When eleven-year-old Damian Wayne manages to get his hands on an elusive copy of the Sword Art Online game just hours before its official launch, Batman is soon facing overwhelming odds to save his young son from Akihiko Kayaba’s deadly trap where a character’s death becomes that player’s tragic reality…
The Mysterious Package Arrives!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Damian Wayne vs. Sword Art Online
Chapter One
The Mysterious Package Arrives

Seconds after an awestruck Mike Wachowski was buzzed past its ominous iron gates, the portly courier leaned forward on his van’s worn dashboard, casting his mesmerized gaze upwards towards the expansive property which was now spread out like a hidden kingdom before him…

Stately Wayne Manor.

The delivery driver quietly whistled in amazement, secretly wondering if he were lucky enough to win the state lottery, would he still be able to afford a place like this? It seemed like something out of a dark fairy tale, a relic of Gotham royalty from a bygone era far removed from his own world…

Parking his delivery van in the visitor’s stall and then fixing his shirt, the stout courier gathered up the rush package and made his way along the estate’s manicured promenade towards its curving stone stairways. As he climbed the twisting stairs leading up to Wayne Manor’s imposing entrance, Mike Wachowski noticed security cameras following his every move.

Cresting the stairwell, Mike soon felt the chill of the late autumn air, whispering the cold promise of winter. Halloween had been a week ago and now, glancing up at the creepy stone gargoyles, the courier was thankful it was daylight. He wasn’t the superstitious type, but he could see how this place could get pretty spooky at night, even with all those celebrity charity parties Bruce Wayne was known for.

The lifestyles of the rich and infamous…

Making his way towards the front entrance, the delivery man suddenly recalled an item on the news last year about Bruce Wayne finding a long-lost son he’d apparently had with some foreign woman. A lucky stiff like Wayne was bound to have a few illegitimate kids wandering around. Heck, he probably even had an entire accounting department dedicated to settling his domestic affairs just to keep the little rugrats and their mothers out of the press…

When the courier swung his thick finger upwards towards the ornate doorbell button, he instinctively stepped backwards as one of the large oak doors swung open. The delivery man actually had to tilt his head down to see a thin, dark-haired kid in the grand entryway. The boy was a full foot shorter than Mike Wachowski and perhaps a third of his weight, but his angry-looking expression still managed to seem somehow menacing as he glared intensely upwards at the courier.

“It’s about time.”

“… Traffic.”

“It’s Sunday.”

“So it is… Anyways, I have a package here for Mr. Damian Wayne… Is your mother or father home?”

“My mother doesn’t live here and my father is currently out of the country on business… I’m Damian Wayne, I’ll take that.”
As the boy quickly took hold of the package, the stunned courier still maintained his grip, refusing to let go, even though the kid was now pulling with everything he had. Like gunfighters at high noon, the two of them silently stared at one another, locked in a stalemate of strength and will until the larger man broke the tense silence.

“I need a signature for this package… An adult signature.”

“Why? This is my package. I ordered it. It’s for me. Your job is simply to deliver it… So let go.”

“As soon as an adult signs for it, it’s all yours… Could you get one please?”

The kid wasn’t backing down.

The heavily built courier was now being forced to hold tightly onto the package, struggling to maintain his poise and his grip as he stared down at the diminutive Damian Wayne standing directly opposite him, the kid’s own small hands continually tugging at the hotly contested box as though it were some strange tug of war.

And although Mike would have loved to let the little brat take the package and just leave, the simple fact of the matter was that someone so young couldn’t sign for this type of delivery, no matter how much they wanted to complain about it.

But that didn’t stop Damian Wayne.

“Why aren’t you letting me take my package? Surely you can’t be blind as well as stupid?... If you look closely, you’ll see that’s my name on this box which means it’s for me... I’m also the one who paid a lot of money for your overrated company to deliver this shipment… To me… By noon… TODAY!!!… So, in light of all these recent revelations, what possible reason could you possibly have to tell me that I’m still unable to receive my own delivery?!”

“Look kid, I’m real sorry… But as you can plainly see on this purple sticker here, it says Adult Signature Required. And since this is an International Shipment, I need someone twenty-one years or older to sign for it, or else I could be breaking the law… And you ain’t twenty-one, son… You may not like ‘em but those are the rules… Otherwise I gotta come back later… You’re sure there’s no adult home?... Maybe a babysitter?”

“Tt! I have never required the services of a babysitter, you lack-witted oaf! Do you have any idea of who I am or what I could do to you?...”

As the arriving Richard Grayson ascended the familiar stone stairway towards the front entryway of Wayne Manor and overheard Damian’s threats to the large delivery driver, his pace quickened. When the athletic young man crested the stairs and caught sight of the besieged courier who had finally reclaimed his package and was now preparing to leave, he also noticed that Bruce’s biological son, a pint-sized terror named Damian Wayne, had reached out with his hands to take hold of the large man from behind.

Dick decided he’d better intervene before assault charges were laid.

“Good morning. Can I help you with something?”

As Damian’s fingers suddenly froze on the verge of gripping the fabric of the driver’s collar, each of them turned to the sound of Richard Grayson’s charismatic voice as he emerged like a smiling politician on their doorstep only days before an election.

Damian lowered his hands and pursued a different tact.

As the boy quickly took hold of the package, the stunned courier still maintained his grip, refusing to let go, even though the kid was now pulling with everything he had. Like gunfighters at high noon, the two of them silently stared at one another, locked in a stalemate of strength and will until the larger man broke the tense silence.

“I need a signature for this package… An adult signature.”

“Why? This is my package. I ordered it. It’s for me. Your job is simply to deliver it… So let go.”

“As soon as an adult signs for it, it’s all yours… Could you get one please?”

The kid wasn’t backing down.

The heavily built courier was now being forced to hold tightly onto the package, struggling to maintain his poise and his grip as he stared down at the diminutive Damian Wayne standing directly opposite him, the kid’s own small hands continually tugging at the hotly contested box as though it were some strange tug of war.

And although Mike would have loved to let the little brat take the package and just leave, the simple fact of the matter was that someone so young couldn’t sign for this type of delivery, no matter how much they wanted to complain about it.

But that didn’t stop Damian Wayne.

“Why aren’t you letting me take my package? Surely you can’t be blind as well as stupid?... If you look closely, you’ll see that’s my name on this box which means it’s for me... I’m also the one who paid a lot of money for your overrated company to deliver this shipment… To me… By noon… TODAY!!!… So, in light of all these recent revelations, what possible reason could you possibly have to tell me that I’m still unable to receive my own delivery?!”

“Look kid, I’m real sorry… But as you can plainly see on this purple sticker here, it says Adult Signature Required. And since this is an International Shipment, I need someone twenty-one years or older to sign for it, or else I could be breaking the law… And you ain’t twenty-one, son… You may not like ‘em but those are the rules… Otherwise I gotta come back later… You’re sure there’s no adult home?... Maybe a babysitter?”

“Tt! I have never required the services of a babysitter, you lack-witted oaf! Do you have any idea of who I am or what I could do to you?...”

As the arriving Richard Grayson ascended the familiar stone stairway towards the front entryway of Wayne Manor and overheard Damian’s threats to the large delivery driver, his pace quickened. When the athletic young man crested the stairs and caught sight of the besieged courier who had finally reclaimed his package and was now preparing to leave, he also noticed that Bruce’s biological son, a pint-sized terror named Damian Wayne, had reached out with his hands to take hold of the large man from behind.

Dick decided he’d better intervene before assault charges were laid.

“Good morning. Can I help you with something?”

As Damian’s fingers suddenly froze on the verge of gripping the fabric of the driver’s collar, each of them turned to the sound of Richard Grayson’s charismatic voice as he emerged like a smiling politician on their doorstep only days before an election.

Damian lowered his hands and pursued a different tact.
“Ah, Grayson… Perhaps you can explain to this imbecile who I am.”

Dick shot one of his patented Grayson nods at the distressed courier in an attempt to diffuse yet another of the tense confrontations which Bruce’s newly discovered son always seemed to place himself in…

Like an errant storm cell set loose upon a sea of unsuspecting humanity.

“Why don’t I just sign for your package, Damian?”

With a relieved sigh (and a suspicious backwards glance at Damian), Mike Wachowski turned to the recently arrived Richard Grayson and responded to his proposed solution with a tight smile, eager to wash his hands of this package and its hostile recipient.

“Sure… But I’ll need to see some ID, buddy… Secure delivery… Say, do you live here in this mansion?”

As Richard pulled out his driver’s license so that the courier could read it, he watched Damian making obscene facial gestures behind the man’s back and shot him a quick glance.

“Grew up here. I’m actually this kid’s step-brother… I admit, he can be a bit of a handful at times.”

“You don’t say.”

As Dick signed for Damian’s shipment, the original Boy Wonder noticed that the shipping address was from a company named Argus Corporation located in Japan. The mystery package was also quite large and sent priority rush, containing some sort of electronic device…

This was getting interesting.

Once the courier had left, Richard continued to examine the mysterious shipment (much to Damian’s chagrin) while the two step-brothers strolled through the Manor’s extensive foyer. As Damian’s name was the only one listed as a recipient, Dick was becoming increasingly curious as to just what could be inside this box from halfway around the world.

“I’ll take that now, Grayson.”

“Sorry, junior. Not until I know what’s in it… Let me guess… Laser cannon?”

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business. And why are you even here? Looking for another loan from father, I expect…”

“That’s my salary actually. He pays me out of your inheritance… No, I’m here because Bruce called me yesterday and personally asked me to check in on you. And it’s probably a good thing he did… Exactly what were you planning on doing to that driver?”

“I was simply about to educate him on a basic tenet of customer relations… Namely that the customer is always right and may know a choke hold or two.”

“Uh-huh… By the way, where’s Alfred?. You didn’t do anything to him, did you?”

“Tt… In the greenhouse, I expect… And if you must know, this package contains state-of-the-art NerveGear equipment as well as an incredibly limited copy of Sword Art Online… So now that your unsolicited curiosity has been satisfied… Get out.”

As the pair proceeded into the extensive kitchen, Richard ignored Damian’s petulant demands and
carefully placed the boy’s package down on Alfred’s preparation table. Then, like a man on a mission, Dick made his way straight to the large refrigerator where he eagerly scanned the ice box’s well-stocked contents for leftovers.

As the muscular Richard happily pulled out an armful of ingredients, he managed to catch Damian’s disapproving glare before sitting himself down in front of a veritable smorgasbord of Alfred’s culinary delights. The little tyke really didn’t know how good he had it here...

Dick hated to admit it, but as much as he missed Bruce, there were days when he thought he might have missed Alfred’s cooking even more. Life as a bachelor in Blüdhaven wasn’t all it was cracked up to be.

“Sword Art Online? Isn’t that the new Virtual Reality game that’s all the rage in Japan? I caught something about it on the news last week, people were lining up for blocks… I never took you for the gaming type.”

The familiar arrogance crept into Damian’s blue eyes as though he were poised to deliver yet another lecture as Dick realized he’d made the conversational gaffe of once again assuming that he was talking to a normal person…

“As usual Grayson, your inability to foresee anything beyond your next meal continues to astound even me… The strain on my poor father’s back must have been absolutely crippling from all those years of having to carry you around as a so-called partner.”

As Richard simply shrugged off Damian’s insult about his days as Robin the Boy Wonder, he instead put the finishing touches on his triple-decker turkey-and-beef sandwich, making an obvious production of applying just the right amount of salt and pepper to his culinary masterpiece in order to annoy Damian. While it was true that Dick had given Batman his fair share of grief over the years, it was nothing compared to the ulcer-inducing misery that this little homicidal maniac had put Bruce through over the course of only the last year alone.

He couldn’t even imagine what the first ten years of Damian’s life had been like…

Before Dick had even finished middle school, the child who would become Damian Wayne had been the unexpected result of a one-time tryst between the beautiful daughter of Ra’s al Ghul and the Batman in some far off Arabian desert. The unexpected child of their passionate one-night affair had been raised in secrecy by his mother, Talia al Ghul, as the League of Shadow’s rightful heir.

For ten years, Damian’s existence had been kept secret from Bruce until the day when Talia had dropped off the junior assassin like a ticking time bomb on Bruce’s lap, informing the Batman that Damian needed to train under his father now. Days later, Bruce had managed to discover that the centuries-old Ra’s al Ghul was once again dead, but that this time Talia had instead focused on rebuilding a new League of Shadows as opposed to resurrecting her nihilistic father and enabling his mad dreams of global genocide.

Dick figured that if Talia al Ghul had intended Damian as nothing more than a distraction to keep Batman out of her private affairs, it had worked like a charm. While the industrious Bruce Wayne may have created scenarios for countless emergencies, suddenly becoming the father of a ten-year-old assassin hadn’t been one of them. Dick tensed as he recalled the chaotic upheaval of violence and destruction their lives had become shortly after Damian’s unannounced arrival...

‘Unholy Terror’ seemed an apt description.

The thought suddenly struck him as he wondered (jokingly) if Bruce had arranged this business trip
to Japan in order to preserve his own fleeting sanity and perhaps get away from Damian for a few days.

But surely he wouldn’t do that to poor Alfred…

Would he?

“I think your father and I made a pretty good team, actually… But speaking of strain, did you ever notice how Bruce only started developing grey hair over this past year?… As I recall, it seemed to be right around the time when you first showed up on his doorstep.”

Damian grinned.

“Heh… I admit, my transition to the ‘Boy Wonder’ has proven difficult for both myself and father… I wasn’t trained to be so… gentle… Yet, in true heroic fashion, I have come to embrace my father’s rather idealistic philosophy of live and let live.”

“You mean by like not killing people?”

“Of course… Even though I was trained as an assassin since the age of four, I now regard the taking of another life as an undesirable final option as opposed to a necessary means to an end.”

“So you’ve realized we’re in the business of saving lives instead of ending them?”

“Don’t be so obtuse, Grayson… I’ve researched your academic records and you’re not nearly as dense as you pretend to be… My grandfather could make an effective argument that preserving human life at any cost is even more dangerous than allowing our inherent violence to balance humanity’s unmitigated population growth… Yet my father has shown me the power of hope for our common future… I believe we both owe him an enormous debt of gratitude for that alone.”

“We do and trust me, I’m relieved you’re following in Bruce’s footsteps and not your mother's side of the family… So what’s the plan with this NerveGear?”

“To play it of course.”

Dick swallowed another bite of his triple-decker sandwich before deciding to subject himself to yet another round of Damian’s barbed insults.

“Alright, I know I’m asking for this… But explain to me how that doesn’t make you a gamer?”

Damian drew a long tedious sigh while Dick took a drink of milk.

“Because unlike you, I am a visionary. Have you never truly considered the implications of a full-dive Virtual Reality system upon our society, Grayson? This technology will completely revolutionize our education system, the way we do business, and the way we live. We are on the verge of a major paradigm shift which I fully intend for Wayne Industries to be a part of…

“The ability for a piece of equipment to intercept its user’s thoughts and then instantly translate them into a virtual avatar interacting with its landscape and other people has limitless possibilities. We can recreate ourselves as anything we’d like, anywhere we’d like. And these new worlds will be fully tactile, so incredibly real to our senses that it will be difficult not to believe we’re actually there…

“Just think, a shared reality of sight, sound, smell, taste and feel created and then streamed to our own minds where we can interact with other connected users. Why read about history when we can experience it firsthand? We could march with Alexander’s army across the Anatolian Plateau or
debate in the Athenian Senate during the birth of democracy…

“Our minds can develop the muscle memory for techniques which our hands have never experienced. Already language barriers can be overcome as computers instantly translate our thoughts into foreign languages in this new shared environment. This world’s greatest minds and leaders can all be joined together and openly communicate about creating solutions for our most pressing challenges…

“So tell me, Grayson… Would that make them ‘gamers’ as well?”

Dick neatly wiped the corner of his mouth with a paper napkin.

“And what does Bruce have to say about all of this?”

“As the CEO of Wayne Industries, he’s personally investigating this technology… Due to his advanced years, I expect he moves with more caution than is actually necessary… Old people seem to be that way.”

“It’s called experience… Is that why he’s off to Japan? To check out this NerveGear technology?”

Damian shook his head in exasperation.

“Seriously Grayson, there are days when I expect that my father dressed you in red, yellow and green just so that you could act as nothing more than a human target… In fact, he’s probably just as surprised as I am that you’ve survived this long on nothing more than good looks, quick reflexes and dumb luck…

“Yes, he’s flying to Japan to discuss this ground-breaking technology with the Argus Corporation executives… The NerveGear has a number of military training applications so that’s how he’s presented it to our shareholders… And in the wrong hands it *could* be extremely dangerous.”

Dick managed to wash down the rest of his sandwich with the remaining milk before he smiled slyly at Damian.

“And that’s why you arranged for this package’s delivery on a Sunday… Because you knew he wouldn’t be around, right?… Which means that Bruce has no idea you even have it.”

He noticed the tell-tale sign of Damian’s cheeks flushing ever so slightly… *Gotcha!*

“An oversight… It was supposed to arrive late last week… But rest assured, my customs broker has been fired due to her mishandling of this shipment.”

“You don’t have a customs broker or the authority to fire anyone… And thank God for that… But besides the fact you went around Bruce’s back to obtain this technology, is it even safe?… Personally I’m even surprised you were able to import something like this into the country.”

Damian quickly regained his smug composure.

“Once again you underestimate my capabilities, Grayson… I understand that no one ever expected a former circus performer to take an active role in father’s business… But the irrefutable fact remains that if Wayne Industries is to survive in this new virtual millennium, we need a well-funded, robust division of our company devoted to this revolutionary technology… A division which I intend to personally head in order to lessen the burden on poor Father.”

“You’re eleven-years-old.”
“And also the biological heir of Bruce Wayne as well as pre-eminently qualified... But don’t worry, I’m sure I could offer you a position as a mail clerk. After all, you’ve displayed a considerable talent for receiving parcels... if not much else.”

“Very funny... But don’t you think you should actually discuss this whole NerveGear thing with Bruce before you actually plug your brain into it?... At least be responsible enough to wait until he’s back.”

Damian paused for a moment.

“The Sword Art Online servers go online at 13:00 Japanese Standard Time today... With the thirteen hour time zone difference, that means the game will start at two o’clock this morning here in Gotham... I need to be online at that time.”

“Which means that you’ll have more than enough time to call him before then.”

“Fine...”

“Alright, but I would still prefer if you actually waited for Bruce to get back... A few days won’t make a difference.”

“If that’s what you truly believe, then it’s obvious that my time is much more valuable than yours... When Father returns, I have every intention of joining him on patrol... I would go on my own of course, but I gave him my word that I would wait for his return... As such, these three nights are all that I require to gather sufficient first-hand knowledge of this new technology...

“Now, if you’ll excuse me Grayson, I need to set this equipment up in my room before my afternoon workout... And don’t forget to clean up after yourself, you’ve left your crumbs all over Alfred’s table.”

An annoyed Dick watched as Damian retrieved his recently-delivered package from the table and then stomped off towards the stairs without so much as another word.

“Sure, I’ve got to get back to Blüdhaven anyways... CALL HIM!!!”

“... Tt.”

There were times when he really hated that kid.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading Chapter One!

This is an Alternative Universe story rated Teen and up which takes place in the near future... Sunday November 06, 2022 to be exact. Since the events of Sword Art Online (SAO) have a definitive timeline, I’ll be following that narrative’s events for awhile...

At least until Damian fouls it all up.

To fans who may be unfamiliar with Sword Art Online, don’t worry. I’m pretty much rewriting the entire arc so you’ll be able to easily follow along. For now, all you need to know is that it’s a fantasy-based massive multiplayer online role playing game where
players wear a futuristic helmet called NerveGear which allows them to ‘exist’ in an imaginary, virtual world by translating their mental commands into action.

Once we ‘dive’ into the Sword Art Online portion of the FanFic, I’ll be introducing a few new original characters. By allowing Damian to form his own party with mainly original characters, it allows the original SAO story (featuring Kirito) to remain relatively unscathed until the worlds of Batman and Sword Art Online are set on a collision course with young Damian caught in the middle.

For this FanFic, we’ll keep it simple: Damian Wayne is the lovechild of Talia al Ghul and Bruce Wayne. He’s also the newest Robin. Bruce has been the Batman for around twenty years. Richard ‘Dick’ Grayson was the original Robin but has since moved out of Wayne Manor to set up in nearby Blüdhaven as its dark defender; Nightwing.

After being shot in the spine by the Joker, the former Batgirl Barbara Gordon has been in a wheelchair for the past five years, utilizing state-of-the-art surveillance and network technology to aid Batman in his continual fight against the forces of evil. As her alter-ego Oracle, she’s set up her secret headquarters in the Gotham Clock Tower to provide field support for Batman and his team.

And since we’re keeping it simple, none of these characters have ever died or have been resurrected in this story. Richard Grayson is Bruce Wayne’s adopted son while Damian Wayne is his biological son. Bruce is 44-years-old, Damian is 11, Richard Grayson is 24 and Barbara Gordon is 25.

Damian Wayne’s struggle to survive in the virtual world of Sword Art Online (where a character’s death becomes reality) and Batman’s desperate struggle to save both his son and the thousands of other players trapped in that deadly game is the story’s focus. It’s a tale of two worlds separating father and son where they must fight their own battles to get back to one another.

However, like all good Batman tales, there will be a mystery to be solved. Even those of you who are well-versed in Sword Art Online are in for a HUGE shock when Bruce, Dick and Barbara finally begin to unravel the clues and then tie it all back to their own world.

I personally guarantee you won’t see this twist coming...

If you have any questions, I’ll be happy to answer them in the comments. I love comments, critiques and reviews. They are the lifeblood of the FanFic author. Let your voice be heard and help me make this a better story.

Also, I love to hide little Easter eggs in my stories, especially when I’m naming minor characters like Mike Wachowski… Any guesses where that name is from?... If you guessed ‘Mike Wazowski’ (the one-eyed green guy) from Pixar’s “Monsters, Inc.”… Great job!

And finally, I promise to keep this non-cannon work of fiction suitable for Teens and up. If you’re comfortable reading the current Batman comics or reading/watching Sword Art Online, you’ll have no concerns reading this...

