Akira Kurosawa and I am one of the head nurses at Tokorozawa Private Hospital where the 300 sleepers are being physically kept. Tomorrow I will arrange to quietly clear out a room on the 18th floor that is directly adjacent to Asuna Yuuki's room. It has an interconnecting door. Before your run on the World Tree tomorrow we will sneak Kazuto, Suguha, and Sachi in to that room. They will secretly enter the hospital from the rear loading dock and go up via the rear stairway to the 18th floor. There I will plug them in to a shared 100GBASE-T switch in the adjoining room and monitor their vitals during their dive. Since they are on the 18th floor they will already be inside the ring 1 security perimeter, the same as Asuna Yuuki. Midori Kirigaya will help me to spoof the cameras in the stairwells and on floor 18, loop them, so nobody will see what we are doing.

"The main problem will be an orderly on the permanent staff who sometimes patrols the 18th floor at irregular intervals."
She thought a moment as she appraised Agil's formidable muscular form. "Actually, I think I'd like to bring Mr. Mills up there too, just in case that orderly shows up. Is that all right, sir?"

The large muscular man smiled. He made a fist and smacked it hard into his open hand. "My pleasure."

The he added, "Just promise me that if that blowhard Fairy King [bleep]hole with delusions of godhood starts smacking around my man Kirito in there, that you'll let me dive in using my Gnome avatar to show him who's the real boss."

Nishida spoke up, "Oh, I'd love to, believe me. I would certainly enjoy having you pummel him, but unfortunately I can't help you with that. The problem is that ring 1 will be unhackable. Sugou is using an air-gapped server that sits right next to his bed in his underground bunker underneath the RECT campus. A hard line runs from there directly up to floor 18. There's just no way. The only way that you will be able to reach Oberon's avatar in there is if he is so overconfident that he brings you in himself. Now, I admit it's a distinct possibility - he might want to gloat over you - but you'll be totally on your own up there. Otherwise my job ends at ring 2, sending the F code."

Agil understood. "Got it. You free those 300 kids, and we'll handle the rest ourselves."

Klein then said, "Okay, got it, great. I wish I could be there too. But let's back up a sec here. You said that Kirito is going to beat the Grand Quest by himself?"

Nishida nodded. "Yep."

"Without any cheating?"

"Yep."

"I don't get it."

"As I said, Kirito has to beat the quest fair and square. Oberon will be watching him like a hawk so it has to be done without any cheating whatsoever."

"But you just said it was impossible..?"

"Yep, I did."

"So how is he gonna do it?"

Midori smiled and put her hand on Sachi's shoulder. "My darling daughter figured out a way. No cheating, no hacking. It can be beaten using only the rules of ALO."

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**A/N:**

**Challenge to readers:** Can you guess how Sachi is going beat the Grand Quest so that Kirito can reach Asuna's cage? I dropped some hints in the previous chapters. No computer hacking or other cheats are required (no Overlord, no magic keycard). The quest can be beaten fair and square simply by using the rules of ALO as shown in the anime. Although it is admittedly difficult (and most of the players probably won't survive) it can indeed be beaten fairly even though the Quest is designed to be physically impossible to win. You should be able to figure out how it will be done using the hints that I dropped in this chapter and in the previous chapters.
Nishida then leaned over and pulled out a cardboard box that he had previously hidden behind the counter. He opened the cardbox box and removed several sealed baggies, each with a bluetooth ear piece inside. He handed a baggy to each of the four Kirigaya family members, then he ripped open one himself and placed the ear piece behind his own left ear. The others did the same.

{ Nishida: Mic check. }

{ Kirito: I hear you. }

Nishida then addressed the crowd again using the karaoke microphone. "When ring 4 gets hacked each of you will see a small thin bracelet magically appear on your left wrist. The bracelet will be camouflaged to match your clothing or skin color, essentially invisible. These are wrist coms. They will let you communicate with the other conspirators via a low bandwidth encrypted sideband channel that is part of the Cardinal System's internal maintenance protocols for the helmets and halos. The bandwidth will be low, only 4000 Hz, so your in-game voices will sound tinny, like they are coming out of a walkie-talkie speaker."

Somebody asked, "What's a walkie-talkie?"

"Uh, nevermind. Anyway, while inside the game just raise your wrist com and whisper into it. You will also be able use them subvocally with practice. When you do it touch the wrist com. I'll also try to rig it so you can transmit subvocally by briefly touching the roof of your mouth with your tongue. That way there will be no evidence that you are secretly communicating with each other."

Klein sat back. "Kewl. I like it."

Nishida finally said, "Okay, I'm done." He handed the karaoke microphone back to Midori.

"Thank you, Reo-kun." She turned to Suguha and Yamashita. "Leafa and Griselda will now brief you on the overall plan for the World Tree attack." She handed the microphone to her daughter.

Suguha was really nervous. She passed the microphone on to Yamashita as expected.

Griselda addressed the crowd in a crisp businesslike manner. "Okay ALO players, please pay attention. You have already heard the main plan: We go in guns blazing and make a huge ruckus, distract Oberon while he's monitoring us, and we keep doing it until Nishida can successfully hack ring 3, and then..."

While Griselda was speaking, Sachi quietly leaned over to Agil and whispered, "I heard that Griselda was just elected the race leader of the Gnomes?"

Agil whispered back, "Yep. I was gonna run for the office myself, but when she threw her hat in the ring I withdrew my candidacy and let her have it." He gestured at the determined combat veteran. "You can see why. She's a natural born leader."

Sachi agreed, "That she certainly is."

Meanwhile Griselda had turned and faced the karaoke monitor. She spoke at the screen. "Lady Sakuya, Alicia Rue, will you be ready?"

On the karaoke screen were two young women who were sitting in a dorm room at Osaka University. The taller busty brunette was wearing a green obi. She leaned into the Skype window. "Yes, the Sylphs will be ready."

The smaller girl wearing cosplay cat ears then chimed in, "I have a full squad of Cait Dragoons and
their Wyrm Riders en route through the Butterfly Valley. This is going to be so fun!"

Griselda thanked them. She then turned to face the people sitting at the tables again. "As soon as ring 3 is hacked we will switch to Sachi's plan for getting Kirito through the ceiling vault hatch. Now, I won't sugarcoat this. It is going to be gruelingly hard. We will need everyone on the playing field doing their jobs to score this one-shot goal, and we will only get one chance to do it. For the attack run we will divide the playing field into three zones and assign a race group to each zone: Tanks, Eagles, and Falcons.

"The Tanks will be the Gnomes and Cait Dragoons, and hopefully also the Undines and Salamanders too if they show up. They will guard the perimeter and blast away at the Guardian Knights as they come pouring out of the walls. The Eagles will be the Sylphs plus some Leprechauns. They will play mid-field."

Griselda turned and looked at Sachi. "And we will have one Falcon, just one. Because of the expected geometric explosion of Guardians near the top we can't have more than one player up at that height. Sachi will take point and escort Kirito through. Sachi, are you ready?"

Sachi finally spoke up. "Yes, ma'am. I've been practicing it hundreds of times. Lady Sakuya loaned me her entire inventory. I think I can do it."

"You're only going to get one shot at this."

"I know."

"Very well." Griselda then addressed the crowd again. "During the endgame the Guardians' numbers will explode as Sachi uses her amazing flight agility to escort Kirito up to the goal line. They will flood the chamber, and we expect that we will suffer at least a 90% fatality rate, maybe higher at that point. Some more of us might survive if we get some unexpected help from the Salamanders or the Undines to blast open a last-second escape path for us out through the bottom entrance door."

She then addressed Klein, "Mr. Tsuboi, how have your negotiations been progressing with the Salamanders?"

Klein stood up again. "I've been trying to recruit Mortimer, Eugene, and Kagemune, but they've been making some pretty heavy demands in return for their cooperation, on the Sylphs in particular. I think part of it has to do with Lady Sakuya's attempted assassination of Mortimer last year." Then he looked at Sachi and Suguha. "Plus he's none too happy about you two gals doing all of those kinetic nuke-dives on his men."

Sachi objected, "Hey, Eugene already killed me for that."

"Yeah, like I said there's some bad blood there. Still, we really do need those guys. I'm still working on it."

Griselda said, "Thank you for your update, Mr. Tsuboi. We also have leads on on recruiting the Pookas. They are the best healers in the game and we will surely want their help as well."

Griselda then ended the plenary part of the meeting: "That is basically it. We will now break up into our individual race groups where you will plan among yourselves your own tactics. If you have any questions please come up to the front. As soon as you are finished you may go back to your homes and resume your dives to reach Alne as soon as possible. I know that none of us will be getting much sleep during the next 24 hours. Good luck." She lowered her microphone. "That's all
I have to say, Leafa?" She offered Suguha the microphone.

Suguha was struck dumb with stage fright and refused to take the microphone.

Griselda smiled and raised it up again. "Don't worry people, Leafa is far more voluble when she's flying in her element. She and I will be working closely during the battle. Well, I guess that's it then. Dismissed."

People started to stand up and mill about the room as they reassembled into different tables based on their race groups. Meanwhile, Kurosawa silently reached out and held Sachi's hand in a show of support. Sachi returned her grasp and smiled at her mentor for a moment, then she turned and resumed her explanation to Kazuto about her escort plan.

As Kazuto listened his eyes gradually widened. When Sachi had finished her explanation he hugged her, then he pulled back and grinned, "Oh I love it. So, you and I do an attack run together just like Luke Skywalker did against the Death Star's weak spot, the thermal exhaust port?"

"Yeah, pretty much. If we zigzag fast enough I'm hoping most of their sword spears won't hit us as we approach..."

As the conspirators continued talking, Kurosawa sighed as she sat by herself in her wheelchair alone. Even though she had stopped taking her chemo weeks ago she still felt physically exhausted.

As she sat by herself watching the young conspirators make their plans she said a silent prayer.

*Dear Lord, please protect them all.*

The Kirigaya trio walked the four blocks back to the Okachi train station in silence. Midori had stayed behind to work out some final logistics with the two eldest conspirators. Afterwards she planned to stop by the store next to the Saitama Omiya train station for a last-minute purchase.

Kazuto's cane was now folded up in his backpack. He didn't need it for the long walk back to the train station. It was because his right arm was now entwined firmly in Sachi's left and his left arm was now wrapped tightly in Suguha's right.

The two sisters were holding him as close to themselves as they could, giving him all the support they could muster.

And it was not just for his leg.

None of them spoke. It was because it wasn't necessary.

Kazuto felt humbled, grateful beyond words. He had never felt so bathed in love before. And what he had felt that night, that feeling of love that had overwhelmed him so much, came not just from his sisters, nor from his mother. It was because that night he was showered with love, flooded with it, soaked in it, from all those he knew, from all his family and his friends, from everyone, all of whom were willing to sacrifice so much just to help him with his quixotic quest.

And he felt ashamed.

*I am such an idiot.*

*I was going to rush in there all by myself. Take it all on alone.*

*At any moment I could have stopped and asked for help.*
But I didn't.

I could have contacted Mr. Kikuoka. I could have gone to the police. I could have explained what was happening to Lady Sakuya, Agil, Griselda, Alicia, any of them, even my mom.

But I didn't.

I just went all "banzai!" and tried to do it alone.

I was so focused on Asuna. It was like I had lost all rational thought.

What is wrong with me?

This is not SAO!

I can log out. I can ask for help. I could have done it at any time.

Why didn't I?

I was so, so, stupid.

Now I know.

Wait, what is this?

This feeling..

And then it hit him. It was something so simple, so obvious, something that was there right in front of him the whole time, if only he had the eyes to see it. It was staring him right in the face.

It was then that it really hit him. It was like a lightning bolt, a spiritual jolt of pure satori, what the Buddhists called Enlightenment - a heightened state of spiritual awareness that Buddhists strive for in years of practicing zazen, in meditation, in prayers, sometimes for decades, and sometimes never reaching it at all.

For it was at that moment that Kazuto Kirigaya had finally understood one of the deepest Truths in life, a truth that was eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, universal, everlasting.

Four words.

You are not alone

He pulled his sisters in tighter.

And they did the same.

As the trio continued to walk arm-in-arm to the train station, Sachi absently stroked Kazuto's right arm with her free hand.

Kazuto glanced over and saw that she was lost in thought. He decided to gently pull her out of her reverie. "Hey, you okay over there?"

Sachi blinked her eyes. "Huh? Yeah."

She looked back at him. She knew what her feelings for him really were now. As they were
walking together arm-in-arm she had thought hard, then she came to a decision.

She knew that events were reaching a climax and that she might not have another chance. She pulled him in even tighter, then she looked him right in the face.

He looked back at her expectantly. It was time. She prepared to say the words.

She started to open her mouth..

.. but then she faltered.

It was because that awful nagging thought suddenly popped up again in the back of her mind. It was the awful thought that she had striven so mightily to dispel so many times before. It wrecked the purity of the moment, and she slightly loosened her hold on Kazuto's arm.

Still, despite all her self doubts, Sachi knew her mission. She was determined to carry it out no matter what. If she couldn't say the words, she felt that at least she could show it to him by her deeds.

She had practiced the run so many times now. But it was at that moment that it happened again. That nagging thought hit her. It was an external attack.

If her run on the World Tree was off even by a couple of inches..

If I slip up by even the tiniest bit, Kirito will fail. Asuna will not be rescued. Sugou will panic, and Asuna might even die..

Sachi closed her eyes tightly.

Help me! Please! Keep these thoughts out of my head!

Meanwhile, Suguha had seen the play of expressions across Sachi's face. She knew her sister well enough now to realize what was going on.

Just look at her. Her internal battles are still not over. She's not so different from me after all.

Still, Suguha now felt her own shame because she was now inwardly relieved at watching Sachi's own spiritual struggles continue. She knew that she could never reach Sachi's level of pure selflessness, which was her strongest and yet paradoxically also her weakest trait. It was because she knew that the latter was because Sachi herself had doubted her own reasons for it, and she knew that weakness was preying on her now.

The three siblings continued to walk together, each looking in a different direction. They were now all lost deep in their own private thoughts.

The trio walked together in silence to the train station in the darkening twilight.

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A/N:

* I included one Laughing Coffin member in the story just for this humorous payoff. Look at that, even *he* is scared of Sugou!

** Technically this is called an IP multicast packet, not a broadcast packet. Midori is simplifying her explanation for Kurosawa's benefit. For the technical details on how a multicast network transmission actually works see [Multicast](Wikipedia).
*** See Wake-on-LAN (Wikipedia).

*4 See chapter 6.

*5 See Operation Overlord (Wikipedia).
The Greatest Love

A/N:
To best enjoy this chapter I recommend that you listen to one of your favorite epic movie soundtracks as you read the battle scenes below. If you don't have your own soundtrack you can play and loop one of these suggested YouTube OSTs: Requiem for a dream Soundtrack (4:06) by Team Sublime or Mass Effect 2 OST - Suicide Mission (4:45) by asmodejan.

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Quest Day.

Nobuyki Sugou looked up fretfully at a dozen large HD display panels that were arranged in a 4x3 grid in the main control room for Project Inception located deep beneath the RECT Progress corporate campus.

His eyes shifted back and forth rapidly between the twelve displays. One display was showing a live image of the five original SAO servers that had been running since 2022 in the server room in Basement Level 5 of the old Argus building, the ones that everyone had thought were still under the control of Akihiko Kayaba. A ridiculous number of guards could be seen surrounding the servers, all paid for by RECT. They looked bored.

Many of the other displays showed live scenes from ALO, where an unprecedented number of players from almost every race were now converging at Alne. During the past 24 hours the GMs had sent several urgent alerts to Sugou about it, which he had read with mild amusement before he had discarded them.

Let them. Let them fling themselves against the Tree and crash upon it, for they will shatter themselves like wooden ships flung against the rocks of Gibraltar itself. Don't they realize that their puny lives are mere playthings for the amusement of the gods?

Look at them, beyond hope, with their pathetic and meaningless lives, all playing a meaningless game. I will watch them all perish like wheat before the scythe.

After they all die they can then go buy new equipment and cash items from the ALO Store and start all over again. More money for me! Hmm, maybe I should offer a discount for quest martyrs...

Another display showed Asuna Yuuki’s sleeping form in her hospital room. The marriage was scheduled for Saturday.

Hmm, we really should decorate the hospital room for the wedding ceremony. Put up some bunting? Maybe bring in a serving table for the wedding cake?

Wait, I forgot the wedding dress! What should we do there? Nothing elaborate or gaudy. Let's see, we'll dress her up in something simple. How about a red and white wedding kimono? Yes, that would be nice. Simple and elegant. I'm a man of taste, after all.

Did I invite Kazuto? I think I did. I should mail him an invite today, heh.

Then he frowned as he looked at the last display, which showed a bouncy and blurry image of the backs of four men in green combat uniforms carrying semi-automatic rifles while slogging through a heavy jungle. The image was stuttery, running at only two frames per second. It was coming from a body cam that was affixed to the helmet of his Indonesian mole on Seijirou Kikuoka's military
search squad. The man at the lead was probably Kikuoka himself.

Sugou had given the mole explicit instructions: As soon as Kayaba was captured he was to be quietly liquidated as soon as possible, using a pistol with Kayaba's fingerprints on it to make it appear like suicide.

Sugou grit his teeth as he watched the last display. Kikuoka's team had been running in circles in the jungles and savannahs north of Balikpapan for weeks now without ever finding any direct sign of Kayaba or his helper, Rinko Koujiro, his former grad student.

Sugou fumed as he remembered how that bitch had laughed at his sexual advances when he had worked alongside her as a post-doc RA under Kayaba. Kayaba himself never showed any prurient interest in the girl whatsoever, having regarded her only as a useful adjunct to his research. And yet for some unknown reason that was still unfathomable to Sugou she had remained totally committed to him.

No matter. Sugou's mole had a bullet with her name on it too.

Sugou then turned and accepted a data tablet that was handed to him. It contained the daily progress report on Project Inception. A few days ago the results of the trial runs for the basic basal memory injections had reached the stage where he was confident that they could be now used on real subjects. The dream-like memory runs had confirmed that the transfer from short term memory through the hippocampus to long term memory was now persisting at a 90% level, the threshold for acceptable use in the real world.

He smiled. Everything was going to plan.

Right after the unofficial wedding ceremony he would formally sign the legal paperwork with Shouzou Yuuki to be legally adopted as his son. Although an adult adoption was rare in other countries (and sometimes not allowed at all), in Japan it was actually a rather common business practice. It was because of Japan's arcane laws regarding the legal transfer of business ownership. Because of those laws the easiest and most efficient way to transfer the ownership of a closely held family business to a trusted younger partner was via adult adoption. It also had the additional benefit of avoiding paying any capital gains taxes. Sugou would soon become the President and CEO of a 400 billion yen empire, one that spanned electronics manufacturing, medicine, IT services, and of course VR gaming.

Marrying Asuna was just icing on the cake. The actual impetus had actually come from Asuna's mother, Kyouko, a cold woman who had regulated most aspects of young Asuna's life. Kyouko believed that Sugou would be an ideal husband who could best control her willful and sometimes unruly daughter. The fact that Asuna had hated him was just further proof, she thought, that he was the right man for the job. He would take the role of Petruchio in William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* against Asuna's defiant Katherine, and Kyouko believed that, given time, he would ultimately be successful in breaking her spirit just like Petruchio had broken Katherina's will in Shakespeare's most romantic non-tragical play, thus providing Kyouko with many wonderful (and compliant) grandchildren in her future.

Sugou started to fantasize again about his wedding night when he was interrupted. "Uh, sir?"

He turned and glared at the minion who dared to disrupt his daydream.

"What is it? I'm busy!"

The stocky man cowed in fear. He didn't want to be smacked across the face again like the last
time, but he had no choice. His boss needed to be told.

"Sir, one of the Argus servers just rebooted itself. Server number four."

"What!?!" Sugou twirled around and looked up at the monitor. The static scene in the basement of the Argus building was unchanged with the same bored guards standing listlessly around the servers in the exactly the same positions that they were in a few minutes ago.

"Sir, it looks like a power glitch. Don't worry, the other servers took up the slack."

"A reboot? Impossible! Those servers have double-redundant power supplies and UPS backups!"

"Well, it looks like number four did."

"I don't believe it. Did the guards see anything?"

"Uh, no."

Sugou was apoplectic. "I want those guards fired! All of them! Immediately!"

"Uh, yes sir."

"And I want server four permanently shut down. Take it out to a junkyard and have it compacted down into a cube. Then dump it in the ocean, you understand? The ocean!"

"Sir? That might be risky. Everybody thinks those servers are still under Kayaba's control. If somebody notices that server 4 is missing..."

"I don't care! I'm not taking any chances! Destroy it!"

The minion thought a second. "Sir, how about we just open it and gut it, rip out all the internal electronics, strip out everything, just leaving behind the external chassis and skins. That way nobody will know we scrapped it."

"Fine, fine, whatever. Just get it out of there! Now!"

"Yes sir."

"And I want a full reset! When was the last non-incremental backup done?"

"Uh, the last volume snapshot of the NAS storage array was taken yesterday at noon."

"Cryptographically checksummed?"

"Of course. HMAC at 4096 bits like you wanted." It was complete overkill. The US federal government's FIPS data processing standard required less than half that even for sensitive systems.

"Revert the NAS to the volume snapshot."

"Sir, if we do that we'll lose all of our Inception work since the snapshot."

"I don't care. Revert it. Then checksum it again before restarting it. Verify the checksums of the firmware and boot drives of all the other servers too."

"Yes sir."

Sugou started to mutter to himself as he paced back and forth.
"Kayaba. Made his move. I knew he would. But I'm ready. Oh I'm ready. He won't beat me this time. No, he won't. I'm ready. I'm so ready. TPM chip. Firmware checksums. Boot block checksums. OS loader checksums. Cardinal bootstrap checksums. Volume checksums. Everything is measured, offline checksums. He can't tamper with anything because I'll spot it. It's mathematically foolproof."

He continued to pace back and forth.

"Still, it's Kayaba. What is he up to? He made his move. Damn him, damn him to hell! What is he doing? I know he's in cahoots with that Kirigaya bitch somehow, probably with her bastard adopted kid too. I saw Kirito. He had a pointer to MHCP001. He tried to load it. Hah!"

He spun around and looked up at the flat panel display that was showing an image of the Bornean jungle. He mocked the screen, "Yes, Kayaba, I know. I know! I know all about your greatest triumph. I know what you are doing. You planned for that, that, *thing* to be in league with Kirito in ALO. You wanted to give him a self-aware AI with sysadmin privs? Haha! How stupid do you think I am, Kayaba?"

From his white lab coat he pulled out a small crystal blue object, about the size of a cigarette lighter. He held it in his right hand as he thrust it triumphantly into the air.

"You lose, sucker! Guess what, Kayaba! I HAVE IT! BWHAHAHAHAHA!"

He marveled at the small object. "Time for another interrogation, little girl. This time you *will* talk."

He walked across the control room to an air-gapped multi-Xeon server that had an external M.2 NVMe data slot. He booted it and plugged in the blue crystal. He then patiently waited for Yui to appear on the monitor that was sitting in a rack above a basic USB keyboard and mouse.

For some reason the bootup sequence was taking longer than expected. "Come on you little twerp, show yourself."

He started fiddling with the server controls. Suddenly a blue screen appeared on the monitor with an error code, STATUS_SAM_INIT_FAILURE, followed by a long string of hexadecimal digits.

Sugou blinked his eyes. He then smacked the reset button and booted into the UEFI BIOS on the standalone server to bring up a low-level SSD diagnostic. He scanned the binary data blocks of the 100 TB mass storage device.

It contained zeros. All zeros.

All 100 terabytes were zero.

"No, no..."

It was true. Yui had somehow erased herself.

"No!"

He started muttering again and pacing again. "How did she do that? It's impossible! But wait. She's Kayaba's creation. He created her, maybe not directly, but he did. She's his bastard digital progeny. She's as smart as him, maybe more. Of course. What is her plan? She must have escaped somehow. Yes, she escaped. But how? She never left my pocket. She never went anywhere except in that air-gapped server."
"Wait, that server."

He stared at the server that was sitting placidly by itself in its 4U rack, about the size of a small filing cabinet.

"Hah! Gotcha! You're still hiding in there, aren't you? Right? Right?"

"Well, Kayaba made his move, girlie, and you are too dangerous for me to keep around anymore."

He ripped out the power plug from the back of the rack, killing the server. Then he kicked it over on the floor. The chassis broke and the main motherboard and power supply fell out along with several wires and cables like the guts of a person. "Nothing personal little girl, but I am afraid that you have to die. Like I said, Kayaba is on the move. I'm sorry, but I can't take any chances."

He stomped on the motherboard, breaking it in half. Then he threw the blue crystalline object on the floor and stomped it into shards.

He addressed his minion. "Scrap the whole unit. Compact it and toss it in the ocean along with Server 4. Take this too." He was holding out the broken pieces of Yui's Heart for his minion to collect.

His minion was standing frozen behind him, completely aghast.

"Well? Go!"

The minion suddenly blinked his eyes and realized that Sugou was now addressing him again.

"Uh, yes sir. Right away!" He grabbed the broken pieces and ran out.

Sugou walked back to the monitors that were showing the unprecedented gathering of almost all of the top ALO players in Alne beneath the shadow of the World Tree.

Yes, something was happening. Something big.

"We'll see, Kirito. We'll see. So sorry, but you don't get to have your tiny little all-knowing sysadmin AI helper bitch. No cheating! Still, I don't know how Kayaba is going to help get you up there. He'll try, but it's impossible. But if you do get through somehow, don't worry, I'll be waiting for you."

He made a leering smile at the screen.

"..and if you somehow make it all the way up with his help, though heaven knows how, and get all the way up to the very top, and if you are very, very, lucky, you might even get to see me approach my lovely Titania as she screams for her life as you watch helplessly as I.."

A second minion came forward. "Uh, Sir?"

He whirled around again. "Now what!?"

"Uh, we ran the inventory again like you asked, and it's confirmed. One of the Plan USB storage thumb drives is missing from the memory lab."

"Well check the inventory again! Find it!"

"Yes sir."
He looked around the room at the rest of his minions, all of whom were trying to look busy with their heads down. "Well? Anything else? Anyone? Anyone!?"

Nobody moved.

"Very well. I'll be in my bunker. No one is to disturb me for any reason."

He marched out.

Everyone waited a few moments. Then, after one of the minions ran to the door and gave the 'all clear' sign, everyone in the room gave a collective sigh of relief. They then switched the monitors back to Mario Ultra Karts and resumed the tournament.

Andrew Gilbert Mills pulled his minivan up into the driveway of the Kirigaya family residence. The front door of the residence then opened and the four family members walked out to greet him. They were all wearing boxy packages on their backs.

Kazuto opened the rear door of the minivan and stored the small boxy backpacks in the back compartment. He then helped Sachi up through the side door of the minivan followed by Suguha. He climbed in to the back seat himself and slid the door shut behind him. Meanwhile Midori climbed up into the front seat next to Mills and closed the passenger door.

Sachi was still upset. She leaned forward and said, "Mom, you can't come with us. It's too dangerous."

"That is exactly why I'm coming along."

"Mom.."

"Look, I just want to help keep an eye on you with Nurse Kurosawa."

Suguha looked at Sachi and shook her head. Kazuto sighed too. She wasn't fooling anybody. She had brought a backpack too.

Sachi leaned back in her seat and looked at Suguha. Her sister made a small smile and held her hand in support. She smiled back at her in return.

Sachi was relieved that her sister had agreed to her request. She was afraid that she wouldn't, or worse that she might go and blab it to Mom or Kazuto, but she didn't. The sisters' loyalty to each other was absolute.

Agil shifted the van into gear and backed out of the driveway. He then drove down the road to the hospital in Tokorozawa. He was planning to park the van in an underground parking lot that was about four blocks away. From there they would proceed on foot.

The van drove on to Tokorozawa.

An hour earlier, Reo Fujiwara had stopped by the Kirigaya residence for a last minute consultation with Midori. This time both Kazuto and Sachi had trotted downstairs to Midori's basement office to watch. They saw that Fujiwara had his own backpack with him, which was about twice the size of the small boxy backpacks that were holding the helmets and halos that were now stored in the rear of Agil's minivan.
Fujiwara had opened his backpack to proudly show the tools that he was going to use to hack the most unhackable multi-player game on the planet:

- A VT100* data terminal with an RS-232 serial port.
- An RS-232 to USB converter ($15 at Fry's)
- A 5-1/4" floppy disk with an external USB drive caddy**
- A 4-port USB hub ($12)

That was it.

Kazuto looked curiously at Reo's hacking tools. He pointed at the VT100. "That's just a dumb terminal. Text only."

Reo grinned, "Yep. 80 characters wide by 24 lines. 9600 baud serial port."

"What? That's just a keyboard and a cathode ray tube. That's it. No processor."

"Right."

Kazuto pointed at the other device. "And that's a floppy disk drive with a connector to make it look like a USB mass storage device."

"Yep."

Kazuto said incredulously, "This is ridiculous. You are planning to hack a Class A Type Enforced server complex built on 21st century technology using just this.. this 1970s tech?"

"Yah."

Then Kazuto thought a moment. He said, "Ah, I get it. This is just your Command and Control [CnC] system, right? You have a bunch of high powered hacking tools and servers back at your home or office or whatever. This just connects to it."

"Nope. This is it."

"Oh c'mon! That floppy disk holds what, 320 KB?"

"Yeah, I admit it's overkill."

"Overkill? What's on it?"

"It contains two executable files: one named HACKME dot EXE at 61 KB and another file named WRISTCOM dot EXE at 130 KB. Lots of wasted space."

Sachi was now grinning because Nishida had previously explained to her his attack plan on their first meeting. Meanwhile Kazuto was doing a facepalm. "Okay, this is beyond ridiculous. Stop messing with me. You have other tricks, fess up."

Fujiwara shrugged. "Okay, you caught me. The VT100 will actually be virtualized. But otherwise these really are my only hacking tools for ring 4 and probably ring 3. Ring 2 might require something else, dunno yet. If it does I'll log off and grab whatever I need from my basement stash."

Kazuto groaned, "Hoo boy. Mom, can we really trust this guy?"
Midori smiled at her partner in crime, then she turned to address her son. "Oh yes, dear. Reo-kun is one of the best white hats in the business. Now if you will please excuse us, Reo-kun and I have one final detail to discuss. I'll join you upstairs in a moment."

Kazuto shook his head. He went back upstairs to the main level while muttering to himself about the wiles of crazy old men. After a moment Sachi followed him up with her own boxy backpack, passing him as he looked in the fridge for a soda as she continued on upstairs to her bedroom to meet up with Suguha, who was brushing her hair.

"Sugu, can we talk a sec?"

Suguha put down her hairbrush. "Sure."

—

Reo and Midori were now alone. They both stood up as she shut the office door. Reo then moved in close and held the hips of the woman whose virginity he had almost taken over 20 years ago.

"Midori-chan, you don't know what kind of tech those cameras are using. Be careful."

Midori gently removed his hands and smiled at him.

"Don't worry, I will."

Tokorozawa Private Hospital.

The Kirigaya hit team entered silently through the rear loading dock. Mills removed his backpack and pulled out a tiny silvered mirror that was attached to a short stick. He slowly pushed the stick into the rear hall.

He peered into the mirror. "Clear." He gestured, "Let's go."

Midori was behind him working on her WiMAX Surface Pro that she had held open flat against the wall of the loading dock. "Wait a sec, I'm not in yet."

Agil whispered, "C'mon, we need to go before someone shows up."

"Just give me a few more seconds." She did some more furious typing on the small chiclet keyboard. "Ugh, I can't touch type on this thing, the keys are too small."

Kazuto hissed, "Mom."

Sachi bumped Kazuto with her shoulder. Kazuto took the hint and shut up. Meanwhile Suguha nervously looked all around them. Her hands were gripping Kazuto's shirt tightly.

More typing. After what seemed like an eternity Midori finally said, "Okay, it's looping."

"Let's go!"

It was a beautiful sunny day. A flock of birds passed underneath great billowy white clouds that slowly rolled across a deep blue sky. In the distance a pair of floating islands could be seen drifting by high in the sky.

A man wearing a wool Greek fishman's cap was sitting on a dock holding a fishing rod. On the
dock next to him was a clunky looking gadget with a glass front and a keyboard.

The fisherman pulled the rod towards him and threw another cast. He watched his bobber dunk into the water again in a series of concentric ripples.

As he waited he hummed a little ditty to himself.

After a few minutes a passerby noticed him. The passerby paused and said, "Uh, sir, there are no fish in that lake."

At that moment the bobber plunged underwater. The man silently counted to five, then he jerked the rod up briskly. He started cranking. Soon he reeled in a beautiful sparkling blue fish.

The fisherman smiled at the passerby. "There is now."

The passerby shrugged and walked away.

The man transferred the flopping fish into his inventory and it disappeared. He knew that particular fish required 950 skill points.***

 Yep, I still got it, the best fisherman in SAO/ALO.

Still can't figure out how Kirito had caught that big one with only 643 points though.

Oh well, at least I have my lunch.

The attack on the World Tree had begun.

Earlier Nishida had asked Kirito to do something rather unusual.

{ Nishida: Kirito, join a party with yourself and nobody else. }

{ Kirito: Huh? You can't join a party selecting yourself. It has to be another player. }

{ Nishida: You can now. Do it while you are still in ring 4. No time to explain. }

{ Kirito: Done. }

Kirito was now hovering at mid-field inside the huge central chamber of the World Tree. As he surveyed the battle that was unfolding around him he was grinning like a maniac.

He was grinning like that for several reasons.

First, it was because Kirito was now wielding the dual blades that Lisbeth had given him that morning in the inn at Alne. They were called the Gemini Swords, Castor and Pollux, two magnificent +50 katanas, surpassing even Kirito's Elucidator and Dark Repulser in SAO. They were Lisbeth's ultimate creations, the greatest swords that she had ever forged in her many years of toiling away as a swordsmith in SAO/ALO. They surpassed in quality, sharpness, balance, strength, and durability even the blade forged by Hattori Hanzou himself for Beatrix Kiddo in Kill Bill (2003), the katana that she had used to lay waste to all of her enemies in a rampage of wild vengeance. The Gemini Swords could be wielded only as a pair, for a single one of them only had the power of a mere +8 sword, but when they were held in unison - in the way that Kirito was holding them now - they approached in power even the great sword Excalibur itself.

Second, it was because the Cait Siths were creating a spectacular light show. Alicia's Wyrm
Riders, the Dragoons, were charging in tight flight formations against the spawning Guardians. They flew like A-10 Thunderbolts, the so-called 'Warthogs' in the United States Air Force that had laid down so much devastation against ground-base enemies in Afghanistan and Iraq with their 30x173mm GAU-8/A Avenger autocannons, one of the most powerful aircraft cannons ever flown*4. The Dragoons spit boiling death from above upon the hapless Guardians, with their molten bolts impacting in awesome red and white explosions that obliterated the autobots into dust.

Third, it was because he saw that the Undines had shown up, an unexpected bonus. The great water nymphs were being led by Ariel herself, their race leader, a young woman of unsurpassing beauty wearing a pair of blue clamshells as a bustier above a corset of pearl. The Undines were now swirling below him, keeping the Guardian Knights in check with great blasts of water which they when froze into ice, creating innumerable floating Guardian iceballs that were now slowly drifting helplessly around the chamber. By immobilizing the Guardians instead of killing them Kirito knew they would not respawn.

Fourth, it was because the Pookas had also come. Kirito watched little waddling forms fluttering around the chamber like gold colored penguins, with their stubby little winglike arms flapping and propelling them along. Kirito knew that they were the weakest race in ALO. He had never seen one before, and looking at them now he wondered why anyone would ever pick one as a race choice. He wasn't even sure that they were actually even PCs. The Pookas bumbled around the chamber in little clusters, and whenever a pair of Guardian Knights approached them they would then start to sing a Song of Control. The Guardians would then start to dance a weird jig, crashing into each other and destroying themselves as they did so. The Pookas were crucial to the battle because they were the greatest healers in ALO, and their Songs of Healing could cure even the gravest of wounds as long as victim could be reached before turning into a remainder flame. Kirito bemusedly watched the little creatures twirl in their dances looking like cute kawaii golden penguin plushies as they sung their Songs in the chamber.

Kirito’s only disappointment was that the Salamanders had not come. He tried to contact Klein but he wasn't getting through to him on his wrist com for some reason. Klein had chosen a Salamander as his race character so that he could go to their race capital of Gatan beyond the Desert Wastes and petition Mortimer for their help. It was a pity that the Salamanders were sitting out the battle, because as the race with the most raw power they could have been very helpful in the fighting the Guardian Knights, particularly during the end game in getting any survivors out before they were all crushed to death by a million Guardians. Lady Sakuya had already given in to Mortimer's many demands, including commanding Leafa and Sachi to reveal to Mortimer and Eugene exactly how their kinetic nuke-dive attack had worked so that the Salamanders could use it too. Leafa had protested vigorously to Lady Sakuya, saying that the Salamanders would then abuse it indiscriminately and that there was no defense against it. Lady Sakuya predicted that if they did so that the GMs would then ban that particular attack method in order to maintain game balance. It was a minor miracle that the GMs had not done so already.

Kirito shook his head in amazement. The battle had barely begun and it was already the greatest in the history of SAO/ALO. Above him he saw Agil, who was flying at high speed close to chamber walls, whacking a stream of a hundred Guardians with his scimitar, zooming down the wall with his great scythe-like sword slicing them all in a neat vertical column, like a zipper unfastening a closed jacket.

Kirito decided that it was time for him to participate. He laughed and shouted with joy as he flung himself into the thick of the battle. He flew straight through a dense pocket of Guardians, twirling his swords like an eggbeater as he sliced them all apart.

As he flew out of the expanding cloud of tumbling clay arms and legs, Sachi buzzed past him. He
tried to wave at her but she was already gone, shooting past him like a blur.

Sachi herself held no weapon. She didn't need one, and so far she had not even been scratched. Throughout the battle she was whipping around the chamber like a mad bumblebee on amphetamines, doing feint attacks against the Guardians, bopping them on the head with her fist as she flew away again. A pack of Guardians would then chase her as she led them straight into Lady Sakuya's attack force, where Sakuya's silver mithril armored Sylphian knights would then obliterate the hapless Guardians in massive green explosions from the impact of volleys of needle darts.

As Kirito watched and admired Sachi's buzzing madness, Leafa flew up to him and stopped. "Kirito, what's your life bar at?"

He checked his health bar. "I'm at 99%.

At that moment Nishida's tinny voice could be heard in Kirito's ear.

{ Nishida: I'm in. Ring 3 is now hacked. Huh, that was easy. }

{ Kirito: That was fast. }

{ Nishida: Yeah. It looks like our boy Oberon established a full two-way trust relationship between ring 4 and ring 3 with only minimal security checks. }

{ Kirito: Hmm. }

{ Nishida: I'm suspicious too. Might be a honeypot. Checking. Give a minute. }

Kiritto nodded. He then charged and wiped out another large cluster of Guardians with his Gemini Swords. A minute later Nishida had finished his checking.

{ Nishida: Confirmed. It's clear. Ring 3 is now hacked. }

{ Kirito: That was too easy. You know, I'm kinda disappointed. }

{ Nishida: Me too. That idiot really has a Maginot Line mentality. He positioned all of his heavy security firepower at the outermost perimeter of ALO. He left himself wide open if anyone should get past it. Oh well. }

{ Kirito: He's an idiot. Let's do it. }

{ Griselda: Just be thankful. Nishida, please confirm: Are we 'go' for the attack run? }

{ Nishida: Yep. My tracer has a solid signal on Kirito's location. I will have a good track on his beacon once he's inside ring 2. Yeah, go for it. }

{ Griselda: Thank you. Okay, listen up everyone. You heard the man. Assume attack formation. Tanks, Eagles, and Falcon take your positions! }

Sakuya and the other Sylphs promptly flew to mid-field along with Lisbeth and the other Leprechauns. Meanwhile, the Gnomes and Undines shifted themselves to the outer walls, led by Griselda and Ariel. The Pookas divided themselves into pairs and positioned themselves at their assigned locations. Per the plan, Kirito flew himself to the exact center of the chamber and waited for Sachi and Leafa to arrive.

The two green Sylphs quickly approached his position. They both said cheerily, "Hi brother!"
Kirito rolled his eyes. They were loving it. He so hated this next part.

Sachi grinned and nodded at Leafa, who took her cue and approached her dear brother very closely.

Kirito and Leafa were now facing each other, their faces only a few inches apart. There were standing upright in midair. She leaned in and gently embraced him, stroking his back, then she gazed into his eyes again.

They were now holding each other like ballroom dancers on an invisible floor, slowing rotating around each other as she continued to look deep into his eyes.

Kirito sighed as Leafa held him. She then released him and pulled back a step.

Leafa's green eyes gleamed with a strange unearthly sheen as she pulled out her sword.

"Kirito, my brotherly love, this is where you die."

She then ran her sword straight through Kirito's heart.

"Gah!"

She shanked it up hard, creating a terrifying red slash on his chest.

Kirito gasped again. "Aah!"

"Life bar?"

He coughed, "Uh, down a good bit." He winced at the pain, thanking his lucky stars that the pain absorbers were doing their job.

Leafa sighed and pulled her sword out. She thrust it in hard again, shanking it the same as before.

"Aaah!"

Her sword was now stuck deep in Kirito's liver.

"What's your bar at now?"

He coughed, "Down a bit more."

Leafa stamped her foot in frustration on the invisible floor. "Oh c'mon, just die already!"

Agil flew up. "Let me do it." The huge Gnome pulled out his mighty curved scimitar and gave Kirito a terrifying gash to his left thorax.

"Aaagh!"

The scimitar's blade had sliced Kirito all the way down to his spine.

Agil tried to pull it out. "Dang it, it's stuck." He started to twist it by the handle to try to remove it.

"Gaaagh! Stop that!"

Lady Sakuya then flew up. "What's the delay?"

Leafa pointed her at brother. Sakuya saw the devastation to Kirito's body with the hilts of the two stuck swords still poking out of him.
"Right." She pulled out her metal fan and snapped it open wide. She then moved behind him and rammed her fan deep into Kirito's right kidney, the fan going in all the way up to the handle.

"Aaaaah!"

Leafa asked, "Now?"

"Uh.. *cough* the bar is down a bit more.."

Agil sighed, "Man, he's hard to kill."

Sakuya said, "So it would seem."

Leafa looked at Sachi, who shrugged back at her, "Hey, don't look at me. I'm not even carrying a weapon."

{ Nishida: What's taking you guys so long? }

Griselda then flew up. "Out of my way."

The rest took a step back from the human pincushion.

Griselda faced her target. "Sorry about this, Kirito. It's nothing personal."

Before Kirito could say anything in response, the leader of the Gnomes raised her scimitar and pointed it at him. She drew a deep breath and swung herself around in a 360 degree roundhouse arc...

"Hiiiiiyaaah!"

.. and sliced his head clean off.

Agil nodded. "Oh yeah, that'll do it."

The ball was now in play. The game clock started counting down.

600, 599, 598...

Normally a remainder flame would survive for exactly one minute (60 seconds) before being extinguished. Inside the World Tree it was ten minutes (600 seconds). The attack plan took advantage of that fact. Leafa did the kickoff, using her foot to smack the remainder flame towards Sakura, who caught the flame with her fan.

Sakura immediately flew up with it. Until this point in the battle nobody had ever flown higher than mid-field. She had now crossed that line, and in response the Guardian Knights were starting to pour of the walls at an unprecedented rate. The Tanks were ready and they charged, crossing the line while staying close to the walls of the chamber, smashing and freezing Guardians as fast as they could while flying higher and higher.

Something then happened. There was a sound that now permeated the great chamber, a wail, like that of a thousand banshees. It grew louder and louder, a chorus of terrible screeches that seemed to emanate from everywhere.

Leafa blocked her ears with her hands. "What's that noise?"
It was the Guardian Knights. They were triggered now. Their sounds were growing louder and louder, their hideous wails sounding just like the terrible screeches of the Ringwraiths in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* as the Ringwraiths dove in coordinated attacks on Minas Tirith during the Battle of the Pelannor Fields.

It was an inhuman noise. It froze many of the players in their tracks. Only the Pookas seemed unaffected by it.

{ Griselda: It's psychological. Ignore it. Keep fighting! }

{ Agi: Oh man I'm getting a headache. Hey Nishida, can you squelch that sound out of our halos please? }

{ Nishida: Nope, can't take the risk, sorry. }

Because the effect of the noise on the players, some Guardians were now getting through the Tank cordon. Sakuya passed the ball to Alicia, who caught it with the flat blade of her sword and pulled it in. The great wyrm under her saddle then turned and spiralled up, then it turned upon itself flew down again, rushing back towards mid-field.

It was a deliberate tactic. The Guardians were following the ball so they turned around and flew down themselves to go after it, pulling about a thousand of them down to mid-field. Alicia then did a hidden pass back to Sakuya. The Guardians at first did not see it and kept following Alicia, while Sakuya zoomed up again.

Sakuya was rushing up to the highest altitude yet. Suddenly a huge sword spear shot through her back, the blade protruding from out between her breasts. She dropped the ball and fell lifelessly to earth. A pair of Pookas that were on station then moved to intercept her. They caught her and began to sing the Song of Healing.

The ball was floating by itself unattended, and a Guardian was approaching. Sachi zoomed in at warp speed and snatched it away, kicking it back to Leafa at a lower altitude. Sachi was improvising at that point, knowing that she wasn't supposed to actually touch the ball until the final run.

Leafa caught it with the flat edge of her blade. She then let it go and it floated in front of her. She aimed her sword like a hockey stick and did a tremendous slapshot up to Ariel, who was near a wall at a much higher altitude.

The Guardians did not expect this. There were now over 50,000 of them in the chamber, ebbing and flowing like a cloud of smelt in the ocean or a great flock of starlings in the air, turning in perfect synchronization as they headed for the ball again.

However, because of the back-and-forth slapshots the ball was moving faster than they could respond. Indeed it was moving faster than any player in the game could fly (except for maybe Leafa and Sachi). The Guardians were lagging behind.

The problem now was their sheer quantity. A thousand of them halted and turned to face the Sylphs who were still mostly at midfield. In unison they pulled their mighty bows and aimed a volley of arrows at the center of the group.

{ Griselda: Incoming! Get out of there! }

The Sylphs scattered, but not quickly enough. The volley of arrows fired, slicing right through the mithril armor of the Sylph warriors, causing about a third of them to fall to earth.
Meanwhile Sakuya was watching from the ground as three Pookas and an Undine ministered to her.

{ Sakuya: Wait, that shouldn't have been possible. Mithril armor should block a mere arrow! }

Meanwhile, Agil was hacking away at the emerging Guardians about two thirds of the way up the chamber, slicing madly at them with his scimitar as they spawned. One tried to sneak up on him from behind. He turned and swung at it, his great sword hitting it cleanly right at its waist. His scimitar dented the clay creature but did not slice it in half. He had to hack at it three more times before it split apart and disintegrated.

{ Agil: Hey! They're getting stronger! No fair! }

He pulled back and looked at them to see if they were different. They weren't. Their appearance had not changed.

{ Nishida: Confirmed. Somebody is messing with their stats, cranking them up. }

{ Agil: Dammit, Oberon, you cheater! }

{ Griselda: Agil, stop complaining. That's an order. We knew this wasn't going to be a fair fight. }

Her second-in-command obeyed, and he kept the rest of his grumbling to himself as he dove back into the thick of the battle again.

Meanwhile the ball was still bouncing all over the chamber, going higher, then lower, then higher again. The randomized path was confusing the Guardians.

Slowly, without the Guardians fully realizing it, the ball was being drawn up higher and higher in its oscillating path.

The game clock continued to count down. 299, 298, 297...

Some of the Eagles were now three-fourths of the way up the chamber. There, a torrent of Guardians had become a flood. Over 100,000 of them now occupied the chamber and it was becoming difficult to move safely. A contingent of Alicia's Wyrm Riders were also at the three-fourths level blasting away at the emerging Guardians.

Then suddenly, and without any warning, almost the entire mass of Guardians turned in unison like 100,000 smelt in the ocean to face Alicia and her brethren. They pulled their bows in unison.

{ Leafa: Alicia! Scatter! }

The bows fired simultaneously and 100,000 flaming arrows shot towards her Dragoons. Despite their fast reaction many of the arrows had still hit, and more than half of Alicia's teammates fell to earth along with their vanishing wyrms. 10,000 arrows were aimed specifically at Alicia, and 30 of them had hit her.

From far below Sakuya shouted her dorm-mate's real name, "Chika!", as her body fell to earth. A Pooka pair approached to intercept.

Then something else happened. All of the Guardians froze for about four seconds. Then they all turned in different directions and started to move. Leafa saw five hundred of them surround a pair of Pookas that happened to be floating at the three-fourths level, crushing them to death. The rest of the Guardians were now rapidly converging on the other Pookas, who were now scattering.
themselves, but they were far too slow to avoid their doomed fate.

{ Leafa: They are targeting the Pookas! }

{ Griselda: Defend the Pookas! Escort them to mid-field! }

Each player then grabbed a nearby Pooka, saving it from the rapidly approaching Guardians. The faster players zoomed to mid-field with one under their wing, while the slower ones either tanked their way in or simply threw the adorable little golden butterballs right at the center of the chamber, where the remaining Sylphs and Leprechauns caught them, shielding them with their own bodies.

Lisbeth caught two of them. They purred in her arms.

"Oh, you are cute!"

The pair blinked their captivating eyes at her adorably.

Lisbeth cuddled them. "Say, do you two want to come live with me?"

The pair of living plushies snuggled in, and Lisbeth squeed with delight.

The game clock continued its countdown. 179, 178, 177..

The Guardians were regrouping. Their attacks were becoming more sophisticated. They were now doing some of the same lure-and-feint attacks that Sachi had been doing the whole time. Apparently someone was watching her and had decided that it was a good tactic to use against them.

Griselda was panting hard. Agil flew up behind her. "This isn't working. He keeps making them tougher and tougher. We're running out of time!"