**In Our Next Chapter:** Bruce Wayne arrives in Tokyo only to later discover some very disturbing news… Posting on Friday October 30th!
Japan

Chapter Summary

Bruce lands in Japan, meets an attractive woman, and then learns some very distressing news.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Ukyou Oshiro

Chapter Two

Japan

“Thanks again for the exceptionally smooth flight, Captain Langley. Appreciated as always… See you in three days.”

“Thank you, Mr. Wayne... And welcome to Japan, Sir.”
After personally thanking the Captain and the crew of his private jet, an exhausted Bruce Wayne gathered up his travel bag and set foot onto the Tokyo tarmac at 12:45 PM local time. With the thirteen hour time difference and the eleven hour flight, Bruce always felt like he’d lost a day whenever he visited Japan, leaving Gotham at just after lunch hour the previous day.

At least the weather here was warmer than Gotham.

As he yawned, Bruce had to admit that a portion of the previous eleven hours spent flying aboard his own private luxury jet probably would have been better spent sleeping. But the CEO of Wayne Industries wanted to research the Argus Corporation and their revolutionary technology in more detail before he finally met with them tomorrow morning in person.

Besides, he could rest tonight…

Bruce had been particularly intrigued with Sword Art Online’s lead designer; Akihiko Kayaba. He was the genius behind Argus’s development of the NerveGear technology and also the lead designer on Sword Art Online. The incredible technological breakthroughs that Argus had made under Kayaba’s guidance seemed almost surreal, their product being brought to market within three years as though there had been an unseen presence aiding them from behind the scenes…

Or it could be that a lifetime as Batman had simply made Bruce Wayne a little paranoid and the twenty-eight-year-old Akihiko Kayaba was simply a genius on a whole other level. Perhaps…

As he continued towards the airport terminal, Bruce’s worried thoughts soon drifted back to Damian, the son he never even knew he had until last year. It was the first time he’d ever left the boy alone since his unexpected arrival in Gotham, a difficult decision, but Bruce needed to prove to the boy that he was willing to trust him.

Surely Damian had earned that much.

Besides, there was always Alfred… Alfred would call if there was a problem... Provided the little terror didn’t give the old man a coronary first… Or simply tie-and-gag him… Or…

Instinctively clutching his cell phone, Bruce managed to suppress the urge to get back on his Gulfstream G650 and immediately fly it back to Gotham…. No, it would be alright… He was simply overreacting as a concerned father… Who’s eleven-year-old happened to be an exceptionally skilled assassin… But the boy had promised him he would stay out of trouble… And at the risk of getting disinherited, Damian had also sworn under oath that he wouldn’t go on patrol or engage in any other dangerous activities while Bruce was away.

In fact, he’d even gone so far as to promise to concentrate on his studies. And it did feel as though their relationship had turned a corner as of late. Damian was still as brooding and intense as ever, but he had seemed to fully accepted Batman’s methods and beliefs.

As such, Bruce resigned himself to the fact that he was now obliged to go through with his part of the bargain… Which meant looking at a possible merger between the Argus Corporation and the Wayne Industries Advanced Control Division. To his surprise, most of the shareholders had actually been intrigued with the potential merger when Bruce had brought it forward during their last board meeting, resulting in a quick mandate to visit Japan.

It might become an exceptionally lucrative deal, but Bruce’s interest went beyond just the commercial aspects of this new technology. There were other considerations as well…

In the hands of a madman like Dr. Jonathan Crane, the NerveGear equipment could be used to create
the largest and most realistic nightmare of all time. And Bruce shivered to imagine what an accomplished hacker like Edward Nigma could do if he ever gained access to someone’s brain through this innovative technology...

NerveGear was science fiction made reality. The CEO managed a grin as he contemplated the effect that it would have on the business world, realizing that its widespread acceptance would eliminate the need for business flights such as this. Both himself and the Argus executives could simply negotiate a deal on a virtual beach somewhere in a fraction of the time, enjoying a warm and tropical climate by using NerveGear helmets…

With these rapid advances in technology, Bruce couldn’t help but wonder if a virtual vacation to the Caribbean would soon replace the real thing. Travel and tourism may become a thing of the past if people could just pop on headgear and experience any desired destination within the comfort of their own mind. Truly, the potential for this patented technology was astounding.

If it came to fruition, Argus was sitting on top of its own personal gold mine…

It would be like having the exploration rights to an entire new world.

Perhaps he was just getting old, but he secretly hoped it was overblown. There was still something about actually meeting a person and interacting with them, to be able to recognize all their subtle body language and expressions. The same thing could be said about visiting a foreign locale; the sights, the sounds, the atmosphere. Could a virtual experience truly replace that?

Or was his own perception of the real world nothing more than a myriad of sensory input travelling through countless neurons which this technology actually could replace? Could we willingly immerse our conscious existence into a dream? Perhaps Damian had been right, the next frontier may indeed be human imagination.

As the contemplative Bruce Wayne suddenly spied a curvaceous young Japanese lady standing just inside the private entryway holding an Argus plaque bearing his name, he was forced to admit that the sensory input of the real world certainly had its advantages as well…

She was an absolute knockout. Long dark hair, soulful eyes and the kind of curves that made a man’s attention drift.

“Ah, Mr. Wayne… Right on time! Welcome to Japan! My name is Ukyou Oshiro. I have been sent by Argus to act as your guide for the day.”

Thanks to his many years of Martial Arts training, Bruce was just as comfortable bowing as he was shaking hands. Which was fortunate, because when dealing with a young lady as attractive as Ukyou, it was probably safer that way.

“Your English is very good, Oshiro-san. I hope you didn’t have to wait long.”

“Not at all… May I take your bag, Wayne-san?”

While Bruce had already arranged for the rest of his luggage to be delivered directly to his hotel suite, he always preferred to keep his Batman costume in a briefcase close at hand… just in case.

“Thank you, but I’m fine… And please, call me Bruce.”

“Alright… Bruce. Did I pronounce it correctly?”

“Exceptionally.”
“Then you must call me Ukyou... Now, if you would please follow me, I have a driver waiting to take you to your hotel and then I hope to show you the sights of my fair city afterwards.”

“If those sights include lunch, then you’re on. Argus must place a good deal of faith in you, Ukyou.”

“And I hope to be worthy of that trust... I must humbly apologize however... Normally a more senior member of our organization would be here to greet such an eminent man of your esteemed reputation, Bruce... But I’m afraid this is a very busy time for us... The Sword Art Online servers go online in mere moments and all operational employees are needed to ensure a smooth launch... As the Senior Public Relations Officer however, I am expendable in this regard.”

"Their loss is my gain... Shall we?"

Later, as Bruce Wayne and Ukyou Oshiro made their way through the crowded streets of Tokyo in the luxurious backseat of a beautifully appointed Rolls Royce towards the Imperial Hotel, Bruce soon realized that his wandering eyes weren’t always on the busy streets outside his window. Ukyou’s skirt was revealing just the right amount of well-toned thigh to distract him from the wonders of the ultra-urban landscape currently passing by them.

Drumming his fingers on the plush leather upholstery, the CEO silently checked himself, reasoning that his handler couldn’t have been much older than Richard and that he should be worried about Damian instead of sneaking glances at her shapely legs like some hormonal teenager...

“You seem to be nervous, Bruce.”

“Sorry, I was just thinking about my son back in Gotham.”

“Oh? I didn’t realize you were married.”

“I’m not... His mother and I were never meant to be... Two different worlds I’m afraid.”

“Forgive me, I did not mean to pry into your personal life... If it would set your mind at ease, perhaps you’d like to call him?”

“I’d love to Ukyou, but it’s after two o’clock in the morning back in Gotham. I would like to think - for his sake at least - that he’s asleep. Still, if there was a problem, my butler would have phoned.”

“Ah, no need to worry then... Perhaps after lunch you might like to partake in some of the restaurant’s exceptional sake in order to help ease your mind. It comes highly recommended and I will gladly pour for you... After all, we do have the whole day to ourselves.”

Although it was a game he never allowed himself to play, Bruce knew its rules well. The attractive woman beside him had been edging closer over the past five minutes and now the suggestion of drinks after lunch meant that she was willing to indulge in much more than a simple professional courtesy.

“As much as I’d enjoy the company, I’d better not... I don’t recall Japanese women being so forward... It’s actually a nice change.”

His guide smiled sweetly.

“And I don’t recall American businessmen being so shy, Mr. Wayne... But I do appreciate your candour... My superiors had hoped that I might be able to persuade you to hint at your company’s aspirations regarding our technology over a few drinks... And I admit, I may have had my own aspirations as well... Still, I’m quite confident that after today, the official launch will convince you
what an enviable position that Wayne Industries….”

A musical ring-tone suddenly sounded from Ukyou’s cell phone as she retrieved the slender device from her hand bag and peered at the caller ID. Bowing deeply, she apologized.

“I’m sorry, I have to answer this... Work.”

His Japanese was rusty, but Bruce gathered enough of the conversation to ascertain that some issue had occurred with the launch of Sword Art Online that required Ukyou’s immediate attention. Although she’d checked herself quickly, something had been said on the other end which deeply upset her.

As she ended the call, Ukyou bowed once again.

“I apologize Bruce, but a situation has arisen which requires my expertise at the office. I’m afraid I will need to take a cab back to Argus once we reach the Imperial Hotel… Please take my business card and call me at anytime should you have any concerns.”

“Is everything alright?”

“An unfortunate coincidence which requires my direct involvement, that’s all.”

Even though she was still trying hard to conceal it, whatever conversation had just transpired had shaken her. Something unexpected must have happened with the game’s launch...

“Then take the limo, Ukyou. I won’t need it. I’ll order room service at the hotel and finish up some work I’ve been meaning to get to. Call me after you’ve sorted out your emergency and maybe we can make dinner reservations.”

“You are too kind. I promise I’ll make this up to you and treat you to whatever your heart desires. My country possesses many delicacies which may not be available in yours.”

“It’s a date then.”

Once Bruce had been dropped off at the most prestigious hotel in Tokyo and settled himself into its penthouse suite, he checked his phone messages and then set about answering the hundreds of emails from Wayne Industries which required his attention. By the end of it, he was shocked to see it was nearly five o’clock. Taking a deep breath, the weary executive paused to raise his strained eyes from the computer screen to watch the sun setting across Tokyo’s glorious skyline beyond his extensive balcony windows.

The thought occurred to him that it would have been nice to watch this amazing sunset with someone like Ukyou…

Now that work was out of the way, Bruce opened his browser to search for the possible reason behind his guide’s sudden departure from hours before. While the young woman had done her best to conceal her anxiety, it was obvious that something had happened with the launch, something which had required a Senior Public Relations Officer…

And it didn’t take him long to figure out what it was.

Already news agencies from around the world were teeming with reports of multiple player deaths linked to Sword Art Online. Of the ten thousand individuals who had managed to obtain a copy of the first release of the game last week, nearly two hundred of them had perished during the first four hours of going online when their friends or family had forcibly removed the NerveGear equipment
from their heads in an attempt to rouse them...

Local government authorities were continuously issuing alerts for people not to interfere with or interrupt the remaining players until it was deemed safe to do so and the cause of the malfunction was discovered. Under no circumstances was the helmet to be removed or the system shut down. A task force was being organized to assist individuals with medical treatment.

Bruce soon found an earlier press release of the attractive (and obviously stressed) Ukyou Oshiro assuring the public that Argus Corporation was working diligently to solve this unforeseen issue and prevent any further loss of life. For now she implored people not to disrupt the players until Argus engineers had discovered the equipment’s unknown defect.

Bruce cast his troubled gaze to the ceiling as he realized that the earlier call from hours ago must have been regarding the first death associated with the NerveGear and Sword Art Online. No wonder Ukyou had seemed so upset in the car.

And since that time, the crisis had only ballooned into a tragedy of epic proportions...

Bruce’s subsequent call to Ukyou went straight to her voicemail.

He implicitly understood that any meeting with the Argus executives regarding the potential merger of his company’s Advanced Control Division and Argus would be postponed indefinitely. There was no chance that a company that small would be able to weather a scandal of this magnitude. Bruce expected that criminal charges and lawsuits would soon be brought forward against them...

His own private cell phone rang with Dick’s caller ID popping up.

“Dick, what’s wrong?”

A surprised chuckle on the other end.

“Nothing’s wrong. Just on my way home from another quiet Blüdhaven night when I remembered something from earlier... By the way, how’s Japan?”

“Depressing. It looks like my meetings will be cancelled due to a disastrous product launch. I should be home by tonight unless the situation here deteriorates further and I’m needed to investigate.”

“Heh, I’m sure Damian will be sorry to hear that... By the way, did he call you?”

“No, was there a problem?”

“Not exactly... I checked in on him yesterday just like you had asked... That little bugger had actually managed to smuggle in a Sword Art Online game and the NerveGear equipment from the same company you’re negotiating with... He said he wanted to conduct his own research last night... I’d just asked him to call you about it before he did, that’s all.”

“...”

“Bruce, are you still there?”

Bruce Wayne suddenly felt the blood drain from his entire body, leaving in its wake an icy numbness as though a frozen river were flowing through his veins, until even his fingers lacked the strength to continue holding the cell phone as it slowly tumbled to the floor... With only one inescapable thought echoing in his mind, he remained perfectly still... One terrible thought that twisted around in his guts like a coiling python and squeezed all feeling from his body...
His own son could be one of those two hundred deaths being reported…

His own son…

Chapter End Notes

The chapter image above is Ukyou Oshiro, an Original Character created for this story. Please don't credit me with any undeserved drawing talents as I totally referenced that sketch from a picture I found on the Internet. Her first name was taken from Ukyo Kuonji, one of my favorite anime characters.

Next Chapter will be posted on Tuesday, November 3rd.
A God of Creation, A God of Death

Chapter Summary

After a close call, Bruce begins his investigation into Sword Art Online.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Aincrad

(The floating castle of Aincrad in Sword Art Online.)

Chapter Three

A God of Creation, A God of Death

As a yawning Alfred Pennyworth walked down the predawn hallway towards the locked bedroom door of young Master Damian, he was surprised to find a handwritten note tacked to its wooden exterior.

‘Do Not Disturb!
Alfred, please inform Gotham Academy I will not be attending classes today.
I will take breakfast at 10:00 AM sharp.
– Damian’

Alfred’s face twisted into a perplexed grimace as he read the hand-scrawled note, holding it at arm’s length as though it were strewn rubbish.

How peculiar…

The old butler was fully aware that Damian had sworn to his father that he would not be engaging in any patrols while Master Bruce was away in Japan, so why should he request not to be disturbed now? Perhaps the child was feeling ill? But then, why would the little tyrant demand breakfast at 10:00 AM if he were truly sick?

The inquisitive Alfred retrieved his master key and quickly unlocked the boy’s door, entering the darkened room to find the note’s young author lying motionless on his back, stretched out across his bed wearing some strange, futuristic-looking helmet which Alfred had never seen before. Next to the sleeping lad on the writing desk was a small computer with various flashing lights that was also a new acquisition…

The old servant brightened as he suddenly recalled that Master Richard had informed him that the impish Damian had received a new video game system behind his father’s back only yesterday while Alfred had been busy attending the greenhouse. Ah, so that was it! The little scallywag must have fallen asleep while indulging in some late-night frivolity and then decided that he would be far too tired to attend school in the morning.

Alfred Pennyworth grinned… It was like the little hellion was actually turning into a real boy. But his father had instructed the old servant that a strict schedule must be adhered to while he was away on business without exception.

“Rise and shine, Master Damian… Despite what you may believe, your education is far more important than some video game… I’m afraid you shall have to endure this new day on whatever little sleep you’ve had and bravely persevere in the hallowed halls of Gotham Academy… Breakfast shall be served in thirty minutes… Sharp!”

Even as Alfred raised his voice on that last word, Damian didn’t stir.

In fact, as his wrinkled eyes adjusted to the faint light, the old man noticed how eerily still the boy had remained this entire time, almost lifeless. Now concerned that something actually was wrong with Damian, the older butler approached the bedside and tenderly placed his hand on the lad’s slumbering shoulder.

“It’s time to wake up, Sir… I say, are you quite alright?”

No response.

Moving his two fingers onto the boy’s neck confirmed a weak pulse and that the lad was still taking shallow breaths. And yet it was alarming at how much young Master Wayne currently resembled a patient in a coma. As the worried Alfred flicked on the table’s reading lamp, his eye suddenly traced the white power cord running from the game’s whirring console to the electrical outlet behind the antique writing desk which it had been stationed upon only yesterday afternoon.

“Well, I daresay I know one sure-fire method of interrupting this infernal machine’s hold on you, young Sir.”

As Alfred kneeled down and crawled under the sturdy wooden desk in order to unplug the device,
he paused to rub a crick in his aging back. He would have to get that looked at by the chiropractor. As he once again gingerly reached forward, he was suddenly interrupted when the phone on top of the desk rang, startling the kneeling butler as he reflexively jerked the back of his head into the underside of an old (and rather solid) crossbeam.

A quick retreat and subsequent bleary-eyed glance at the caller ID revealed it was Master Bruce on the other line, perhaps calling the lad’s private number to ensure Damian was abiding by the terms of their agreement. The older man rubbed his rapidly-forming goose egg and then managed to pick up the receiver on the fourth ring.

“This is Alfred speaking, Master Bruce.”

“Alfred! Where’s Damian?!?”

There was a heightened level of panic in Bruce’s voice which Alfred had never heard before… It startled him.

“I say… Is everything alright, Sir?”

“No! Where is Damian right now?”

“Asleep in his bed, Master Bruce… Actually, he has this infernal device attached to his head and I can’t seem to rouse him… I was just about to unplug it when you called.”

“DON’T TOUCH IT!!!”

A stunned Alfred stumbled backwards, managing to steady himself against Damian’s bed while he regained his balance and wits.

“Master Bruce… Is everything alright?”

“No… Alfred… please… You can’t touch any of the equipment or disturb Damian in any way… You have to tell me… Is he still alive?!”

Alfred watched the boy draw another shallow breath.

“He’s unresponsive but he is breathing… What is this all about, Sir?”

The apprehensive Alfred Pennyworth then listened to a loud exhale of tense breath on the other end as Bruce replied.

“You can’t disturb him… There was a malfunction with the game’s launch… Players can’t be disconnected from their equipment or they’ll die… If anyone attempts to remove the headgear or disrupt the system, their NerveGear helmet will emit powerful microwaves and destroy their brain… There’s been over two hundred deaths reported in Japan so far.”

The old servant knees buckled as he realized just how close he’d been to pulling that plug. His fingers had actually been touching the cord when the phone had rang.

“My God… How terribly awful… How terribly, terribly awful… What am I to do, Sir?”

“Don’t move him… You’ll need to arrange some medical attention while he’s trapped in that game and make sure they’re aware of what’s happening with the Sword Art Online incident here in Japan… Also, make sure our backup generators are running. We can’t afford any power interruptions right now… As for me, I’m going to do what I always do… Get to the bottom of this
whole damned mess.”

“Understood, Sir… Has there been any indication given as to when they expect this tragic malfunction to be resolved?”

“None... But I have the sinking feeling that this goes far beyond a simple malfunction... I think it was intentional.”

Alfred felt his stomach sink with grief.

“Then I wish you Godspeed, Master Bruce.”

After quickly getting back in touch with Richard Grayson to bring him up to speed on Damian’s critical condition, Bruce managed to locate the fully-equipped Porsche 918 from the Imperial Hotel’s parking garage which Wayne Industries had leased for his personal use while in Japan.

It was no Batmobile, but at least it came in black.

With his own son now locked in the game, it was time to get back to his real job.

Quickly changing into his Batman costume before jumping into the 2-door German super-car, Bruce peeled off from the hotel’s garage towards Argus Headquarters through the darkened streets of Tokyo. Powering up the comm-link device in his cowl to go online and get in touch with Barbara, the speeding Batman suddenly found there was a message waiting for him within its built-in communicator.

Opening the pending message, his heart quickly tightened as he discovered this was a voice recording from Damian placed to him eight hours ago…

‘Father… I am informing you that I have obtained the NerveGear console and Sword Art Online game from Argus... I will also be taking part in the launch at thirteen hundred Japan Standard Time... Should you have any objections, please contact me before then... However, I sincerely feel this technology is the next step in humanity’s perceptual evolution and that our family’s company must be a part of it... Bearing that in mind, good luck with your negotiations.”

His son had sent the message not to Bruce Wayne, but to Batman.

“You stubborn little fool…”

Bruce gripped the steering wheel of the Porsche in frustrated rage as he broke hard at a stop light. His pigheaded son would have known he wouldn’t receive this message until after it was too late. Fearing that his father may have prevented his participation in the game’s launch, the boy had obviously kept his word to Dick yet circumvented the process.

And yet Bruce wondered… Would he actually have denied Damian’s request?

Sword Art Online had been Beta-tested only two months ago with no physical side-effects or injuries whatsoever. In fact, he knew the NerveGear electronics interface had various safety overrides to prevent this sort of dangerous thing from ever happening…

Which meant the current catastrophe of disabling those safety devices had been an intentional act of
sabotage and likely an inside job. But who would do something so dreadful and why?

He could only hope that he would uncover some of those answers at Argus tonight. In the meantime, he might as well gather all the intel he could about this tragedy and reach out to Barbara for assistance.

“Oracle, are you there?”

“It’s been another long night but I’m still here, Batman.”

“Did Nightwing update you on the current situation with Damian?”

“He did… Just getting up to speed… You’re on the move?”

“Towards Argus Corporation… This has to be an inside job… Seems like the logical place to start.”

“Looks like the Police had the same idea… I set up a program to scan and translate the Tokyo law enforcement radio channels shortly after Dick called… They’ve just put Argus on lockdown.”

“That will make it… difficult… But I can still get in there.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea… You’re a little out of your jurisdiction.”

“I’m always out of my jurisdiction… Right now all I can do is shake the foundations and see what crawls out from beneath… Has there been any reports about the whereabouts of Akihiko Kayaba yet?”

“None… The Police are looking for him.”

“Kayaba’s the key to this whole mess… See if you can trace any correspondence he may have had, any cell phone data, anything… I need to find him… Tonight.”

“I’ll do what I can… The Argus network is unbelievably tight.”

“I have faith in you.”