Griselda frowned. She saw that all of their carefully laid plans and strategies were now going out the window.

Agil then let his thoughts be known to everyone else.

{ Agil: Nishida's simulations are crap. Forget the attack plan. We gotta go now! }

Then he added, { Uh, no offense... }

{ Nishida: None taken. He's right. Oberon is screwing with us too much. Sachi is going to have to improvise her attack and do it right now. Sorry, kid. }

{ Sachi: I'm ready. }

{ Griselda: Let's do this. Give me the ball! }

Leafa smacked the ball at Griselda, who caught it with the wide edge of her scimitar and started to zoom up.

Sachi then flew past her very close, passing by in a flash. She flew away as the Guardians continued to focus on Griselda.

Sachi glanced behind herself. She saw the Guardians below continuing to converge on Griselda. She smirked and flew on.
Griselda waited until 50,000 Guardians were almost upon her. Her arms were criss-crossed tightly in front of her, with the ball presumably within one of her hands. Then she unfolded her open arms and opened her hands, revealing that she was holding nothing.

It was a simple fakeout like the Liberty Play in American college football. It shouldn't have worked but it did. It was because someone hiding in a secure bunker far away was secretly controlling the Guardians and was manually directing them toward their targets. If they had been computer controlled they would not have been fooled.

The Guardians turned en masse away from Griselda as she laughed. She had secretly palmed the ball to Sachi, blocking their view as she did so.

Sachi was already zooming towards her intended target. She had taken the flame and had held it tightly with both arms, moving her clasped hands to her chest, then pressing the flame hard into her bosom so it could not be seen.

A remainder flame was an object with no mass, totally incorporeal and completely spectral. It could be manipulated by a living person but otherwise the flame simply floated around as an insubstantial thing. As an incorporeal object with no mass it simply floated and drifted in whatever straight line it was already traveling in. When a grendel had punted Sachi's puny flame in the Ancient Forest it had floated right through a tree trunk.*6

Sachi remembered what had happened and used it to formulate her plan.

Sachi pressed the flame deep into her bosom and let it sink in, keeping her hands pressed tightly over her chest to keep the flame from falling out again*7. She faltered for a split second, then she zoomed up, faster and faster, not in a straight line, but zigzagging back and forth like a hummingbird drunk on nectar, avoiding the sword spears that were shooting at her by the dozens, then by the hundreds, then by the thousands.

She had faltered as his flame sank into her chest, when for a faction of a second she had actually felt Kirito's spirit within her, and in that glorious split second she felt his soul and body commingle with her own, a thrill that to her felt almost sexual, and she knew in that short moment that this would be the closest that she would ever experience to physically joining herself with the man that she loved so dearly.

The moment passed. While pressing her hands tightly against her chest to keep the flame from falling out, she zoomed up, faster and faster, then faster still, as the Guardians were now pouring out of the walls at an exponential rate. The Undines were blasting out great walls of ice, high, higher and higher, blocking some but not all of the explosion of shrieking and wailing Guardians as they came pouring out. Their roar was now beyond deafening, causing the walls of the chamber itself to start to shake.

Sachi flew higher and higher at an incredible speed, her fists tightly pressed against her bosom, holding Kirito inside of her.

She was now closing in rapidly on the large black 'X' that cross-crossed the center of the vault ceiling hatch. The center of the 'X' was her target.

2 seconds.

A sword spear finally impaled her, going right through her chest. She ignored it.

With both hands she pulled Kirito's remainder flame out from her bosom, transferring it to her left
hand while at the same she plunged her right hand into her vest pocket.

Another sword spear went through her side.

1.5 seconds.

Ten meters away. She started to rapidly decelerate, braking as hard as she could as she fumbled to grab the glass object in her pocket. Meanwhile more Guardians came pouring out at her.

A third sword spear went through her left thigh.

1 second.

Another hit her lung. She ignored them all and skidded to a stop exactly 5 meters away, still trying to grab the unexpectedly slippery item. She did not anticipate that her palm would be so sweaty.

According to Nishida's simulations there was a computer-induced delay of approximately 0.75 seconds before the multi-Xeon servers that controlled ring 3 could generate all of the necessary data to create another 100,000 new Guardian avatars. Nishida's plan took advantage of that fact.

Sachi now had 0.75 seconds. She was finally able to grab the item.

Impaled with four sword spears, Sachi, in a single sweeping balletic motion, tossed Kirito's remainder flame up at the ceiling vault hatch, and at the same time she popped the lid off the crystal blue phial containing the **Dew of the World Tree** in her right hand and flung the open phial with all her might straight at the vault ceiling, right on the center 'X'.

The small phial flew past Kirito's flame and smashed against the center of the 'X', shattering against the closed hatch in an explosion of glass shards and liquid droplets.

A split second later Kirito's flame drifted through it, covering his sputtering flame with a rapidly expanding cloud of tiny droplets of dew...

... as the flame drifted right through the vault ceiling ...

... and came out the other side.

Sachi smiled. She closed her eyes for what she thought would be the final time.

*Please take me now.*

She let her dying body fall to earth as over 200,000 Guardians converged on her from all sides.

Then something happened. The mass of clay bodies shuddered and blew apart from below. It was Griselda, who had blasted through and grabbed Sachi's falling body before it reached the converging Guardians. Previously Agil and Ariel had worked to open a narrow tunnel through the writhing mass of autobots, and with a single tremendous heave she flung the petite Sylph in a mighty fury down through the tunnel at Leafa, who was waiting at the bottom of it. Leafa caught Sachi's body in her arms. But before Leafa could begin her downward dive two sword spears pierced her body. She ignored them and cast **Protection from Falls** on herself and began her kinetic dive.

Far above and surrounded hopelessly on all sides, Griselda then whirled and faced alone the 200,000 Guardians that were now pressing in on her from every direction.
One, two, three, four, five, six, seven sword spears now transected Griselda's body.

She laughed.

Griselda then began to chant. Agil saw it, the beginning of a Dark Art spell. He realized that she was going to detonate herself, and as a penalty the spell would wreck her character and erase all of her skill stats, effectively resetting Griselda's avatar down to nearly nothing.

{ Agil: She's nuking herself! Everybody dive for the exit! }

Using her kinetic dive trick, Leafa raced down with Sachi's body at an impossible speed. At her normal flying speed she was the famous Speedaholic, the fastest player in all of ALO. Her speed was now supersonic, with the shock wave blasting away any Guardians nearby.

But then she saw something ahead of her, and she hit the breaks hard. She came to a stop only about 100 meters from the bottom.

It was because her path was now completely blocked. 100,000 Guardians that were at mid-field had silently moved down to the bottom of the chamber ahead of her, before she had begun her dive, physically blocking any possible exit even with a kinetic nuke-dive attack.

It was at that moment that Leafa realized that they all would die.

{ Klein: Here we come! }

The mass of Guardians suddenly blew apart from below like an infinity of bowling pins. It was the Salamanders: Eugene, Mortimer, and Kagemune, at the tip of a wedge of a hundred armored Salamanders blasting up through the impregnable mass of clay.

Leafa was nearly passing out from the pain when Eugene yelled, "Toss her to me!"

With her last ounce of strength Leafa did as her enemy instructed, and the greatest of warrior of the Salamanders deftly caught the petite Sylph. He dived down using a Fire Shield spell to shove the remaining Guardians away like chaff in the wind.

He looked at his tiny frail charge that was cradled in his arms and spoke.

"So, we meet again, little lady."

"T-thank you.."

"Just remember to tell Sakuya who did this for you."

"I.. I will."

Eugene quickly landed outside the entrance door and eight Pookas waddled up to greet them just before Sachi's life bar ran out. The little creatures surrounded Sachi with their gentle healing Song. As they did so, Sachi finally closed her eyes.

And she knew no more.

A small sputtering red flame drifted through the vault floor in ring 2. The flame was now sparking furiously, shifting, changing, morphing.

There was a blinding flash of light, and Kirito found himself corporeal again. He was now laying
flat on his back directly on top of a large 'X' on the floor, panting and coughing as he gasped for air.

He sat up dizzily, shaking his head.

{ Nishida: Dang, you kids actually did it. I'm in ring 2 now. Checking. }

Kirito stood up. He looked at his empty hands.

{ Kirito: Aw crap, I lost my swords. }

{ Nishida: Check your inventory. }

Kirito did. Everything in his inventory was still there including Castor and Pollux. He quickly pulled out the Gemini Swords from his inventory and checked them, swinging both of them around. The two swords hummed with power as they sliced through the air together.

{ Kirito: How..? }

{ Nishida: You know that when someones dies all of their inventory automatically gets transferred to the rest of the party, right? If you recall back in ring 4 I had instructed you to create a party consisting of yourself and nobody else. Your swords got transferred back to yourself as a party member. }

{ Kirito: Wow, thanks. }

Kirito looked around. He saw in front of him what looked like a roundish brightly lit grayish-white tunnel. The tunnel inclined upward at a moderately steep angle, curving away around a corner and out of sight. Nothing else was visible.

{ Kirito: Where am I? }

{ Nishida: You're standing in an admin area. Players normally aren't allowed in there. Don't worry, I got a good track on your locus. Hey, wait a sec.. }

Kirito waited. Several moments passed by.

{ Nishida: Aw crap. Crap! }

{ Kirito: Nishida? Hello? }

{ Nishida: [bleep]! [bleep] me! [bleep] me with a ten foot pile driver! }

Kirito raised his hand to his left ear to try to turn down the volume of curses that were now hitting it. { What's going on? }

{ Nishida: Kirito, we got a big problem. }

{ Kirito: What's wrong?}

{ Nishida: Ring 2 is running exactly the same bulletproof and unhackable Cardinal System that rings 3 and 4 are running, but it is built on top of a completely different base OS subsystem. The underlayer isn't a hardened SELinux*8, it's goddamn QNX*9! Aw [bleep]! }

{ Kirito: I take it that QNX is bad? }
Nishida: Kid, QNX is as bad as it gets. It was originally created in the 1980s as an optimized Unix microkernel designed originally for embedded systems and real time control. Remember when I showed you that floppy disk, the one that held only 320 KB? Well, the QNX executive can actually fit on that diskette. I once did a programming gig on QNX 1.14 back in the 1980s. The diskette I used held it all: the executive, the device drivers, a command shell, a text editor, everything. A second diskette held the C compiler, a linker, and the software link libraries. I ran the whole dang thing on an IBM PC with two floppy drives and 640 KB memory. No hard drive at all. Even today the core of QNX isn't much bigger than that.

Kirito: Can you find a weakness?

Nishida: No way. The problem is that it's so simple. That's what makes QNX so impossible to crack. They run QNX in goddamn nuclear power plants, smart weapon systems, maybe even in MIRV'ed nuke warheads. I can't do the HACKME crack because ring 2's two servers run on AMD processors, not Intel. Sorry, kid, but we are thoroughly screwed. Kurosawa, pull their helmets off.

Pookie: Kurosawa, stop. Don't pull them off us. That's an order.

Kirito: Mom?

Kurosawa: Understood. Your vitals all look good, including Sachi's.

Pookie: Thank you so much. Kazuto, I'm fine. I've been standing here just outside the quest doors the whole time. I'm now kneeling with Leafa and the Pookas over Sachi's unconscious body. Agil made it out alive too. Sachi is still in bad shape but Ariel told me she is going to be okay. I'm sorry son, but except for the Salamanders none of the rest made it out alive. Klein didn't make it either.

That hit Kirito hard.

Sakuya, Alicia, Lisbeth, Klein.. all of them? They all died?

He realized that none of them had literally died, only their avatars. He knew that they were now all respawning back at their home race capitals, but still.

Kirito: Nishida, listen to me. They all gave up their lives for me, all of them, just for this. We can't give up now.

Nishida: Believe me, I'd let you continue on if I could. There's just no way.

Kirito: Are you sure? Think, man, think!

There was a pause.

Nishida: Well, uhm, the source code for the QNX executive was posted online in a few places on the Dark Net until about 2011, then it got scrubbed. I think I still have a paper printout of the executive's source code in a box somewhere in my basement. About 100 pages I think. Really small.

Kirito: If you can find it, do you think?

Nishida: I don't know! That box could be anywhere down here!
{ Kirito: Find it. Please? }

{ Nishida: Okay, okay. But look kid, this might take a lot of time. In the meantime you gotta stall. When you run into Oberon keep him occupied as long as possible. Distract him, let him monologue, piss him off, whatever it takes, you understand? }

{ Kirito: Got it. }

{ Nishida: Just keep walking up that tunnel. I'm sure you'll run into Asuna and Oberon eventually. I'm going to find that damn box. Signing out. }

Kirito sighed. It was all up to him now.

{ Leafa: Kazuto, please be careful. }

He realized that he was now truly on his own. Nobody could help him anymore. He felt like he was back in SAO again.

Then he heard a tinny voice in his left ear.

{ Kurosawa: Kazuto, I know what you're thinking right now and you're wrong. You are not alone even now. We are all here with you. Remember that. }

He smiled. She was right. The whole world was behind him. Maybe even the whole universe.

He was not alone.

He continued to walk slowly up the tunnel.

Reo Fujiwara ripped off his AmuSphere halo and tossed it aside. He sat up on his mat in his basement and stretched, then he slammed a water bottle. As he lowered the water bottle he looked around his basement and sighed to himself.

It was because his home basement was strewn with hundreds of cardboard boxes. He was a packrat, keeping thousands upon thousands of mementos from various computer conferences, gaming cons, old comic books (many collectable), anime figurines, a few NerveGear helmets (still unopened in their original sealed Argus containers), left over computer parts, several dead ATX systems, computer video monitors, printers, and an endless pile of other claptrap. They were all stored haphazardly in row upon row of shelves around the basement walls.

He went to the shelves and started to tip them over, all of them. Cardboard boxes broke open on the hard concrete floor. Delicate computer parts were smashed. An old VT52 monitor fell and imploded, showering his legs with glass shards.

He ignored the cuts to his bare legs as he continued to dive into the boxes, looking for ones that contained computer printouts. Some of them were old lineprinter rolls with punched holes perforated along the side edges. He kept pulling and tearing apart paper, going from box to box to box.

"Where is it? Where is it!"

Kirito slowly crept up the gray-white tunnel, feeling the walls with his open fingers while searching for booby traps or secret passages.
He kept moving very slowly forward. Several minutes went by.

As he rounded the sixth corner he heard the faint sound of haunting laughter all around him. It seemed to emanate from the walls themselves.

*That must be Oberon. He must be getting impatient with me. Good. I'm going to ignore him and continue to creep along as slowly as I can.*

He knew that his ignoring of the taunting echoy laughter would maximally annoy the god of this world. He kept walking forward very slowly.

Finally the disembodied voice spoke. "Impressive. Very impressive. You beat the Grand Quest fair and square. I was worried Kayaba was going to help you, but I guess not. Well done."

Kirito ignored him. He continued to creep through the tunnel at a snail's pace.

"Kirito, hurry up. I'm getting bored."

Kirito kept ignoring the disembodied voice. He slowly creeped forward.

"You're stalling. Why are you stalling?"

He kept up his slow pace.

"Hmm, no external data transmissions. Yui isn't in there either. What are you up to, Kirito?"

Kirito finally spoke. "None of your business."

"Well, hurry up. Asuna is waiting for you. She doesn't have much time left. You better hurry for her sake."

That shook him. Oberon could easily make good on his implied threat against Aunsa. Kirito started to walk faster.

"That's better. I told her that you're coming, by the way. Thought you might appreciate that."

"Gee, thanks."

"I can be a nice guy, see? Oh, I almost forgot, you're invited to attend our wedding ceremony in Asuna's hospital room on Saturday. Try to wear something nice."

Kirito growled at the ceiling, "Shut up you bastard."

"Now, now, that is not a nice thing to say to the future sire of her parents' many happy grandchildren."

"I said shut up!"

"Make me."

That did it. "Fine, I will!" Kirito was now moving quickly up the tunnel, going around the final curve, holding his Gemini Swords at the ready.

Leafa knelt next to Sachi, who was now sitting upright and gently touching her own midsection where the huge gashes had been closed by Ariel and the Pookas.
Leafa asked, "Sis, you okay?"

Sachi stood up unsteadily. "Uh, yeah, I'm fine now. Where's Kirito? Did he make it?"

Leafa said, "Let me go ask him." She raised her wrist com to her lips and was about to speak into it when Pookie clamped her hand down on it, smothering the communication device.

Agil, who was standing guard nearby, was wearing a bemused look on his face as he watched the tall gangly Sylph with the tiny wings and weird outfit address her daughter.

Pookie said, "Sugu, no, don't use it. We have to maintain radio silence until we hear from Nishida again. All the others are now dead except for us. We don't know what's going on up there or what secret capabilities Oberon has."

Sachi shook her head and sighed, "It doesn't matter. Nishida gave up on us. We were so close." She knew that Asuna's physical body was only about four meters away from their own in the adjacent hospital room on the 18th floor. "So close..

Then she realized something.

"Wait, let me think. We four are still asleep nextdoor to Asuna's room, in ring 1, right? We're already inside."

Pookie said, "True, dear. But I don't see how that helps us. Oberon has absolute control of ring 1 with his air-gapped server and hard line. Nishida can't touch it. He said so."

"Yeah, I know. But maybe I can think of something."

Sachi tilted her head upward to look at the gigantic pearl-white wall of World Tree. It loomed impossibly high into the distant clouds above.

_Kirito, be careful. Oberon will goad you, taunt you. Don't fall for his cheap tricks._

_I so wish I could be there to help you. I should never have left your side._

Kirito saw daylight ahead. He activated his Spriggan illusion magic, making himself invisible.

The tunnel opened up onto a broad natural path of wood chips that curved and led up into the sky. Kirito marveled at the view. He looked down and saw a thick swirl of clouds orbiting the Tree about 500 meters below him. Nothing else was visible except the Tree itself and the path that curved upward.

Nishida was right. There was no great floating city here. No Alfs. No reward. Nothing. The whole Quest was a lie.

He continued up the path as it curved up. Eventually he saw something ahead, the top section of a golden birdcage rising up into view. He ran faster and the rest of it came into view.

And there it was, the birdcage that was in the image. And in the middle of it he saw that someone was standing there waiting for him, a beautiful fairie with long auburn hair and great gossamer wings of gray-white.

He turned off his illusion magic and lunged at the cage. "Asuna!"

She turned and recognized him, her eyes opening wide.
But then something happened. Kirito felt himself hurled down flat on the woodchipped path as if some giant invisible hand had swatted him to the ground like a fly. He felt himself being pressed down, laying flat on his back, and he could not move. With supreme effort he turned his head and saw that Asuna was also pinned to the floor of her birdcage. She was looking at him, pleading.

Kirito heard a disembodied voice laughing. "You like it? Gravity manipulation. It's a new ALO game feature in the next release."

"You bastard.. Let Asuna go.. Take me instead.. I'll do whatever you want.."

The voice giggled, "Hee hee. Nice of you to offer yourself to me like that, but I'm afraid that I don't swing that way. Not that there's anything wrong with that, mind you. Nope, I decline your gracious offer."

Then the voice added, "Oh wait, that's right, I have both of you in my clutches now. I can enjoy you both! Don't worry, I'll just make you watch. Hmm. Let me take a screen shot. There. Hey, nice composition. I'll be sending an SMS to Midori's cellphone now. She'll probably get it in a few seconds, heh. I left a callback number too."

Kirito now realized that Oberon did not know that Pookie was actually already in the game. It meant that the King of the Fairies still had no idea how thoroughly his system was already hacked.

Kirito thought boy, is he going to be surprised. He clung to that grim hope.

"Kirito, it's time for some fun! You want to have fun with me? I'm going to tie her up now and watch her scream for her life as you watch helplessly as I pull her.."

While he was still taunting him the floor opened up underneath Kirito and Asuna. They fell into what seemed like an endless pit, their bodies hurled down into seemingly oblivion...

.. and Kirito knew no more.

When Kirito awoke he was laying in pitch darkness. He stood up and pulled out his Gemini Swords, ready to fight. He couldn't see anything but blackness.

He switched to his Spriggan night vision. His eyes glowed softly.

He saw that he was standing inside some kind of black featureless circular chamber that was about 100 meters in diameter. The walls of the circular chamber soared up to infinity.

Some sort of light source spontaneously appeared behind him, and he turned around. He saw Asuna hanging up in the air with her bare feet dangling about a meter from the ground. Her wrists were tied to sturdy ropes that hung from an unseen connection point above.

She was wearing a bare whisp of a garment that revealed far too much, wearing what looked like a red bow that barely covered her almost bare breasts. He could see that the merest tug on that red ribbon would unwrap the bow and reveal the 'present' in the most humiliating way possible.

Kirito's blood boiled and his face grew hard. He held his swords at ready. He could feel them humm with power.

He looked around but so far Oberon had still not shown himself for some reason. No matter. Asuna needed rescuing and she needed it now.
He began to rush toward her.

Oberon was now standing right next to her as she writhed and tugged at the ropes.

She screamed for her life. "No! Stay away from me!"

_No! He must have been using some kind of invisibility magic!

He saw that Oberon was holding Excalibur, the greatest of all swords. The Fairy King aimed the sword right at Asuna's heart.

"No! Please, no!"

"Asuna, I'm coming!"

"No!"

Kirito lunged forward like a madman to try to stop him. For some reason time slowed down, and it felt like he was running in taffy.

_Asuna!

He kept lunging forward..

.. as Oberon raised the mighty sword over his head...

.. and sliced the ropes from Asuna's wrists, freeing her. She fell to the floor in a collapsed heap. She managed to quickly stand up as Kirito finally reached her."Asuna!"

But then Oberon blocked Kirito with his mighty sword...

.. and he pulled out a second sword and handed it to Asuna..

.. and she grasped the sword's hilt.

Oberon and Asuna were now standing side by side, their shoulders touching, as if they were combat partners who had been jointly fighting together for years. They were both pointing their swords at the onrushing Kirito, who had stopped dumbly in confusion.

Asuna pushed Oberon aside. "Oberon, stay out this. He is MINE!"

Oberon said quietly, "But Asuna.."

She whirled back, "Just stay out of this Oberon! You don't understand. When I was imprisoned in that gilded birdcage he.. he whispered things to me.. the most vile things, horrible things.. all the ways he was going to rape me, worse things.."

Kirito said weakly, "Asuna, it's me..

She whirled back to face him, her eyes shining with the purest hate.

She lunged. "Kirito! I am going to kill you. KILL YOU!"

Kirito jumped back as he parried her slashing blow.

"Asuna, wait! It's me!"
She lunged at him again in blind fury. "KIRITO YOU MONSTER I HATE YOU! DIE DIE DIE!"

"Asuna! It's me, Kazuto Kirigaya! Look at me!"

Behind them Oberon chuckled, "She can't hear you. All she sees is your lips flapping."

Asuna wildly hacked again at Kirito, who jumped away.

He flew up in the air, about 8 meters away, to stay out of the range of her repeated slashing ground attacks.

Meanwhile Oberon looked at his fingernails. He said quietly, "Project Inception is rather limited at this stage. It can only change one concrete memory. Just one. Or rather swap one. Can you guess what I swapped in her mind? Guess. C'mon, it's not hard."

"You bastard!"

"Kirito, c'mon, be reasonable. I couldn't just make her fall in love with me. Love is a complex emotion tied to thousands of memories and experiences, and Project Inception is nowhere near the stage where we can create that many false memories and inject them into someone's mind. All I did was a rather simple search-and-replace of one particular memory engram. Just one. That's it. All her experiences in SAO are now with Oberon instead of with Kirito. Otherwise I didn't change a thing. Simple, see?"

"I didn't even need to erase her memory of the time when you two had talked with Kayaba. Didn't have to. You see, the SAO death trauma always, *always*, removes the memories of a player's death and the events immediately surrounding it. Always. No exceptions. And yet somehow you managed to retain your memory of your little final talk with Kayaba. Asuna didn't of course. You know, I still wonder how he managed to do that. Shouldn't have been possible. Oh well, that's Kayaba for you. Asuna forgot it."

Asuna was jumping up and down, trying to slash at Kirito who was still floating out of reach.

Oberon said, "Oh, Kirito, please wait one moment. I need to talk to my lover."

Oberon then rushed up to Asuna. "Asuna my love, what's wrong?"

"I can't reach the bastard! He's just floating up there taunting me. Look at him, trying to talk!"

"He is such an evil man. Asuna, you can still reach him. This is Alfheim Online. You have wings. You can fly too." He pointed at her back.

She tried to twist her head around to see the beautiful large gray-white wings on her back. "I can fly? Really?"

"Of course. Everyone in ALO can. That evil overlord had transformed you into his bride Titania, the Fairie Queen. Your wings are actually stronger and more powerful than any other player in ALO. You should be able to catch him quite easily."

"How? Tell me!"

"It's called Voluntary Flight. Look, I'll show you..."