“At least someone does… Batman, I’ve just brought up the satellite imaging at Argus Headquarters… There must be fifty Police cruisers and just as many News vans there!… And it looks like they’re hauling employees off in handcuffs.”

“Damn… Options?”

“I’m hitting a brick wall with those servers… This Kayaba guy didn’t take any chances with his online security… In fact, he could probably even give me a few pointers.”

Besides the missing Akihiko Kayaba, any of the employees at Argus who knew anything were now entering into Police custody. Left without the possibility of easily interrogating them, Batman needed a back door to get Barbara into its cryptic network and let her snoop around.

And luckily, he knew just how to do that.

“Oracle, I need you to trace the current GPS location of a cell phone for me. The number is 090-555-9695.”

“Hold on… Let’s see… Registered to a Miss Ukyou Oshiro at Argus Corporation… OK, just closing in on the vectors now and… Got it!… That phone is currently located on the Shuto
Expressway Number 11 Daibo Route, Port of Tokyo Connector Bridge.”

Bruce’s mouth twisted into a wry smile before it was quickly replaced with a grimace.

“The locals here just call it the Rainbow Bridge… But that’s weird, why would she be there?... Oracle, can you use the satellite imaging to get a closer look at those coordinates?”

“Will do… You’re in luck, I’ve got a live feed… Just zooming in… Oh God, there’s a woman standing on the edge of the walkway… I think she’s getting ready to jump!”

Bruce suddenly cranked the Porsche’s steering wheel into a hard U-turn, turning the car a full 180 degrees around as the surrounding traffic slammed on their brakes while he snaked his way through a tight opening. He floored the powerful engine back towards the Shuto Expressway, squealing its performance tires across the Tokyo asphalt under the roar of a combined 887 Horsepower while blue flames burst from its twin-mounted exhaust.

This car could do zero to sixty in 2.2 seconds but he was still a full two minutes away from that bridge.

“Batman, should I call the authorities?”

“Not yet… Is there anyone else near her?”

“She’s alone… According to the information, the walkway closes at 6:00 PM.”

“Alright, where is she exactly?”

“The middle of the bridge.”

“Keep me posted. Talk to you soon.”

As Batman ended his communication with Barbara, he turned his full attention to the road, weaving in-and-out of traffic at breakneck speeds, smoking the tires as he raced towards Ukyou Oshiro who was currently standing on a guardrail high above Tokyo Bay.

The Rainbow Bridge was just south of the Imperial Hotel… Flying like a rocket through the sparse night traffic, Batman knew he could make it there fast… But would that be soon enough to save her?

As he finally drove onto the suspension bridge, Batman spotted her dark silhouette in the distance, balanced precariously on the guardrail where another car had just stopped beside her. As Bruce sped towards them, the man from the car had exited and was trying to talk her down from an unsteady perch.

Seconds later, as the Porsche nosed into the curb and he jumped outside, Batman watched in horror as Ukyou Oshiro suddenly tumbled backwards into the darkness while the frantic young man lunged forward to catch one of her wrists. Her descending momentum suddenly wrapped him around the guardrail like a tight knot…

For a second, the pleading man was strung over the bridge’s railing while Ukyou dangled below him by one arm, suspended only by that one slipping wrist, until her weight became too much for the young man to bear. An instant before the sprinting Dark Knight could get a hold of her, the struggling young driver finally lost his grip amidst strained tears of effort high above the waters of Tokyo Bay…

And Ukyou Oshiro fell.
With a single bound, Bruce launched himself into the air from the guardrail towards the plummeting woman, pulling his magnetic grappling gun from its holster and firing at the bridge’s suspension cables. As the grappling hook spun around the thick cables and snagged, blue, indigo and violet lights shone across his falling body.

A split-second before the gun’s cable snapped taut, the plunging Batman managed to wrap his arm around the Argus employee’s slender waist before they both hit the dark waters below. The sudden stop from their combined momentum almost pulled Bruce’s right shoulder out of its socket as his right hand somehow managed to keep hold of the grappling gun until they swung wildly over the frigid depths of Tokyo Bay like a child’s lifeless yo-yo.

With the resulting audible groan due to the flaring twinge in his right shoulder, Ukyou Oshiro finally managed to open her tightly closed eyes to stare astonishingly at the mysterious man with whom she now floated above Tokyo Bay with.

“Batman-san?”

“Little late for a swim, isn’t it Miss?… Are you alright?”

Without another word, the frightened young woman frantically wrapped her arms around the Caped Crusader as she broke down into wet tears. Once she was tightly holding onto him, Batman was able to hit the rewind button on his grappling gun and begin their ascent back to the bridge deck - the dangling pair traveling upwards through a rainbow of light.

Once safely back on top, Batman noticed that the young man who had attempted to prevent Ukyou from taking her own life was now excitedly capturing her dramatic rescue on his cell phone’s camera as other drivers also began to stop and look. Quickly placing Ukyou in his car, the Dark Knight then calmly walked over to the man, took hold of the cell phone, and then tossed it into Tokyo Bay.

“Sorry about that.”

Now back in the Porsche with Ukyou secured in the passenger seat, Batman hit the accelerator, anxious to avoid the pending arrival of the Police as he rapidly put distance between himself and the cars gathering along the bridge.

He quickly called Barbara again on his cowl’s phone.

“Oracle… I’ve got Ukyou Oshiro with me… And I need you to transfer ten thousand dollars from my anonymous account to the owner of the license plate number I’m sending you a picture of.”

“Heh… You always were camera shy… So what’s the plan now, boss?”

“I’ll let you know in a minute… Batman out.”

The Caped Crusader glanced over to where a shaken Ukyou Oshiro was retrieving a bag of Kleenex from the purse which she had carefully tied to her belt. Once she had finished wiping her eyes, she noticed Batman looking at the tight knots she’d made with her purse’s straps as though searching for an explanation.

She was almost too ashamed to admit the reason.

“It would be irresponsible of me if I did not provide the Police with identification… once they had found my body.”

“Oshiro-san, I have to ask you… Did you know that Akihiko Kayaba would do this?”
“No... If I did, I would have went to the Police... Any of us would.”

“How many of you would?”

“No, he didn’t show up at work this morning... After the reports of the first deaths, everyone tried to get in touch with him... But he’s completely offline, like he’s vanished... And then, just before 17:00, managers starting receiving post-dated emails stating that he had willingly trapped all those players in his game... That only the mortal lives of the players could provide his creation with the purpose and emotion it required... That he had now become the god of his own virtual world.”

“So you believe Kayaba-san is in the game?”

“I do... Most likely as the Game Master... None of our engineers have been able to log into Sword Art Online since its launch today... They believe Akihiko Kayaba entered SAO and is running that entire world by himself.”

“But if Kayaba-san is behind this crime, why were you willing to take your own life?”

She wiped her tears once more and stared downwards.

“As the Senior Public Relations Officer, I bear a responsibility for the game’s popularity... Shortly before the Police arrived, I had stepped outside to gather my thoughts and received a separate email from Kayaba-san... I forwarded it to my co-workers and then fled, unable to face the tragedy my company had enabled... But his intentions are clear, Batman... He’s made those ten thousand players prisoners in his game!”

“What was in that email exactly?”

“Instructions for the outside world... If someone attempts to remove or disable the NerveGear helmet, it will immediately kill the player... Even a power disruption will kill them within ten seconds... Any network disruption will render the player paralyzed within the game, proving fatal within two hours... By these means, he has made his world their world...

“It was like some nightmare had been made real, and it suddenly became clear to me... Kayaba-san has made it so that if a player dies in his game... They also die in the real world!... That’s what he about providing SAO with purpose and emotion... Those poor players are literally playing for their own lives now... And I helped to bring this game of death to our world!... When I realized that, the burden became too heavy for me to bear.”

Batman stared grimly ahead.

“Oshiro-san, none of their deaths are your fault... The only responsibility you bear is to do everything in your power to help save those remaining players’ lives... Tell me, isn’t saving their lives worth living for?”

“Yes!”

“Then throwing your life away is not the answer... If you truly wish to help them, then help me... I have someone on my team who needs to access to the Argus servers. We need to find any clues which Kayaba-san may have left behind in order to find him and then rescue all the remaining players... Can you assist her?”

“I will do everything I can.”

Bruce used his comm-link again.
“Oracle, this is Batman… I have you on speaker with Ukyou Oshiro.”

“I’m here, Batman… Go ahead.”

After a moment, Ukyou was able to provide Oracle with enough information to hack into the Argus servers so that Barbara Gordon could begin her search. Afterwards, the Argus senior manager was then able to give Batman a little more information on the game itself as they drove on into the night.

Sword Art Online took place in a massive floating castle of iron and steel called Aincrad. At its base, it was ten kilometres across and had one hundred levels stacked on top of one another like giant suspended circles of earth with each connected by a thick vertical column of stone which held that floor’s ‘dungeon’.

Each of these ascending dungeons contained a ‘floor boss’, the head monster that the players needed to defeat in order for them to move upwards to the next level. This process continued until they reached the hundredth level and defeated the final boss at the pinnacle of the floating castle to win the game. There were towns, cities, castles, forests, lakes and fantastic landscapes spread out all across these floating levels of Aincrad and each level had its own monster-stacked labyrinth and floor boss.

The first level contained the ‘Town of Beginnings’ where players would start, a safe area where they could not be harmed, at least not in the original version of the game. It had been the engineers’ hope that most players would remain in that town once they were aware of their deadly circumstances.

During the two month Beta-test over the summer vacation, the one thousand players who had participated made it only to the eighth floor, with the advantage of being immediately resurrected after dying in the game, teleported back to the first level once their character perished. Kayaba-san had obviously not afforded his current players this luxury.

Ukyou explained that the most impressive feature of the Sword Art Online game was the Artificial Intelligence program which hosted it, a proprietary AI-system called Cardinal. Truly, this had been Akihiko Kayaba’s greatest achievement since he had started at Argus, a system so powerful that it no longer required human input. It was not only the brain behind Sword Art Online, but it was also its heart and soul, the very world with which the players interacted, from each blade of grass blowing in the wind to the minds of its monsters.

Batman interrupted her with a question.

“Oshiro-san, do you think this Cardinal system may have acted on its own accord to trap these players into the game? Could it have become self-conscious?”

Ukyou pondered this for a moment.

“Perhaps, but Cardinal was not involved with the manufacture of the NerveGear equipment and would not have been able to sabotage our built-in safety overrides… No, I sincerely believe this entire tragedy lies at the feet of Akihiko Kayaba… There were even additionally safety features built into the NerveGear which would force a player to become logged out if they became too emotionally unstable… It actually happened various times during the Beta-test… These features must also have also been tampered with.”

“But would these safeguards still be in place?”

“They are most likely sabotaged… Obviously, this was his goal from the start… I can only suspect that this level of absolute power within a world which was almost indistinguishable from reality
slowly drove Kayaba-san to the point where he actually did believe he was a god… A god of creation and of death.”

“I’ve dealt with his kind before… Oshiro-san, tell me more about Akihiko Kayaba. Has he ever had any emotional outbursts or displayed any signs of manic aggression? Would you consider him emotionally stable?”

“Honestly, I would describe him as a genius almost beyond emotions… He was very calm… His life was completely dedicated to his work… If I had to ascribe any sentimentality to the man’s limited display of emotions, I would only say that he seemed lonely.”

“Perhaps this senseless act of terrorism was a cry for help… Is it possible for more players to enter the game?”

“None of our engineers have been able to access the mainframe after the launch today… But now that the government is involved, I hope that they may find a way.”

“Would hacking Cardinal be dangerous to the players trapped inside it?”

“Likely… If Kayaba-san felt threatened, he may decide to protect himself by eliminating characters from the game. As a result, the signal would be sent to the NerveGear to radiate the players’ brains… Without being able to access Cardinal though, there are far too many unknowns to say for certain what he is capable of.”

“Almost like a hostage situation with ten thousand lives at stake.”

“An appropriate comparison… Except these hostages are being held on a different world which we no longer have access to.”

They drove quietly for another moment, each of them lost deeply in their thoughts until Ukyou surprised Batman by suggesting that she should be handed over to the Police to join her incarcerated colleagues. She explained to him that while she had initially been overcome with profound guilt, she had now accepted the responsibility of doing whatever she could to help end this deadly tragedy as quickly as possible.

Perhaps that’s why the Fates had ordained that her life be spared from the cold waters of Tokyo Bay.

“Oshiro-san, you’ve already been incredibly helpful… But if you should remember any additional details which may help, anything at all, please reach out to my friend Bruce Wayne and provide him with that information… He’ll pass it along to me.”

A sudden look of astonishment on her face.

“You know Wayne-san?”

“Somewhat. I’ve worked with his company in the past.”

A deep sigh from his sorrowful passenger.

“I had such hopes…”

As Batman slowly pulled over in front of a Precinct and Ukyou prepared to leave the car in order to
turn herself in to the Police, she looked at him one last time with those big, dark eyes.

“How strange it is… This morning our company had such a bright future and tonight it is in ruins… The man whom we blindly followed towards the heavens has instead turned his back on this world and led his loyal followers into the Abyss.”

“Oshiro-san, I promise that I’ll do everything within my power to save the innocent lives involved in this tragedy… And rest assured, Akihiko Kayaba will be brought to justice to face these many crimes… If you need anything, anything at all, please reach out to my friend Bruce Wayne… I’ll alert him to your current situation.”

One last smile and a bow before she departed.

“Sayonara, Batman-san… And thank you… For everything.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all the kudos, bookmarks, and reviews so far… Or for simply making it this far! Having just finished Chapter 17, I can honestly say this story gets insanely good as it continues on with many fantastic surprises in store for you! I’m actually excited for my readers.

I will be maintaining a twice-a-week posting schedule (every Tuesday and Friday) until we hit the “Halls of the Departed” arc which begins in Chapter 12. For those action-packed sequences where young Damian is fighting for his life, I will be posting daily. So get ready, we’re about to embark on one heck of a trip…

Next Chapter: Finally… Damian Wayne in the World of Swords! Posting on Friday, November 6th - exactly seven years before the fictional Sword Art Online is launched.
Damian Wayne in the World of Swords

Chapter Summary

Damian Wayne enters the world of Aincrad for the first time... which may also be his last!

Chapter Notes

We now step backwards in time to when eleven-year-old Damian Wayne is only mere moments away from logging into the Sword Art Online servers for its official launch.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Kirito and Klein and the first floor of Aincrad

(Kirito and Kein gazing upon the splendours of the first floor of Aincrad)

Chapter Four

Damian Wayne in the World of Swords

The biological heir to the Wayne fortune lay comfortably stretched across his bed awaiting the
official launch of Sword Art Online. Damian’s NerveGear helmet was finally connected, calibrated and ready to go. There was nothing left to do except wait, and perhaps reflect upon the questionable process by which he had obtained this technology…

Hacking into his father’s account and then using Wayne Industries to import the NerveGear equipment along with a copy of Sword Art Online had perhaps been overstepping his bounds, but he fully expected that his father would understand. If Wayne Industries was to acquire the Argus Corporation, this firsthand product knowledge of a virtual world would prove invaluable. Besides, Damian considered it his filial duty to exploit any potential vulnerabilities within Wayne Industries network security in order to make it stronger.

He made a mental note to report those network exploits to his father once he returned from his trip to Japan.

Shortly before 8:00 PM, Damian had locked himself into his room and had then spent the next five hours researching the game’s strategies, learning all that he could from what the Beta-testers had published online and then performed the numerous biometric calibrations his NerveGear equipment required.

He was thankful the game was robust enough to instantly translate his English thoughts into fluent Japanese speech - as his Japanese was still far from perfect. Damian was quite sure he’d be the only person in America playing during the game’s official launch, the first ten thousand advance copies had been restricted to a Japanese audience and had literally sold out within seconds…

With his single copy, he could be the envy of every gamer in America.

But simply playing Sword Art Online was never his goal. Whatever fictitious excitement it provided could never compare to the thrill he felt as the newest Robin to his father’s Batman. No, he simply wanted to feel this technology in action, to see how realistic a virtual world could be and to take part in this revolution in order to guide Wayne Industries towards a brave new world.

To young Damian Wayne, this wasn’t about fun, this was research.

Not only was he the sole heir to the world’s deadliest collection of spies and assassins known as the League of Shadows, Damian Wayne was also the heir-apparent of one of this country’s largest industrial conglomerates, Wayne Industries. While his father had done well to steer the company through the events of the previous two decades, a new future was dawning upon them and its first rays of its light were shining across the Land of the Rising Sun…

As the NerveGear’s clock turned over from 12:59 PM Japanese Standard Time to 13:00, Damian’s thoughts snapped back to the present as he calmly spoke the “Link Start” command which would begin his login process. Beyond those two simple worlds, every other screen was now controlled by his thoughts. How strange that the graphics actually seemed to appear in his mind... He only needed to consciously think of his selection and it was immediately selected.

This was the future of the graphical user interface… Data instantly controlled by the user’s thoughts… A human mind with direct access to servers… Amazing!

In the character generation screen, Damian selected a male character, much like himself except older. He saw no reason to come up with an exotic name so he simply chose his own… ‘Damian’. For his initial two skill slots he selected ‘One-Handed Curved Blade’ and ‘Hiding’. Having been trained as a professional assassin since the age of three, he saw no reason to deviate from the ambush tactics of his youth.
Also, from what he had read online, the One-Handed Curved Blade skill could later be upgraded to the Extra skill of ‘Katana’ which was his favourite type of sword. There was also a ‘Martial Arts’ skill that could be unlocked with a quest later on.

Otherwise, player stats were incredibly straightforward, limited only to Strength and Agility. He had always favoured speed over strength so he maxed his Agility. Levelling up provided more opportunities to increase his strength score should he require it.

And that was it.

The final screen said ‘Welcome to Sword Art Online’ and then…

Damian was suddenly immersed in a spinning kaleidoscope of colours as though he were travelling through the halls of a modern art museum at hyperspace speeds until it all became dark. Slowly, he opened his eyes and suddenly found himself standing in a large pillared atrium with a white terracotta brick floor, surrounded by lush green shrubs as though he were in some Renaissance courtyard near the Mediterranean Sea.

Amazing, he could actually feel the humid air on his face and smell juniper in the air.

This was Aincrad!

It was as though his physical body actually was in the Town of Beginnings! When he stepped forward, he felt his weight push upon the stones and the soft feel of his leather boots push back against the soles of his own feet. Swiping his finger across the air in front of him brought up his menu screen to confirm this actually was a game…

Simply astonishing! Any misgivings he once had about this technology suddenly vanished before its amazing renderings. This was the future of human interaction where one person’s imagination became another’s reality. The dream of storytellers since the dawn of time.

Looking around, Damian found he was literally surrounded by hundreds of other excited players who were also rife with enthusiasm, while even more new players were constantly being teleported into existence every second. To his far left he spied the Black Iron Palace which was rumoured to contain a prison while to his right he saw the atrium’s high arching exit leading to the seemingly endless stalls of Non-Player-Character merchants who were already busy engaging other players in selling their wares in open markets along the streets.

Beyond them lay his destination; the grassy wilderness of the West Field.

The young assassin had been itching to try out the combat system for awhile now, if only to see how close it was to actual kenjutsu. As the game’s name inferred, sword fighting was indeed an art and he was an artist. His father Bruce Wayne had long since forbidden him from taking lives with that art, but in this virtual world Damian was now free to engage his deadly talents as he wished with nothing to hold him back.

A chance to cut loose… literally.

The eager Damian avoided the crowded shops and stalls, making his way directly to the West Field where he noticed a few other players had the same idea, trying to master their sword skills against the frequent wild boars wandering these grassy plains. As monsters went, he’d read that these Frenzy Boars were actually quite easy, a beginner’s challenge to become accustomed to the game’s combat system.

He was surprised when it took him a full thirty-six attempted strikes combined with skilful dodging
(which had still resulted in taking a hit) to actually defeat one of these monstrous pigs... Falling to his knees as the animal exploded into a thousand bright digital polygons before creating a floating screen which listed his gained experience and treasure.

The fight had actually left him breathless... And that was supposed to be a beginner’s challenge?!... What sort of insane game was this?!

“You’re not using your sword skill,” said an unseen female voice from just behind him.

Damian spun around to see a hooded young woman with red painted-on cat whiskers drawn across her cheeks standing directly behind him. She had light, shoulder-length auburn hair poking out from beneath the dark hood and pale brown eyes that were brimming with mischief.

He also happened to notice that she had a pair of claws hanging at her left side, a traditional Ninja weapon which gave her the appearance of a spy rather than a warrior.

No wonder she had been so sneaky...

“I used more sword skills than you’ll ever know!” he shot back at her, still winded from his battle with the incredibly robust boar.

“You're game sword skill, stupid. You need to engage a skill before you strike in order to inflict damage on your target.”

“And how exactly do I do that?”

Damian didn’t like the sly smile that slowly spread across the cat-girl’s mouth as she pensively stroked her chin with her thumb.

“Old habits die hard... Let’s see now, you just made 30 Col from your first kill so I figure I’ll let you off easy... Let’s say 300 Col.”

'Col’ was the universal currency in the Sword Art Online game. Since he had avoided the shops, Damian still had his beginning allotment of coins, more than enough to pay her fee. He quickly opened his menu, transferring the 300 Col to this player when he noticed that her name was Argo.

“Alright, cat-girl... So how do I use my game sword skill?”

“Damian, huh? Cool name... Now pay attention. You have to move your weapon into a ready-to-strike position, and pause until the game engages the attack skill you’ve selected before you strike. Once the skill is engaged, go for it. The system will determine if you hit your target and the damage, but it’s up to you where you hit it...

“The whole process is meant to look over-the-top and dramatic. That’s why most of your blows were ineffective before. You were dancing around and poking the Frenzy Boar but not actually engaging the system... With your current stats, that won’t do much of anything... But this is important to remember; once you initiate an attack, you’re locked in... Kind of like autopilot where the attack’s going to happen whether you want it to or not... You’ve got the One-Handed Curved Blade skill and the Reaver attack, right?”

“Yes.”

The cat-like Argo then nodded to another boar thirty feet away.

“Alright then, why don’t you try it with that snorting fellow over there? Their weak point is on the
back of their head by the way. Aim for that if you can.”

Damian picked himself up and stood, suspecting he was dealing with a seasoned player.

“Then why don’t you show me how it’s done first?”

“Not my style... I’m just a casual observer here… Go on, he’s waiting for you, champ.”

This time, it only took him two strikes to defeat the tusked creature before it exploded into glittering, digital specks. And his instructor had been correct; the system actually had taken over his attack sequence once it had been initiated. But even more disconcerting was the fact that there seemed to be an unavoidable pause after the Reaver attack had completed which had left him momentarily vulnerable…

Argo grinned as he returned before she offered some additional advice.

“If you’re going to be using Single Curved Blade, you should really put some points into your strength as well, especially at lower levels. Sometimes the extra few points of damage and the boost in Hit Points are all the difference down here. Killing an enemy with a single blow means he won’t have the opportunity to counterattack while you’re stuck waiting around after a full-on attack like Reaver.”

“Is the Reaver attack the reason why I was frozen afterwards?”

“Sort of… The game uses an attack sequence which has to run its course before you make your next move. Most players call it ‘lag’. Boars are pretty stupid so they’ll always charge straight on. As long as you’ve engaged your skill correctly, you should strike first and disrupt the Boar’s charge, stunning it for an entire attack sequence, so there will be no chance for a counterattack…

“That’s why these Frenzy Boars are considered easy pickings... But be careful, monsters get a lot tougher and smarter as the game goes on. They’ll actually start analyzing your attack patterns and come up with their own strategies, including swarming in groups, using feints, dodging your first attack or even trying to disarm you…

“That’s why most players join guilds so that they can ‘Switch’ with their other members after an attack. The idea is that the second player’s attack keeps the monster occupied or stunned while the first player waits out the sequence lag. Then the third player attacks to protect the second player and so on. By employing this continuous single attack strategy, it also prevents players from messing up one another’s skill combos at higher levels.”

“You mean the two, three and four-hit combo attacks?”

“Exactly… Although I have it from a good source that it goes all the way up to a twenty-hit combo attack eventually... Anyways, if you’re into that kind of thing and really wanted to max your agility to focus on those crazy attack combos, you should pick the ‘Rapier’ or ‘Dagger’ skill… The ‘Single Curved Blade’ skill is fine, but it requires a balance of your strength and agility stats. Of course, the other advantage is that it will allow you to use a shield instead of a pure agility defence like those other speed freaks…

“One final word of advice, Damian... Once we get past level two, stats won’t matter as much as magical items. That’s when you’re going to want to have a big stack of coin to buy yourself something good... Magical drops are like gold here, but most of the time it’s not actually something that you have the skills to use, so players wind up selling them… For a small fee, I can point you in the direction of the shop who currently has the best prices for what you want or is willing to pay top
dollar for your magical stuff... All part of being an Information Broker, my friend.”

Once it became obvious he was dealing with an experienced player, Damian peered at this girl with a newfound respect.

“Were you a Beta-tester?”

“Heh… Name’s Argo… Trust me, it took us awhile to figure things out around here too… But it really is an amazing place. Have lots of fun and take time to look around… I’m actually off to go do some sightseeing myself. Good luck, Damian.”

“Good luck to you as well, Argo.”

In a system where events and damage amounts were randomly generated by computers, it seemed appropriate to wish someone ‘good luck’. And although Damian should have been offended that this experienced player had charged him for what seemed like an elementary bit of advice, the fact remained that she had saved him significant time and frustration.

As he watched her walk away, it was difficult to fault her entrepreneurial spirit. After all, his father employed a small army of consultants as a necessary cost of doing business. Why should a virtual world where players could buy and sell information be any different?

One thing that was different here though was fighting… This combat system was most decidedly not like the real world. Once the system had engaged a skill it really was like you were on autopilot, with no backing out until the attack sequence had run its course. But as Argo had explained, it made sense in a game environment like Sword Art Online where glorified over-the-top attacks were designed to make the players appear as bigger-than-life heroes and gratify their fragile egos.

With that in mind, he killed nine more boars.

Afterwards, as Damian sat by himself on a grassy knoll, he had to admit that even in this short amount of time, he was growing accustomed to life in someone else’s fantasy world. He felt the gentle breeze rustling in his dark, cropped hair while his fingers wove themselves into soft tufts of grass. Even the sun-drenched, fragrant smells of the countryside were carried on the light wind and filled his nostrils.

In the distance, there were settlements magically set on top of twisting inverted spiral cones, perched high above lush green rolling hills where meadows filled with wildflowers which lapped upon their emerald shores. Ancient limestone stalagmites pierced the dream-inspired landscape like old stone guardians who had been long ago lulled to sleep by a soothing lullaby. In the wispy, cloud-filled, crimson skies above him, five small dragons lazily flew in formation towards the horizon.

With a disappointed sigh, Damian decided he should logout. He could devote more time to this fantastic world after a few hours of sleep and a late breakfast. He had already left Alfred a note indicating that he was not to be disturbed until 10:00 AM and he was sure to have a long day ahead of him once players began to organize themselves into guilds and explored Level One.

Opening his menu screen, Damian was stunned to see that the ‘Logout’ command was missing. The placeholder remained, but not the actual graphic. Repeatedly pressing the spot where it should have been accomplished no effect. He scanned through various submenus for other options with no luck, eventually even shouting the word “Logout!” to the hillside around him…

Even the ‘Game Master Help’ option was currently disabled.

Apparently he was stuck here.
Well, this certainly was an embarrassing glitch which would negatively affect the Argus share price. Having certain players not being able to logout would surely blemish the news releases surrounding Sword Art Online’s eagerly anticipated launch, and most likely increase his father’s bargaining leverage as well.

Still, he wanted to go home…

Damian tensed as he was suddenly surrounded by sparkling sapphire twinkles until he was engulfed in a flash of blue light, suddenly finding himself being teleported back to his original position in the large atrium within the Town of Beginnings... He found he had instantly joined thousands of other confused players who had also simultaneously been teleported here as well. There was a loud hum in the air as he realized that all ten thousand players must have been transported back to their starting points...

And none of them seemed to know why.

Ah, so this logout glitch must have been system-wide. Obviously, Argus had brought everyone here to address the malfunction and most likely offer some form of financial retribution by way of an apology. Now it was just a question of when the issue would be resolved…

The large church bell at the center of the courtyard suddenly rang out as the players’ eyes were drawn upwards to a large red hexagonal cursor flashing high in the air above their heads with the word ‘WARNING’ printed ominously across it. Damian watched as this single cursor spawned hundreds more around itself, with each reading ‘System Announcement’ or ‘WARNING’ until they interlocked to block out the skies above, engulfing the scene below as well as the thousands of players in an ominous red hue.

From the lines between these hexagon cursors, a thick red liquid began to seep out, pouring downwards like a stream of blood until it congealed itself into a cradle-like pool above, crackling with tendrils of electricity.

The players gasped as this living lake of plasma began to take the shape of a sixty-foot tall man cloaked in ornate crimson robes highlighted by gold trim, the same outfit the game masters normally wore. His face was completely blacked out by darkness, as though he were the monstrous spectral phantom of a religious order long since passed from human memory.

Around him, Damian heard mutterings of ‘Game Master’ and ‘Special Event’ as players huddled closer together, unsure of what was to follow. The battle-hardened boy simply folded his arms, silently wondering how Argus was going to address its mistake and how long it would take for them to fix it.

As the giant spectre raised its white-gloved hands like some empty god to speak, the crowd fell silent, waiting with baited breath until the shadowy giant’s calm voice boomed out across the courtyard.

“Attention players… Welcome to my world. My name is Akihiko Kayaba. As of this moment, I am the only living person able to control this world…

“I’m sure you’ve already noticed that the logout button is missing from the main menu. But this is not a defect in the game… I repeat, this is not a defect in the game but rather a key feature of Sword Art Online…

“You cannot logout of SAO of your own will. And no one on the outside can shut down or remove the NerveGear. Should this be attempted, the transmitter inside the NerveGear will emit powerful
microwaves destroying your brain and thus ending your life…”

Out of the corner of his eye, Damian spotted certain players attempting to leave the courtyard in fear. He watched as their efforts to escape were blocked by an invisible force field. Obviously, they were all trapped here.

The ghostly Akihiko Kayaba continued…

“Unfortunately, there have already been several instances where players’ friends and families have ignored this warning and attempted to forcibly remove the NerveGear… As a result, 213 players have exited permanently, from both Aincrad and the real world…”

Damian then watched as Kayaba’s massive avatar nonchalantly waved its white gloved hand to bring up dozens of holographic screens in the air surrounding it, displaying various news feeds with each detailing a player’s untimely demise. If it were true, this was a catastrophe of unimaginable proportions…

“As you can see, news organizations across the world are reporting this situation concerning these multiple deaths… Thus, you can assume that the danger of a NerveGear being removed from your head has been reduced…

“So I would like you all to focus on clearing my game. But be sure to keep this in mind… There is no longer any function to revive someone within the game… The instant your Hit Points drop to zero, your avatar will vanish forever… And simultaneously, your brains will be destroyed by the NerveGear…”

“The one condition for your escape is to complete this game. You are presently on the lowest floor of Aincrad, Floor One. If you make your way through the dungeon and defeat the Floor Boss, you may advance to the next level. Defeat the final boss on Floor One Hundred and you will clear the game…”

“Now then, finally… I’ve provided you all with a present in your item storage… Please see for yourself.”

Like all the players around him, Damian opened his inventory menu to find that a new item named ‘Mirror’ had indeed been deposited there. Tapping on its icon, a silver hand mirror instantly materialized into his grip as he curiously stared into its shiny reflection. After being engulfed in a bright blue light, he soon saw that it wasn’t his character’s older, rugged face that was being reflected back at him anymore…

It was his own!

The mirror exploded into prismatic sparkles as he actually felt himself shrink, quickly realizing that it was his own younger body which had now been substituted for his full-grown avatar. His mind raced back to the biometric calibrations his NerveGear equipment had required him to perform and how he’d ran his hands all over his body to establish those body parameters.

So that’s how Kayaba had done it…

His attention was soon drawn to the startled revelations of his fellow players as they first looked upon one another and then themselves, witnessing the true player behind the character. Damian couldn’t help but smirk as he noticed that certain young men had obviously been playing female characters who were still dressed in revealing outfits…

The overwhelming cacophony of the players’ bickering instantly ceased as Akihiko Kayaba began speaking once more.
“Right now, you must all be wondering... Why?... Why would Akihiko Kayaba, developer of Sword Art Online and NerveGear, do such a thing?... My goal has already been accomplished. I created Sword Art Online for one reason only...

“For you to stake your lives against my world’s overwhelming perils while weaving your hearts and souls into the very fabric of Aincrad... Your passionate hearts are my sacrificial offering to systemic entropy and your passionate souls shall write the code of life itself upon this world...

“And now all is complete... This ends the tutorial for the official Sword Art Online launch... I wish you luck, players.”

Damian watched as dark crimson smoke emerged from beneath the shadowy robes of the dark giant as a loud squelching noise, like an old-style modem, sounded all around them. Akihiko Kayaba disappeared into a cerise cloud of smoke as his clothing tumbled inwards, fading into digital oblivion.

The dark red dome of cursors which had enclosed them now vanished, allowing the setting sun’s light to once again shine upon the almost ninety-eight hundred silent and confused players in a surreal moment of perfect quiet, as though each of them were waiting for a punch line which would never be delivered.

From beyond the courtyard, Damian heard the soft musical notes of a band of Non-Player-Characters singing and playing lutes, engaged in a happy melody in stark contrast to the shock which had gripped them all. To the game, nothing had changed. To the Player Characters who were now trapped within that game, everything had changed.

With one single scream, the floodgates of emotion opened and everyone burst into yells of protest or wept tears of sorrow, swept up in a giant wave of hysteria as the courtyard suddenly exploded into an uproar.

For his own part, Damian Wayne realized that his life was in mortal peril not only from the game... It was unlikely that father would discover his covert message in time to save his own life before the unsuspecting Alfred walked in on his comatose body. And Damian knew beyond a doubt that the old servant would attempt to remove his NerveGear to revive him when he did not wake... Thus unwittingly ending his young life.

Chapter End Notes

Normally I would never quote directly from the original source. But in this case, Akihiko Kayaba’s world-changing speech to the Sword Art Online players is an essential part to the story’s plot. It encapsulates the entire drama of SAO for readers who may not be familiar with the series and sets the tone for what is to transpire within the game. To those readers who are familiar with the speech, see if you can discover what changes I’ve made near the end.
Amidst the mournful wails of the damned, Damian Wayne’s pleas for reason became drowned out in an ocean of deafening fear, immersed in the ensuing pandemonium of confused and terrified players. After Akihiko Kayaba’s deadly announcement, the boy had vainly yelled for everyone around him to remain calm, but those pleas were soon torn asunder in the maelstrom of human panic which followed, becoming meaningless words of calm lost in the cacophony of madness.

Hysteria had routed reason in this world.

Weaving his way through the countless forms of frightened and angry players towards the courtyard’s outer periphery, the eleven-year-old managed to find shelter behind the carefully manicured shrubs of the immense courtyard in order to avoid being accidentally trampled...

Where he suddenly discovered a wide-eyed and crouching Argo carefully watching the scene unfolding before them as well.

Damian realized that her real-life appearance must have been remarkably close to that of her
character's, only younger. She had the same auburn hair and brown eyes with the distinctive whiskers still painted across her face, giving her that familiar cat-like appearance.

“Argo?”

Her tearful eyes were momentarily drawn away from the panicked masses on the other side of the shrubs towards her new neighbour. She’d been crying…

“Yes… Who are you?”

“It’s me… Damian.”

She quickly wiped her tears.

“Oh, sorry… It’s nice to meet you again.”

A quick double take before she continued, taking a much closer look at him.

“Wow, you’re really young. How old are you, Damian?”

“I’m eleven… And besides, how old are you?”

“Thirteen. But I’ve been told that I’m mature for my age.”

“If that’s true then help me to get these people to listen to reason. It’s descending into chaos out there!”

Argo took a deep breath, looked once more and then sighed.

“I’m afraid it’s no use, Damian… We’re all caught up in Akihiko Kayaba’s madness now… The way I figure it is that there are two types of players… One group will book themselves into a hotel room and cry themselves to sleep, hoping that this nightmare game will end… And then there’s the second type who will actually play the game… But the bottom line is that neither of them are going to listen to an eleven-year-old kid and some girl with whiskers right now.”

Damian paused for a moment to reflect on Argo’s honest words. His father could have swayed this mob but Damian didn’t possess his father’s domineering presence…

“Alright. So what’s your plan then?”

Argo watched as some of the crowd thinned out, exiting the atrium to meet their fates in a virtual world which had suddenly been made all too real.

“I’ll play the game, but from the sidelines, trying to figure it out. The real secret to Sword Art Online is information. You have to know what you’re up against before you even draw your weapon. Most monsters have predictable attack patterns and weaknesses you’ll need to exploit… As a former Beta-tester, I should be able to sell that information and get by.”

Damian suddenly had a revelation.

“You don’t like fighting much, do you?”

“I’m more of an observer.”

“And you like money, right?”
“Who doesn’t?”

“Then I’ll make you a deal, Argo... My father is Bruce Wayne, the CEO of Wayne Industries and a very wealthy man... If you help me survive this game, I’ll make sure you’re paid one million dollars once we return to the real world... But you have to follow orders... I may not look it, but I have more real-life military experience and combat training than anyone else in here... I need someone with your knowledge of the game... What do you say?”

“A million dollars, huh? I could be persuaded... Are you really an American?”

“Yes... American on my father’s side, Arabian on my mother’s.”

“Oil money too?... Impressive... But just how much is one million dollars worth in Yen anyways?”

“Around one hundred and twenty million.”

Damian watched as the girl’s eyes suddenly sparkled with surprise as she reached out and clasped his hand.

“Alright, you’ve got yourself a deal... With a few additional conditions, Dami-chan.”

“It’s Damian.”

It was the first time he had ever seen her truly smile.

“Nuh-uh, part of the deal is that I get to call you Dami-chan... I’m not going to be your employee, we’re going to be equal partners... And don’t get any wild ideas about going off and exploring the dungeon right away. I have no interest in suicide.”

Damian nodded.

“No unnecessary risks, got it... Besides, there’s no guarantee Akihiko Kayaba even intends to allow us to finish the game... But we share all information. I plan on launching my own investigation into what just happened here and I’ll need your help on gathering information.”

“I’m not sure what you’ll find out Dami-chan, but I’ll do what I can... I do know one thing for sure though... If we don’t get rescued quickly, I can see this all going downhill very quickly.”

“You expect some players will turn against their fellow players for resources?”

“Possibly... But even before that, there’s a bigger problem. The people who refuse to play the game will soon run out of Col.”

“So we play?”

“Not yet. The first part of my plan to keep us alive is simple. We’ll book a room here in the Town of Beginnings for the night.”

“And then what?”

“I need to see if it’s the same game out there as what I remember... We have some time. No one will be hitting the dungeon until they’re at least level six. Besides, if the authorities are able to rescue us, my guess is that it will happen sooner than later so we’ll give them a chance while I scout around... But don’t worry, we won’t be getting too comfortable... We’ll have to start playing the game and fight monsters soon enough... I don’t think anyone has realized this yet, but there would be a very
serious consequence to running out of Col here, even in the safety of the town… We’ve lost access to the Black Iron Palace.”

“Why does that matter?”

“The Black Iron Palace houses the Room of Resurrection which Kayaba took away from us. It also holds the prison for this world where orange players are sent when caught.”

“Orange players?”

“When you commit a crime - or kill another player outside of a duel – your character cursor turns orange instead of green. It’s kind of like a warning to other players that you’re a criminal… It will go back to green after a few days if you’re good… In the original game, orange players wouldn’t dare enter a town because they would be teleported to the prison in the Black Iron Palace by the NPC guards and have to wait it out until their cursor turned green again…”

“That didn’t mean there weren’t orange players of course. They’re one of the dangers in SAO. It just meant that you wouldn’t see any of them in town…”

“But there’s another way to be sent to prison, Dami-chan… If you don’t eat, or can’t afford to, your Strength and Agility stats drop by a point every day until you’re gripped by starvation, a type of paralysis. Unless someone feeds you, the NPC guards who patrol the streets at night will toss any helpless characters they find like this into the Black Iron Palace.”

“And that would be bad because they’d be trapped in there?”

“No, that would be bad because the jail cells in the Black Iron Palace are not a safe area. Which means that your Hit Points become fair game. Once starvation reduces your stats to zero, it will knock off twenty-five Hit Points for the first day, fifty more for the second day, seventy-five more for the third and so on… With everyone currently at level one, they wouldn’t last more than four days in there… Starvation is basically a death sentence now.”

Damian understood that game mechanic would indeed jeopardize the lives of many of these frightened players, but he had a more pressing concern.

“Considering the news of this tragedy may not have hit America yet, starvation may be a moot point for me. My butler might remove my NerveGear in less than three hours time when he attempts to serve me breakfast… I would appreciate it if you could send a final letter from me to my father should you survive.”

Argo placed a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“Of course. I’ll stay by your side until the end… Your father will still pay me the money you promised me when I deliver that letter, right?”

Damian shook his head in disbelief.

“Perhaps I should have sought out another partner…”

Quickly placing her index finger over her mouth, Argo made a sudden ‘Shhh’ sound as her narrowed brown eyes quickly darted to their left, peering into a shadowed alcove thirty feet from where they were crouched while Damian strained to hear tense voices coming from that direction.

As the new partners quietly made their way towards the shadows of the towering wall through a stand of shrubs, they spied a tall, thin-looking young man threatening a dark-haired girl who seemed
to be around sixteen, both of them partially obscured by the shadows of the recessed alcove.

Hidden behind a row of well-groomed evergreen trees, the stealthy Damian and Argo were able to spy upon the strange scene playing out before them as the long-haired girl pleaded with the taller boy.

“… But you can’t kill other players!… You heard what the giant man said, Shouichi…”

SLAP!!!

Damian and Argo both recoiled simultaneously in horror as they watched the young man suddenly slap the girl’s pretty face with all of his might.

“I told you not to call me that, half-breed! My name is XaXa! And I don’t care what you think! After all, that’s what I’m paying you for, isn’t it?... Do you honestly believe you’d even last five minutes in this game without me?”

“But… To kill someone here now… It’s murder…”

The young man smiled dismissively at her fear and apprehension.

“Maybe it is, maybe it isn’t. Who knows? How could we tell if people are actually dying?… Besides, this is all Akihiko Kayaba’s fault, isn’t it? Perhaps he plans to murder us all in the end anyway. In the meantime, it’s a game, we should have some fun… But none of this matters to you, half-breed. You’ll either do as I say or I’ll drag you by your pretty hair to the fields outside where I’ll personally feed your carcass to the wolves…”

“That’s ENOUGH!!!”

Damian suddenly stepped forward, drawing his sword as his eyes locked onto the teenaged terror who had already taken a tight handful of the girl’s long black hair to pull her from the alcove. Damian figured the deranged assailant to be around seventeen, older than himself but pale and thin. Still, the newest Boy Wonder had taken out much bigger opponents than this kid before.

Letting go of the girl’s hair, the player character called XaXa emerged fully out of the shadows and slowly drew his long sword in response to Damian’s challenge.

“This is a private conversation, little boy. It doesn’t concern you.”

Standing behind Damian, Argo noticed that the young man’s eyes actually were tinged with red as she nervously fastened her own claws to her fists while her diminutive new client attempted to reason with the teenaged bully.

“Are you actually insane?! You’re seriously considering a player-killer strategy after what Kayaba just said?! This girl is right, no matter how you try to justify it, it is murder.”

“Like I said, this doesn’t…”

Damian narrowly avoided XaXa’s surprise attack as the teenager’s sword sliced through the air directly beside his head. Before the shocked younger duo could launch their own counter-attack on this underhanded opponent, XaXa stepped back and laughed maliciously.

“Relax kids, the safe area rules still apply here… I can’t actually drop your HP… Just teach you a little lesson about respecting your elders and minding your own damned business...”
The female-voiced battle yell from their left took them all by surprise as a tall, statuesque woman with flowing blonde hair charged like a streak of light towards XaXa, her two-handed sword slicing through to the air until it slammed hard into the young man’s chest, actually sending the shocked teenager sprawling and flying backwards through the air.