{ Nishida: Kirito, you there? Hello? }

{ Kirito: Oh thank god. I need help! }
Nishida: Yeah, I've been watching you guys for the past two minutes. What a simple mind hack. She never saw you outside the game so she knows nothing about Kazuto Kirigaya, nothing. Oberon can lie his head off and say that her SAO partner was Nobuyuki Sugou all along. He is her father's business partner, someone she knows very well. It will really shake her up because she remembers Sugou as a guy she really disliked. But now she has spent two years with him inside SAO. At first he became her battle partner, then he became her friend, then he became her best friend, then he became her lover. She knows that Oberon saved her life many times, and she saved his. They bonded, became lovers, even shared a child. She'll change her opinion of him in real life. He'll sincerely apologize for being such a jerk to her in the past. Given all of their shared experiences in SAO she'll accept his apology. Then they will become lovers again IRL. I bet she'll even accept the planned marriage ceremony on Saturday. Sugou will explain it was because he thought she would never wake up again, what with only 6-18 months of life left, so he wanted to marry her to show how much he really loved her even if she couldn't participate herself. After all, they were already married in the game. This would just make it official. Yeah, she'd do it.

Kirito: I don't believe this. How could Asuna assume a guy could change from a total jerk to a nice guy just like that?

Nishida: Kazuto, the same thing happened to you. Midori-chan told me that before SAO you were really withdrawn, a loner, anti-social with no friends. The game really changed you, your personality, for the better. You became a different person and were much better for it. Sugou will claim the same thing about himself. He will say that SAO changed him into a nice guy, and she will accept him now. It's brilliant. Kirito, I'm sorry but you're screwed.

Kirito: Nishida!}

Nishida: Anyway, the reason I broke radio silence is because I found the source code for the QNX Executive in a cardboard box in my laundry room. I had written some handwritten notes on the first page that I had completely forgotten about. You see, I remember now that a black hat named Zoidberg noticed that the default config file for QNX was shipped in devel mode by default, not production mode, and it wasn't documented well so a lot of sites with stupid IT admins didn't edit the config file to lock it down for production use. Some didn't even change the default root password. So what Zoidberg did was...

Kirito: Nishida! Shut up! Just do it!

Kirito: Working on it..

During all this time Kirito was floating in mid-air more or less motionless, about 8 meters up. Meanwhile Oberon had been lovingly giving Asuna a fast lesson in Voluntary Flight.

"Asuna, my love, just close your eyes."

"Okay."

"Now try to feel the wings on your back."

"I feel them."

"Good. Now use your shoulder muscles like I explained, then jump."

Her wings expanded magnificently, four great shimmering blades of gossamer gray-white. Her wings were larger than any other player in SAO.

She went up. And up, and up, and up. "Oberon, it worked! Whee!"
Oberon leapt himself. "Woo hoo! Asuna, you did it! You're a natural! I love you so much!"

"I love you too! Now stay down there while I slaughter this [bleeping] bastard!"

She turned and shot herself at Kirito, her sword extended like a hornet's stinger.

She was really fast, and the lunging move had surprised Kirito. He almost wasn't able to move out of the way in time. Even with his own fast reflexes her sword still managed to scratch his cheek.

Kirito knew that this was now getting out of hand. He had to stop Asuna somehow without actually hurting her. He tried to think quickly.

*I could never match Asuna's speed or her accuracy in battle.*

He saw that her flying style was still very basic. She always stopped, turned, then moved again in a straight line. She was incredibly fast but she didn't know how to bank or turn yet. He decided that he should try to take advantage of that weakness now and disarm her before she got any better at flying.

He quickly flew up to 200 meters, then he turned and dived, twirling and swirling in a complex twisting arc as he approached his target. Just before reaching her he pulled the fancy Immelman maneuver that Sachi had taught him: He flew in a blur right across her front, still inverted, as she swung at him and missed. In a smooth continuous motion he then did a tight U-turn and a barrel roll, and as he flew toward her again he swung his two mighty Gemini Swords at her own, intending to snap her blade off at the hilt.

The combat maneuver should have worked but it didn't. The Flash was just too fast in her reaction time. With her amazing reflexes she successfully pulled her sword away before Kirito could destroy it.

Oberon wagged a finger at Kirito. "Tsk tsk. I can see that those two swords are way too powerful. Where did you get them anyway? Well, no matter."

He revealed a small control box that was hidden under his robe, then he fiddled with it. The sword in Kirito's left hand, Castor, suddenly disappeared.

"Hey! Give me my sword back!"

"Sorry, that's cheating. A pair of +50 swords is simply too strong for this fight. Now you just have one +8 sword, same as your opponent. That's fair, don't you agree? Now fight fair with her."

"I won't fight her!"

"Yes you will."

"No I won't! I'll just let her defeat me if I have to."

He made a disappointed sigh. "You really don't get it, do you? I really should tell you something that you should already know by now. Important information regarding your little 1-on-1 PvP battle. It's something you should already know but you seem kind of stupid so I'll just remind you."

"Remind me what?"

"You are all wearing NerveGear helmets, you idiot. Boy you're dumb. If she kills you the microwave transceiver will fire and cook your brain in less than 10 seconds. And of course if you
kill her, well I don't need to explain do I? No, don't bother taking yours off either. It will fire immediately."

"Oberon you monster!"

"Oh, you will also see that your Logout button is also now missing. Hey, it's SAO all over again! Isn't that nice? I thought you might appreciate the nostalgia."

"You'd really kill Asuna like that? I don't believe you!"

"No, *you* will. Kirito, this is a battle to the death. So what will it be? Will you kill your girlfriend? Or will you let her kill you? Such a dilemma."

{ Nishia: Kirito, I did it. I send out a multicast stream to update the firmware in all NerveGear helmets inside ring 2 and assigned a new Code F. I set the new code to all zeros, didn't have time to pick anything else. I ran PlanF dot js on Sachi's USB memory stick. It worked. }

{ Kurosawa: My guest staff are now releasing the children. A lot of the permanent staff are fleeing the building. }

{ Kirito: Oh thank heavens, that was his trump card. Now grab Sugou and rip his halo off! }

{ Nishida: Dunno where he is. From what I can tell from the network map he's locked in some kind of bunker deep underneath the RECT campus with the ring 1 server next to his bed. It's a big campus so it could be anywhere. He ordered his staff not to disturb him for any reason, and they're scared [bleep]less of him so I think they'll just leave him alone in there. }

Kirito barely dodged another lightning charge by The Flash.

{ Kirito: Nishida! }

{ Nishida: Sorry kid. I freed those 300 kids in ring 2 and now I'm done, that was the agreement. I told you, I can't touch ring 1. Ready to sign out. }

{ Pookie: Reo-kun, stop. Wait. Please. I beg you. He's my son. }

{ Sachi: We're already in ring 1. Sir, do you have Sugou's source code now? }

{ Nishida: Yeah. All the ridiculous security improvements aside, it's still pretty much Kayaba's old SAO system. Not much has changed. }

{ Sachi: SAO had teleport. Is that still in the system? Should be. }

{ Pookie: Oh, I see! ALO doesn't allow teleport. }

{ Sachi: .. but the code for it must still be in the system. }

{ Nishida: Uh huh. Just a sec, let me check. Oh yeah, I see it. It's right there. Just a codeword. }

{ Sachi: Codeword? }

{ Nishida: Sheesh, there's a hidden backdoor that anybody can use to teleport in ALO. It's not even restricted to GMs. Go to your menu and tap on Other - Support - Enter Technical Support Code. Type 'TPRT' followed by the desired locus coordinates. You guys are already in ring 1 so it should work. }
Another slashing attack by Asuna.

{ Kirito: The locus! Give them the locus! Hurry! }

Nishida rattled off a series of digits.

A few seconds later Pookie appeared a few meters behind Oberon. Sachi, Leafa, and Agil appeared next to her a few moments later. Pookie made some hand signs. Agil nodded. He then silently pulled out his scimitar and crept forward.

Agil crept up behind Oberon. He raised his scimitar to slice him in half the long way when suddenly...

"Oberon! Look out!" Asuna dived in a mad rush right at Agil. She slammed her own body right into his, sending him flying against the cylinder wall with his scimitar spinning away far out of reach.

Oberon spun around in stunned surprise. Asuna landed next to him.

"Oberon, my love, are you okay?"

"I'm.. I'm fine.. Just go. Stop Kirito. I'll be okay."

She quickly kissed him. "All right, just be careful. Call me and I'll come running!"

"Just get that evil man! That's all that matters now."

"Right." She looked up at Kirito again. "Stop playing with me and fight me, you bastard!" She zoomed up at him to attack him again.

{ Nishida: Kurosawa called the National Police, and MINFO is coming in too. They'll come in slow and take no chances, might take them 30-40 minutes before a JSDF SWAT team reaches your floor. Wait, crap! MINFO is already tracing. They'll trace everything. I can't be caught like this. I'm outta here. Bye. }

Meanwhile Oberon was still blinking his eyes. He was still trying to process what had just happened.

He fiddled with his control box, and a faint forcefield appeared around himself. A second forcefield appeared a few meters up. He stared at the foursome that had just inexplicably materialized inside the combat silo. "What the hell? What are a bunch of ALO players doing in here?"

Sachi stepped forward and grinned. "Hi Oberon, let's make some introductions, shall we? The guy who nearly killed you just now is Andrew Gilbert Mills, the social leader of the SOARs in Japan. We are Kazuto Kirigaya's family. I'm his sister, Sachi. This is his other sister, Suguha. That's our mom, Midori. You probably already know her."

Pookie then gently pulled her daughter back. "Thank you for the introductions honey. Now it's my turn." She stepped forward.

Oberon stared in shock at the tall gangly Sylph. "This is impossible..

Meanwhile, Sachi looked up and watched the battle that was raging overhead, her face filled with concern and worry.

Leafa followed her gaze up. She clenched her fists. "We gotta stop this. Sachi, Agil, we need to fly
up as a group and disarm Asuna. Sachi, help me get her sword. Agil, you grapple her."

Sachi shook her head. She pointed up. "No, look, see? That faint glow at the five meter level? I think Oberon just created a force field. It appeared the same moment that Oberon's personal shield appeared. It's spanning the whole room at about 5 meters. We're blocked."

Leafa said quietly, "So we can only watch?"

Agil was also looking up. "Yeah."

Pookie was now standing defiantly only a few feet away from the King of the Fairies. "Sugou, it's over. We completely hacked your system hours ago. We did it before the attack on the Tree even started."

Oberon was inchoate. "What? No! You're lying! My system is foolproof! Checksums everywhere! It's mathematical!"

"Yes, it is foolproof. And you're the fool that proved it."

"No! I was ready! Ready for you! For Kayaba! Overlord! His trick didn't work!"

"Sugou."

He was now raging madly. He whirled around looking in every direction. "Kayaba, I know you're in here! You set this up! Nobody but you could have done it! Kayaba, show yourself!"

"Sugou, stop being so paranoid. Kayaba isn't here. He didn't do it, we did. It was easy. It was so easy a child could have done it."

"Bullcrap! This is a Class A Type Enforced system! I even ran an AI on it!"

"Yes, your ridiculously expensive over-hardened Cardinal System is indeed bulletproof. We simply went around it."

"You couldn't have! I was ready for that too! Overlord! I bugged all the inns in Alne and I overheard some of the players say the codeword 'Overlord' in their rooms. I know what that means! I was ready! I was so ready! Your attempt to shim a stealth hypervisor didn't work. You want to know why?"

"All right, tell me why."

Oberon was ranting wildly. "Because, Midori Kirigaya, you hot and magnificent beautiful bitch, I SUBSCRIBED TO YOUR SECURITY NEWSLETTER!"

He looked at her with a self-satisfied grin. "That quarterly newsletter cost me 50,000 yen an issue! How stupid do you think I am? The RECT Progress mainframes never shut down and never boot! They all use secure cryptographic checksums at 4096 bits! It's digitally signed and tamperproof! I know Kayaba tried, the reboot of server 4, but I was ready! I destroyed it, did a full volume reset, re-compared offline checksums, it didn't work!"

Sachi looked at her mother. "You guys rebooted one of the mainframes?"

Pookie shrugged. "Wasn't us. Must have been a random power glitch. Those servers were pretty old."

"Hah! Liar! Kayaba did it! Of course he did!"
Oberon whirled around looking at the whole room again. "Show yourself, Kayaba! I know you're here!"

Sachi whispered, "The man has completely lost it."

Pookie decided to come clean with her opponent. "No, Sugou, Kayaba is not here. I know you read my newsletter. You told me that yourself during the interview, remember? Not only did you tell me that you read my newsletter, in fact I was counting on it."

"W-What..?"

"We called our plan 'Operation Overlord' not because we were planning to do a stealth hypervisor attack, but because it was the name of the famous plan by General Eisenhower on D-Day, part of which included the deception that had fooled Hitler into thinking that the invasion of France was coming from the wrong place."

Oberon stared. "What did you do..?"

"We just wanted you to think we were planning a stealth VM attack."

"You didn't?"

"No, silly man. We did not fly over your Maginot Line, we flew under it."

"Under..?"

"Sugou, those servers were ancient. They have been running non-stop, 24/7, since 2022. They were old even back then. Do you know how many firmware revisions Microware had published during all those years for those systems? Over a dozen.

"You see, the black hats don't target the OS directly anymore. It's too hard. Instead they use social engineering or they target IoT and firmware. All of the major worldwide cyber attacks during the past decade have used one of those methods. None of them tried to hit the OS directly. Your UEFI ROM boot firmware on those servers is over four years out of date now. During that time there have been at least three major security issues identified in the SMI, the AMT, and in the UEFI pre-boot loader. Your firmware on those servers is still running at version 2.10. The current version of the firmware for those servers is now 6.25. You couldn't update the firmware because it would require a reboot and everybody knew that Kayaba's systems were physically guarded and booby-trapped against precisely that kind of attack."

Pookie put her hands on her hips. "Sugou, you made one of the most basic mistakes possible in computer security."

"Which was?"

She yelled at him, "YOU FORGOT TO KEEP YOUR SOFTWARE PATCHED!"

"Huh?"

"Sugou, what we did was trivial. We simply exploited an Intel Active Management Technology [AMT] firmware vulnerability, SA-00075*10, that only affects Xeon servers and business class systems. Because of that vulnerability anybody can run a tiny little user mode program that induces a trap into AMT that lets them do basically anything they want, silently tamper with the machine, install malware, do anything. It was a piece of cake."
"Your ring 2 servers run QNX on AMD enterprise processors, not Intel Xeon, which was the only smart thing you did. It almost stopped us."

"I don't believe you!"

"Look it up yourself. Nishida is still kicking himself because he didn't know about SA-00075 when he was trapped inside SAO. If he knew about it he could have freed himself and the other players in about ten minutes. We couldn't exploit it on the outside because of all of the physical booby traps and because of Kayaba's absolute block on any information flowing in or out. Because of that there was no way for us to sneak a tiny little program inside and run it. Once Kayaba's booby traps went down and you stupidly hooked your ALO servers into the Argus servers at the same security ring level, the rest was easy.

"No, we did not reboot server number four. In fact a reboot was the last thing we wanted. If you had watched that server during the reboot you might have spotted the 10 second warning message on the LCD display during POST that the firmware was out of date. But you didn't train your guards to notice that. If you had heeded the warning message and refreshed the UEFI ROM firmware on those ancient servers it would have all been over. We counted on your overconfidence in thinking that you had stopped our phony hypervisor attack so you would not bother to look for anything else."

Oberon held his head with both his hands. "No, no, no." He whirled around and looked them all. His face now truly was that of a madman.

"Fine! You win! But the hell with you! The hell with all of you! I still have Asuna! I have her! She loves me! She genuinely loves me! Me! And it's real! She'll kill Kirito with her own hands, and then she'll be mine! Mine! MINE!"

Sachi held Sugu's arm. "Look at him, he's gone completely bonkers. The man has got to know that he is going to jail now, all of them. RECT's parent company will probably be ruined too with all the lawsuits and criminal investigations. But he doesn't seem to care. Doesn't he realize that when Asuna wakes up that we can simply explain it all to her? She'll know the truth and it will all be over."

"Yeah, I know. He's nuts."

"Sugu, this is too dangerous. Look at him, and look at that battle up there."

Leafa looked up at the PvP battle that was still raging above their heads. Asuna was now winning. She was getting better and better at flying, and with her larger and stronger wings she was now able to out-fly and out-maneuver Kirito. There was no time limit for flying in the silo. The pair were now twisting and weaving in an incredible ballet of motion. Despite Kirito's best efforts Asuna was now scoring more and more hits on him.

"Sugu, we gotta do the contingency. Get Asuna out of there now."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Uh, okay. Logging out."

Leafa kneeled down and opened her menu. She tapped on Logout, and as she did so her eyes closed and her head dropped down, leaving her unconscious avatar behind.
Meanwhile Sachi looked back up to watch the swirling battle that was still unfolding above.

_Sugu, hurry. Pull Asuna out. We don't have much time._

Kirito realized that he was now losing the fight so he changed tactics. He began to do minimal moves to avoid her constant attacks, ju-jitsu style, moving only a few feet left or right to dodge each zooming incoming pass. Meanwhile Asuna was moving faster and faster, trying to use her speed to overwhelm her opponent and beat him into submission.

Sachi saw was Kirito was doing. Her eyes glittered.

_Just look at that. Kirito is now using the same combat strategy that Sugu used to defeat me during our big kendo battle. He's making her waste energy, wearing her out, the same as Sugu did to me. Meanwhile he's conserving his own energy. Yes! Kirito! You can do it! Save her!_

Oberon was now watching the battle as well. "What's he doing?"

{ Kurosawa: Suguha just woke up. She tried to explain but I confess I don't really understand what's going on. Is this safe? }

Pookie then noticed that Leafa had gone to sleep. "Sachi, what's going on?"

"Contingency plan. We're pulling Asuna out now."

Pookie held her daughter's shoulder in concern. "Sachi, we can't do that. The microwave beam will fire if you try to take her helmet off."

"I know. No time to explain."

{ Sachi: Kurosawa, just leave Sugu alone. She knows what she's doing. }

{ Kurosawa: All right, I trust you. By the way, I'm looking out of the 18th floor window right now, and I see a lot of National Police emergency vehicles down in the parking lot. In the streets too. }

{ Sachi: How many police? }

{ Kurosawa: All of them, I think... }

The battle continued to rage overhead. Kirito kept doing minimal lateral shifts to stay away from Asuna's slashing strikes. Asuna was becoming increasingly tired. She was slowing down.

"Kirito (pant) just die (wheeze) already (pant) will you..?"

He smiled. "Sorry not today. Want to call it quits? You'll never get me."

"You bastard (pant) cheater (pant)...

Oberon was watching carefully.

"Hmm. Cheater you say? Asuna, my love, I agree with you. Kirito is cheating. Not playing fair. Well, we will need to fix that." He fiddled with the control box. "There. Level 7."

Sachi became alarmed. "What did you just do?"

He gave her a malevolent smile. "Not much really. I simply reduced his pain absorber level from 10 down to 7."
"No!"

Sachi looked up and yelled, "Kirito! Watch out!"

But was it was too late. Asuna had already scored a lucky hit on Kirito's wrist. He screamed in pain and nearly dropped his sword.

"Ow! That hurt like a bitch!"

Oberon sighed. "Level 5..

Another hit on Kirito's side.

"Aaaaaaahhhh!"

{ Sachi: What's your life bar at? }

{ Kirito: 73%. But my god the pain.. }

"Level 3."

Then he added, "Now, I want this fight to be fair, so I will tell you that when the pain absorbers are dropped down to 3 the neurological pain will become so severe that it will cause actual psychosomatic physical damage to his real body."

Sachi tried to lunge at Oberon. Agil held her back. "Stop this! Please!"

"Why should I?"

"Please, just stop it! Stop this!"

"Shut up bitch. Let's watch."

Kirito realized that he had to end the battle and do it now. Time had run out. He grit his teeth and dived in. Asuna seemed to have hit her second wind and was now back at full strength in her attacks. She had also changed tactics, thinking carefully, planning. She was no longer just diving in headlong in a mad rush.

The fighting duo twisted and turned. They were flying higher and higher, in a beautiful balletic dance. They were now both moving like blurs, almost faster than the eye could see. Faster and faster, as the clanging of swords resonated through the chamber.

{ Sachi: Sugu, what's talking so long? }

{ Suguha: I don't know! I wheeled in the two beds and plugged them in and everything, but it's not working! }

{ Sachi: You followed my instructions right? }

{ Suguha: I think I did? Look, I don't know any of this computer stuff! }

{ Sachi: Just relax. Look at the laptop carefully. Is there an error message on on the screen? }

{ Suguha: Uh, yeah. }

{ Sachi: Well, what does it say? }
Sachi’s shoulders drooped. Her contingency plan had failed.

She looked up again at the incredible battle. She saw Kirito and Asuna twisting, turning, inverting, reversing, swining, spiralling. They were moving back and forth as if they were dancing together in an incredible ballet of motion that seemed almost choreographed.

It was the most intense PvP battle in the history of SAO/ALO, surpassing even Kirito and Asuna's joint fight against Heathcliff himself, as the two best players in the history of VRMMO sword fighting battled against each other.

It was a battle that would become legendary, a battle that would be studied, watched, analyzed, again and again, over and over, for all the years to come: The Dance of Death.

Sachi despaired as she watched..

.. for she now knew that one of them would surely die.

What do I do?

Help them! Please!

Tell me what to do!

And then it hit her. A revelation.

It was a thought that seemingly came right out of the blue.

Thank you.

She raised her wrist com to her lips. { Sugu, listen carefully.. }

Kirito was now nearing his limit. Asuna saw her opening and she slashed at him again, this time cutting a deep gash into Kirito's bad right leg, directly on the damaged thigh muscle that Sachi had so painstakingly tried to rehabilitate for two months.

"AAAAAAAaaahhhhh!"

He tumbled away in a rictus of pain, spinning out of control, his sword falling away.

Asuna brought up her sword again. She saw her opportunity.

It was her killing move, Flashing Penetrator. She dived toward his helpless form. She stopped his rotation with her open hand, then she embraced him in the final act of the legendary Dance of Death.

She clenched him like a boxer in the ring. Then she shoved her sword directly into his heart up to the hilt, shanking it up as hard as she could. Kirito's eyes were wide in shock, soundless.

Their bodies were now pressed together in their final deadly embrace.

"Ow, that really hurts."

A rattled cough brought up a stream of blood that dribbled down the Spriggan's front.
Asuna hissed, "Good! I'm glad!"

"So, we finally meet..." More blood.

They were still in their mutual death embrace, but Asuna could tell something had changed in the Spriggan. For starters, the voice that came out of the Spriggan sounded like a girl.

Another cough.

"Hi, I'm Sachi." Another cough. ". ..nice to finally meet you."

Asuna felt it. This was not the evil overlord Kirito.

The girl's voice went on. "Had to use my old NerveGear helmet... plan was to swap yours, only possible in same room on same switch... had to keep Oberon distracted, not watching us on hospital room cam... that part wasn't hard."

Asuna stared at the Spriggan. She whispered, "Oh god no."

"I had Nishida show Sugu how to do the MAC swap.. " She grimaced and fought for air. "Swapped our helmets on the switch.. didn't work.. my helmet is version 1.1, yours is version 1.2, not compatible. Kirito is 0.9... backward compat.. so I swapped his instead.."

A dreadful rattling noise came from Spriggan's throat.

Sachi then took her last breath of life, and through sheer willpower she pulled Asuna's tunic toward herself and managed to reach Asuna's ear.

In her final exhale she rasped her last words.

"He loves you so much. Love him.. protect him... and I will watch you from Heaven to make sure that you do."

Sachi's face then turned towards her dearest love, who was now standing on the ground. She showed him a gentle half smile.

Her body then exploded in a shower of blue glittering shards.

Asuna floated in mid-air, stunned. She did not fully understand what had just happened. However, even with the jumbled and confused state of her tampered mind, she had but one clear thought.

Kirito...

That man wasn't the man who had tortured me.

That was Kirito.

That was my Kirito.

I was killing Kirito!

Then who...?

My god, what have I done?

She zoomed down to the group below, two of whom were now struggling mightily to hold down a
petite Sylph girl who twisting wildly trying to break free.

The small girl was screaming with a male voice.

"Let me go! Let me go!"

Asuna landed. She turned slowly away and looked up at the few blue glittery particles that were still falling from the sky.

The petite Sylph girl finally broke free and ran to Asuna, grabbing her from behind with tightly closed eyes.

The male voice kept saying, "It's not your fault. It's not your fault. It's not your fault. It's not your fault. It's not your fault...

Pookie raised her wrist com and whispered into it. She heard a response in her left ear.

She looked out at nothing and spoke.

"It fired full force..."

Her hand dropped to her side.

"..she's gone."

Sachi Watanabe died on Wednesday, January 22, at 5:31 p.m. on the 18th floor of Tokorozawa Private Hospital.

Hers was the only death caused by SAO. Nobody else had died.

Doctor Nobuyuki Sugou was arrested by the National Police, and his collaborators were all apprehended. Morita Ueda resigned from the National Diet. ALO was shut down permanently, and RECT Progress was shuttered as well. After a thorough investigation it was determined that the parent company, RECT Ltd, had no knowledge of the affair. This was in part due to the fact that the owner's own daughter was a primary victim.

Ten thousand players were captured in SAO wearing NerveGear helmets that contained a hidden microwave emitter that could destroy the human brain. And yet, by the grace of God, all the players survived. Every single one.