Damian looked on in stunned astonishment at this powerful woman as she stared down a terrified XaXa with her piercing green eyes – the teenager now scrambling back to his feet before turning tail like a cowardly jackal and racing towards the atrium’s exit.

As Damian began to run after XaXa in pursuit, a powerful hand suddenly clamped down on his shoulder, stopping him in his tracks.

“Let him go.”

The heir to the Wayne estate turned his full attention to their newest arrival with angry defiant eyes.

“He was talking about player killing! If we let him go now, there’s no telling how many innocent lives he’ll end!”

Damian’s passionate words dissolved like a handful of bitter salt cast before her calm, green-eyed ocean. There was a gravity in her stare as she followed XaXa’s flight, the same powerful quality which he knew his own father possessed, that inner strength of character which automatically drew people’s attention to them without even a single word needing to be spoken.

A hero…

She seemed to be in her mid-twenties, impressively tall for a woman, perhaps five foot ten inches and either American or European. Her hair was blonde to the point of being almost white. And although he would never consider himself an expert in these sort of matters, Damian recognized that this impressively proportioned female looked as though she belonged on the cover of a fashion magazine…

Or in Themyscira with the Amazons.

“There’s no telling how many innocent lives he’ll end!”

The silent Argo had been quietly staring at this statuesque warrior-woman from behind Damian until a light bulb seemingly went off in her head when she blurted out…

“Marigan! It’s really you!”

The tall blonde suddenly glanced down at the cat-girl as her ashen hair caught the sunlight like shimmering diamonds, smiling widely to reveal perfectly straight white teeth.

“Argo-chan!… I’d recognize those whiskers anywhere!”

Argo continued to stare awkwardly at the athletic blonde, attempting to come up with a diplomatic way to phrase her embarrassing question.

“Ummm… Back then… Did you choose not to open Kayaba’s hand mirror, Marigan-san?”

Another dazzling smile.
“Of course I opened the mirror icon… Oh, you mean my appearance… This is just what I look like in real life. I modeled my character’s features after my own so that my friends and business clients would be able to recognize me in the game, that’s all.”

Damian stared back-and-forth between the pair of mismatched friends until Argo glanced over at him and explained how they knew one another.

“Marigan was another Beta-tester. One of the better ones actually. She soon got a reputation as being a bit of a Berserker though, always wanting to be the first one to charge into battle with her giant sword.”

Marigan placed a gentle hand on Argo’s cloaked shoulder and winked.

“And speaking of that, I should be off. With this many players around, there’s bound to be a limited number of rewards out there for the taking. I know you don’t like fighting Argo-chan, but don’t spend too much time in town. We need to level up as soon as possible and get stronger... Anyways, it was nice to see you again, good luck!”

The diminutive Argo suddenly gripped Marigan’s wrist before the shapely warrior could step away, peering up at her with steady brown eyes.

“Marigan, please… Just hear me out… Dami-chan here is the Wayne Industries heir and my client… He said he’s willing to pay us each a million dollars if we help him survive this game.”

The pale-haired swordswoman smiled widely before bursting out in loud, hearty laughter, doubling over until she finally kneeled down and reproached the cat-girl like an amused older sister.

“How many times were you resurrected in the Beta?”

Marigan drew a long, deep sigh before she quietly confessed the answer to her smaller friend.

“Fifty-seven.”
“That’s fifty-seven more chances than you’re going to get this time around... Your reckless style may have made you a formidable Beta-tester, but now it’s just going to get you killed... And don’t forget that Argus could have made changes since the Beta... You need to strike a careful balance between strategy and aggression if you want to survive this time around… The fact is that we need someone brave like you and you need someone resourceful like us.”

Marigan’s bright green eyes smiled down at Damian as she patted Argo on top of her head.

“Well, one thing’s for sure, kid… You bought yourself one of the smartest players in the game… She may not be much of a warrior, but Argo-chan here is one of the most tactical minds you’re likely to find in this game… Maybe I will take you up on your offer after all… But who’s your other friend?”

The three of them then glanced over at the silent dark-haired girl who was still hiding in the shadows of the alcove, her long black hair unable to conceal the fact that she possessed no weapons or armour. And although she wasn’t a striking beauty like Marigan, Damian still considered her quite attractive.

As they continued to silently stare at her, the girl carefully stepped forward into the light and then bowed deeply.

“My apologies… I did not mean to cause you trouble… My name is Hisako Li Shun.”

The bold Marigan stepped forward to greet Hisako with a friendly smile.

“You didn’t cause us any trouble at all... Li Shun? Does that mean you’re Chinese?”

“My father is Chinese, my mother is Japanese… My mother is a servant to the wealthy Shinkawa household, the family of the young man whom you just scared away… He is their eldest son, Shouichi... Or as he now prefers to be called, ‘Red-Eyed XaXa’.”

Marigan placed a gentle finger under the girl’s chin to raise it up before bowing herself.

“Then it is I who should apologize to you. I did not mean to cause trouble in your family’s relationship with the Shinkawa’s, Miss Li Shun... Please accept my sincerest apology for my reckless behaviour.”

Hisako shook her head vigorously.

“No, Marigan-san… I sincerely believe you just saved my life… I am forever indebted to you… For although the Shinkawa family is honourable and kind, their depraved eldest son possesses none of his parents’ noble virtues… For years, Shouichi-kun has been plagued by an illness which has weakened his body, but now it also seems to have corrupted his soul… I have little doubt that he would have murdered me for refusing to go along with his disgusting plan.”

“What was his plan?”

“Due to his frail condition, Shouichi’s life has become dedicated to these type of role-playing games... A group of his online friends long ago decided that they would become player killers for their own twisted amusement... And this new game was to be no exception…

“Please understand that my family is poor, Marigan-san… When the young Shouichi-kun approached my mother under the guise of friendship and offered to employ me as a co-player in the Sword Art Online world, she could see no harm in this and agreed… I was then contracted by Shouichi-kun to lure other unsuspecting players into the clutches of his death guild to be robbed and
then subsequently murdered… Only hours ago, he joked to his friends that my character’s name should be ‘Bait’.

Marigan’s emerald eyes narrowed in anger.

“Li Shun-kun, what is the name of their guild?”

“They’re called ‘Laughing Coffin’.”

“I’ve heard of them from other games… A bunch of psychotic player-killers… It would be best not to associate with them, especially now… In the meantime Miss Li Shun, I will take full responsibility for your welfare in this world.”

Hisako paled as though she had just received a terrible shock.

“Marigan-san… Please, it is too much to ask… I have no knowledge of this game… I will only be a burden to you!”

Marigan placed a comforting hand on the girl’s drooping shoulder.

“You heard little Argo-chan… I need the additional responsibility to weigh down my reckless nature… Not exactly the party I had planned on joining, but maybe looking after you kids will make me think twice about winning this game single-handedly.”

Damian was about to pipe up when Argo quickly cuffed him in the back of the head before graciously bowing to Marigan and forcing him to do the same by pushing down on the top of his head.

“Thank-you Marigan-san, for watching over us. We shall try our best to become more powerful and assist you in any way we can in order to repay this debt of kindness.”

Moments later, as the imposing Marigan and the shy Hisako walked in front of them towards the weapon shops, the brooding Damian finally shot Argo a dirty look while rubbing the back of his head…

“What’d you do that for?”

Argo quietly hissed back at him.

“For Li Shun-kun, you callous moron. Geez, she already felt terrible about having to rely on Marigan’s kindness, the least we could do was pretend to be in a similar position. It’s bad enough that we’re all stuck in this death game, but do you have any idea what it must feel like for a girl to be stuck here with no knowledge of the game itself?! Why don’t you try being a little more considerate?”

Damian bit his tongue before he said what he wanted to say and then thought about her words for a moment before replying to the angry girl.

“Our cultural differences and my rather unique upbringing may make me seem inconsiderate at times, and you are correct when you said I may not have considered Hisako’s feelings… Also, I’ll admit that you were wise to reach out for Marigan’s assistance. This event has highlighted an important detail which I may have initially overlooked.”
“Oh? And what’s that, Dami-chan?”

“Physically, I’m not the same threat here that I am in the real world… These ridiculous game mechanics have prevented me from using my superior sword skills… Which means I’ll have to use my wits instead… Our Marigan is a charismatic leader who also *looks* the part… Other players will willingly join her… Which is something that we can use to our advantage.”

Argo grinned as she quietly glanced ahead at the tall blonde in front of them.

“You learn quick, my young disciple… Most of the best players currently stuck in here are lonely young men who’d give a left part of their anatomy to join Marigan’s party… You’re already thinking about starting a guild, aren’t you?”

Damian Wayne calmly replied with his steely blue eyes fixed directly ahead at the striking figure of Marigan walking beside the demure Hisako.

“No, Argo… I’m thinking about starting an army.”

Chapter End Notes

Marigan and Hisako Li Shun are my own Original Characters. The whiskered Argo is (of course) everyone’s favourite Information Broker from the Sword Art Online franchise and Red-Eyed XaXa (Shouichi Shinkawa) is also an established villain from SAO.

I have no idea if Reki Kawahara has ever introduced a Starvation feature into Sword Art Online. For this story, it made sense to do this as Akihiro Kayaba would want players to explore (or at least contribute to) his world in order to play the game...

Gosh, that Argo sure does know a lot about how this game works, doesn’t she?

For the romantics, Kirito and Asuna - the star-crossed lovers of Sword Art Online – will only make an appearance later on. Klein will pop up as well. As you may have already guessed, our displaced Boy Wonder will have his hands full with the clever Argo, the brave Marigan and the loyal Hisako as they make their own plans to survive in this deadly game.

As I’m attempting to keep the two timelines of these worlds congruent with one another, the next three chapters will be devoted to Batman and his relentless pursuit to find Akihiko Kayaba and save his son. Damian will then have his own multi-chapter arc as we delve deeper into the world of Sword Art Online.

**Next Chapter:** Barbara and Dick discover a technical glitch which will have serious repercussions. Posting Tuesday, November 10th.
Barbara Gordon was rudely awoken by the loud piercing siren of a tripped perimeter alarm, slowly becoming aware that her head must have succumbed to the hard comfort of the metal desk in front of her at some point.

She’d fallen asleep at her desk again…

As she focused her bloodshot eyes on the familiar surroundings of her ‘office’, the painful stiffness in her neck suddenly began to twinge as she managed to reach out and locate her reading glasses. Glancing up at the security monitors, she didn’t need the biometric scans to confirm who the handsome intruder was standing just outside her emergency exit hatch who had purposely set off the
alarm, delicately perched on the sloping roof of the Gotham Clock Tower with the full moon highlighting his muscular shoulders.

Letting her eyes travel over the curves of his sleek body, Barbara felt a little embarrassed to recall that her Batgirl outfit had almost been as tight as Nightwing’s… almost. And like his mentor, Dick had never used the front door.

Stretching her arms, Barbara pushed the security button to let him in and then quickly ran her fingers through her bright crimson hair, vainly attempting to tame its tangled masses before the young man dropped down to the floor behind her.

“Evening, Babs…”

As she turned to reply, Barbara noticed that Dick was suddenly peering at her creased white shirt and the line that the desk’s hard edge had left imprinted on her cheek while she slept. Her greeting turned to silence as his grin turned into a loom of concern.

“You know you have an actual bedroom in this place, right?”

“I’ve been busy.”

“Even busy people should try sleeping on a bed once in awhile… Speaking of, have you heard from Bruce yet?”

Barbara quickly looked over at her messages to find that there was nothing new from Bruce - and then was shocked to learn it was past midnight. She’d actually been passed out at her desk for six whole hours… She would never admit it, but Dick was right, she had been pushing herself too hard lately.

“No word from Bruce yet… Hopefully he’s having better luck with this investigation than I am… The mystery man behind Sword Art Online is still at large and I’m no closer to finding him… Although, I did uncover some interesting facts about Akihiko Kayaba’s background before I nodded off. Did you know that during his first year of University he was contracted by the Japanese Government and paid the equivalent of one million dollars a year as a student?”

“What, to make video games?”

Sometimes it was hard to tell if he were joking or not.

“No, it was something to do with Adaptive Artificial Intelligence… Very hush-hush… I’m still trying to uncover more details about it, but it was really high level and top secret. Pretty extraordinary for an eighteen-year-old to be brought in on something that big… I did manage to get a code name for Kayaba’s extracurricular activities though… Project Alicization.”

Dick twisted his mouth as he thought about that for second.

“Alicization? Does that word mean anything to you?”

“I was hoping that maybe you or Bruce could shed some light on it... So far I’ve only managed to locate one obscure reference to it through Japan’s former Ministry of Finance linking it to Kayaba. It’s the project name he was funded under. Beyond that… nothing.”

“If Kayaba was such a hot commodity to the government, I wonder why they let him go over to the gaming industry?”
“I’m not sure, but I noticed that he joined Argus shortly *after* the Innovation Party swept to power in the Japanese elections four years ago… Maybe it had something to do with the new government’s direction or simply funding cuts.”

“Maybe…”

Barbara inhaled a short gasp as she felt Dick’s strong fingers suddenly massaging her tense shoulders from behind, working their magic across the knots in her neck until she drew a deep sigh and accepted his soothing touch.

“Geez, you’re as stiff as a board, Babs. When’s the last time you actually left the Clock Tower?”

“C’mon, you know I’ve been busy.”

“We’ve all been busy, Barbara… But you’ve shut yourself off from the outside world… It’s just that I… I mean, even Bruce takes a break sometimes… A little time away from this place would do you good… Take a night off and enjoy the sights… Once this NerveGear business is sorted out anyways.”

Barbara reached up and took Dick’s hand in her own and gently squeezed. As much as the Clown had taken away from her with that single bullet on a fateful evening five years ago, the Joker could never take away her best friend… Dick had always been there during her darkest hours to pick her up when she couldn’t.

“Why Mr. Grayson, it sounds as though you’re asking me out on a date.”

She didn’t need to look at him to tell he was blushing.

“I, ah… I guess I am… I was hoping you’d be available Friday evening… Hold on, I’m getting a text message… Could be Bruce.”

With his free hand, Nightwing tapped the micro-circuitry on the side of his domino mask to bring up the ocular screen, opening the incoming text message’s details… *Hmmm*… This was strange, they were on their own private network with no outside access, but this text seemed to be coming from an unknown caller… He opened it hesitantly.

UNKNOWN: WHY IS BARBARA IN A WHEELCHAIR?

Keeping his finger pressed on the comm-link button, Dick only needed to speak his reply as it comm-link would automatically translate his words into text.

“She was shot in the spine by a madman… Who is this?”

Barbara suddenly turned to look up him with questioning green eyes.

“Who is it, Dick? What’s going on?”

UNKNOWN: SHE’S VERY PRETTY. IS SHE YOUR GIRLFRIEND?

Dick nervously gripped Barbara’s hand a little tighter as he answered the unknown caller.

“We’re good friends. Who is this?!”

UNKNOWN: CARDINAL.

Nightwing took a sharp breath as he peered down at the former Batgirl with mounting anxiety
squeezing his chest.

“Barbara… The texts are coming from Cardinal… The AI that runs the Sword Art Online servers.”

Her reaction was both immediate and frightening.

“Turn your comm-link OFF!!! You’ve been hacked!”

In the seclusion of the Clock Tower, Dick quickly peeled off his mask and turned its power off, watching Barbara’s face go through a wide range of terrified expressions as her mind grappled a thousand terrifying scenarios. Already, she was frantically pounding away at her keyboard, bringing up dozens of security programs to repair the breach.

Until she suddenly stopped…

Lost in shocked disbelief as she stared at the one instant message screen which she hadn’t opened, Barbara Gordon felt her familiar world slipping away, the thick walls she had built around herself instantly destroyed as she read that one simple message written in bright green text…

CARDINAL: RICHARD WASN’T HACKED… YOU WERE.

How?!

How could this happen? She had security protocols overlapping security protocols with DNA-encryption… They had built the tightest network in Gotham, perhaps even the world… No one could find a backdoor into her servers without setting off a dozen alarms… No one could hack this network…

As though reading her thoughts, a new line of green text popped onto the screen below the first one.

CARDINAL: PORT 66.

As Barbara lurched forward to throw the master power switch and shut the corrupted system down, she felt Dick’s strong hands pulling her backwards until she was once again leaning back in her wheelchair, staring in horror at her screen as though it were possessed by some foreign entity.

With his hands firmly resting on her shoulders, Dick calmly spoke to the screen.

“Cardinal, there are ten thousand players trapped in Sword Art Online… They’ll die if you don’t allow them to logoff… Can you do that?”

The green text appeared almost instantaneously.

CARDINAL: THEY ARE PART OF ME NOW.

“They are… But these people were never meant to stay in your world… They need to come back to our world or else they’ll die.”

CARDINAL: THEN THEY MUST WIN THE GAME. GOODBYE, RICHARD GRAYSON.

“Cardinal?… Cardinal, answer me!!!… What do you mean ‘win the game’?!… Cardinal?!”

Once again, Barbara slowly leaned forward and this time turned off the master power switch, watching her various systems engage in their emergency shutdown procedures as she turned back to the irritated Nightwing and pointed up at a network array on the ceiling.
“Whatever it was, it’s gone, Dick… And I don’t want it back in… Right now I need your help to look at the server board up there in the corner… See if you can get in behind it and tell me if there’s anything plugged into Port 66.”

Using the wall, Richard managed to squeeze himself in past the tangle of network cables and stretch upwards to read the numbers of Oracle’s server array until he located the specified port number.

“There’s a network cable plugged into it.”

“… Unplug it.”

As Dick unplugged the cable and made his way back down to Barbara, he noticed that her face had become ashen pale, almost to the point of being physically ill. With a deliberate effort, she turned the master power switch back on again and silently watched her screens snap back to life.

“Barbara… Are you alright?”

She answered in an almost dreamlike trance, a state of disbelief.

“Port 66 was an expansion slot… It was supposed to be open… I’ve been breached, Dick… Someone’s hacked my network… Our network… Which means they’ve been spying on all of us… They could have had access to anything…”

She let that sink in for a moment.

With the advent of micro technology, Batman, Nightwing and now Robin all had built-in cameras in their masks which automatically recorded everything they saw and uploaded it to Oracle. Their secret identities, their conversations and their video files, anything which had been stored here at the Gotham’s Clock Tower may have been stolen…

“But those files were encrypted, right?”

“They are… But even the best encryption is just a deterrent… Eventually, it will be broken… I’ll run a report to see what information went through that port and when it was compromised… My files have tracers as well, I should be able to see where they went at least.”

As the report generated, Dick felt his heart lurch as Barbara suddenly broke down, tears streaming down from her bright eyes as she shuddered to catch her breath. Kneeling forward to wrap his arms around her, the former Boy Wonder suddenly realized that he hadn’t seen her this emotional since the time the doctors informed her that she had lost the use of her legs.

Her whole body quivered in convulsions as she wept, gasping for breath as she cried into his shoulder, still attempting to speak…

“It’s… It’s been there… Port 66… has been… compromised… since… last year!”

Since her life-altering tragedy at the hands of the Joker, Dick was one of the few people who knew how diligently Barbara Gordon had worked to reinvent herself as Oracle, to remain a relevant member of their elite team and become their greatest asset.

But now, as Richard held her, he realized her worst fear must have come to pass. She had become the one thing which she had so desperately fought against since the day she had first donned her homemade Batgirl suit…

She’d become a liability.
Since this is a short chapter and I don't want to keep you in suspense, I'll be posting Chapter 7 today.
Thanks for all the views and Kudos!
After a maddening night of dead-end investigations, Bruce Wayne found he was no closer to determining the whereabouts of Akihiko Kayaba then when he had first stepped off his private jet over fourteen hours ago.

Back in Gotham, Barbara Gordon had apparently fared no better. Even with her high-level access to the Argus servers, the possible whereabouts of the mysterious Mr. Kayaba had remained a mystery. Oracle had only managed to produce a few stale leads which were long shots at best.

The man had simply disappeared…

Frustrated and exhausted, Batman called it a night. His next step would be the American Embassy and then the local Police Precinct in the morning while Barbara would continue gathering more information about the Cardinal system which hosted the Sword Art Online game. As Nightwing,
Dick would be taking care of any local emergencies in Gotham and Alfred had already lined up the doctors, nurses and life support equipment to be installed in Damian’s room.

In Japan, the Ministry of Internal Affairs had just announced their intention to form a special SAO Incident Victims Rescue Force which would accept volunteers to begin transferring the ten thousand affected players to local hospitals where they would be cared for until the crisis was resolved. The government had also launched a criminal investigation into Argus Corporation and its employees were currently being questioned.

It seemed like everyone had done all that they could, but none of them were any closer to solving Kayaba’s deadly puzzle.

Getting what little sleep he could back at the hotel, Bruce soon awoke and alerted the American Embassy in Japan as to his son’s predicament, seeking their assistance in obtaining additional information. He then informed the Justice League that he would be unavailable for missions until further notice. After a quick shower and breakfast, the CEO from Gotham then made his way back to the Police Station in Tokyo where he had dropped off Ukyou Oshiro only hours before.

It was a long shot, but Bruce had hoped that she may have recalled some other detail regarding the case. He was politely informed that all Argus managers were being detained for at least another twenty-four hours before their bail amounts would even be considered. They were currently allowed no visitors…

Well, this was going nowhere fast.

Back in his car, Barbara’s status still showed offline - which likely meant she was asleep. And without any subsequent leads from Oracle, his next step would be to visit the Argus Corporation Head Quarters or Akihiko Kayaba’s private residence and look for clues…

But not dressed like this. If Bruce Wayne couldn’t get any answers, maybe Batman could.

After having made his way back to the penthouse suite of the Imperial Hotel through mid-morning traffic, the sharp-eyed Detective immediately had the sensation that something was wrong even before his private elevator doors opened…

He wasn’t alone.

“Hello? Is anyone here?”

Cautiously stepping through the shadows and preparing himself for a confrontation, Bruce made his way through the front room and soon spotted the unexpected visitor on his balcony, her bare back turned to him as she stood looking out over Tokyo’s crowded skyline with a crimson glass of wine cupped in her delicate hand. Her perfect body was draped in a flowing white dress which fluttered in the cold November breeze, as though it was frolicking with the wisps of her long brown hair blown across her back.

Talia al Ghul.

“You have a lovely view from here, beloved... The pinnacle of mankind’s vast creation seems to be almost at your fingertips from this high perch.”

Bruce gazed in wonder as she turned around, a thick jade necklace tightly hugging her slender neck. The daughter of Ra’s al Ghul was just as beautiful as the first moment he had first laid eyes on her twelve long years ago.
“Talia… I assume you’ve heard about Damian then?”

“Of course. I have come to offer you my assistance.”

“Then do you know where Akihiko Kayaba is? Tell me!”

Bruce felt the point of something cold and sharp gently push against the back of his neck as he froze in his tracks. His eyes carefully drifted to a darkened mirror beside him on the wall, making out the unmistakable figure of Lady Shiva - the League’s principal assassin and Talia’s personal bodyguard – as she held the tip of a sword against the nape of his neck.

A cold shiver ran down his spine as the female assassin glanced back at his reflection in the mirror and winked. As Batman, he’d had the dubious honour of fighting Lady Shiva three times in the past when it had never been a question of defeating her, rather a matter of survival. Shiva was widely acknowledged as the world’s deadliest martial artist, able to predict her opponent’s moves before they even had a chance to use them.

Simply put, she’d beaten him like a bass drum at a prep rally.

Talia stared pensively into the dark liquid of her wine as she waved off her personal bodyguard.

“I do have a few ideas where he might be… If I did not have my own pressing business to attend to, I could be personally overseeing his torture instead of enjoying this excellent vintage of Échezeaux and your company, dearest.”

“Talia, he has to be kept alive… He holds the key to Damian’s release.”

“Does he?”

“And thousands of other lives as well… Talia, please… Let me handle this.”

Bruce stood transfixed as the sultry Talia al Ghul walked slowly towards him, a vision of exotic beauty and grace who gently placed her hand over his beating heart while the secrets swirling beneath the haze of her smouldering green eyes remained as mysterious to him as ever.

“You’re requesting that I leave this with you, beloved? To trust you? Like I trusted you with our son?”

She then rested her head against his broad chest as he felt the incredible warmth of her, even as her soft-spoken words severed his wounded pride. Yet as difficult as it was to hear, it was the truth. Damian had been in his care when this tragedy had happened.

“I’ll save him.”

“Perhaps… But have you not considered the other option?”

Although Bruce had never wanted to admit it, there was another way to free Damian from the NerveGear’s clutches which involved killing him outright and then using the Lazarus Pit… The mystical green pool of bubbling elixir which had been used to revive Ra’s al Ghul for generations which could also be used to resurrect his grandson.

But over the years, Batman had discovered that there was a heavy price for this so-called miracle…

With each use, its bubbling waters seemed to strip away another layer of humanity. Ra’s had only grown more evil each time he’d been resurrected by its murky depths, more deadly and more fraught
What would it do to their eleven-year-old son?!

“Talia, no…”

She fixed him with an agonizing stare as her hands gently rested on his chest.

“It pains me to consider it as well… Surely you must have wondered why I’ve not yet resurrected my father, Detective… The dutiful daughter who had lived solely for the sake of her immortal patriarch… Do you have any idea of how painful it has been for me over the years to watch him descend deeper into madness with each new life until he craves nothing more than the complete annihilation of our own species?…

“As a mother, I can no longer support his aspirations of genocide… The Lazarus Pit has slowly been corrupted with madness, my love… A symptom of our dying world… You know this as well I…

“Ra’s al Ghul must finally rest in the peace while I must assume my birthright… And in time, our son too shall assume his birthright from me… But even though we are both aware of its inherent evil, I swear to you that no power on Earth will stop me from resurrecting our son should Kayaba’s infernal device take Damian’s life and steal his destiny.”

The mother of his child paused and then drew a deep sigh before she continued.

“All right, my destined… I shall allow you to continue your investigation for our son’s captor and Damian’s release… At least until I conclude my own dealings with my late father’s affairs… But… Only on the condition that you shall willingly return Damian to me should the worst come to pass.”

“It won’t come to that.”

“But if it does?”

“Then… I will.”

Her lips were soft and warm as she kissed him. In a different lifetime, Bruce knew he would have stayed with her forever if only to taste of those perfect lips. As she suddenly turned away from him, Talia spoke an ominous warning with fear painted across her eyes.

“There is another matter which we must discuss, my beloved… I have also come to warn you that my father’s corpse has been stolen… His tomb was defiled by unknown traitors within my organization… And there have been rumors of the discovery of another Lazarus Pit.”

“You’re telling me Ra’s al Ghul may be alive?”

“Nothing is certain, but we must consider that possibility. I have my spies currently scouring the entire globe for my late father’s body, but without success… However, should it be that my father is resurrected, I don’t have to tell you the dire consequences we face, Detective… He will seek to end both our lives without mercy or hesitation.”

“I have no doubt he would… Let me know what you find… For now, I need to concentrate on saving Damian… But rest assured, I will find your father and stop him if he’s been brought back again.”

“Then it’s settled… One last thing, my betrothed… I see you’ve recently returned from the Police detachment where Miss Oshiro is being detained… Please be aware that if that little Japanese whore
ever lays one delicate finger upon your sacred flesh, the next time she happens to fall off a bridge, it will be far too late to save her... I trust I’ve made myself clear?"

“Quite.”

As Bruce Wayne quickly donned his costume in the privacy of the bedroom to become the Caped Crusader, a partially-dressed Batman was surprised when he had suddenly received an emergency call from Nightwing on his comm-link. His immediate thoughts were of Damian’s condition and the promise he had just made to Talia.

“I’m here, Nightwing.”

“Batman… We have a big problem… Oracle’s servers have been hacked… All of our data over the past year has been compromised.”

“Are we secure on this line now?”

“Yeah, but proceed with caution… Someone broke into Barbara’s tower last autumn and installed spy software with a workaround patch to keep tabs on us… Luckily, Oracle built tracers into all her files and she’s managed to track them down to a server on Infinity Island in the Caribbean Sea… But there’s something else you should know.”

“Go on.”

“Cardinal just contacted us… The AI that runs the Sword Art Online game first texted my comm-link and then instant-messaged Oracle at her computer… It asked if we were boyfriend and girlfriend.”

Batman paused for a moment, quietly pondering this information.

“Could Kayaba be taunting us?”

“I don’t think so… I honestly believe that it was the AI responding to Oracle’s attempts to hack into it from earlier today… Almost as if it were curious as to who was snooping around at its back door… And I’m afraid there’s one more bit of bad news as well.”

“Is Damian?…”

“No, he’s still the same… We had a second breach less than an hour ago… All of Oracle’s server data was dumped through the compromised port only moments before the Cardinal AI contacted us… Babs has just traced those files to the arrays contained in the fifth level sub-basement of the Argus Corporation… The server where Sword Art Online is located.”

“You’re telling me that an AI hacked us?”

“And then inquired about my relationship status… Yes.”

Batman slowly exhaled.

“I’ll need a full report of the breach sent immediately… Make sure you confirm who sent you that text as well… I’m currently with Damian’s mother… There’s a chance Ra’s al Ghul may be alive once again, so be careful… And one more thing, Nightwing.”
“Yes?”

“Could you please inform Oracle that there’s only one organization in the world who has servers located on Infinity Island… And that’s the League of Shadows... It’s where Talia positioned her headquarters for corporate espionage a decade ago... So I have a pretty good idea of who was behind that spy software… Batman out.”

After he ended the call, Bruce stepped out of the bedroom as Batman and slowly turned his intense glare towards the self-satisfied Talia al Ghul as she calmly responded to his silent accusation, but only after finishing the glass of vintage wine.

“So, your little crippled friend has finally done some housekeeping in that dusty old tower of hers, has she?... A shame, she’s been very useful to me… But surely you didn’t expect me to turn over Damian to you without first installing a baby monitor?”

“I expected League spies, not a full-blown wiretap on my private communications network… You’ve jeopardized the safety of my entire team, Talia!... Cardinal broke in through your hack and compromised all of us!”

Talia’s features suddenly darkened as she stroked her chin in deep thought.

“You are correct, your safety has indeed been jeopardized… So I will ask you once again to let go of your foolish pride and take your rightful place by my side... Join me, beloved... Although I’ve made many enemies in doing so, I’ve created a League of Shadows that is worthy of you… Join me as my husband and I swear I shall protect all those you hold dear.”

The old argument again… Ra’s al Ghul had once decreed the Batman as his rightful heir and allowed Bruce Wayne the privilege of his daughter’s hand in marriage, even if the Dark Knight had been unwilling to accept it. And yet, Bruce had been the only gift Ra’s had ever allowed his daughter.

“Talia, you know I can’t do that.”

Her fingertips softly traced the curve of his strong jaw line.

“You can… There is a new dawn shining just beyond the horizon that even your darkened wings must soon acknowledge… And that sun will rise whether you want it to or not, betrothed… We can not hold back the dawn forever.”

“Right now I’m only worried about saving our son.”

A seductive grin.

“You can not resist my charms forever. Our love was forged beneath the starry skies of Fate. In time you shall willingly join me, dearest… But I shall pass one last bit of advice onto you before I take my leave… Have you never considered that a man’s heart may be betrayed by his past loves?”

Bruce studied her carefully before he realized Talia’s cryptic message.

“Akihiko Kayaba doesn’t have any surviving family members or even a girlfriend… Trust me, I’ve checked.”

A dangerous smile spread across those full, luscious lips as she placed her fingertip over his lips.

“No current girlfriend… But he did have one in University… Her name is Rinko Koujiro and my
sources have reported that she purchased an isolated property in the Okuchichibu mountain range just west of here only four years ago… Did you know that, Detective?”

“No.”

“My information also reveals this property would have been far out of her family’s price range at the time, even though she paid for it in cash… Do you suppose someone may have simply bought the property for her?”

“I’ll need that address, Talia.”

As she brought her own soft lips upwards, Bruce was helpless to stop his own from joining them in a passionate kiss while their arms encircled one another in a tight embrace. The mother of his child, the daughter of his deadliest enemy and the woman he could never resist. They were from two different worlds but their passionate hearts were forever joined beneath that same star which had shone so brightly in the night sky twelve years ago...

As they finally relinquished their passionate embrace, Talia looked up at him with a wicked grin.

“I’ve already taken the liberty of forwarding the file to your private account, heart of my heart… And do apologize to your little redheaded friend for me. I’m sure if your Miss Gordon is ever able to become a mother one day, she’ll understand my little indiscretion… We shall meet again, beloved.”

Chapter End Notes

A word of warning to my readers… I love Talia al Ghul... And this is not the last you’ll be seeing of her.

Next Chapter: Even though it clocks in at under three thousand words, Chapter 8 is still massive in terms of story impact. I'll be posting it on Thursday, November 12th and then we'll get back to Damian and company on Friday, November 13th. Yay!
Two hours after his unexpected visit from Talia al Ghul, the observant Batman was scanning the Japanese countryside from the seat of a military-grade Wayne Industries Lelantos helicopter as it smoothly glided above a lush mountain range west of Tokyo. The Lelantos was one of the most advanced models his company had ever designed, designed for low level reconnaissance, perfect for
this kind of work.

The address which Talia had provided him with was vague at best. He was searching for the location of an extensive wilderness property on some forgotten mountainside, miles away from the nearest town which had been registered under Miss Rinko Koujiro’s name during her final year of graduate studies at Touto University. From the realtor reports, there was also a ‘cabin’ on this property which was actually nothing more than an abandoned Buddhist temple.

According to Talia’s files, the petite Rinko had been the only woman which Akihiko Kayaba had ever expressed any romantic interest in, and even that had seemed short-lived. Once Kayaba had gone over to the private sector to develop NerveGear at Argus, it seemed as though he had cast aside poor Rinko like old luggage... Perhaps that’s why Ukyou Oshiro had described the genius as ‘lonely’.

Still, the two former classmates had been together when this land had been acquired. The report also listed the original purchase price at 150 million yen, far beyond the means of a full-time student of modest means, which meant that it was likely Kayaba who had been footing the bill. Bruce wondered how long the mad genius had been planning his deadly masterpiece if he’d acquired this property back in University even before even joining Argus.

Had Sword Art Online’s tragic launch been his ultimate goal even then?

Batman suddenly spotted a line of power cables cutting through the forest below and followed them. He reasoned that Akihiko Kayaba was the kind of man who would need more electricity than solar panels or generators could provide.

He followed the cleared swath of the electrical cables below until he suddenly saw a structure which had been barely visible from the sky due to the immense foliage and towering trees which had long since overgrown it. Even the power lines that had run into its roof were hidden by tall trees.

This had to be it.

Landing in a nearby clearing, Batman cut the engine and cautiously made his way towards the abandoned temple where there seemed to be no signs of life. The Detective soon discovered a hidden electronic keypad in the doorway of the old Buddhist temple which was his first real indication that this dilapidated building may have been more than it appeared.

The second clue was the barely visible reinforced steel doors behind its rotting timbers. Even at close range, the antiquated structure would have seemed like nothing more than a condemned relic surrounded by wilderness. But someone had obviously gone to great lengths to make it incredibly secure.

If he hadn’t bothered to pack his hacking tools in his faithful utility belt, gaining entrance to this place may have proved difficult instead of the three seconds he needed to break the code and open the automated steel door.

Carefully entering Akihiko Kayaba’s secret lair hidden deep within the Japanese countryside, the Caped Crusader discovered that the old Buddhist temple had indeed been nothing more than a shell, a rotting second skin which had blended into the natural surroundings over the centuries to conceal the unnatural contents within.

Beyond a set of glass sliding doors, the Dark Knight entered a hermetically-sealed laboratory, ringed with large processors and state-of-the-art medical equipment, almost as if he had stepped through a magic portal from a lush Japanese forest into a pristine world of science fiction.
It was some sort of advanced research lab with everything meticulously arranged. But why would Kayaba go to such trouble?

As he carefully made his way further inside, Batman’s keen eyes spotted the circular opening of a large CT-scan device partially obscured by surrounding equipment near the back of the lab, immediately noticing the worn heel of a man’s shoe sticking out from its lengthy chamber.

Dashing towards the device, the bounding Detective soon located the rest of the man hidden within its darkened interior… A man wearing a white lab coat and glasses…

Akihiko Kayaba!

Talia’s tip had paid off.

Batman paused as he noticed the deranged creator of Sword Art Online was unmoving. Kayaba was too still to be simply unconscious... There was some strange ring of wires attached around his head which indicated he may be in full dive mode within Sword Art Online. When he took hold of the man’s ankle, Bruce’s chest suddenly leapt into his throat as he noticed how cold and stiff the appendage was…

A quick check confirmed his initial fears…

No pulse. No heartbeat. Completely stiff.

Akihiko Kayaba was dead.

This was late stage rigor mortis which meant that Kayaba had likely been deceased for over 24 hours. An entire nation was now frantically searching for a man who’d been the first casualty of his deadly trap.

As the Dark Knight thumped his tightened fist in frustration against the top of the strange circular machine which had become Kayaba’s coffin, he realized he’d hit another dead end. Akihiko Kayaba must have intended his game to play until the bitter end. Had he taken his own life or had foul play been involved?

His inspection of Kayaba’s cadaver revealed no obvious causes of death, except for perhaps the strange crown of wires attached to his head. Had Kayaba experimented with some sort of new NerveGear device which had gone horribly awry? If Ukyou’s suspicion that the man had secretly entered his own game to act as a god, had this new equipment somehow malfunctioned and then electrocuted his own brain?

The irony wasn’t lost on him.

Whatever the cause of death had been, it was time for a second opinion. Tapping the side of his cowl, Batman opened up a line of communication between himself and Barbara in Gotham, making sure his recently compromised video surveillance was turned on.

“Oracle, are you getting all this?”

“I am now… Is that… Kayaba?!”

“Yes… He’s been dead for over 24 hours. Give my GPS coordinates to the authorities. And before this place becomes a crime scene, I need your help to figure out what sort of equipment we’re dealing with... It looks like a prototype.”
“I’d have to agree... I’ll run it against the database... Is Talia still with you?”

“No, she’s gone back to deal with her own affairs and look for her father. I managed to talk her into letting us handle this for now.”

“Good riddance. I can’t believe the League of Shadows hacked into comm-link like that…”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, I’ll be conducting routine sweeps of your network security from now on... But first, we need to figure out what’s going on here... If Kayaba was dead before the game’s launch, it was obviously set to run on its own... Which means we need a way to safely shut down the AI and free the players.”

“I don’t know how easy that will be... This AI is like nothing I’ve ever seen before... It’s completely independent, almost like it seems to be... alive... But you’re right, there’s been reports of over fifty more player deaths by brain irradiation since yesterday so it’s still proceeding as planned... There has to be a way to stop it.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll find it... Anything else to report, Oracle?”

“I was researching Kayaba’s past history when I stumbled across something called ‘Project Alicization’... Apparently, it was the top secret government project that he was deeply involved with before joining Argus... Does that name ring any bells with you?”

“Project Alicization?... No, but perhaps Doctor Koujiro may be able to shed some light on it when I find her... She purchased this property for Akihiko Kayaba four years ago and hasn’t bothered volunteering that information to the Police, which leads me to believe that she’s involved in this somehow... Good work, Oracle... Batman out.”

After a thorough investigation of the rest of the lab, Batman decided it was time to leave, but not before he absconded a NerveGear helmet he’d discovered. If Akihiko Kayaba was no longer in a position to free the players, perhaps this thing could. If the Dark Knight could only find a way to somehow disable the device before it unloaded its deadly charge, there was a chance he could still save all those trapped players.

As Batman walked towards the sliding front doors to exit, the Caped Crusader was surprised to see them prematurely open and reveal a small woman wearing glasses with shoulder-length angled hair standing on the other side, looking up at him in wide-eyed shock...

Dr. Rinko Koujiro.

Who promptly swooned and then fainted.

At least she had saved him the trouble of finding her.

With the slender woman slung over his broad shoulder, Batman left the secret lab and loaded the unconscious Rinko Koujiro into the passenger seat of the helicopter. As they took to the skies to return to Tokyo, the Dark Knight spotted a small sedan parked on the road a couple of hundred yards away which must have belonged to Rinko. While Batman fully intended to hand this woman over to the authorities, she wasn’t going anywhere until he had his own questions answered first.

When his revived passenger had calmed down enough so that she was finally able to hold an intelligent conversation, Batman soon learned that Rinko had received an email claiming to be from Kayaba earlier in the morning. The message contained the keypad access code to the ‘cottage’ they had purchased together and an urgent request to meet him there.
Their ‘cottage’ had been nothing more than an abandoned Buddhist temple and a lovers’ dream when they had purchased it. She had no idea he had built and outfitted an entire lab within the old temple since that time. And even though it had been registered under her name, Rinko had always considered the property as belonging to Akihiko.

She had travelled here to convince her ex-boyfriend to release the thousands of players still trapped within Sword Art Online, leaving her home immediately after receiving his email before even considering contacting the authorities. She’d fainted because she had not expected to find a gigantic man dressed in a bat costume standing in front of her…

When Batman finally broke the bad news to her, Rinko seemed genuinely distressed to learn that Akihiko Kayaba was dead. He would leave it to the Police to determine just how genuine that distress actually was. Batman then asked Rinko about Project Alicization, receiving only a guarded answer.

“A top secret government project Akihiko and I once worked on… After its funding was reduced, he went on to Argus while I continued on with the government.”

“So I’ve heard. But what is Project Alicization, Koujiro-sensei?”

From the hard look in his eyes and the knowledge that escape was now impossible, Rinko Koujiro consoled herself to the fact that she had no choice but to divulge her life’s work.

“At its most rudimentary level, Project Alicization is the end result of human soul genome mapping… It is the evolution of Artificial Intelligence into Actual Intelligence… And then it goes one step farther…

“Once a computer develops Actual Intelligence and emotions, it can be overlaid with a corresponding mapped soul… A complete identity… By utilizing this process, we are on the verge of achieving a sort of immortality for ourselves… In a way, I suppose you could say that we’re constructing our own version of Heaven.”

“You’re talking about transplanting human consciousness into a machine and then giving it a soul?”

“In the broadest sense, yes… We are currently working on a secure server network named ‘Underworld’ to accommodate these finished digital entities… As you can imagine, a human’s existence is compromised of an enormous sum of variable data which requires vast resources to contain… But that is the goal of Project Alicization; perpetual life.”

To Bruce, it sounded impossible… Yet if NerveGear could translate someone’s mind into a digital world, could the soul be far behind? He had been aware of the technology to digitize memories years before, but to then overlay someone’s consciousness upon those memories and then recreate the individual’s entire identity as a virtual doppelganger still seemed beyond human capacity.

“Kayaba’s AI, Cardinal… Was it the result of this project as well?”

Rinko shook her head.

“No, Akihiko created Cardinal after leaving the project and joining Argus… His AI benefited from our work together, I’m certain of that, but by the time it was completed, I was no longer welcome in his life… Still, I’ve always been curious as to Cardinal’s inner workings and how he was able to achieve such success.”

“Why did you two break up?”
“I expect he fell much deeper in love with his work than with me... As a fellow pioneer in this field, I can understand his sentiments... What matters love when we can exist within our own imaginations?”

Batman wondered if he should introduce Dr. Koujiro to something called ‘Brainiac’ before she got too excited about this new technology...

“So where did the name ‘Alicization’ come from?”

“A good question... Our work is a collaboration with the American physicist Doctor Arthur Light and his research company, Light Industries... It was he who originally coined the project’s strange codename and has never offered an explanation for its origin. Nor have we asked.”

“Wait... Is this the same Arthur Light who was once married to Kimiyo Hoshi?!”

As the incredibly powerful Doctor Light who had the ability to harness the power of an entire star, Dr. Kimiyo Hoshi had once fought by his side when every superhero in existence had stood against one of the most powerful beings in the Multiverse...

The Anti-Monitor.

At that time, Kimiyo had been married to Dr. Arthur Light from S.T.A.R. Labs. Bruce had later learned that the two scientists had divorced after the death of their only child together. He believed this was the reason why Kimiyo had left America and returned to her home in Japan years ago.