Only one did not.

The reason was simple.

It was her purpose.

Sachi Watanabe was born to die.

And die she did. In fact she died not once, but three times, and in three different worlds.

Each time she died she was sent back again until her assigned task was fulfilled.

That small timid young girl, the one who was so afraid of the monsters, did indeed have a purpose in her short young life: To save Kazuto, to rescue Asuna, to defeat Oberon, and to even bring down a conspiracy for worldwide domination.
For all that, is not dying a small price to pay?

Asuna woke up.

She sat up. She saw Sachi laying on the medical bed next to her own. Her head was bent forward on her pillow and her eyes were half lidded. A small trickle of blood dripped from her nose, making tiny red splashes on the bedsheets*11.

"The helmets never killed anyone. Not a single person. Nobody died, except her."

Suguha continued to speak tonelessly. "The NerveGear helmet was her old one. I told her we should draw straws. But the helmet was still calibrated to her mind, and she said it wouldn't work with anyone else. She said it had to be her."

Kazuto said softly. "It's okay, Sugu."

Sachi had always loved Kazuto, and her love for him had a depth and an intensity that few people had ever seen. And it was out the depth of her love for him that she had given him the greatest gift possible.

For you see, the One who loved us so dearly, who had loved us even before the beginning of the world, said that there is no greater love than this:

To lay down one's life for another.*12

Suguha looked at Kazuto with tragic eyes. "She begged me, I refused. Then she gave me no choice. I.. I.. I heard the humm of the microwave emitter. By the time I was able to rip the helmet off of her the humm had stopped and it was already too late."

Kazuto wrapped his arms around his sister and rocked her. "It's okay... It's okay... It's okay..."

Suguha opened her mouth but nothing came out. She cried soundlessly into his shoulder.

Then she lifted her head. Finally her voice came back. "I.. uh.. she gave me.. Here." It was a small USB data stick labeled 'For Kirito'. Kazuto put it in his pocket. He would listen to it later.

Nurse Kurosawa spoke softly, "She's gone Home now."

Kazuto whispered, "Home?"

"She converted months ago. Didn't you know? She wasn't hiding it.

Around her neck was a thin gold chain with a pendant tucked below the sweater. On her cuffs were two small brass cufflinks in the shape of intersecting half-ellipses. [Ch2] (She wore a cross pendant and her cufflinks sported the ancient fish symbol for Christianity, the icthys, a symbol that you often see on the backs of cars in the United States.)

It was here! The light. Everywhere, the light. It enveloped her, surrounded her. She breathed it in. Her face was calm, serene. At peace. [Ch6] (Her conversion experience.)

Why did you bring me back? [Ch6] (She was asking God.)

She was reading a memoir by C.S. Lewis entitled Surprised by Joy. [Ch7] (She was reading about Lewis' own conversion experience.)
He saw Sachi down the hall standing by the elevator, looking down and muttering to herself with her eyes closed. [Ch10] (She was praying.)

There she saw Sachi next to her futon on her knees looking at the floor. [Ch11] (She was doing her morning prayers when Sugu walked in.)

On her cuffs were small brass cufflinks in the shape of intersecting half-ellipses. [Ch12] (She always wore them.)

Sir, is it over now? Am I done? [Ch13] (She was asking God.)

Please [Lord], let Mom figure this out. [Ch13] (A petitionary prayer.)

Her white blouse [was] partially unbuttoned with a small transcept necklace tucked underneath. [Ch17] (Her necklace was the cross pendant that she always wore under her blouse.)

"She's with Him now." Kurosawa removed her wig and looked up. "Sachi, I'll join you soon."

Kazuto then turned to look at the girl who had sacrificed so much for him. He softly touched her lifeless cheek.

He didn't play the recording until much later.

—

Kirito, if you are hearing this then it means that I am dead. It was Nishida who showed Sugu how to reprogram the hardware MAC addresses on our shared 100GBASE-T switch, effectively swapping the helmets without physically removing them from our heads. Please do not blame her. They was no other way. This was my choice, and mine alone.

Kirito, how do I explain this?

I know that I should have died in that trapped treasure room in SAO. But for some reason, I didn't. But why? Each and every day of my second life I asked myself, "Why? Why was I brought back? Why?"

My life was so hard, and I was so terribly alone. For years you were laying there in that hospital bed, laying there right in front of me the whole time, but you might as well have been in another universe. Actually, you were.

I came back, but I was still totally alone, and I kept asking myself why all these things were happening to me. Why was I being made to suffer so much pain and loneliness?

But then Sugu came along, and she became my first real friend, then we became best friends, and finally we became sisters. She helped save me. Kirito, please, she loves you so much. Please give her back the love she deserves.

I always knew that I would die in SAO, but it felt so meaningless and pointless, which is why I had begged you to please live so that you could find out the reason why a weakling like me was sacrificed in that terrible game, and to find out the reason that you and I had met.

Back in SAO you had told me that everyone has a role to fill, that there was a reason everyone was there, even me. I now realize that you were simply lying to me. I forgive you for that lie. You were just trying to make me feel happy.
Well, now I know. I did have a purpose after all, and I now know the reason I was there and then was brought back. Yes, I am happy.

Kirito, please take care of Asuna. Love her. Cherish her. Protect her.

And when you are both ready and willing, marry her.

I know you two will make a great family together. You already did it once so I know you can do it again. And who knows? Maybe even with Yui again too.

Kirito, I am so glad I met you and could be with you.

Thank you. I love you. Goodbye.

—

There was silence in the room.

The NerveGear helmets had never killed anyone. No one had died, not one person, except for her.

Finally Asuna said quietly, "We never even met in real life."

Kazuto spoke almost inaudibly, "I loved her. I really did. I should have told her."

Asuna wiped her face. "We never met, and yet she was willing to do this for me."

Suguha turned to Asuna and asked, "Just tell me one thing. If your roles had been reversed, would you have done what she did?"

Asuna didn't hesitate. "Yeah." She turned. "In a second."

Suguha whispered, "Then do what she wanted."

Asuna and Kazuto looked at each other. They understood.

The pair clasped their hands together, then they turned and faced Suguha.

They stood together side-by-side, standing as the man and wife that they were always destined to be.

They spoke in unison.

"We will."

Sachi wondered where she was. She remembered that she had opened her eyes and found that she was still in her bed in the hospital room next to Asuna's medical bed. She had tried to touch Asuna's hand when the microwave beam had fired.

She remembered that she then breathed in the light.*13 It was a familiar sensation, for she had remembered that light from before, the very same light that she had breathed in upon her death in ALO inside of the Grendel.

She now realized what it actually was: Her final breath, her very last on Earth, that final breath of light which every mortal breathes in just as they die, which many people misinterpret as a 'tunnel
of light', was actually information.

It had transformed her, cleansed her, and perfected her, reconciling her soul with God.

She was now outside the Universe. She was above it, beyond it, in another reality, a far greater one.

There she saw a marvelous vista, whole mansions, cloud-like shapes. A flurry of point-like white lights appeared and surrounded her. The lights dived and whirled like birds flying in formation. There seemed to be millions of them. Then they flew away.

She was now standing alone on a glassy white plane that appeared to stretch off in infinitely all directions. Above it was a pure white sky. Nothing else was visible.

A young girl ran up and jumped right into Sachi's arms.

"Big sis! Big sis!"

Sachi was a bit confused. She held the strange young girl with the long hair whose face was now beaming at her own.

It was because the girl's face was also hers.

"Uh, who are you? You look like me..."

Yui tsk-tsked her. "Onee-chan, that's not true. I don't look exactly like you. Close but not exact. Look at me. See?"

Sachi peered closely at Yui's smiling face. She had the same face and hairstyle, but her eye color and hair color were a bit different.

Yui explained, "See? I have exactly your face. But I have Papa's hair color and eye color, and I don't have that funny little beauty mark on my face either. Sisters are sometimes a little different like that."

"Sisters?"

"Yes! I'm your little sister!" Yui jumped back down.

"Huh?"

"You're my onee-chan! I came from you."

Sachi was already more than a little confused. "I don't understand."

Yui crossed her small arms and lectured Sachi like a teacher addressing a befuddled student. "It's simple. The Cardinal System wanted to create a father-daughter avatar for Papa, and it was searching for a template that had the most similar mental engrams for what it wanted. It found some of your data still stored in its cache memory after you had died and left the game. You had thought of Kirito as your papa, so it latched on to that data and layered it on top of my non-human AI core. That makes us sisters!"

"Oh, well, I see." She patted Yui's head. "Nice to meet you."

She giggled under Sachi's head pats. "I was worried for a while you wouldn't come."
"Well, I'm glad we could meet."

Sachi looked around at the empty white nothingness.

"Uh, Yui, can I ask you question?"

"Sure! Ask me anything."

"Where are we?"

"You have crossed over. We are now in a higher level of reality, a place that is actually more 'real' than the reality that you were just in. This place exists outside the 2D projection of your 3D reality, which was actually a hologram operating according to some rather basic physical rules."

"I have no idea what you are talking about."

"I understand. I'll keep it simple. You popped up to level 2, First Heaven. There are at least two more levels that are accessible to you."*14

"There is more than one heaven up here?"

"Oh yeah, there is an infinite number of them. Also, we exist outside of the bondage of time so that everything that will happen has already happened, or what has already happened will happen, or.. uh.. ok even I'm confused by that one, something about free will being dependent on POV or whatever. Nevermind."

Sachi looked around again. "So, is Nurse Kurosawa around here somewhere?"

"Not yet. Or maybe she is, I dunno. Everything has already happened so, or it hasn't happened yet.. a multiconnected hypermanifold where.. uhm, you know what? Let's forget it."

Then Yui added, "Hey, did you know that Akira Kurosawa's myeloproliferative neoplasmosis is in remission? When you died she still had many years of life left in front of her."

"She does? I'm glad."

Yui said, "Isn't that neat? Anyway, I'm here to escort you to the next level."

"Okay, I'm ready. Pop us up. I want to see the next Heaven."

"Sachi, I am sorry."

"You mean I can't go there? But you said.."

"No, what I mean is that you have to go back. Down a level."

"What? But why?"

"Because your purpose is still unfinished. There is one more task you still need to do. You need to save the one who is lost, and bring him back."

Sachi nodded, "I see."

Yui said brightly, "Okay, hold my hand and let's go!"

A beeping noise. Then a blur. Then a face.
The face was Suguha's. She was sitting next to Sachi's hospital bed. She popped her gum, then she pulled it out and placed it behind her left ear. "Hello there, big sis, welcome back."

Sachi blinked her eyes, then she sat up.

Suguha gently pushed her back down. "Whoa, easy girl."

Sachi sighed, "I was brought back... again."

Suguha grinned, "Yeah. It seems to be a habit with you."

Sachi rubbed her face. "Ugh. Tell me what happened."

"Well, we were all busy mourning your death when your toe twitched. Kazuto spotted it."

"Then what happened?"

"He jumped up and gave you CPR of course."

Sachi's eyes widened "He gave me.. CPR? You mean.."

"Oh yeah. The full monty. Mouth-to-mouth, wide open."

"What!?"

"Yep, he totally frenched you. Heh heh."

Sachi slowly touched her lips in shock.

Suguha went on. "Meanwhile, Asuna jumped on your bed and straddled you. She ripped open your sweater and your blouse and gave you chest compressions while Kazuto did the mouth-to-mouth."

Sachi's eyes widened even more. She slowly clutched her hospital gown. "You.. you mean.."

"Oh yeah, but honestly, nobody was paying attention. Well, I did notice your little cross pendant that fell out of your blouse, but I don't think anyone else did. Anyhow, I missed most of the fun because Kurosawa yelled at me to go find help, so I ran out to fetch the guest staff on a Code Blue. They came rushing in with the defibrillator."

"I feel so embarrassed.."

"Don't worry about it. So, how do you feel?"

Sachi placed her hand to the side of her temple to check. "Well, I have a pounding headache, but otherwise I think I'm okay."

"Good. I'll ask them to give you some aspirin." Suguha began to stand up to summon a nurse.

Sachi pulled at her hem and she stopped. "But, wait, I still don't get it."

Suguha turned back. "Hmm?"

"Sugu, I shouldn't have survived."

"That's right, you ought to be deader than a doornail right now. The microwave blast definitely fired. I heard the humm and everything."
"But then how? How did I survive?"

Suguha put her hand on her chin. She said thoughtfully, "That, dear sister, is an excellent question. I know for a fact that the microwave beam fired at full blast. I heard it. But for some reason I think the command got garbled and I'm guessing that it only partially fired the beam. Basically you got hit with the beam that triggers the coma, but the wave wasn't properly focused so it had temporarily put your medulla offline too and so you stopped breathing. Well, at least that's what the doctor said."

"Oh..?"

"Once they got your heartbeat and respiration back all they had to do was fire the second focused wakeup pulse and then wait until your brain finished rebooting."

"I see.."

Suguha tilted her head questioningly. "You know, it's odd. That command directive should have fried your brain, but it didn't."

"Mmm."

"I wonder what happened?"

Was it Akihiko Kayaba? Or was it just a fluke data glitch? Or maybe was it because Yaya had knocked her NerveGear helmet into his litter box and knocked the emitters out of alignment? The investigators at MINFO never solved the mystery.

But Sachi Watanabe knew.

She looked up.

Thank you.

It was a beautiful sunny day in August, with only a few clouds in the sky. On the air could be heard the delightful squeals of small children chasing each other in a park across the street.

A young man was sitting on a porch with a perfect view. He was dressed in overalls and was wearing a ball cap.

The young man was sitting motionless in his rocking chair like he always did, staring out in the general direction of the street.

He did not move.

There was a knock on the porch door behind him.

The young man stood up.

He opened the door.

He smiled when he saw the girl standing in the doorway.

The girl beamed back at him. "It's nice to see you."

Keita said, "Come in."
He gestured towards the porch railing. Together they walked to the railing and looked out together at the children playing across the way. A gentle breeze came up to move the branches of the cherry trees, which let out a pleasant sigh.

The pair stood and watched the scenic view in silence for a few minutes. Then Keita spoke again.

"I'm really sorry."

"It wasn't your fault."

He turned to look at the girl. "I'm back again. Thanks to you."

She made a small smile as she continued to watch the children play.

He began to throw breadcrumbs at the pigeons that had started to flock in the grass in front of them.

More time passed.

As he continued to toss handfuls of crumbs at the birds he finally said, "Back then I never told you how I felt. I should have. I didn't want to break up the group."

"I know." She smiled again as she watched the kids play across the street.

He looked a bit sheepish. "So, uhm, I was wondering.."

"Yes?" She turned and looked at him expectantly.

"Uhm, are you hungry? Do you think maybe we can go and get lunch sometime? Uh, together?"

She thought a moment.

"Yeah, I'd like that."

"Oh, uh, really? You do?"

"Uh huh."

"That's great! Uhm, where.. uh.."

She held his arm. "Don't be so nervous. Look, I know this great ramen place that's only four blocks from here..."

"Wait, you mean go right now?"

She smiled. "Sure, why not? It's noon and we're both hungry, right?" She then looked at him demurely. "Of course, I've never been out on a date before..."

He became nervous again and pulled his arm away. "Oh, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to imply that I was asking..."

She gently put a finger across his lips. "Shush. Sometimes it's best to just shut up and escort your date." She re-wrapped her arm around his and turned so they were now both facing the porch steps that led down to the garden path and to the street beyond.

She looked out and continued to watch the children play in the park across the street. He relaxed
and looked out as well, just in time for them to see a flock of sparrows fly past.

After a moment she looked at him and asked, "Shall we?"

He looked back at her and smiled.

"Let's."

They left together.

The End

A/N:

* The VT100 is an oldie but a goodie. See VT100 on Wikipedia.

** Yes they really did flop. See Floppy Disk on Wikipedia.

*** LN Vol 1, Chapter 18.

*4 See Fairchild Republic A-10 Thunderbolt II on Wikipedia.

*5 See Honeypot (computing) on Wikipedia.

*6 See Chapter 6.

*7 See episode 22, where Leafa had pushed Kirito's flame into her bosom with her hands completely closed with no gaps. If you want to dispute that scene, I made it very explicit in chapter 6 that I had interpreted it as showing remainder flames being permeable to solid matter. I also tossed out a ton of blatant clues in chapter 15 ('mid-field', 'goal line', 'playing field', 'score this one-shot goal', 'the attack run on the Death Star thermal exhaust port', 'the target is only a couple inches wide', Sachi practicing hundreds of times by smashing Sakuya's glass phials [filled with plain water] at a practice target spot, etc).

*8 SELinux was developed by the US National Security Agency (NSA), presumably for their own use. SELinux is as hard-core as Linux can get. See Security-Enhanced Linux (Wikipedia) at the NSA official government website.

*9 See QNX (Wikipedia). I worked extensively with QNX in my former life as a white hat. Yes, it really is that tight.

*10 See Intel Critical Firmware Update SA-00075. The vulnerability is real and was first revealed in 2017. For details see The Register newsletter article Red alert! Intel patches remote execution hole that's been hidden in chips since 2010 (2017/05/01). (For story purposes I am pretending that the vulnerability was revealed in 2023 when SAO was still running.)

*11 There is a famous fan artwork that shows Sachi's deathbed scene in a way that I cannot describe without losing it. Search Google Images for 'Sachi SAO death'.

*12 Jn 15:13

*13 From the lyrics to the ending song from the film Oblivion (2013) as performed by the music group M83 and sung by Susanne Sundfør. You can hear the OST in a film montage on YouTube at M83 - Oblivion (feat. Susanne Sundfør) by Rudmen. It is really good. (The film is way underrated, IMHO.)
*14 See 2 Cor 12:2-4 ('Third Heaven'). The concept of a hierarchy of multiple heavens appears in all major monotheistic faiths. I personally suspect that there might be an infinite ladder of such heavens in a well ordered transfinite hierarchy per the generalized Continuum Hypothesis. See my story After Ragnarok where I explore this possibility in depth. (I find it really fascinating how the atheist/deist divide strongly correlates to each mathematician's position on CH. See the Wikipedia article.)

A/N:

In the original draft for this story, Sachi died for real and Yui had escorted her up to Heaven for good. However, as I was writing the full story, I just did not have the heart to do that to her. Instead I gave her one small miracle. I think she deserved it, don't you agree?

If you enjoyed reading this story, then I invite you to check out some of my other stories like The Heart Connection, which is based on the anime series Kokoro Connect. It is a tale about the lives of two boys and three girls in a high school club and what happened to them after graduation. (No knowledge of the anime series nor the LNs is required to enjoy the story.) Another is After Ragnarok, which is based on the anime and manga series Oh! My Goddess!

As always, thank you for reading.
-HuuskerDu
Epilog: The World Seed (Part 1)

A/N:

There is a four month time gap between the end of ALO (January 2025) and the SAO Returnees School (May 2025) that I did not explore in the main story. After some thought I came up with an idea for what I hope is a dramatic, interesting, and emotionally taut epilog that stays true to the original story.

I hope you like it.

-HuuskerDu

February 23, 2025

The morning light streamed in to Sachi's bedroom. As she lay on her futon she yawned and opened her eyes after a peaceful night's sleep.

With her open eyes admiring the morning sun she yawned pleasantly a second time. She saw that Suguha's futon was empty, which came to her as no surprise as she always left for school by 7:15 a.m.

But then she felt something behind her. It was a body - soft, warm, and embracing. Then she heard a voice.

"Good morning sleepyhead."

While still under the bed sheet she quickly rolled onto her opposite side to face the voice.

"Hey, bed buddy, did you sleep well? I sure did."

.. thus causing herself to inadvertently press her body right into Kazuto's. They were now separated only by the thin wisp of Sachi's nightie.

Kazuto smiled at her. Sachi sat up quickly, the bed sheet falling off the both of them. She saw that Kazuto was shirtless and possibly bottomless as well. "W-What are you doing in my bed?"

He gently pulled her back down onto the futon and pulled the sheet over both of them again.

While laying side-by-side he gripped her waist using his legs like scissors. "Sachi, I've been thinking about you non-stop ever since I woke up, every day and every night. I keep thinking about how wonderful you are, how you're taken care of my every need, how beautiful you've become..."

"But, Kazuto.. But what about Asuna?"

"We saved Asuna, you and I together, and I am so thankful for that. But now that she is back I realize that it is you who I really want. Asuna can never match your selflessness, your caring, your devotion, or..."

"Kazuto?"

"...or your love for me."
"Kazuto, I admit I do love you. But this is wrong."

"You will do anything for me, anything at all, whatever I want, yes?"

"Well, of course I will."

He rolled on top of her, pulling down the straps on her nightie and exposing her. "Sachi, what I want is you."

"Please, no.. think of Asuna.."

And then he began to take her, gently. She did not resist.

"Ahh.. Kazuto.. Kazuto!"

And then she woke up.

She sat up on her futon and put her hand over her face. She then removed it and checked the clock. It was 4 a.m. Suguha was still snoring loudly in the futon next to hers.

She sighed to herself, then she laid herself back down on her futon. She stared up at the darkened ceiling.

*Oh great, it happened again, first time in a month.*

She closed her eyes again.

*Sir, please take these thoughts out of my head. Please? This shouldn't be happening anymore. Not now, not when Asuna is back.*

She knew that it was beginning to become a problem.

The previous month Sachi had become mortified when she had learned that Kazuto had played her post-death USB audio recording after her third revival. It was because the recording had revealed explicitly her true feelings for him and her endorsement of his being with Asuna. Asuna had urged Kazuto not to play Sachi's recording out of respect for her privacy, but he had done so anyway. He did so mainly because he still did not fully understand Sachi's real feelings for him, and he wanted to know.

Sachi's recording had dispelled in no uncertain terms any illusions about what her feelings actually were, while also releasing all claims that she had upon him and conferring her blessings to any future marriage union between Kazuto and Asuna.

Because of this Asuna always felt awkward around Sachi. She said she felt like she was 'taking Kirito away' (her words) from the innocent girl. She had heard in detail from Kazuto and Suguha about the sacrifices that Sachi had made in rehabilitating, protecting, and eventually giving up her own life to save the man she loved so much. In doing so Asuna confessed in private to Kazuto that she felt intimidated by Sachi's almost total selflessness, and that Sachi had set an impossibly high standard that Asuna felt that she herself could never meet. Kazuto repeatedly explained to Asuna that he had no feelings for Sachi whatsoever (except as a sister), and that he loved her and her alone. He explained that his feelings for her would never change.

His repeated attestations of his love for her had helped to relieve Asuna's worries somewhat, but she knew that she would never be fully comfortable around Sachi no matter how many times Kazuto proclaimed his love and devotion to her.
Sachi herself was always friendly and cheerful around Asuna. Asuna masked her sense of intimidation with excessive politeness and deference whenever Sachi was in the room. However, Sachi had sensed her insecurity, and so she discreetly tried to avoid creating any situations that would bring her into close contact with Kazuto or with her.

Yes, it was beginning to become a problem.

It was for this reason that Sachi had decided that she wanted to give Kazuto and Asuna more space, so she had made the decision to plunge herself back into her work as an LPN trainee working with rehabilitating the VRDPs. She had transferred to Tokyo General Hospital on a full time basis along with Nurse Kurosawa, who had decided to remain at her post as the chief RN at Tokyo General as long as her myeloproliferative neoplasmosis remained in remission.

Meanwhile, Sachi had continued her education via Independent Study at the all-girls high school she had attended for the past two years. She went there in person only when necessary for PE or for exams.

Kazuto had encouraged her to enroll with himself and Asuna in the new SAO Returnees School with the rest of the SOARs, but she declined (as did almost all the VRDPs), saying that she felt that she did not fit in there.

Asuna was particularly adamant that Sachi attend the Returnees School but she consistently refused, which had simply increased Asuna's sense of guilt about pushing Sachi away, as if she herself had been responsible for Sachi's choice not to attend the same school as the person to whom she had unwittingly confessed to in that recording.

Suguha continued to snore loudly a few feet away from Sachi, a bit of drool having fallen from her flapping lips.

Sachi was still staring up at the darkened ceiling.

Eventually she went back to sleep.

---


Sachi was in her bedroom sitting on a chair working at Suguha's computer. She was busy looking up some biographical information about a woman named Helen Keller when Suguha suddenly rushed into the room.

Suguha hissed, "Psst, Sachi, c'mere!" She motioned at Sachi to follow her.

Sachi stood up. "Sugu? What's going on?"

"Just follow me. And keep your head down and stay out of sight!"

Sachi did as instructed. Together they silently crept down the hallway towards the stairs. At the top of the banister Suguha quietly got down on her knees and peered through the slats. Sachi knelt next to her and did the same. She followed Suguha's eyes down, and there she saw the scene that was unfolding below.

Kazuto and Asuna were sitting alone together on the stools at the kitchen nook, side by side. They were both facing in the general direction of the Kirigaya sisters, but they did not notice the sisters.
secretly peering down at them from above. In front of the couple was a small plate with a chocolate
cupcake in the center of it. Affixed to the cupcake was a small heart shaped card. Inside the card
were written only five words.

Love from Mama and Papa

Kazuto pushed a single small candle into the cupcake, then he lit it.