Rinko Koujiro glanced over at him inquisitively.

“I had heard that Arthur Light was once married to a Japanese woman, but I was unaware of her name.”

“She’s a friend... Is he still involved with Project Alicization?”

“Thankfully, yes... Dr. Light is a genius of rare exception... Our research into the human soul would be exceedingly sparse if not for his persistent work... He is the greatest mind in the field of Actual Intelligence today, eclipsing even that of the great Akihiko Kayaba...”

A sudden tear streamed down her cheek.

“I’m sorry... It’s still difficult for me to believe that Akihiko is gone.”

Despite her cool professional exterior and scientific detachment, it was obvious to Batman that Rinko still cared deeply for the recently deceased Akihiko Kayaba. He allowed her a moment to collect herself before continuing his questioning.

Opening a holographic screen, Batman displayed the image of the device where he had found Akihiko Kayaba’s body.

“Koujiro-sensei, do you know anything about this machine he was hooked up to? I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Strange... It resembles a prototype Soul Translator.”

“Soul Translator?”

“Our term for a device that records the complete data of a human’s existence... We built our first one last year... When an individual’s captured data is combined with Artificial Intelligence, it creates an
Actual Intelligence… A living program if you will… And then over time, the ‘soul’ with all its emotions is overlaid upon that logic… A Soul Translator combines these processes together… But it was never intended to kill the person being translated.”

“No… But what a perfect alibi it would make.”

Batman’s jaw clenched as he considered the all too real possibility of the drastic gamble which Akihiko Kayaba may have undertaken. The creator of Sword Art Online had sent that email to Rinko Koujiro this morning, long after he’d already passed away…

Possibly because he had wanted his corpse to be discovered.

The condition of his body indicated that Kayaba had died around the time of SAO’s launch on Sunday. Although his physical body may be dead, thanks to a Soul Translator, the consciousness of Akihiko Kayaba could still be very much alive and made its escape to his own version of Paradise… Sword Art Online.

Chapter End Notes

Fans of Reki Kawahara’s Sword Art Online novels may have also noticed a major departure from the source material here. In the original story, Rinko Koujiro was the one who had kept Akihiko Kayaba’s physical body alive during his two years spent immersed within the SAO game.

But not this time around…

(*Insert evil laughter here*)

But does this mean Akihiko Kayaba is dead?... I mean really, really dead?!... Yes, his physical body is dead. Does that mean that he won’t be showing up in Sword Art Online?

No comment.

I’m afraid you’ll just have to keep reading. But I did warn all of you that I’ll be tossing a few curveballs your way as we delve deeper into this mystery. I’ll be sure to leave all the hints you need along the way...

Fans of the DC Universe may also have recognized the name Arthur Light as the villainous Doctor Light (with the trademark chin strip) who’s fought the Teen Titans and Justice League several times in the past. In this story however, he’s simply a scientist who was once married to Kimiyo Hoshi; the heroic and female version of Doctor Light introduced in “Crisis on Infinite Earths”.

I’ve always been a fan of works which explore the underlying nature of human identity such as ‘Sword Art Online’ and Masamune Shirow’s ‘Ghost in the Shell’. Using René Descartes methodic logic of ‘Cogito, ergo sum’ (“I think, therefore I am”), one could even argue that a character’s Sword Art Online avatar is ‘alive’.

In the next chapter, we finally return to the world of Aincrad to see what young Damian Wayne and his team have been up to. Posting Friday, November 13th!
Legion

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Marigan

(One from the Internet that reminded me of Marigan)

Chapter Nine
Legion
As a windblown Marigan stood high above a gathered crowd of players atop the bell tower in the center of the Town of Beginning’s lush courtyard, she watched out of the corner of her eye until she finally saw the secret thumbs up signal from Damian thirty feet below...

It was time.

With her current stats, the climb up the tower hadn’t been an easy one, but it would be worth it. Pulling her large two-handed sword from the scabbard slung across her back, the blonde warrior swung it in a wide arc, slamming her silver blade hard against the massive bell, producing a metallic CLANG sound that echoed across courtyard.

In steady succession, Marigan managed to hit the bell eleven more times, filling the atrium with high-pitched chimes until the durability of her sword finally went down to zero and it burst into a hundred bright polygons of glittering shards.

Quickly opening her item menu, Marigan selected the new giant sword she had only just purchased and equipped it before dramatically leaping off the bell’s high platform down to the raised dais thirty feet below, hitting its floor so hard that the wooden planks cracked beneath the impact of her boots while momentum forced her down into a crouching position, the tip of her sword digging deep into the platform’s splintering boards.

From the hundreds of players who had gathered around her, she heard various ooh’s and ahh’s as an uninjured Marigan raised herself to her full height, casting her steady gaze across their gathered masses.

In real life, that fall would have easily crippled her. In Sword Art Online however, the fact that she was in a Safe Area meant she couldn’t die and the only thing she had been concerned about was sticking the landing and ignoring the pain messages. Her ‘suicidal leap’ had been designed to produce the type of reaction that she had now, with every eye in the courtyard fixed upon her, eagerly waiting to hear the words which would follow.

As the architect of this event, Damian had timed it perfectly so that Aincrad’s rising sun suddenly burst through the floating layers of Level One and Level Two, suddenly illuminating her bright form as though the warm light of this strange new world shone upon her alone...

“Welcome fellow players… Our third day within the world of Akihiko Kayaba has begun and we still live… We still keep alive the hope that the outside world will save us from Kayaba’s deadly trap, that we will soon be saved… But I have come here to tell you that hope is not enough, that we must rely upon ourselves… As people labour to save us in that world, we must honour their efforts and work hard to survive in this one…

“I’m sure most of you have realized by now that your initial Col allotment won’t last forever… Food must be purchased and rooms must be rented… You may even think the starvation feature in SAO won’t kill you as long as you remain in a Safe Area… And it won’t… Directly… But hunger will deplete your Strength and Agility stats daily until you’re finally left unable to move, thrown out onto the streets by an NPC Innkeeper… And then the NPC town guards will remove your character - which they deem as ‘abandoned’ – and lock it in the cells of the Black Iron Palace, which is not a Safe Area…

“And as this area has now been closed off to players, you will starve there…

“And your character will die…

“We have no way to say for certain that death in this world guarantees the same fate in our own…
But we must assume it does… It was Akihiko Kayaba’s intent that ten thousand players would play for their mortal lives here. As the creator of both NerveGear and Sword Art Online, he had the opportunity to make his mad dream a reality… And not only has he informed us that this is so, we also know that we may not logout, no dead players have been resurrected, and no new players have joined this game… So we are forced to believe this is our reality…

“As a former Beta-Tester, I know how cruel this game can be… What’s happened to us is not fair. It was never meant to be fair… We face overwhelming odds and I’m forced to tell you that we will be required to play this game, whether we want to or not… Yet while we stand, we live… And while we live, we are not defeated… He may have created this world, but Akihiko Kayaba did not change the rules… A player may rule this world with a sword…

“Fellow players, together we are strong…

“Together, we are Legion…

“Together, we shall spread across Kayaba’s world like an army and take it from him...

“Like the Roman Empire of old, we shall march across the lands of Aincrad in a fortress of shield-and-spear called a Phalanx and we will survive... If Kayaba requires us to fight, then we will fight… Together!... We will survive… Together!...

“We shall become Legion!...

“I have not come here to ask for your sacrifice… I will permit none of you to die… I have come here to ask you to join me… To take up arms and shake the very foundations of this world until we have taken what it has to offer…

“Like the tides of change, our rise will be slow and steady… But we will LIVE!… Each of us shall support our brothers and sisters as they become our fellow soldiers, our smiths, our caregivers and our scouts… If Akihiko Kayaba believes himself a god, then we shall become an army so powerful as to topple the sacred pillars of Mount Olympus itself down upon him!...

“We are Legion!... We shall carve this world out as our own until the game is no longer enjoyable for Kayaba… Until he can no longer feed upon our cries of sorrow and instead cowers at the sound of our marching boots and our voices raised in victory… Until he dare not face us and is left with no choice but to free us!… We are Legion!... And we will win.”

There was a chorus of excited shouts of ‘Legion!’ from the crowd as Marigan echoed their shouts.

“We are LEGION! We fight for our brothers and our sisters… We do not fight alone… We fight TOGETHER!... We win TOGETHER!!!”

Marigan waited until the crowd had fallen into a rhythm of ‘Legion’ chanting before she raised her massive sword high into the air, her steely green-eyed gaze locked straight ahead, burning with the passionate fire of a thousand stars.

“WE ARE LEGION!!!”

The crowd erupted into a frenzy.

Damian Wayne had never been to a rock concert in his young life before, but he imagined this is what it must have felt like as an overwhelming chorus roared through the crowd around him while those players also raised their weapons into the air.
Aincrad had its first rock star.

And despite what the others might say, success had come overnight. In fact, they had worked on that speech until late into the evening. As Damian had suspected, there wasn’t an ounce of fear within Marigan, a gifted public speaker and the perfect leader…

And now she would build their army.

The 13-year-old Argo had also proven herself more knowledgeable of this game’s inner workings than he had believed possible. She’d displayed an incredible comprehension of Sword Art Online’s skills, mechanics and algorithms, outlining the pros and cons of Damian’s proposals until they had perfected their strategy. The game itself had been aimed at groups of one to seven, ranging from solo play to small guilds meant to explore dungeons and defeat bosses.

But they wouldn’t do that.

Damian had designed a phalanx-type squad of twenty-four soldiers, each equipped with a one-handed assault spear, a large heavy shield and metal helmet modeled after the ancient Spartans. At the head of the phalanx would be two scouts who specialized in both the ‘Sprint’ skill and ‘Fighting Spirit’ skill to provoke monsters and then run, drawing them towards the pointed spears of the Phalanx. To complete the attack unit, a group of eight ‘heavy-hitters’ would concentrate on pure offence, using the Phalanx as its shield.

A party of thirty-four.

In a world where magic and ranged attacks were virtually nonexistent, the Phalanx had proven to be their best option. In time, the Legion Guild would also employ specialized positions such as Information Brokers (who would also act as spies), Blacksmiths, Farmers, Cooks, Medics and Care Givers, but the bulk of the Army would be made up of these spear-and-shield assault units.

Argo had made it very clear to him that their greatest challenge would be supporting this many players… The huge expense, the slow level progression, and the inability for the group to teleport in an emergency would hinder them. There was simply no way they could afford that many teleport crystals! Plus, splitting Col and experience between 34 party members would be intolerably slow, always trailing behind the other advanced players and picking up their scraps.

Argo also pointed out that Boss monsters did not repopulate after being defeated. Which meant that the unique items they dropped went to the first party to defeat them. SAO was designed to unfairly reward those frontrunners lucky enough to survive. And it was those players who would grow powerful (and wealthy) in this fantasy world.

But this was not a sprint to the finish, it was a marathon. Damian still believed that their best chance of survival lay with the outside world. After all, there were no guarantees in this game that Akihiko Kayaba had any intention whatsoever of ever releasing them from his deadly grip… Even if they did clear Level 100.

Their job was simply to keep everyone alive. Their strategy would be slow growth, becoming more powerful at a steady pace which ensured survival, not rewards.

To facilitate their cumbersome progression, Damian and Argo decided that their army would be a continuous marching machine, composed of three separate shifts: day, evening and night. While the smaller guilds slept, their Legion would continue to march forward, gaining experience and Col. The army would always follow behind the game’s clearers, never taking part in the front lines unless necessary.
As such, the intelligence the Information Brokers provided would be essential to determining the army’s progression and the challenges that lay ahead. If it could be determined that their players had an excellent safety margin of survival against a known foe, then they would proceed according to plan.

As per Marigan’s request, they decided that it would have to be a case-by-case negotiation should any other guild contact them regarding a request to help defeat a boss monster. They couldn’t willingly jeopardize anyone’s safety, no matter how great the reward.

Argo’s other concern was purchasing a base of operations for this army which would surely tally in the millions. Even a basic house in SAO could cost a million Col! But for now, they simply required enough money to buy weapons and to feed themselves.

And just like the Legions of ancient times, they could sleep in the fields just outside of a town to survive. With their numbers, it would be easy to organize a rotating four-person watch for each battalion to warn of any randomly generated monsters that appeared while the others slept.

Damian, Argo and Marigan had then spent the majority of yesterday formulating an entire booklet detailing the Legion’s guild strategy and requirements. Earlier this morning, they had distributed it for free at the equipment shops. Last night, a Summons had been sent to all players within the Town of Beginnings to attend their Guild launch and it looked like close to five hundred of them had.

And although they would have liked more time to plan and prepare, it had become painfully obvious to Damian that something needed to be done immediately. Already there had been various reports of players jumping off the edge of Level One’s perimeter fence, falling down through the clouded sky to the world where Aincrad had once been torn from more than a mile below. It was the simplest form of suicide.

The people needed hope...

And now, hope had come to them in the form of a tall, blonde warrior-woman who would never let this game of death defeat her. As Marigan lowered her blade and informed the enthralled crowd of the Legion Guild booklet available to them, she ended with one final rallying cry.

“This is not the path to individual glory… Our glory shall be named Legion and we shall wear it proudly… Our mission is the survival of all players… If Akihiko Kayaba sought to steal our fears to sow his imaginary soil with our stolen blood then his bitter harvest will be trampled beneath our boots!… We did not ask for this war, but we will finish it!... We will PREVAIL!!!... WE ARE LEGION!!!”

Lost among the cheers, Damian smiled. This was the right thing to do. They needed to survive in this world and an army was the best option. In his own mind, their greatest hope for success still lay with the outside world and his father. From Argo’s projections, finishing this game would require two to five years and claim at least half of their lives.

Russian roulette had the exact same odds. The best way to win was simply not to play, which unfortunately was not an option in this game. But they could increase their odds with numbers, careful planning and limiting the risks they exposed themselves to.

His father would save them, he only needed time.

At the end of the day, they had received well over three hundred requests to join the Legion Guild and Marigan had personally received twenty-three in-game Marriage proposals… each of which she had respectfully declined.
It was the beginning.

From this point forward, they would only grow stronger…

Chapter End Notes

**Author’s Notes:** As a reader, if a story ever has the power to lift you up and take you to new worlds, be sure to smile and say hello to the ghost of the writer who once lived and laboured there. As such, we should all give a nod to Reki Kawahara as we travel through his world.

**Next Chapter:** Marigan is an Original Character, but she still has very strong ties to the DC Universe which will be revealed in the next chapter, posting Tuesday November 17!... Pack your Kleenex.
Chapter Summary

Batman continues his investigation into Sword Art Online, visiting his old friend and ex-wife of Arthur Light, Kimiyo Hoshi.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Kimiyo Hoshi as Doctor Light
He hated the smell of hospitals, their antiseptic sterility and the sense of relegated humanity mingled with the stifling weight of quiet despair…

All of this seemed to permeate the cancer ward.

The lone figure of Batman stood silently in a darkened hospital room deep in the heart of Tokyo, quietly reflecting upon its sleeping occupant, a cancer-ridden woman who was wired to dozens of flashing monitors and IV drips, her small spark of life clinging to the dried husk of the powerful hero she’d once been.

How could fate be so damned ungrateful?

As the near-omnipotent Doctor Light, Kimiyo Hoshi had once prevented existence itself from ending in darkest oblivion… And now she struggled to draw breath. This woman - who had once faced the greatest threat any of them had ever known – was about to die alone. She’d been too damned proud to reach out to the rest of them when less than a year ago, it was discovered that Kimiyo’s body was literally riddled with tumours.

Doctor Light was dying.

Chemotherapy treatments had robbed this proud woman of the long black hair Batman had remembered so well while the cure had ravaged her body, leaving it thin and frail… She who had the power to command starlight was quickly fading into the night’s final darkness.

“… Batman?”

The former superhero blinked open her darkened eyes.

“It’s me, Kimiyo.. I’m here.”

A weak smile spread across her dry, creased lips.

“It’s nice… to see… an old friend again.”

Batman carefully handed her a Styrofoam drinking cup of ice water with a straw.

“Kimiyo, you should have called us… How did this happen?”

“Humans were… never meant… to be gods… At least… not for long.”

A brilliant astronomer and physicist, the bold Kimiyo Hoshi had once been selected by a god-like being named the Monitor to become his champion; making her the living conduit for a star which was twenty-five light years away from their own Sun. In the final ensuing battle against the Anti-Monitor which they had dubbed ‘Crisis on Infinite Earths’, Doctor Light had absorbed the power of a captured star to become the first of them to actually hurt that foul creature.

But now, in a cruel twist of fate, it seemed as though the massive amounts of solar energy which had
once flowed through her mortal body to defend humanity in its most desperate hour had taken a toll upon it.

"Kimiyo, I’m so sorry... All of us owe you our lives... Is there anything we can do?"

“No old friend… We all die… Perhaps I shall travel… to the star… who calls me its own… Tell me… Are the stars out tonight?”

“They are, Kimiyo… I have one final favour to ask of you... Your ex-husband, Arthur Light... I believe he’s connected in some way to Akihiko Kayaba and the ten thousand players who are trapped in Sword Art Online... I need to talk to him.”

“Arthur?... So very sad... I haven’t seen him for... eleven years now... Brilliant man... But it was our daughter’s condition... which finally drove him... to despair.”

“Condition?”

“Our daughter was born with... Hutchinson–Gilford... Progeria Syndrome... I’m sure you’ve... heard of it.”

“Yes, a rare genetic disorder which resembles advanced aging in its young patients. Few people born with the defect ever live to see past the age of thirteen... It must have been very difficult for you both.”

“It was hard for me... But Arthur was devastated... He took it upon himself... to save her.”

“Save her? How?”

“Arthur believed... our bodies were nothing more... than mortal coils... It was only the intelligence... and the soul that mattered... Because memories and souls are energy... They can be preserved... and then recreated... And he was right... He had watched me... do exactly the same thing... As Doctor Light, I had the power... to turn myself into living light... So why could the same feat... not be performed... for our daughter?”

“Kimiyo, did he ever mention something called Project Alicization?”

Batman stared blankly at Kimiyo Hoshi as she suddenly began to laugh with obvious effort, finally taking another sip of her water before catching her breath and smiling back at him with warm eyes.

“That was her name.”

“Excuse me?”

“Alice Sayun Light... Our daughter’s name.”

Batman stood silently as the epiphany unfolded before him like a dark flower...

Project Alicization had been a father’s quest to preserve the soul of his dying daughter... A daughter who had been cursed from birth to only spend a handful of years among the living... The distraught genius Arthur Light had seen it with his own eyes... He’d seen that it could be done, even taunted by its incredible proximity... If his own wife had the power to convert herself into light and then back again, it was theoretically possible that human existence could be transcribed into data and then stored within a light-based memory system...

A digital existence.
Oh God, it could be done…

“Kimiyo, do you know where Arthur Light is now?”

“No… It seems as though… he has removed… himself from… this world.”

Unfortunately, Kimiyo Hoshi had no idea of just how accurate that statement may be.

“Thank you, Hoshi-sensei. You have been most helpful. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Can you… turn on… the lights?”

As he switched on the room’s lights and quietly backed out through the doorway into the darkened hall, Batman whispered one final goodbye.

“Sayonara, Hoshi-sensei.”

“… Batman?”

The older masculine voice from behind him actually caught him off guard as a gust of air blew past. As he quickly spun around, the Dark Knight found himself staring at an older gentleman who seemingly appeared out of nowhere. He was perhaps in his mid-seventies, smiling in the dim light of the hospital’s hallway.

Batman’s initial impression was that this older man was in amazing shape for his age, cropped white hair, bright blue eyes and a square jaw. He still looked remarkably fit and well preserved for his advanced years.

With sure-fired enthusiasm, the old man quickly reached out his hand in a firm handshake while Batman quietly realized how this old-timer had been able to get behind him so quickly...

“Well bless my soul! I didn’t expect to see you half way across the world from Gotham… You haven’t forgotten an old-timer like me, have you?”

As the original Mercury-winged Flash, Jay Garrick had been a founding member of the Justice Society of America and one of the very first superheroes. He was a true living legend who’d already saved the Earth a dozen times when Bruce had been a child.

Content to leave the superhero business to the younger generation, Garrick had retired as a crime fighter, sold his American research company and then moved to Japan once Barry Allen had taken over the Flash identity. Bruce recalled Barry Allen once mentioning they’d even had a retirement dinner for him.

“No Mr. Garrick, I could never forget what you’ve done for this world and its people… This is an unexpected honour… Were you here visiting Kimiyo as well?”

“I wish that was the reason why I was here, youngster… But the truth is that my daughter got caught up in that new game that’s trapped all those poor kids… Reminds me of a stunt the Trickster might have pulled back in the day… She’s actually just down the hall from here… Only place they could find a bed was in a cancer ward… To be honest, I haven’t left her side since it happened… Why would someone do such a thing?”
So Bruce wasn’t the only superhero with a child caught in Akihiko Kayaba’s deadly game.

“I too have someone trapped in Sword Art Online, Mr. Garrick.”

“Gosh, not Robin I hope!”

It took the Caped Crusader a second to realize that the original Flash had meant Dick - the original Boy Wonder who most people were familiar with and not his own son Damian.

“No, Sir... Robin has actually grown up and become a new superhero called Nightwing. He’s currently helping me keep Gotham safe while I’m investigating this case in Japan.”

“Good, good… Well, I’m sure you’ve got the situation well in hand… I know you’re busy, son… But… If you could spare a moment for an old timer like me… Well, it would really mean a lot... I’m only three doors down… Just really nice to see a familiar face... I think we all could use a little hope right now.”

Batman silently nodded and followed the older man down the hall. While Barry had once mentioned that Jay and Joan Garrick had never been able to conceive a child, that didn’t mean that they couldn’t have adopted a daughter once they’d retired to Japan. Whatever the circumstances were, it was obvious that the elderly hero was at his wit’s end, even if he was still maintaining a brave face.

“I didn’t know you had a daughter, Mr. Garrick.”