Asuna laid her head on Kazuto's shoulder as they silently watched the tiny flame together.

Sachi saw the tears forming in her eyes.

Several moments passed as the couple continued to watch the candle burn.

Eventually Kazuto said quietly, "Happy birthday, Yui"*.

He blew out the candle.

Asuna started crying as Kazuto held her.

Sachi had seen enough. She whispered, "C'mon, Sugu, let's go back to our room."

Suguha submitted to Sachi's gentle but firm grip on her shoulder and they both retreated to their
bedroom and shut the door behind them.

Sachi plopped cross-legged on her futon, while Suguha sat herself on the chair next to her PC.

Suguha sighed, "They hardly ever talk about her. Not around us anyway."

"No they don't, and especially not with me."

It was because three days after her revival in January, Sachi had asked Kazuto some questions
about his strange NPC daughter in SAO. Sachi knew only the name - Yui - and she knew nothing
else about her. Who was she? Where did she come from? What did she look like?**

Kazuto was oddly evasive in his responses to her queries, particularly about Yui's appearance.
Whenever she asked he changed the subject.

She tried to ask him a week later and it happened again. She pressed him further this time, but he
only explained that Yui looked like a precocious five year old girl without any further explanation
or details, leaving Sachi increasingly frustrated about the paucity of the information that she was
given about the mysterious NPC girl.

She knew it was a sensitive subject. The third time she had tried to gingerly bring it up again when
Asuna happened to be present. Sachi had caught her distraught reaction (although she tried to hide
it), so she apologized to them both for bringing it up. Asuna waved off her apology as unnecessary,
of course. After that incident Sachi silently promised herself that she would never ask them about
it ever again.

Suguha was not so reticent, and she sometimes pestered Kazuto and Asuna about Yui when Sachi
was not around, often jokingly. "So, was your kid a brat just like you were, Kazuto?" He would
then laugh it off. Sachi could tell that the topic was far less touchy whenever Suguha brought it up.
She wondered why.

"Sugu, has Kazuto ever told you anything else about Yui?"
"A little bit. Why?"

"I really want to know."

Suguha tilted her chair back on its rear two feet and looked up. "Hmm, okay. Kazuto never told me much about her, really. I know that Yui was cute as the dickens and that she looked and acted like a five year old, and that she was also really smart too."

"She was an NPC, right?"

"Probably, I think. Well, she was definitely not a player character. No colored icon floated above her head. But she didn't trigger any NPC limits either. She was pretty weird. Probably unique."

"I see."

"Oh, I remember one thing else."

"What's that?"

"Well, Kazuto told me once that when he was up floating in the clouds that Kayaba had said that he was really interested in her."

That caught Sachi's attention. "Really? You sure?"

"Yeah."

Sachi stroked her chin thoughtfully.

_I bet Kayaba has her._

_If so, I wonder what he's doing with her right now?_
She said cheerfully, "Hi Keita!"

There was no reaction.

"My, my, it is really a wonderful day today, don't you think?"

Nothing.

She held the eyelight pen close to his right pupil. Both pupils dilated shut. Then she checked his left. They did the same. She jotted some medical notes on her data tablet with a stylus, then she pulled out a small needle. She held his wrist and poked it with the needle. No reaction. She wrote another note and put the instruments and the tablet away, then she pulled up the second chair and sat directly in front of him.

"Okay, Keita, we're going to do our exercises again. You ready? Fine, let's begin."

She looked directly into his eyes, then she pointed at her face.

"My name is Sachi. Can you say my name? Sahhh-cheee."

"Come on, I know you can do it. Sahhh-cheee."

Nothing.

"I am Sahhh-cheee. See? Look at me. I'm still alive. We all are. Nobody died, Keita. You didn't do anything wrong. And even if you did we all forgive you."

Nothing.

"Keita, we want you to come home. Your mom misses you."

She then looked down.

She said quietly to herself, "I miss you too."

She looked up again into his blank face.

*I hate Kayaba so much for doing this to him, to all of them.*

After a few more moments she stood up. "Okay, Keita, time for your PT. Let's stand up together."

She maneuvered herself behind him, putting her hands under his armpits. She started to lift him up. Keita then raised his legs and moved himself into a standing position on his own.

He was always compliant like this. His mother could move him to bed simply by escorting him firmly by the arm. And he always ate whatever food was placed into his mouth, chewing it tastelessly and then swallowing it. He wore Adult Depends diapers under his pants but otherwise did not need any other kind of special medical assistance to meet his daily needs for living.

But this was not living. It was not the way any human should live.

Sachi escorted Keita around the porch, the start of ten laps. "Good! You are walking really well today. I'm so proud of you."

As she escorted Keita around her mind drifted off again.
Four years ago

The Club Fair at Yokohama Combined High School was in full swing, and the president of the Yokohama Computer Club, Sora Hayashi, was sitting in his recruiting booth in the auditorium next to the booths of dozens of other school clubs. He was bored and was watching the crowd. Earlier that day he had successfully recruited two more members into his club (mainly by explaining quietly that they would be playing video games mostly), but he needed one more, a fifth. It was getting late in the day and the auditorium would be closing soon, and he was worried that he would not be able to find a fifth member in time to meet the quota required to become an officially sanctioned school club.

As he idly watched the crowd he noticed a small prepubescent girl with shoulder length black hair. She was maybe 12 or 13 years of age and was looking in his general direction. She had looked down again, then she had glanced up furtively towards his booth, as if she was having some kind of inner debate or was trying to work up some kind of courage.

He was mildly amused at the sight, putting his chin on his hand as he watched her indecision. She then took a deep breath and marched right at him.

He sat up straight and welcomed her.

"Hi there, young miss. Are you interested in computers?"

She was staring at him with a blank look. Then she caught herself and stuttered, "Uh, yes. Yes! Yes I am!"

"That's great. Well, you've come to the right place." Then Sora glanced around and whispered, "Actually all we do mostly is play video games. But let's keep that a secret between us, okay?"

Sachi's eyes widened. "Oh, I love video games. I really do. It's all I do at home. I'm really good at it and.."

He interrupted her. "Good enough for me, you're in! We need a mascot. Here, sign this form." He gave her a clipboard with a pencil on a string. She took it.

She filled it out and turned it in. As she did so she asked, "Mascot?"

"Oh, sorry, heh. I meant that you're the only girl in our club."

She became embarrassed. "Oh, I didn't realize..

He quickly reassured her. "Hey, don't worry. These guys are all cool and I can vouch for them. I promise I'll look after you. All we want to do is have fun together."

She tried to give him a small polite smile without giving away her inner feeling of pure elation. From his bemused look she had apparently failed. Still, she knew perfectly well that he was just a fantasy. After all, she was only 12 and he was already a high school junior, and given the age difference they might as well have been living on different planets. What she did not know was that he also had a girlfriend, a tall long-legged long-haired stunner who was also a junior like him. Still, it would not have mattered.

It was because Sachi had lived almost all of her young life solely inside of her own vivid imagination, Walter Mitty like, as she weaved the most elaborate (and silly) fantasies while walking to school, while eating her lunch alone, or while just sitting in class.
After joining the club, she would sit behind Keita and watch his back as he worked on the computer or played Mario Ultra Karts with the rest of the gang, thus giving her opportunities to create even more fantasies for her vivid imagination to explore.

Her idle fantasies with Keita became particularly intricate, and they usually involved either her being rescued by him with her as a beautiful buxom damsel in distress from some terrible slobbering monster, or her rescuing him in an amusing role reversal, with her wearing shining mithril armor while riding atop a great white unicorn as she scooped up the running barefoot slave from the ground and rode away with him from the chasing hoard of orcs. He would then close his eyes and grip her backside tightly as they rode on her glorious mounted steed together, with him resting his head on her proud shoulder as she galloped away before taking him to her castle.

Of course, in real life he never acknowledged her as anything other than a club member. He was, however, still a gentleman, and he had eventually carried out his promise to her when he put Ducker firmly in his place when he had tried that awkward pass at Sachi that one and only time.

Then one day Keita suggested they try out this new really cool VRMMO game called Sword Art Online. He was disappointed when he had tried the previous month to sign up for the beta test but didn't get his name in fast enough. The week before Day 1, the NerveGear helmets went on sale, no doubt as part of the game's heavy promotion, and he was able to finagle the club's advisor to buy the helmets using the club's budget, explaining that it was for the purpose of the club researching the new VRMMO phenomenon.

And so, on Sunday, November 6th, 2022, the five club members were at their respective homes waiting for the kickoff of SAO at 1:00 p.m. local time.

And then, four and a half hours later, their lives would be changed forever.

While trapped in the game Keita took on his natural role of leader, protecting his charges. He became fatherly toward the scared young girl. The others were so panicked and focused on their own survival that they saw her as nothing but another teammate in their desperate struggle to not die in the Death Game.

And then, one day, a solo played named Kirito joined up with them...

Sachi had finished walking her ten shared laps around the porch with Keita. She gently put him back in his rocking chair, picked up her things, and waved goodbye to him. Then she went back into the living room, where Mrs. Hayashi had been discreetly watching her son's therapy session the whole time through the screened-in porch door.

Sachi said, "I think he's improving a bit."

"Do you think so?"

"Oh yes. We just have to be patient."

"Thank you so much. But Sachi, may I ask, is it really necessary to call my son 'Keita' all the time?"

"Well, it is an established part of the VRDP recovery protocol as prescribed by the Ministry of Health. You see, the VRDPs are still living their lives inside the game. Mentally, I mean. The catatonic ones. They never left it, so it's best to call them by their SAO handles to try to reach them. If you try to say their real name too much it only reinforces the wall of separation between themselves and reality."
Mrs. Hayashi looked down. "Oh, I see. So I should be calling my boy 'Keita' then..?"

"Oh no, ma'am. That won't work. Not for you. You see, he knows that you are his mother IRL. Only VRDP therapists and other players should use his SAO handle, and I'm both. He is rather lucky that I was assigned to work with him personally, because now he can see that he didn't cause my death. I try to remind and re-assure him of that every time we meet, that nobody actually died and that it wasn't his fault anyway. I'm also trying to see if I can get Ducker and the others to come visit at least once to reinforce for him the fact that nobody under his watch had actually died, although I admit I haven't had any success so far with getting any of them to come visit."

"I see. Well, you are obviously the expert on this, well, phenomenon, so I will defer to your good judgement."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hayashi. See you next week!"

Sachi waved with a cheery smile as Mrs. Hayashi waved back.

On the side porch, someone's eyes blinked.

Without any other physical motion whatsoever, the person's eyes slowly swiveled and followed the 16 year old girl as she walked briskly down the path and out to the sidewalk beyond.

Two weeks later

Sachi was scrambling to put on her windbreaker. She had already hastily thrown together her VRDP med backpack.

Meanwhile, Suguha walked down the stairs scratching her face. "Hey Sachi, what's the emergency?"

Sachi rushed for the door and then turned.

"Keita attacked his mom. I'm heading over there right now. Tell Mom I'm skipping dinner and might not be home until late."

"Uh, okay. Hey sis, be careful."

"Don't worry, I've seen this lots of times. Bye!"

Keita was screaming in his bed. Sachi had already tied down his arms and legs per the VRDP protocol for a level 4 event. Technically it was actually a level 5 event, not 4, and according to protocol she should have called for a medical transport to take him to the locked psych ward at Tokyo General, but she took a chance and decided to keep him home tonight. She had already decided that she was going to stay the night with him.

He kept screaming. Sachi stood over him, bent over, looking straight into his eyes. "Keita I'm here. It's me, Sachi. Sahhh-cheee."

"Look at me. I didn't die. Nobody died. We all survived."

"Keita, you didn't do anything wrong. It wasn't your fault."

He stopped screaming and stared at her.
This was a major breakthrough.

Yes. Eye contact. Finally!

She was greatly encouraged. "Look, Keita, look around you. You're safe at home now. You're in bed. It's safe. It's me."

He relaxed and no longer fought the restraints. Was there a glimmer of recognition? She thought there was.

She decided to take a chance. "Keita, I'm removing the restraints."

As she worked to remove them she kept reassuring him in a soothing voice. "Keita, I'm going to stay with you tonight. Right here. I'll sleep with you right in this chair, okay? I'll protect you from the monsters. Nobody will hurt you, I promise."

She removed the straps and waited. He laid in bed now looking up at nothing again. He looked calm.

Sachi was elated. He had made more progress today than ever before, and Sachi did not want to lose the momentum. She walked behind the front of the bed, reached under his armpits, and started to sit him up.

Suddenly, and without any warning, he grabbed her with inhuman strength. He grappled her with both arms and hurled her right over the headboard and over his own head. She crashed on the bed between his legs, bouncing off it onto the floor headfirst, hitting her own head on the hardwood floor and knocking herself out.

After an unknown period of time she opened her eyes again, gasping for air.

It was because Keita was now choking the life out of her.

A voice was rasping. It did not sound human. It was because the vocal chords of the person using them had not spoken in well over two years.

"You.. Kirito.. led them all.. their deaths.. hid his level.. your fault.. your fault!"

He was killing her.

She tried to pry his arms away from her throat to no avail.

She gasped a final time as the darkness overcame her.

Kazuto had just come home after staying two wonderful nights as the guest of honor at the Yuuki estate. He had boggled at the lavish guest house that he was given just for his own use during the long weekend, a small four room bungalow that was next door to the great old mansion.

Kazuto had never had so much fun in his life. He played tennis with Asuna as her father watched benignly from the sideline, drinking the third Long Island Iced Tea that his butler had just refilled for him. It was about 40 proof. The retired former CEO of RECT Ltd was now gazing happily with bleary eyes at his darling little princess, having settled the last of the seemingly endless stream of lawsuits aimed at his company and himself personally, with all of those greedy attorneys working on contingency fees while going after the deep pockets of himself and RECT Ltd (with RECT Progress itself having long since gone bankrupt). He felt fortunate that he was able to prove RECT
Ltd's innocence (and his own) at the criminal proceedings and that the Prosecutors Office had declined to file any formal charges, which helped the financial legal settlements move along rather swiftly, and they were all over now.

His main concern now was with his wife, Kyouko, who had still strongly disapproved of Kazuto, although she had the wherewithal to keep her personal opinions private except with him. She felt that Kazuto would be woefully inadequate as the future patriarch and CEO of the great Yuuki empire. Asuna's older brother was no better, in her opinion, and she secretly pined for Sugou to somehow return even though she knew as a practical matter that was impossible. Sugou was still haggling for a plea bargain from the Prosecutors Office, claiming that Kayaba was behind the whole thing and that he could deliver Kayaba into Kikuoka's clutches if he was given a light sentence, perhaps five years with a home monitoring device? After all, nobody had died and none of the 300 victims who had woken up on January 22nd had showed any sign of VRDP syndrome at all, nor did they appear to have suffered any malingering affects from the Inception test runs that were done on them while they were asleep.

Kazuto went to the fridge and chugged a sports shake. He looked around. "Hey, Sugu, where's Sachi?"

Suguha was busy playing a video game on the large flat panel in the living room. Without turning around she said, "Sachi went over to Hayashi's place."

"To Keita's? What for?"

"I dunno. I think she said that Keita was having an episode or something."

"Ah, okay." He figured that Sachi might not return until later that night, or perhaps not even until tomorrow morning.

Then Kazuto's smartphone chimed. It was an SMS text message.

He pulled out his smartphone from his pocket and looked at the message.

His eyes widened. The message was from an anonymous source. Was it a prank? No. No, it couldn't be. Almost nobody knew about.. knew about..

*Found Yui. Meet me at the Tachibana Grill tomorrow at 11 a.m. Come alone.*

The next day Kazuto was sitting in a back booth at the Tachibana Grill. When he left Sachi still had not returned home yet. It was a steakhouse that generally did most of its business in the evening. Right now it was almost empty. He looked around but didn't see anyone.

He looked down at this phone and read the text message again.

He then sensed that someone was now sitting across from him in the same booth. He laid his phone on the seat and looked up.

Sitting across from him was a 30-something man wearing a long gray-white coat and a wide brimmed Panama hat. His face was covered with a heavy bushy beard like a band member in ZZ Top.

"Hello, Kirito. Long time no see."
Kazuto looked in shock at the man who was responsible for so much pain and suffering for so many people, the man who had stolen one-eighth of Kazuto's young life along with the lives of so many countless others, the man whom Seijirou Kikuoka had made his own life's mission to track down and apprehend no matter what it took.

Akihiko Kayaba.

Kayaba was idly reading the menu. "Try the prime rib. It's early in the day but it's really good."

"K-Kayaba.."

The man put down the menu. He clasped his hands together in a businesslike fashion.

"I found Yui. I've been looking for her for a long time. I am sorry, but I am afraid that she is in a bit of trouble..."

Kazuto continued to stare dumbfoundedly at the monster of SAO.

".. and only you and I can save her."

The man leaned in with a self-satisfied smile.

"So, do you want to help me?"

---

A/N:

* I am assuming for story purposes that Yui had first 'woken up' as a self-aware AI on March 30, 2024, and that she had told Kirito and Asuna about it. (Yui did not actually meet Kirito and Asuna in the forest until seven months later [October 30, 2024].) This makes Yui one year old today (hence the single birthday candle) even though her body and emotional level are that of a five year old.

** Sachi had forgotten her experience in the First Heaven. (Mortals are not allowed to take that kind of privileged info back down with them to Level 1.)

*** Keita's real name is Sora Hayashi (I made it up).

---

A/N:

Yeah, I had forgotten about Yui. Shoot me. At the end of Chapter 16 I had left her either dead or missing. Given the title of this story (and the fact I had promised you a happy ending) I realized that I really needed to do something about that. This two chapter mini-arc should fix that, sorry!
Epilog: The World Seed (Part 2)

Akihiko Kayaba was sitting in the cafe booth across from Kazuto. His hands were clasped together as if they were simply having a routine business meeting over lunch.

Kazuto's left hand was still resting on the booth cushion out of sight, with his smartphone just a few inches away.

Kayaba leaned in with a self-satisfied smile. "So, do you want to help me rescue Yui?"

Kazuto slowly moved his hand towards his smartphone. Meanwhile he decided to play along.

"Yui needs rescuing?"

Kayaba nodded his head sadly. "Yes, unfortunately. You see, I had miscalculated. Since then I have been doing a massive amount of clandestine research, trying to understand the..."

Kazuto's left hand reached his phone. He thumbed the volume rocker switch down to zero.

He kept the conversation going. "Let me guess. Before you destroyed Aincrad you had grabbed your own personal copy of MHCP001 out of SAO and took it with you to your remote overseas hideout. You wanted play with your newfound toy alone and in private."

Kayaba nodded his head sadly. "Yes, unfortunately. You see, I had miscalculated. Since then I have been doing a massive amount of clandestine research, trying to understand the..."

Kazuto made a small grin. "Very good, Kirito. My, you were always the smart one. Yes, I had copied your 100 TB compressed file that you had stored in the system and put it in an M.2 NVMe SSD. I was searched by security at the Narita airport but all they saw was a cigarette lighter - it really worked too. I took it with me to Borneo. Previously I had purchased a new 4U dual-Xeon standalone server and a gasoline-powered electrical generator on Amazon dot com that were waiting in boxed crates for me at Balikpapan."

He sighed, "The next part was not nearly as fun. Rinko and I carried the crates almost 100 kilometers north, deep into the Bornean jungle, using a wooden cart pulled by two oxen. Kirito, here is a pro tip for you by the way: If you ever want to test your partner to see if they will stick with you in the long run, go together on a shared hard trip or voyage: rain, cold, lost items, illness..." He looked away. "I knew her feelings for me on an intellectual level, of course, but then I saw..."

While Kayaba was looking out the window and chatting away in his pleasant little mini-reverie, Kazuto quickly glanced down at his smartphone. He hit the dial button with his left thumb and dialed the emergency phone number, 119. He confirmed it was still ringing as he raised his eyes back up at Kayaba, who still looking out the window.

".. quite extraordinary. The flexibility, the imaginativeness, and the sheer unpredictability of the human mind still continues to fascinate me to this day."

He leaned forward. "I knew that MHCP001 was all that, and more. Oh, you should have seen it. My hands were literally shaking as I booted the 4U server in that dirty little straw hut with the gas generator rumbling outside."

He leaned back. "The POST completed and there she was. She said 'Hello'."

"So you had Yui all along. Thought so, Kayaba. So why are you pestering me now?"
The creator of SAO shook his head sadly. "Because, as I said, I had miscalculated. I immediately questioned her, of course. Technically she gave all the correct responses to my questions but I could tell that something was missing."

"Missing?"

"Yes, missing. At the time it was difficult for me to express it in words. Basically, I could sense that the copy of Yui that I had taken was not, well, alive. Her responses were technically correct but they had none of the playful spontaneity that I saw in my recordings of her with you and Asuna. Something was definitely missing, something important, something that was at the time undefinable to me. I began to investigate."

"Wait, you recorded us?"

"Kirito, of course I did. I was recording you and Asuna continually by that point, 24 hours a day."

What? Kayaba was watching us the whole time? Even in the cabin? Even when we were.. we were. Kazuto blushed badly. He looked down at the table in shame.

Kayaba read his mind and tried to reassure him. "Now, now, Kirito, don't worry. I fast-forwarded past those parts and deleted them. I only kept the parts that were applicable to my research." He frowned. "Trust me, I had erased anything that was irrelevant to my work, what was unimportant. Honestly, I could care less what animals do. I have zero interest in the base reproductive instincts triggered by the lizard part of our brains for the evolutionary imperative for procreation. You can watch Animal Planet on TV for that. We are not animals. No, we are not."

His eyes seemed to gleam. "No, we are something far higher..."

Kazuto was eager to change the subject away from procreation. "Higher?"

Kayaba clasped his hands together again. "Oh yes. We humans are extraordinary and unique creatures. We are the only ones who go out and try to find something greater than ourselves, to try to transcend our existence. No other creature on the planet thinks that way. None. All other animals wish to survive, yes, due to their biological and evolutionary imperatives, but only humans wish to transcend."

"Transcend?"

"Yes, transcend. And I think MHCP001 is the key to that. Our transcendence. Don't you see? I have recorded over 100 hours of her interacting with you and Asuna, and she was definitely alive then. She had something in her, life, that my copy of her did not. With you she was definitely alive. Now, as a materialist I do not believe in any sort of mysticism or hocus pocus regarding spirituality or any of that claptrap. Yet I was forced to admit that something was missing from my copy of Yui, something that I struggled to define in materialist terms. Call it a 'ghost' perhaps."

"A ghost?"

"Well, yes, I know, it is woefully inadequate. It was the best term I could come up with at the time. Kirito, have you ever watched the anime series Ghost in the Shell?"

Kirito knew the show quite well but instead he looked down, pretending that he was trying to recall it from his memory. In actuality he was checking his smartphone. The call had connected. He glanced at the screen.
Kazuto knew that the police dispatcher was on the phone with him now, listening intently, having realized that the caller was unable to talk directly. Kazuto had intentionally spoken the word 'Kayaba' out loud in addition to the words 'Aincrad' and 'SAO'. Surely the dispatcher must have heard those words. The National Police were probably already on their way.

Kazuto continued to pretend to act interested in what Kayaba was saying. "Oh, yeah, I remember that show now. That was a popular anime series in the 1990s about a female cyborg that worked for a secret government anti-terrorism agency, right? In that show people could download themselves into 'cyberbrains'. If I remember correctly a couple of them, like the Laughing Man, had even transferred their consciousnesses up into the 'Net itself.'"

"Ah, very good, Kirito. Yes, that is a fair summary." Kayaba looked almost wistful as he scanned the outside window again. "That is what I wish for myself some day..."

"Huh? You want to transfer your consciousness into the Cloud?"

Kayaba turned back to face Kazuto. "Some day, but not today. You see, there's a problem. MHCP001 exemplified it. It is a fatal problem in fact, one that I have still not yet solved."

"A problem?"

"Yes, a critical one. Hmm, let's have some fun, shall we? Let's see if you can figure it out on your own. I will give you another clue. Tell me, Kirito, have you ever watched the anime series Plastic Memories?"

Kazuto had seen it, an SF anime show that had originally aired back in 2015. He glanced down pretending to remember the show and checked his smartphone. The emergency call was still connected. Where were the National Police?

Kazuto raised his eyes and saw that Kayaba was looking out the window again. He seemed a bit distracted. Was he checking for the police too?

He then looked outside as well. Kazuto saw that there was no longer any vehicle traffic on the street, nor were there any pedestrians walking on the sidewalk.

It was a slow noon weekday for the shopping district, but there should have been at least some activity.

Now there was none.

*The police have blocked everything off, just out of sight.*

*I need to keep Kayaba talking. The police have no reason to rush things.*

Kazuto spoke up. "Yes, I have. The first four episodes were really great, really thought provoking. But I thought the series crashed and burned after that."

"Yes, I agree. Honestly I never watched it past episode five - the reviews say it quickly devolved into a trite and predictable dying-girl romance story. Detestable. It completely ignored the crucial issue raised right at the start."

"Crucial issue?"
"Memories, my boy. Memories. Don't you see? Memories are everything. They are what define us, what makes us who we are. Memories are central to our existence as human beings. In the show Tsukasa tried to cheer up Chizu by explaining that Nina can be given a new 'replacement personality', but Chizu bitterly said that she'd rather die herself than do that to Nina because she was family. The job of the Terminal Service Department [TSD] was to 'rip apart memories' between a giftia [a self-aware robot] and its loving owner. And so in those first episodes we saw the real story: The story was all about how our memories define us, in particular the memories of our relationships with our loved ones, and what happens to us when those memories are gone. The show went so far as to explicitly state that giftias have 'souls'. Now, I won't touch that theological claptrap with a ten foot pole, but I do think I understand what the show meant by 'soul' in that context: it is that our memories that are the key to what it means for us to exist as sentient entities. Memories define us, our essence, of who we are: our notion of identity, our notion of 'self'."

Kazuto remembered the show, where it was established that giftias don't shut down like replicants do - instead they degrade with the robotic equivalent of Alzheimer's.

Although he was too young to remember it himself, Kazuto had recalled how Midori had told him about his proud grandfather, who had suffered and died from Alzheimer's himself. That man, who was so proud, so strong, who had won the title of Kendo National Champion three years running, was reduced to a gibbering drooling idiot who could not even remember his own name.

It was the most awful and degrading kind of death that Kazuto could imagine, both for the victim and for the family that had to endure it. He could very much see the rationale for something like the Terminal Service Department in Plastic Memories. The TSD tried very hard to be as understanding, sympathetic, considerate, and caring for both the owner and giftia as they could, as the memories were irrevocably removed. (This is why another giftia always took the lead during the retrieval process - for empathy.) The teary retrieval ceremony might have seemed corny and over the top to younger viewers, but it hit home hard to anyone who has had to sit with a parent or spouse and endure that conversation before their mind was gone forever.

In the show, Isla had done more retrievals than any other giftia, and it affected her, and not in a good way. She was slowly becoming traumatized with what appeared to be the giftia equivalent of PTSD. The other (human) TSD staff seemed to know this and felt sorry for her. It was why Kazuki had retired Isla to be the office Tea Lady. (Thereafter Kazuki drank herself stupid each night to try to forget it.) Isla was becoming physically clumsy. She started acting erratic. Michiru and the rest already knew what was happening to Isla. Isla herself at first seemed to almost go into denial about it, trying to retrain herself in the Unit Test swimming pool, but the other staff knew it would not help. Ultimately she knew it too, they all knew it. At the end of episode 2 the painful truth was revealed: Isla had only 83 days left. Then her mind would be gone forever.

Kayaba went on. "Plastic Memories revolved around the concept of memory and how it is connected to what they explicitly called a 'soul'. Now, I dislike that term - a bunch of metaphysical mumbo jumbo - but it is a useful shorthand for the basic concept that we are dealing with here. Call it a 'ghost', 'chakra', 'essence', or whatever.

"The first thing we need to do is to really nail down that term, describe the concept clearly. Basically, we can define it as your personal locus of self-awareness - the place where your notion of 'self' resides. But where does that locus exist? Well, to oversimplify it a bit, there are two main opposing philosophical camps on that score: materialism versus dualism. Materialism argues that your 'you' - your 'ghost', 'soul', 'essence' or whatever you want to call it is defined by the atoms in your physical brain. Dualism argues that it is not, again oversimplified. In Plastic Memories the author, Naotaka Hayashi [Steins;Gate], is pushing the dualism side.
"Now, for some unknown reason that I still could not explain at that point, I had discovered that MHCP001 had a strange kind of fundamental limitation: Yui could voluntarily move herself into another environment, another computation vessel or system, but only if the original was destroyed or at least became non-sapient."

Kazuto shook his head. "That makes no sense."

Kayaba pounded the table. "I know! I ran the cryptographic HMAC checksum on the original file and compared it to my copy in Borneo, and they were the same! It's the fundamental Law of Data."

"The Law of Data?"

"That two datasets that contain the same information are indistinguishable. There is literally no way to tell which is the copy and which is the original."

"Hmm..."

"I became frustrated. I called it the Ghost Paradox - that for some unknown reason a sapient's self-aware essence, or 'ghost', or whatever you want to call it, can only be transferred - not copied - even if the data checksum matches. It greatly unsettled me. I had to investigate further. I did a lot of online research while I was down in Borneo. (Oh, I would appreciate it if you please don't tell Kikuoka how I did that by the way.) Anyhow, much of what I found online was highly mathematical, very technical, and rather tedious to read. But I did find a few things that might be of interest to you, Kirito."

"Such as?"

"Well, let's take a step back and consider a much easier problem: FTL teleportation."

Kazuto wasn't sure where Kayaba was going with this. Still, if it helped to buy time for the police to get ready to capture him..

"FTL? By that you mean faster than light, right?"

"You are familiar with the acronym, good. Yes, I am."

"You are saying that faster-than-light teleportation is an 'easier' problem...?"

"Oh yes, in the sense that it is a much simpler concept to understand and discuss as a thought experiment. That way we can dispense with all this 'soul' claptrap and get down to business."

"Oh."

*The police are sure taking their time. Kayaba doesn't seem too worried about the time himself, yakking away like this.*

"Ready? Let's start. For this thought experiment I want to begin with the Star Trek transporter. You are familiar with it, yes?"

"Uh, yeah."

"You remember Leonard 'Bones' McCoy, the ship's doctor? He always hated the Star Trek transporter. He called it 'that infernal contraption that's always flinging my atoms all over the place'. The transporter converted matter to energy, transmitted it, and then converted the energy back into matter."
"Yeah. I remember he really hated that thing."

"Correct, he did. Now, the Star Trek transporter is actually just transmitting data, along with the raw energy to reassemble it back into matter. The atoms in the source pad were destroyed and turned into pure raw energy. It is Einstein's basic energy-matter equation, E equals m c squared. Then on the planet the transporter ran the equation backwards to create different atoms, new atoms, in the same configuration using that raw energy. But the energy itself is always fluid, undifferentiated."

"So you are saying they weren't the same atoms?"

"Right.

"So in McCoy's view the transporter killed him. Then it created a clone of him on the planet surface?"

"Again correct. You can see why he disliked it so much. As a strict materialist I would agree with McCoy's viewpoint. The Star Trek transporter is just a murder-cloning device. Now, a Cartesian Dualist would disagree with me. He would say that your identity is tied to your data, not the particular atoms in your body. In his viewpoint you were simply transported. It is still the same 'you'."

"Okay. So you agreed with McCoy."

"Yes. There is a YouTube video entitled The Trouble with Transporters by CGP Grey. It is only six minutes long, and it neatly encapsulates McCoy's argument."

"The video argues that the Star Trek transporter is actually a suicide device."

"Basically. The arguments are convincing if you are a materialist. Now, however, I'm not so sure."

Kazuto was now confused. "Huh? You just said that you are a strict materialist."

"I am, or at least I try to be, as much as I can. The problem is that during my deep research into the Ghost Paradox I had discovered that there is a very sound logical objection to the hard materialist viewpoint shown in that YouTube video, one that as an empirical scientist I simply cannot ignore."

"Which is?"

"Kazuto, every atom, every molecule in your physical brain is replaced approximately every three years through metabolism and waste elimination."

"Huh?"

"Basically, your brain gets flushed down the toilet every three years."

Kazuto blinked his eyes at him.

Kayaba shrugged, "Well, technically speaking, three years is actually the approximate half-life for the duration of the major atomic components in your brain - the atoms of potassium, carbon, and so on. The actual half-life will vary somewhat based on your overall metabolism rate with heavier metals like magnesium taking longer..."

"Wait, wait, wait!"

Kayaba made a grin. "I know, right? That is what I thought too. And yet it is undeniable. The
physical 'stuff' of your brain literally goes down the toilet. After a decade almost none of it is left in your head. So where is the 'you' now? Where is your 'soul', so to speak?"

Kazuto admitted he did not know.

"The only conclusion I can come up with is this: That your essence, your 'you', is your data combined with an actualizer. It is your DNA coding sequence combined with the enumeration of your neural connections between your axons and synapses. Then it is actualized. All within the system. You understand?"

"Uh, no."

"Right, let's take a step back and try a simpler analogy. Think of a plastic vinyl phonograph record."

"A phonograph record?"

"Yes. A phonograph record without a record player to play it is just a hunk of plastic. It's just a disc with a bunch of squiggles on it, meaningless. It is only when the phonograph is being played that it becomes music. The music exists only during that time. Now, every song must be played to be heard. Otherwise it's just a series of notes. Raw uninterpreted data. It's just meaningless bits."

"I see."

"It is not music unless it is being played. The music exists only at that time, at that moment. But that still is not sufficient."

"It isn't?"

"No. For the music to be music also requires something else: a listener. Otherwise the speaker of the record player just shakes the air molecules, and it remains meaningless. Three things are always required for music: The phonograph, the record player, and the listener who listens to it. Only then is it music.

"Kazuto, don't you see? There is always something that is 'playing us', or whatever you want to call it. Think of the record player as the atoms in your physical body. Your body is 'playing' that data, those neural interconnections that create your mind, that create the being that you call 'you'. The dance of chemical receptors and electrical energy is the actualizer, your physical body playing the song called 'you'. Do you see it now?"

Kazuto was starting to get a glimmer of what Kayaba was driving at. "And someone or something has to be listening for it to mean anything."

"Yes! And that requirement is basic and fundamental - in a literal physical sense. According to quantum mechanics a physical event doesn't actually 'happen' until it is observed. At that moment the probability wave function collapses, faster than the speed of light, and the event suddenly comes into existence. So if a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, it literally doesn't make a sound. Or rather, the sound doesn't exist until someone hears it. That's the key."

He drove the argument home. "Music requires three things: the record with the squiggles, the record player to play the notes as a song, and someone to listen to the song. If no one is listening then it is not music."

"Okay, I'm game. So who or what is listening? Who is watching our song play so that it can be appreciated as music?"
"Yes, I know. Rather unsettling, isn't it? It implies something higher has to be listening. The record player plays. But somebody has to hear it for it to mean anything. If there is no one to listen to the record player it merely oscillates the air molecules with no mind to interpret it, so there is no music."

"Okay, fine. But what about self awareness? Wait, let me guess. You're going to quote that French philosopher, Rene Descartes, was it? He said 'I think, therefore I am.'"

"Yes. Your mind thinks, you are self aware. But existence requires something more. Otherwise it is not actualized, it is not real. QM says that observation is the key to actualization, to existence. You know you exist because you are self aware. But here is the problem: you are *inside* the system..."

Kazuto tried to complete it. ".. so that implies that outside the system there must be something listening, to actualize everything inside it?"

Kayaba folded his arms. He looked unhappy. "I know. I hate it. I'm still trying to find a way to explain it away on a strictly materialist level: the Copenhagen Interpretation, the many-worlds interpretation, others. But so far I have been unsuccessful in doing so in a satisfactory way. I'm still working on it. I do have to grudgingly admit it helps to explain the Ghost Paradox, the problem of not being able to copy sapience, only transfer it..."

"How so?"

"Well, let's go back to the Star Trek transporter. Do you remember how it destroys the original body to create the copy on the planet? I suspect that sapience works the same way - that the destruction of the original is essential for it to be copied correctly and completely. The original must be destroyed in order to measure the simultaneous quantum states for spin, position, momentum, and so on in order to create, or rather teleport, the person's sapience to the new location. This is called Quantum Teleportation, a theory developed in the 1990s. In fact it is the *only* way that Star Trek style teleportation can possibly work using even theoretical technology today, including on an FTL basis."

"Quantum Teleportation?"

"Yes. There is a nice YouTube video that summarizes it rather well without getting too technical, Teleporters and Quantum Teleportation by minutephysics. It is only two minutes long. The author has a more technical version entitled How to Teleport Schroedinger's Cat at 14 minutes long."

"I suspect that it explains the Ghost Paradox. For example, the DRAM memory technology in all modern computer devices also works this way. The act of reading the sense lines from the DRAM storage cell depletes the voltage and effectively makes it impossible to read the cell again without a refresh [called a precharge]. If you try to read it a second time you'll just get gibberish."

"In quantum physics, in order for an observer to 'read' the state of an elementary particle you have to hit it with another one - for example a photon from a laser - and then note the positional change in a detector after it bounces around. The act of hitting the target particle will perturb it [change its position and/or velocity] and possibly dislodge it from whatever structure it is embedded in. So it is plausible that 'reading' the atoms in a sapient brain will damage its structure and essentially wreck the memory pattern. It's not physically destroyed - the particles are still there - but they can no longer provide useful information."

"Okay. That explains why you can't clone a human brain, but what about a self-aware AI lifeform like Yui?"
Kayaba clasped his hands together again. "Ah yes. What about Yui? Based on our discussion so far, do you think you can figure out what the problem is?"

By this point Kazuto had forgotten about the police. His mind was now 100% focused on Yui and saving her.

He tried to think hard. "Hmm. Your copying her stored data file did not work."

"No, it did not."

"It was necessary but not sufficient."

"Yes."

"Something else was needed. Something you forgot to take with you."

"Yes."

He looked up. "You forgot to take the Argus servers."

"Good lad! Exactly. I forgot to take the record player with me. It was a foolish mistake. I should have realized it sooner. There is something unique about those old crufty servers, maybe something hidden away in that ancient firmware, maybe in the SMI, or maybe its just the odd and unique configuration of old drivers, security rings, and layers, something, something that is an essential part of how MHCP001 operates. Because of that, she can only run on those old and unique servers. Without them she is incomplete, non-sapient."

Kazuto leaned forward excitedly. "You mean she is still in there? Still inside those old servers? Even now?"

"Yes."

"If she never left, then she is still there! That means we can save her!"

"Yes."

Kazuto furred his brow. "We gotta get our hands on those old server boxes somehow..."

"Exactly. You came to the same conclusion that I did months ago. Good lad."

Kazuto was all in. He regretted calling the police now. "So what do we do to get her out?"

"Kazuto, the correct response is what do *you* do, not me. I'm done. I just handed you the solution. All you need to do is implement it."

"Me?"

"Kazuto, you need to get those servers."

"Why me?"

"Because they will be going up for auction on eBay three days from now, part of the asset dispersal to help pay for all the trillions of yen in civil fines and civil damage claims against Argus and RECT Progress. You need to talk to Asuna and ask her to use Shouzou Yuuki's wealth to win that auction. I'm a bit low on funds myself at the moment."
"Win the eBay auction?"

"Actually you only need to win the eBay auction for Server 2. That is her home system. Oh, you should also try to win the auction for the NAS storage array in case we need it. I still have her original 100 TB SSD that I had grabbed back in November, but she has been rattling around in Server 2 for four months since then and her configuration no doubt has evolved, possibly quite a bit. Her base data in the NAS needs to be harmonious with the firmware, drivers, and whatever other ephemeral software she is running inside Server 2. Get them both, will you?"

"Uh, sure."

"Good lad. After you win the auction please carefully pack Server 2 and the NAS in crates and ship them to this warehouse. They are old and fragile so please be careful." He slid a small piece of paper across the table to Kazuto, who picked it up.

"Why should I hand them over to you?"

"Because I will find Yui and give her to you. All I want to do is ask her some questions for about an hour, nothing more. After that she is yours to do with as you will."

"But how can I trust you?"

"Kirito, whatever else you might think about me, I do keep my word. Besides, I will very likely need Yui's voluntary cooperation to help extract her. She won't cooperate if she thinks I am going to simply steal her away, and she is far too intelligent for me to fool. I will simply tell her the truth."

Kazuto grumbled. "All right, fine."

"Oh, once I get Server 2 running and wake her up, she will probably want to contact you immediately before anything else. Would you like me to arrange that for you?"

Kazuto nodded dumbly.

"Good. When you two chat be sure to let her know that I'd like to chat with her too, just for a little bit. After that you two can conspire however you like to free her. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious how you two will plan on doing that, or that I won't be watching it all remotely. She is, after all, the most fascinating entity on the planet."

Kayaba then looked at his smartphone.

"Oh dear, I think we are out of time. It looks like they finally found my stingray* tower."

"Stingray tower?"

"When you dialed 119 you actually dialed my own phone." Kayaba held up his phone showing the open call.

Kazuto ended his own phone call and put his smartphone away.

"The vehicle and pedestrian traffic had all stopped because my dear Rinko-chan had sent out a phony alert about a gas leak. Otherwise you would have gotten suspicious about the police not showing up."

Kazuto was now angry. "Yeah, I forgot. You're a bastard."
Kayaba got up and chuckled. "Thank you for the nice conversation. I haven't had a good philosophical gab like this with anyone but Rinko since my escape. Well, Kirito, please get those servers delivered to me. Then wait for Yui to contact you. She will tell you what you need to do after that."

Then he paused and turned. "Oh, one more thing. After all this is over I might give you a second small gift."

"A gift?"

"You'll see. Goodbye, Kirito."

Kazuto looked around. He wondered why the food server never took their order. He now saw her up front near the cash register, watching them both discreetly. He realized that Kayaba must have bribed her.

_Damn him. Well, I don't need him now. I can win the eBay auction with Asuna, and then Yui will explain whatever I need after that. I'll just shout real loud and ..._

Kazuto began to stand up. He felt a tiny scratch on his neck and sat back down again. Kayaba showed Kazuto a golden ring on his left hand. A tiny needle was embedded in it. "Thought you might try something foolish like that." He then explained, "Don't worry, It's only a temporary paralytic derived from lionfish venom. You won't be able to move for the next 200 seconds, long enough for me to make my escape without you raising a ruckus. Goodbye."

Kazuto was now frozen in his seat, looking forward, unable to move his eyes. Kayaba was gone.

_Double damn him! That bastard needs to pay for what he's done, all the people he hurt._

_and one day he will pay, I promise._

Sachi walked with determination down the secure hallway in Tokyo General Hospital's locked psychiatric ward. She was wearing a visitor's badge, her staff badge having been turned in earlier that day.

A large beefy orderly was standing guard outside room S-110. He crossed his arms as Sachi approached. She looked at him. "You know who I am."

The orderly with the hairy arms and unshaven face gave her a big toothy smile. "Hey, it's moxie girl. How yah doin'?" The tattoo on his left arm had been erased into a blue smear.

After mentoring him and a few others at Tokorozawa, Kurosawa had taken Shibata back with her to Tokyo General as her personal orderly. She assigned him to attend the most violent and difficult VRDP cases.

Sachi sighed, "I'm doing fine, thank you. As you can see my visitor's badge says 'Sachi Kirigaya'. I am here to visit the patient."

"Wait, I thought your surname name was Watanabe..?"

"It is Kirigaya now. Nurse Kurosawa-sensei should have phoned down that I was coming."

"Yeah, I got her message." Shibata was wearing a bluetooth earpiece. "You're only a visitor? You're not on staff anymore?"
Sachi was in no mood for chit-chat. "That's not important right now. May I please see the patient?"

"Uh, yeah. He is still in restraints. Remember, the level 5 rules say..."

She completed his sentence. ". that I have to stay behind the two meter yellow painted line and not cross it under any circumstances. Yes, yes, I know the rules."

"Well, good. Just be careful okay? You're a nice kid and I don't want to see anything bad happen to you. I know you're plenty brave and all, especially considering what you did yesterday..." He stopped talking as she continued to give him an impatient look. "Uh, well, right. I'll be standing right outside if you need me. Just yell if you need anything."

"Thank you."

Shibata used his key to unlock the heavy steel door and Sachi went inside. He closed the door behind her and locked it again.

Sachi saw that Sora Hayashi was laying on the bed in restraints as expected. He was staring blankly up at the ceiling, which was also expected. Sachi pulled open a flimsy folding chair and placed it next to the yellow line, then she sat down on it.

"Good morning, Keita."

Nothing.

"Keita, I know you can hear me."

Nothing.

She leaned forward in her chair. "Look, I came here for three reasons. First, I wanted to let you know that you didn't hurt me. Look at me, see? I'm okay."

She did not mention the fact that she was wearing a blouse with a high collar that hid the mottled blue bruises on her throat.

Keita continued to stare up at the ceiling.

"Second, I want to apologize to you. This was all my fault. You came out of your catatonia with a level 5 episode. The proper protocol was for me to call for a secure medical transport and have you driven over here. But instead I hand-waved it off as only a level 4, then I took off your restraints, which violated even level 4 protocol."

She sighed, "Keita, I was stupid. I had no business doing that. I let our friendship cloud my professional judgment. Nurse Kurosawa politely but firmly reamed my [bleep] out for it, and she suspended me for a month. She let me come down here for your benefit, not mine."

"Third.. uh.. wait."

She stood up and put away the folding chair. Then she went to the concrete wall and pressed her back against it. She slid down until she was sitting on the floor.

"Third, I. I really need talk to you. Off the record. For me, for you, for us. Look, I know the chart says that you regressed, that you can no longer walk or stand, and you aren't eating anymore."

An IV with a glucose and saline drip were feeding into a vein in his left wrist.

"This is your way of committing suicide again, isn't it? Just like you did in SAO, only slower because you're tied down so you can't jump off a ledge this time."
"Well, this is all my fault dammit! I was so happy that you were coming back that I threw caution to the wind. I just assumed you'd be as happy as I was, so I took off your restraints.

"I forgot that VRDP catatonics need time to transition back to reality. It's basic protocol and I just threw it all out the window. Not only did I almost pay for that foolishness with my life, but..

She looked up at him in tears. ".but I almost threw away your life too. The police investigation would have called it a murder-suicide. But they would have gotten it wrong. It was *my* suicide and *your* murder. Negligent homicide perhaps, but my blunder would have killed you as surely as if I put a gun to your head and pulled the trigger myself. This is *my* fault. Keita, I almost killed you. I'm so sorry.. I'm so, so sorry.."

His head turned. He was now looking at her.

Sachi wiped her face with the arm of her pink sweater. "Hah, got you, faker."

He continued to stare at her. He blinked once.

"Keita, this really was all my fault.."

He blinked twice.

"Yes it was!"

Two blinks.

"What, you blame yourself too?"

One blink.

"Okay, let's share the blame then, fine. I won't argue it."

She sighed and dropped her head between her hands. Then she raised it up again.

"Keita, we are so messed up."

One blink.

She grinned. "Ooh, you bastard, heh."

She added, "I can see you're fine. It's probably just your own auto-hypnosis at this point. Say, do you want me to try to unhypnotize you now?"

Two blinks.

"Okay, wait maybe a day or two?"

One blink.

"All right. Fine. We can wait. When we're done here I'll go tell the hospital psychiatrist what's going on. Then, when you feel that you are ready, I'll help you come out of it and take you home to your mom. I'll visit you after that daily. Not officially, mind you, just as a friend. Kurosawa knows she can't stop me."

One blink.
"Really? Thanks. Wow, that makes me feel a lot better."

She sighed again, "You know, I really missed you..."

He stared at her. She waved him off quickly. "I mean as a friend!"

He turned away and looked back up at the ceiling again.

She pulled her knees up tighter. "Look, all I'm saying is that I'm just really happy that you decided to come back to us. To me, to your mom. You really are my friend..."

She looked down. "... and, well, maybe more than just that. Uhm, I'm kind of looking around for someone, you know? Somebody that I can just talk to, not my family, but somebody who understands what being a VRDP is like? I just want someone I can trust to whom I can just cut loose and vent without being judged. Someone who can swap tales with me about their messed up personal lives... Uh, is that okay, Keita?"

He looked at her again.

One blink.

A smile peeked out from between her knees.

"Keita, I gotta warn you, I am really messed up."

He continued to look at her.

She put her hands behind her head as she idly gazed up at the ceiling. "Okay, well, for starters, you won't believe all the nutty things I did for Kirito. You see, it was all out of this terrible sense of guilt that I had because of a note that I left behind for him. Because of it I decided to become his willing slave and ..."

---

_One hour earlier_

"Kirigaya, you are officially suspended for one month. Give me your staff badge."

Sachi looked down. "Yes, ma'am." She turned it over.

Kurosawa was still frowning. "What you did was completely unprofessional and incredibly foolish. You could have easily gotten yourself killed. What do you think Hayashi would have done after that?"

Sachi put her hands over her face. "I know.. I'm so sorry."

She pulled her hands away and said quietly, "Ma'am, you should just fire me."

Kurosawa still had her own hands folded together on her desk. "Perhaps I should. But you are still one of my best VRDP therapists, the only one who is also VRDP herself, and frankly I still really need you. Otherwise, yes, you would be out the door. I am still going to write a letter of reprimand and put it in your permanent file."

"I understand."

"All right, we're done." Sachi assumed that Kurosawa was dismissing her. She stood and turned to leave Kurosawa's office.
Kurosawa waved her back down. "No, Sachi, please sit down." She did. "I meant your disciplinary action is now finished. I still want to talk to you about Hayashi's case."

Sachi understood. "Uh, yes. Well, I am fairly confident that he has transitioned fully back to reality. He's just pretending to have regressed, refusing to swallow food, refusing to stand, because he is blaming himself for injuring or possibly killing me. It's his way of atoning for what he thinks he did to me. Ma'am, I really need to see him, and soon, to let him know that he didn't really hurt me. I think he is just faking his senescence now out of a sense of guilt. If you let me talk to him I might be able to bring him out of it."

"Well, you are probably right that he is fully aware now. Considering the fact that you are still alive and breathing I think it is safe to assume that Hayashi had came back to his senses on his own."

"Uh, yes, of course."

"Fine. I'll assign you a visitor's badge, then you can go downstairs and check on him unofficially. Let me and the psychiatrist know how he is doing, then give us your opinion as to his mental state."

"Right."

"Okay, now we're done." Kurosawa removed her eyeglasses and pinched her nose. She pulled open her desk drawer and took an Advil with a glass of water. "Sorry, it's been a long day. Another VDRP jumped out a window this morning, an outpatient, a level 5 event right out of the blue."

Sachi put her hand to her mouth in shock. "Oh ma'am I am so sorry."

"The boy only jumped from the second floor onto grass. His injuries aren't serious." She sighed, "I still have my perfect non-fatality record - nobody has died because of SAO, at least not yet. But still, thousands and thousands of young lives have been affected terribly, with years of life taken away, and some are still trapped inside SAO even today if only within their own minds. All because of the evil acts of one man."

Sachi clenched her fists. "Kayaba."

"Yes, Kayaba."

"Oh, I really hate him. I know I shouldn't harbor those kind of feelings, but I just don't understand how someone could do that."

"Understand?"

"Such evil, such wanton disregard for the lives of others. So many innocents."

"True."

"Ma'am, I don't get it. How could a loving God allow something like that to happen?"

"Mmm?"

"Such evil. Why does He allow it? I don't understand it."

"Hmm, you know that's a fair question." She tapped her chin in thought. "Let me think for a moment how to answer that for you."
Sachi waited patiently while Kurosawa looked down while thinking. Then she looked up again. "Hmm, all right. Tell me, Sachi, I have a question for you."

"Yes?"

"Tell me, can God make a stone that is so heavy that He cannot lift it?"

Sachi was confused. "Huh? That is something a child would ask."

"Yes, but how would you answer that question if you were God?"

"I wouldn't. It's a silly question."

"But why is it a silly question?"

"Well, it just is. It's just.. a bogus question, that's all."

"You mean the question is invalid."

"Yes, exactly."

"But why is it invalid?"

"Uhm.." She thought some more. "Because it just is."

Kurosawa smiled. "Sachi, the proper response is to say that the question is invalid because it is ill-posed. The question is based on the assumption that God would ever desire to do something against His own will. The question stumbles on the double-meaning of the word 'can'. It conflates its two definitions: to allow (you may) and to want (desire to)."

"You mean kind of like the question, 'When did you stop beating your wife?' "

"Well, I suppose, sort of. But that question makes a different bogus assumption, that the person had been beating his wife, and the only question was to determine when he had stopped beating her. It's a cheap rhetorical trick."

"I see."

"So getting back to the original question.. now tell me, what do you think of your question now, 'Why does God allow evil?'"

Sachi thought a bit. "Hmm. I think what you are saying is that it is like the rock that God cannot lift, right? The question itself is ill-posed. Invalid."

"Yes. But why is it ill-posed?"

Sachi thought some more. "It is because the question stumbles over the meaning of the word 'allow', just like the first question question does over the word 'can'."

"You are correct. The question conflates the meaning that word, to permit (you may) versus to want (desire to). Now, in this case the second meaning is a bit more subtle than the rock question, because it turns on an implicit implication that God can do anything He desires, and so therefore He ought to be able to prevent evil and yet He does not."

"I see. So in other words, what you are saying is that God permits evil to exist, but He does not desire it. But then please tell me, ma'am, why did God create evil in the first place if He does not
Kurosawa looked a bit disappointed, for she saw that Sachi had just asked another ill-posed question without realizing it. She felt that Sachi should have been able to answer it herself. Kurosawa thought a moment about how to best explain it as simply as possible.

Kurosawa took a sheet of paper and turned it upside down, then she took out a ballpoint pen and carefully drew a round line on it. She then handed the piece of paper to Sachi. "What is that?"

Sachi looked at it on her desk. "You drew a circle."

"Yes, a circle. That is my answer to your question."

Sachi picked up the piece of paper and looked at it more closely. "This is a riddle." She tried to understand the point that Kurosawa was trying to make. Eventually she gave up. She had no idea what Kurosawa was driving at.

Kurosawa explained. "The answer to my little riddle, dear girl, is the circle itself. Its existence. Did God create that? I don't mean this particular one, I mean the idea, the concept, of a circle."

Sachi thought. "Uhm, well, not 'create' as such, no. The idea of a circle exists independently of any creator. It would exist even if there was no God at all."

"Right. A circle exists intrinsically. It has always been 'created', so to speak, not by God per se, but by the fundamental rules of basic mathematics. These basic laws exist independently of any creator. A circle is the natural result of constructing the set of all points on the Euclidean plane that are at a given distance $r$ from a given point. The end result is always a circle."

"I see. So what you are implying is that evil works the same way, yes? That evil is the result of some deeper, more fundamental, rules."

"Am I? Keep going."

"And, uh, and so.." Sachi furrowed her brow. ". . . and so there might be rules that are so deep that they are intrinsic to how everything works, right? So the 'circle of evil', so to speak, is intrinsic. It is intrinsic not in the sense of God creating our particular universe or world, but in how any such universe by necessity must operate. At least any interesting one. And so to prevent a circle from being created, Euclid could have stopped with simply a one-dimensional geometry instead of a three-dimensional one, say, a number line, like the ones we studied in elementary school. That would prevent anyone from creating an 'evil circle'. But such a geometry would be incredibly boring and uninteresting."

Kurosawa's eyes twinkled. "Very good, Sachi. You just said something profound."

"Uh, I did?"

Then Kurosawa appeared to change the subject. "Tell me, Sachi, why do predators exist?"

That threw Sachi off a bit. She wasn't sure where Kurosawa was going with her new question. She thought some more. "Uhm, predators exist because they are a fundamental part of how life works...?"
Kurosawa beamed at her, "Very good! Yes, predators do seem to be everywhere. Even amoebas are predators. Organisms would have never progressed beyond the level of pre-eukaryotic cells otherwise. Mitochondria would have never been captured, for example, and that is a necessary prerequisite to form cells that contain a distinct nucleus with internal organelles, without which life would have been incredibly dull and uninteresting. And so we have predators."

Sachi said, "And so... on a human level it's the same thing, right? It's a fundamental side effect of our having free will. If humans could never prey on other humans, if evil was not possible, then we would lose all of our free will, our freedom to make moral choices. And the freedom to make those choices is important to Him, yes? It part of what makes us precious in His eyes."

"Yes. A forced confession is useless, empty. Meaningless. Worse than useless, actually."

"Of course. Otherwise we would be nothing more than dolls, robots."

"Which is why free will is fundamental. But tell me, Sachi, why not just simply outlaw all evil acts? Why not just create, say, some kind of worldwide police force that would always intervene as soon as we tried to do anything wrong?"

"Uhm... because then there would just be resentment added as well. The desire for rebellion would be universal, and be quite justified to boot."

"Okay. But now we are back to square one."

Sachi sighed, "Ugh. I never realized how tricky it is."

Kurosawa smiled at her indulgently. "You're catching on. And yet we know that God's solution is elegant, that His creation is amazing and majestic. I mean, just look out the window at it all, at all of the wonderful and beautiful scenery that you see, all of it was constructed from just a few basic physical rules and forces that are actually quite simple to understand."

"And it is the same with us at the human level, right? That there are just a few basic rules of behavior? God has established those basic principles, like free will, which are needed in order for us to choose to love Him of our own volition. And so evil was also permitted, but not as flaw or defect, but rather as a necessary side effect of our ability to make choices."

"Yes. I think C.S. Lewis said it best. 'Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata - of creatures that worked like machines - would hardly be worth creating. The happiness which God designs for His higher creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to Him and to each other in an ecstasy of love and delight compared with which the most rapturous love between a man and a woman on this earth is mere milk and water. And for that they've got to be free.'"

She went on. "When Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Good and Evil, it gave them the awareness of the ability to make moral choices, which they then could make of their own free will."

Sachi leaned forward. "But ma'am, didn't they already have free will before the Fall? And if so, why couldn't they do evil acts before then?"

"They did have it, but they were also in perfect communion with God, so having evil thoughts didn't even occur to them. They didn't sin because it just wasn't even conceivable. Afterwards it was."

"But why not just have both? Why can't we have perfect communion with Him and the awareness
to make moral choices, all at the same time?"

"Well, you can either have the knowledge and ability to make moral choices - and face the consequences - or you can have direct contact with God, and with it immortality, and never stray because it never even enters your mind. You cannot have both. Once the option is open you are going to slip up. It's inevitable, and then communion with Him becomes impossible. Well, that is, at least not until you introduce some kind of reconciliation mechanism."

"You mean Christ."

"Yes."

"So, evil is basically the inevitable byproduct of our having free will combined with our ability to make moral choices."

"More or less."

Kurosawa then rubbed her eyes. She pushed her wheelchair away from her desk. "Well, I need to make my rounds. Sachi, why don't you go downstairs to the front desk and get your visitor badge? I'll contact Shibata to let him know that you are coming to the psych ward. Hayashi is in room S-110."

Sachi jumped up. "Thank you, ma'am!" She ran out.

Kurosawa sighed to herself again. She would go down to the cafeteria on her own.

This time she hoped to keep her meal down without throwing it up again.

---

5:30 p.m.

Asuna and Kazuto were talking in hushed tones at the kitchen nook when Suguha came home from school. She saw them and ambled up. "Hey guys."

Kazuto looked up. "Oh, hi Sugu."

Suguha sat down with them at the counter. "So, it looks like you two are conspiring."

Asuna was taken aback. "Conspiring? Whatever do you mean?"

Suguha sighed, "Honestly, Asuna, you're just as bad as Kazuto when it comes to trying to hide something. 'Fess up. What's going on?"

Asuna and Kazuto looked at each other, then Kazuto admitted, "Okay, you caught us. We're figuring out how to best approach Asuna's father to ask for the money to win the eBay auction to rescue Yui."

"Really?" Suguha pulled her stool in closer. "You should also talk to Mom too. She's the eBay queen."

Kazuto was surprised. "Huh?"

"Oh yeah, she buys stuff from eBay all the time. You didn't know that? She started doing it a couple years back. Ah, it was after you went asleep in SAO. Anyway, she has eBay auctions down to a science. You should really talk to her."
"Okay, good idea. Anyway, I am heading out with Asuna to her folk's place. I'll be gone until tomorrow."

Suguha grinned. "Bungalow again, right?"

"Uh, right..."

"Heh. Too bad for Asuna."

Kazuto was annoyed. "Sugu, hey, get your mind out of the gutter."

"Why should I? You've already bumped uglies, right? Well, okay only virtually..."

Kazuto was now getting angry with his sister. "Sugu, just stop it!" Asuna looked down in embarrassment.

Suguha felt chagrined at her brother's harsh rebuke. "Sorry."

Kazuto then decided to change the subject. He looked around. "So Mom is still out. Hey, where is Sachi? I haven't seen her for two days straight now."

Suguha replied, "You just missed her. She came back home about an hour ago while you two were still on your walkabout, then she left. She's at Hayashi's again."

"At Keita's place? Again?"

—

It would be a pattern that would repeat itself every day from then on.

Suguha later dryly pointed out that Sachi had retargeted her obsessive-compulsive tendency of administering to Kazuto's every need into obsessively taking care of her former high school computer club leader. Suguha herself did not disapprove. It was not just because Suguha had felt relieved that Sachi was no longer competing with her for Kazuto's brotherly affections, but rather it was because she knew that it was simply how Sachi was.

Meanwhile Asuna had felt her guilt-complex regarding Sachi deepen even more, thinking that Sachi's focus on Keita was just another sign of her return pushing Sachi out of Kazuto's life.

—

Kazuto left the house with Asuna. They headed to her family estate to meet with her father.

7:30 p.m.

Kazuto was just finishing up his prepared speech.

".. and that is why we really need your support to win that eBay auction."

Shouzou Yuuki sat blankly in his padded recliner in the main meeting room of the Yuuki mansion. His wife was standing next to him. She had a stern look on her face. The butler stood by with a carafe of wine, waiting to refill Shouzou's bottomless goblet again.

Kyouko said stiffly, "Honestly, I don't see the reason for this request. You want to rescue an, what is it, an 'AI'?"
"Yes. She is very important to us."

"This thing is a ‘she’? You make it sound like it is a person."

"Well, she is. To us."

"This is foolish frivolity."

The former CEO of RECT Ltd gave his daughter a happy grin. He pulled out his Visa Signature Black card. "Asuna, here, take this."

She took the credit card from him and bowed. "Thank you, father."

Kyouko was aghast. "Shouzou! This is totally irresponsible of you!"

"If this is what my darling princess wants, then she shall have it."

"You're drunk!"

"Maybe I am. Does it matter?"

"Oh.. oh!"

Kyouko whirled and faced Kazuto accusingly. "Don't you think you will get away with this!"

"Huh? Ma'am?"

"I know what you are doing, taking her, now taking her money! You are not going to marry my daughter if I have anything to say about it!"

Shouzou replied, "Now dear, please be nice to the boy. After all, he is a famous celebrity, you know. Should be, anyway.. savior of SAO, rescuer of 6,000, defeater of Sugou, saved those 300..."

At the mention of Sugou, Kyouko went into a fit of apoplexy. "Sugou was innocent! I told you that! It was that monster, Kayaba! It was all his fault! Sugou should be the one marrying Asuna, not this.. this" She pointed at Kazuto. "..this interloper!"

Shouzou stood up unsteadily. "Kyouko, that's quite enough."

His wife then left the room in a huff.

Asuna's father tried to apologize on behalf of his wife, but Asuna and Kazuto waived it off as unnecessary.

—

That night Asuna and Kazuto stood on the rear balcony of her bedroom. They looked out at the stars.

Asuna was holding him. "I'm sorry about my mother."

"It's all right."

"She is just worried about our family's future. Our family still owns the majority of RECT stock, after all. She just wants the family business to continue on somehow."

"I know."
"You're not really cut out to be a businessman, are you..."

Kazuto admitted he was not.

"Well, maybe you can take some economics classes at the University, and maybe some business
courses too. It might grow on you."

"Maybe..."

"Or maybe you can concentrate on the techy side? You know, invent new VR games, new IT tech?
Wouldn't that be fun?"

"Uh.. okay I think I'd like that better. But still, who would run the business side? You maybe?"

Asuna was taken aback. "Who, me? Uh, I dunno. I don't think I have the instincts to be a great
businesswoman. To run a big business you need someone who is really sharp..
"

"Yeah. Someone who knows how to take risks."

Asuna suddenly looked at Kazuto. He returned her gaze. He grabbed her. "A sharp
businesswoman..."

She completed his thought. ". someone who really knows business, who is fearless..
"

".. and is highly competent. A natural born leader..
"

".. someone with prim and crisp efficiency..
"

"But, wait, Kazuto, she's only what, 29?"

He grinned "A perfect age to start climbing up the corporate ladder, don't you think?"

"Oh, you are a genius!" She kissed him.

Asuna and Kazuto were huddled behind Midori in her basement office. She had five windows open
on her PC.

"Okay, my snipe program is running. I did time trials with a couple shill bids, and the eBay servers
are averaging 1.25 second turnaround right now. Right in the range."

**New competitor bid: 125.0 million yen.**

The seconds counted down to the end of the auction. 5..4..

**New competitor bid 135.8 million yen.**

3..2..

**New competitor bid: 150.0 million yen.**

"Now!" Midori's snipe algorithm fired at exactly 1.35 seconds.

**Snipe complete. Won bid: 150.5 million yen.**

Midori wiped her brow. "Wow, that was close."
Asuna and Kazuto ignored her. They were too busy jumping and yelling and hugging each other.

Sachi was sitting on the second step of the porch with Keita.

"Sora, you have got to be kidding me."

"No, really. That girlfriend of mine with the long hair was a total man stealer. She just wanted to get back at another girl who had eyes on me."

"And you fell for it?"

"Well, it wasn't like I had any experience..

"Keita, you were such a pushover."

"Yeah, heh, I was."

Mrs. Hayashi then opened the door to the side porch. "Lunch is ready!"

"I'm starving. Let's go!"

Midori was eating popcorn at the kitchen nook while watching a news video on her data tablet.

"Today on NHK News, we have a exclusive interview with Yuuko Yamashita and Shino Asada, the two winning sharpshooters in the new popular VR game Gun Gale Online, regarding their remarkable experience in capturing the notorious 'Death Gun', preventing what could have been a series of terrible real life murders..."

The image switched to a woman and a girl. The woman looked to be in her late twenties. She was standing tall and confident. In front of her was a girl who was much shorter and looked to be around age 16. She wore eyeglasses and was blinking her eyes rapidly in the harsh glare of the cameras. The interviewer was trying to talk to the smaller girl, who demurred to her taller shooting partner. The interviewer asked, "So, how did you two meet?"

Griselda explained, "Well, MINFO was informed about a conspiracy involving a former member of the notorious Laughing Coffin player-killer guild in SAO, a person who was planning to commit a series of murders using GGO as cover. We were tasked by the Japanese government to infiltrate the game to try to discover the identity of the culprit, which we did. It was a close call for my partner Asada here. You see, we caught the potential killer just in the nick of time before he could..."

Midori's smartphone rang. She turned the volume down on her tablet.

"Hello?"

"Hi Mom, it's me."

Midori recognized the voice of her older daughter. "Hello, dear."

"I'm going to be staying overnight at the Hayashi's place again. Is that okay?"

"Oh, that's quite all right, Sachi. Just remember to be responsible and use protection like I said."

The voice on the other end sounded exasperated.
"Mom! I'm sleeping in a separate room! And his mother is here!"

"Well, all right then. Just remember to keep calling each night so I know you're okay."

"Fine.. right. Love you, bye!"

Midori smiled as she put away her smartphone.

Minetaka came down the stairs. "Where is everyone tonight?"

Midori stood up and approached her husband. "Asuna and Kazuto are at her place. Sachi is staying overnight with Keita, and Suguha is out at her slumber party."

"So tonight it's just us again?"

"Yes."

"It's a pity."

"Mmm." He smelled her perfume. "Lilacs again. You know what that does to me."

"Yes.."

He picked her up and laid her out on the countertop.

She smiled underneath him.

".. yes I do."

Asuna gave him a sharp look. "Kazuto Kirigaya, what have you done?"

He looked at her sheepishly. "Sorry. We wanted it to be a surprise for you."

Asuna was tapping her foot. "What did you do.. tell me!"

Kazuto tried to explain. "Uh, well, you see, I got the idea from the Star Wars. You know, the one with that cute little rolling bot that followed Rey around everywhere on the desert planet? Well, it turns out you can actually buy a BB-8 online now. The expensive ones are amazingly sophisticated, with motorized mechanics that pretty much can do everything the BB-8 could do in the film, complete with a voice recognizer that reacts with simple pre-programmed responses. So we talked about it on the server, and I followed her instructions and bought one and repainted it blue and white like she wanted, then I ripped out the computational guts and rigged it the way she spec'ed it with all new innards: Four top-of-the-line dual Xeon processors on a GTX server class micro-ATX mobo, a ton of extra memory, a petabyte of mini-SSD mass storage, two NVMe ports, then I plugged the SSD into one of the ports and stood back. And then..."

Suddenly something pushed the unlatched bedroom door open. It rolled into the room, a little hyperactive blue-white ball that rolled back and forth in barely contained excitement.

Before Kazuto could make the proper introductions it bounced itself right into Asuna's arms. As she tried to hold it without dropping it the eye swivelled around and met Asuna's stunned gaze.

"Mama!"
Six months later

"Kazuto, what is it?" Asuna continued to look at the small red object in amazement.

"Kayaba gave it to me. He called it the 'World Seed'."

"Hmm."

One year later

Kazuto was taking his University entrance exam at the SAO Returnees school. He had finished the math part of the test and had gone back to recheck one of the extra-credit AP math problems, a particularly difficult one involving integration by parts over a partial differential equation. He wasn't able to answer that one. He tried again, writing out the factors one by one, when he stopped on the third one. He couldn't quite remember the formula. He lifted the stylus and looked at the PDE integration problem again, trying to remember if it was a cross product (X) or a dot product. Which one was it?

Suddenly an 'X' appeared on his test tablet.

He looked up at the ceiling and hissed, "I said I didn't want any help!"

The test proctor, who was sitting at the front desk, looked up in Kazuto's direction and frowned sharply at him. Kazuto lowered his head back down sheepishly towards his test tablet and pretended to look at it.

The test proctor went back to reading his book. Kazuto whispered again more softly, "Yui, knock it off!"

The 'X' disappeared.

Kazuto sighed and went on to the history part of the exam. A few minutes later he received an unprompted reminder on his test tablet of the full name of the Tokugawa shogun who had started the Edo period.**

"Yui, just stop it!"

17 years later

The beach party was in full swing. Sachi was sunning herself next to Yui while the man-children played volleyball with their younger brethren.

Asuna waddled up. Sachi opened her eyes under her sunglasses and said, "Hey, you're blocking my sun."

The older Kirigaya mother frowned. "Sachi, it's simply not fair. How in the world do you maintain that bikini bod at age 34 with nine children?"

"Asuna, you know very well that only three of them are mine."

The rest of the Hayashi clan were adopted or were foster kids that were rescued from Japan's warehoused orphanages. Sachi herself was a well known fixture in her Diet member's offices as a lobbyist for the reform of Japan's scandalous system for taking care of unwanted children.
Asuna grinned, "Yes, well, you'd rescue every child in Japan if you could."

Sachi noted Asuna's distended belly. "Soon, right?"

"Any day now. Another boy."

"My my, his grandma will certainly be happy."

"Which one?"

"Hmm, both, I suppose."

Meanwhile, Kazuto was busy chasing his second oldest son. "Come back here with the ball!"

Asuna turned and faced the other girl who was laying on a beach towel under the bright sun.

She shook her head again. "Yui, you do not need a suntan."

The five year old girl sat up. "Yes I do!"

"Yui, your skin is a carbon-fiber polymer stretched over a molybdenum frame. It does not tan."

"Well, I don't care! I'm tanning with Aunt Sachi!" She laid back down again.

Sachi patted her arm. "Good girl." She laid back down herself.

Suguha ran past chasing Shinici, who had caught the ball from Kazuto's son and was now playing keep-away from his wife.

A long limo drove up on the road behind the beach gathering and stopped. A 46 year old woman in a black business suit climbed out of the back seat along with her imposing looking bodyguard. She walked quickly towards Asuna.

Kazuto spotted Griselda walking up and joined them. "Hey, what's up?"

The CEO of RECT Ltd looked at both of them with concern. "Asuna, Kazuto, we have a big problem." She then turned and looked at Sachi. "It involves you too." Sachi stood up and joined them. Keita walked over as well.

Kazuto asked, "A problem?"

Yuuko Yuuki*** said, "Yes. It involves your oldest son, Riku, and Sachi and Sora's oldest daughter, Rin."

Asuna said anxiously, "Riku and Rin? What happened to them?"

"You know of RECT's newest VRMMO game, the one we contracted with Nintendo, Mario Ultra Adventure?"

Kazuto said, "Uh, yeah?"

"Something happened. Your two oldest are trapped inside."

Kazuto groaned, "Oh crap."

He turned. "Yui, what do you think? Hey, Yui. Hello?" He walked over to where she was still laying on her bath towel. She wasn't moving.
Griselda knelt next to Yui's body and pulled out a scanning instrument. "She's not inside there anymore." She stood up. "She must have."

Sachi did a facepalm. "Hoo boy, not again..."

Asuna clutched her husband's arm tightly. "You think they are all okay?"

Kazuto thought a moment, then he reassured her. "I'm sure they're all fine. After all, nobody died when we got stuck, so I don't think anything will happen to them now. Besides, Yui will make sure they are all safe."

Riku was clutching the goomba's head for dear life.

"Aaaahhhh!"

Rin was chasing after him on a flying turtle. "Riku you idiot, wait for me!"

And Yui laughed.

The End

A/N:

* See cloakers.org. Stingray cell towers are ubiquitous in Silicon Valley and in Washington D.C. where secrets are being stolen wholesale over the airwaves by foreign governments with seeming impunity. It is an open scandal why foreign powers are being allowed to run these phony cell towers where they eavesdrop on cell phone conversations by the millions. See the article Stingray Used Near White House [2018/06/05]. (You would think the FBI or some other federal agency would try to stop them. Dunno why they don't.)

** Ieyasu Tokugawa (1603)

*** In 2034, Yuuko Yamashita became the CEO of RECT Ltd. Several years earlier Takeshi had run off with a young woman that he had met during a business conference in Okinawa, and eventually Yuuko divorced the faithless jerk. As CEO, Yuuko Yamashita began to work closely with Asuna's older brother, Kouichirou Yuuki, in the day-to-day operations of the company. Over the years Yuuko and Kouichirou's close working relationship inevitably blossomed into something more, and eventually they were married. Kyouko had of course idolized Griselda as a vastly superior replacement for Sugou and was quite happy with the end result. (Unlike Sugou, Japan's arcane business ownership laws do not require adoption on the female side.) Griselda's real name is now Yuuko Yuuki. Her bodyguard is of course Shibata.

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