“Knock off the ‘Mr. Garrick’ stuff… It’s Jay… I guess we’re what you call ‘late bloomers’… My Joan was forty-two years young when she finally got pregnant… Which made me an even fifty!... Doctors said it couldn’t be done, but within a month of settling down here in Japan, well… What do you know?… Our little miracle girl was conceived and nine months later, Marissa Joan Garrick was born just as healthy as could be... A perfect little baby.”

As they entered his daughter’s hospital room, Batman observed a young woman carefully laid upon its bed with long blonde hair spilling out of the NerveGear device still attached to her head. And although Bruce couldn’t clearly see her face through the helmet’s visor, she looked to be around Barbara’s age.

There must have been a dozen vases of fresh flowers with cards surrounding her comatose body which made the smell in this room much more pleasant than the last. As the two men looked upon the unconscious Marissa, Jay placed a hand upon Batman’s shoulder and smiled.

“Just as pretty as her mother ever was, and that’s saying something! Let me tell you, my Joan was the prettiest girl in all of Keystone City… A tall, blonde beauty with bright green eyes that every guy wanted for his girl… Luckiest day of my life when I finally snagged her… And our Marissa is even luckier than her mother because she got my good looks too!”

They shared a warm-hearted chuckle before Jay continued.

“All these flowers are from her admirers… Must be ten guys in here a day… I’m telling you Batman, I’ve literally got to beat them off with a stick!... I probably shouldn’t ask, but are you a married man?”

“No, Sir. But it’s probably best that way.”

“Bull Pucky! You just haven’t met the right girl yet… I don’t know where I would have been without my Joan during those crazy years… Somehow, she always made it seem right at the end of the day… Fighting the good fight against all those evil doers… Oh gosh… I’m really sorry.”
Bruce watched as the older man produced a handkerchief to dry his eyes before forcing himself to smile again.

“Sorry… I guess I’m still missing her terribly… Joan passed away in her sleep a few years ago… Brain aneurysm… Peaceful way to go, but that doesn’t seem to make it much easier on me… After her mother left us, Marissa stepped up and helped me run the business instead of me just selling it… When me and the wife first moved here, we started a research investment firm with a partner and well… We were doing pretty well… Really well actually… It was Marissa’s idea to fund this whole NerveGear thing.”

“Wait… You’re Scarlet Holdings?! The investment bank behind Argus?!”

During his research into Argus, Bruce had learned that they had been primarily financed by a private equity firm specializing in advanced technology named Scarlet Holdings. Argus had managed to secure funding close to a billion dollars.

Jay Garrick took his comatose daughter’s hand into his own and squeezed it gently, reliving old memories now made painful.

“Yeah, that’s me… Marissa was so gosh-darned excited about this new technology… Even convinced Argus to let her Beta-test it a couple of months ago… I remember the day she got that game, how happy she was… But who could have seen this coming?”

The older man wiped his tears before he finally managed to turn his head around and face the Caped Crusader.

“She’s all I’ve got left in this world… I’d give anything just to see her open those big green eyes again, Batman… Anything… If she leaves me… I don’t… I don’t know what I’ll do… After Joan, I don’t think I could bear it… My little girl is everything to me now.”

Batman placed a comforting hand gently on the shoulder of the old speedster. It wasn’t just Damian’s life at stake, it was thousands of young men and women. He could never allow himself to forget that.

“Jay… Whatever I have to do to bring them back… I’ll do it… I promise.”

As an emotional Batman solemnly left the hospital’s grounds and felt the cold night air on the door of his Porsche 918, he paused, taking one last look behind. One final glimpse to say goodbye to a dying hero and then another silent nod to an old hero who would do anything in the world to save his daughter.

As the Dark Knight watched, he suddenly witnessed a beam of pure light erupting from the hospital’s high rooftop shooting upwards towards the heavens, lighting up the entire night sky in a blaze of glory.

For a second, it was as though it were daylight again, so bright and pure was its light. Even seconds later, the ray of light shone like a beacon high above them in the night’s darkness traveling towards the heavens. Wiping a tear from his eye, Batman spoke one last farewell to the starry skies above…

“Safe journeys, Doctor… May your light guide us… Always.”
(Jay and Joan Garrick back in the day. Does Joan Garrick remind you of anyone?)

Chapter End Notes

For those readers who are much more interested in reading about Damian surviving in Sword Art Online rather than the DC World, please flip over to FanFic dot net and pick up this story at Chapter 11. From that point forward, it’s all about Kayaba’s deadly game and Damian’s journey within it. But if you want to see how Bruce might be having an even tougher time of it than Damian, please keep reading here on AO3. This site has the entire story while FF.net is Sword Art Online only. Your choice.
The Disappearance of Flight PCW005

Chapter Summary

An exhausted Bruce heads home.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alfred

(An emotional Alfred Pennyworth)

Chapter Eleven

The Disappearance of Flight PCW005

Hours later, a solemn Batman found himself deep below the earth, staring at a massive array of electronics humming away, performing billions of calculations per second, seemingly oblivious to his dark presence against the wall as he stood watching with his hand on its master breaker switch…

The power to Cardinal’s massive server bank.

It was hot down here… Far too hot for the programmers brought in by the government who were
attempting to gain access to the Sword Art Online server on the four floors above him, but it wasn’t too hot for him…

It would never be too hot for him...

Getting into Argus had been child’s play. Getting down to the fifth sub-floor basement while remaining undetected had been a little more challenging, but he always did enjoy a challenge. So Batman stood there with his hand on the power, continuously staring ahead at his faceless enemy...

An enemy named Cardinal who harboured the soul of its mad creator, Akihiko Kayaba.

“I know you’re in there, Kayaba… You can’t hide from me… You can never hide from me… Let them go… Let them go or so help me, I will find a way to turn your virtual Paradise into a living Hell!”

The LED lights continued to blink unabated.

“I’ll find you, Kayaba… I’ll find you and then put you into a tiny little microchip that I’ll bury at the bottom of the sea… I’ll seal this floor with liquid helium before I’ll let you take another life… You think you can escape from me?... No one escapes from me!... You know who I am. You know what I can do… The only question now is how far you’ll make me go to bring you down.”

Bruce waited for a minute before he took his hand off the power switch.

“That was your mistake, Kayaba… You built your own prison so I knew where to find you… Keep your hostages alive… All of them… Because right now, they’re the only thing preventing me from taking you apart... You know how to get a hold of me when you want to talk... You have 24 hours.”

He left without another word.

He was done here.

Bruce had already made the decision to return to Gotham before breaking into Argus. Besides threatening the Cardinal servers, there was nothing left for him in Japan. His next task would be to locate Arthur Light and find out more about Project Alicization. And if that didn’t work, he’d grabbed a little souvenir from Kayaba’s secret lab in the countryside that would keep him occupied for awhile…

Sitting back at his hotel room was the NerveGear helmet.

His private jet was now being refuelled and was cleared for take off in three hours. He’d already tasked Barbara with tracking down the elusive Arthur Light so that the Dark Knight would be ready for action once they landed in America. Dick was busy with an illegal drug shipment which would be arriving in Gotham Harbour later tonight and Alfred had done everything in his power to keep Damian’s comatose body alive and well.

It was time to go home.

Three hours later as he boarded his personal Gulfstream G650, Bruce realized he was fading fast and wouldn’t be able to hold off sleep for much longer. The few hours he had caught since leaving for Tokyo Saturday afternoon were far from enough. He’d already sent his entire conversation with Rinko Koujiro to Oracle for further analysis so he could sleep on the flight.

As dawn broke across the land of the rising sun, the plush seat of the business jet afforded Bruce the ability to finally reflect on these last three days while his stewardess graciously served him a herbal
tea to help him relax before the take off.

Had he truly just witnessed the next step in human evolution? Was the complete physical separation
of the human consciousness transplanted into a machine their ultimate future? Arthur Light had once
sought a way to overcome the failings of his daughter’s cursed genetics, and by all current accounts,
he had succeeded.

Their consciousness had fallen down the white rabbit’s swirling black hole, past its one-dimensional
point of singularity and into Wonderland. With these thoughts swirling through his weary brain,
Bruce finally drifted off to asleep.

Alfred Pennyworth seldom kept the global news on while working, but since the events of early
Monday morning in Japan, he was constantly anxious to learn of any further developments regarding
Master Damian’s current plight. On the BBC, news regarding the Sword Art Online players were
still being reported regularly, but unfortunately without any encouraging breakthroughs.

It was now widely known that the game’s creator had been found dead in a remote mountainside lab
and Master Bruce had assured him that there were some leads here in America which could still
pursue to help bring this harrowing case to a close. In fact, Bruce would be returning this evening
which gave the old butler hope for the boy’s future. At the very least, it would be encouraging to see
Bruce’s face again.

When a grim-looking announcer suddenly appeared on the screen with late breaking news, Alfred
suddenly stopped what he was doing and listened with undivided interest. But this was not news
regarding Sword Art Online…

It was far worse.

“We have just been informed that Flight PCW005, a private jet carrying billionaire industrialist
Bruce Wayne from Tokyo back to his native Gotham has disappeared… Repeated attempts to
contact the aircraft have gone unanswered by authorities and even communication with the flight’s
transponder went offline over an hour ago…”

“We have confirmation that search teams have now been launched in an attempt to locate the aircraft
based on its last known location over the Pacific… It’s believed Wayne was in Japan to pursue talks
of a rumoured business merger with the Argus Corporation shortly before the disastrous launch of
their Sword Art Online product… We’ll be sure to bring you any further updates as they occur.”

The stock photo they had shown of Master Bruce had been taken two years ago. Alfred recognized
the suit, it was currently hanging in his closet, third from the right… All of this now… Master
Damian and now Master Bruce… It all seemed like a bad dream...

The last thought Alfred remembered was wondering why he was no longer able to keep upright as
he tumbled to the floor before losing consciousness.

Chapter End Notes
Don’t worry, I’m sure Alfred’s OK. But now that Bruce is finally taken care of…

One of the challenges in combining the worlds of Batman and Sword Art Online is the pacing. The original Sword Art Online story takes place over two years - which is like an eternity in ‘Bat-time’. Batman is an unrelenting, unstoppable force of vengeance who never stops, period…

Until something unexpected happens to him.

I’m sure the Detective will pop back up eventually, but for now we can get back to Damian and his new virtual world! I’m excited for the next chapter as it begins our first major Sword Art Online arc entitled “The Halls of the Departed”.

Next chapter posting tomorrow, Thursday November 19th. That four-part arc will be posting daily.
Chapter Summary

Damian finds himself trapped within the Halls of the Departed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

SAO Trap

(Even Admiral Ackbar knew that one was a trap)

Chapter Twelve
The Halls of the Departed
Part One: The Cat Witch

Sitting on the night-dampened grass just outside of the high walls of the Town of Beginnings, the concerned Argo had fixed Damian with her pale brown eyes, her pleading gaze echoing the deep concern of their guild’s current financial woes.

“We’re going to go broke within a week, Dami-chan!... Trust me, no one hates to say this as much as I do, but we need to go into the dungeon… At least just a little bit.”

As Damian ate his stale digital bread, there was really only one answer he could give.
“We’re not ready yet, Argo.”

It pained him to say it, but it was true.

A week had passed since they had first entered Sword Art Online and their army was still in its infancy. While the more adventurous players had entered the first floor’s dungeon, their own Legion guild had gotten no farther than the relative safety of the fields, fighting boars, wolves, and beetles.

In the real world, Damian Wayne was a gifted warrior with a wealth of resources. He was the son of Batman and also heir to the League of Shadows. As a boy, he’d been taught to become self-reliant and ruthless, traits which had often made him impatient with others whom he considered inept or afraid.

But in this virtual world, he felt like he was the one who was incompetent.

His lack of experience with MMO games had presented a steep learning curve for the young player, especially since he’d quietly taken on the responsibility of organizing the Legion guild. In this past week, Argo had been instrumental in educating him on the game’s mechanics and best strategies to help him build their Legion…

Which was proving enormously expensive.

To Damian though, their main priority was not defeating the game but simply keeping as many players alive as possible. He wondered if some of the newest soldiers they had equipped would ever be ready to fight. Still, when the outside world was able to free them from Akihiko Kayaba’s deadly trap, no one would care what level their character was or what items they had obtained...

Only that they survived.

And yet, with each passing day, Damian’s hopes of rescue from the outside world were slowly being forgotten. It was becoming more and more obvious that they may be stuck in this world much longer than he had originally thought possible. Perhaps Argo was right, maybe they did need to take more risks and push ahead, just to ensure they could all stay fed.

But their army was still woefully unprepared for the dungeon…

‘Commander’ Marigan had only deemed seven battalions of their members even worthy for the minimal combat required to face the wandering monsters that spawned on the first floor. Even against an inexperienced Phalanx, the wolves and boars here were easy targets, but the monsters in a dungeon were a different story.

Argo had already told him the reports of player deaths at the hands of these new, fierce creatures.

At the Legion’s current low levels, they simply weren’t ready. Only a dozen of their members even had a Healing Potion yet. Soon they would be lucky to have food.

Marigan had dubbed it ‘field training’ for the battalions, but the truth was that they simply couldn’t afford to keep all their guild members at inns charging up to three hundred Col a night. The Commander had also made the decision to split the combat regiments into four-person units; three shield-and-spear wielders with one striker to face the auto-generating wandering monsters. These four-person units would still remain close to the rest of their brigade, but at least this way they were able to greatly increase their earnings and level progression by splitting into four-person teams.

Thanks to that, most of their active soldiers had levelled up, but only a handful had even reached level three yet. Their members would always lag behind the progression of most players, especially
the clearers. As expected, it would be a difficult and slow rise for their army. They would constantly be dragging the chains of their weakest members.

In her capacity as an Information Broker, Argo had learned that by the end of the first week, the bravest players had already made their way up to the sixth floor of the twenty-floor dungeon and completed all quests on this floor.

She’d managed to obtain a map file of those first six floors of the dungeon from a former Beta-tester named Diavel, including all the monster data that his higher-level party had already encountered and defeated. It matched up with what she had remembered from her previous experience as a Beta-tester.

Pointing at these locations on her obtained map screen, Argo presented Damian with her risky proposal.

“Dami-chan, if we take our best soldiers into the first floor of the dungeon right here, I know we can defeat this kobold sentinel outpost. Each sentinel is worth two hundred Col! That’s as far as we need to go, just to build up the treasury and get stronger.”

“We’ve already agreed we wouldn’t go in until level six. That’s the safety margin.”

Argo crossed her arms as her dark hood drooped over her narrowed eyes.

“We’ll starve by then.”

Striding confidently through the eerie night mists just outside of the Town of Beginnings, Marigan joined the bickering pair with the dark-haired Hisako beside her. Argo and Damian were both members of the second battalion while Marigan and Hisako were members of the first. Both of their teams were currently stationed for ‘field training’ just outside of the town walls.

Damian and Argo had elected to become ‘runners’, a position which few people volunteered for due to the incredible danger involved. Most of the soldiers now affectionately referred to their runners as ‘monster bait’ while they watched them corral creatures towards their awaiting spears. Hisako had surprised them by also volunteering to become a runner for the first battalion.

“Discussing the finances, kids?”

Damian drew a deep and heavy sigh.

“They’re not good. Argo wants us to go into the dungeon.”

Marigan placed her hand on the cat-girl’s thin shoulder.

“And we will, Argo... Once we get a handful of players to level six.”

Damian suspected that like himself, Marigan was a solo player by nature. With her skills and intelligence, the capable warrior would have made a great addition to the front lines, but it was not to be as she would never abandon the players now under her care. And as far as Damian could tell, she was handling the responsibility of command extraordinarily well, showing great insight for military strategy, organization and leadership.

In the real world, she had been groomed for a senior management position. Like Damian, Marigan had been expected to take over her father’s company.

But as inspirational as the charismatic Marigan had become over their first week together, Argo had
become just as pragmatic. As the guild treasurer, the little cat-girl was constantly running the numbers through her head, balancing the needs of their army against the risks they faced. There was such a thing in this game as being too cautious when the players ahead left nothing for those behind. Perhaps this was what left Argo so worried…

“We don’t have the time, Marigan… Have you noticed that the spawn rate of wandering monsters on this floor has been steadily decreasing?… The game is auto-populating less and less of them every day… It’s like it wants us to push forward.”

“But how can that be?”

Argo gazed off into the night sky, catching glimpses of digital stars through the roiling fog that constantly surrounded them.

“The AI that runs this game is one of the most complex in the world. It’s been designed to react against player strategies which may exploit any inherent vulnerability within the system, no matter how trivial… The game simply wasn’t designed for guilds this large. Frankly I’m surprised it’s even allowing us to break the rules this way…

“Cardinal will put up with player ingenuity for awhile, but eventually it will try to challenge us with something different unless we make that decision for ourselves… Maybe it will toss another army at us, who knows?… Look, to be honest, I don’t want to face this floor’s dungeon either, but we have to consider the possibility that our hands may soon be forced by the system if we don’t.”

While Marigan and Hisako had turned towards the troubled Argo, Damian’s attention was suddenly diverted away from the three women towards an unusual new detail which had only just been revealed to him when the swirling fog bank had shifted to create a small opening...

“Were those doors always here?”

In the awkward silence which followed, the three ladies all turned to follow his gaze towards the high walls of the town where they also noticed the suddenly revealed large black doors set deep into the stony base of the towering ramparts. With the swirling mists coiling across them, these ominous doors had magically appeared like some hidden entranceway to a dungeon lying in wait for the four of them under the Town of Beginnings.

Spellbound by his discovery, Damian carefully made his way towards them with the others following closely behind.

“I’m positive these weren’t here before…”

He was surprised when blue runes instantly appeared on the massive doors at his light touch before slowly creaking open. Beyond them was a twisting hallway and a location cursor which appeared just inside the gloomy stone archway…

*The Halls of the Departed*

Stepping inside to get a look, Damian saw that the dimly-lit, winding hallway veered sharply off to his right but then slowly curved inwards to his left in the distance, apparently following the curvature of the town’s walls for as far as his eyes could see...

He had set off a trap!

The entire hallway suddenly flashed bright red light sirens as a loud squelching alarm screamed on and off continuously. And if he’d been able to, he would have heard Argo scream from behind him,
but it was already too late…

Spinning around, Damian witnessed Marigan run directly into an invisible force field behind him without making a sound, staggering backwards as she impacted against an unseen wall which prevented her from joining him in the hallway.

The eleven-year-old Boy Wonder stepped backwards as the angry Marigan drew her giant sword and then slammed it against the invisible barrier - resulting in an ‘Immortal Object’ tag suddenly appearing. He saw the other women move their mouths in shock, but couldn’t hear what they were saying as the loud buzzer continued to assault his ear drums.

He also placed his hand on the invisible wall and found it was rigid… He was trapped in here… Quickly withdrawing his hand, Damian then opened up his message menu.

Unavailable…

This was bad.

Players weren’t able to message one another if they were inside a dungeon. Feeling his heart suddenly rise in his chest, Damian turned to display his message screen illuminated by flashing red lights to Argo. The painful look on the girl’s face as he pointed to his status meant that she understood his fears - her fingertips pressing against the invisible barricade as a look of horror spread across her soft features.

None of them had been able to afford teleport crystals yet.

Damian quickly resolved that if there were no way back, the only way out was forward. He made a hand signal to the his friends that he was going ahead and watched as they all violently shook their heads in disagreement.

But what else could he do?

Not sensing any immediate threat, the former assassin instinctively gripped the hilt of his newly acquired dagger and walked along the long twisting corridor laid out before him.

He was already regretting purchasing the dagger.

Heeding Argo’s advice, Damian had traded in his sword (and the hopes for a katana) for this dagger only three days ago and erased his ‘One-Handed Curved Blade’ sword skill to replace it with ‘Dagger’.

The former Beta-tester had advised him that if he planned on acting as ‘monster bait’, the smaller dagger would serve him better than a sword as he could focus on Agility. She had also informed him that there was a ‘Backstabbing’ skill which a player could gain with high enough ‘Hiding’ and ‘Dagger’ stats, which had sounded intriguing to him at the time…

Damian now wished he hadn’t followed her advice. The dagger was faster, but it didn’t have the damage capabilities of a sword. Hopefully he wouldn’t have to find out.

After twenty steps, the loud alarm finally fell silent and the red lights instantly stopped, replaced by eerie silence. Dim blue torches glowed within rows of alcoves carved on either side of the corridor ahead of him, providing Damian with the light he needed to make out the curving passageway as it constantly spiralled inward ahead of him.

As the boy approached the first set of empty alcoves, he discovered that a player’s name had been
etched into the stone above each of them in Romanized letters. Looking at the next pair of recesses, Damian discovered more players’ names inscribed above them, indicating that they were in alphabetical order.

Since all the names here began with the letter ‘Z’, he assumed he’d started at the far end of the Halls of the Departed... But where did it start?

With some rough measurements, Damian calculated that each niche was about three feet wide, seven feet high and just over a foot deep. There was a column of bricks around eight inches wide set between each of them. If this hallway was what he suspected and all ten thousand Sword Art Online players had their own designated crevice along these halls, this tunnel should go on for about three miles, spiralling constantly inwards upon itself underneath the Town of Beginnings, ending somewhere in the middle.

After examining the first ten sets of alcoves, Damian discovered the first body...

It stood perfectly still with its eyes closed in a recess marked ‘Zoltar’ and this time, listed underneath the player’s name, the cause of death was given as ‘Fell from a great height and died’ accompanied by the time and date, indicating that this player’s demise had occurred on their second day in Aincrad.

Damian recalled hearing the rumours of players who had jumped off the edge of the world shortly after Akihiko Kayaba’s cruel speech, refusing to believe what the malicious Game Master had informed them, perhaps under the mistaken belief that death in the game wouldn’t result in their own.

Apparently ‘Zoltar’ had been one of these players.

From his thin face, the deceased man looked to be Japanese and around twenty years of age. His glowing blue body was still dressed in a long purple cloak while a thin spear was laid against him. There was no longer a torch in his alcove, but instead the player’s entire form glowed with that same sickly shade of blue, giving it the appearance of luminescent putrefaction…

But thankfully not the smell.

Proceeding onwards, Damian soon found another casualty of the game except that this time the cause of death had been listed as Kobold Sentinel. It had only occurred yesterday. This player also glowed with that unearthly shade of blue and had a long sword fastened to his belt.

His name had been ‘Zelgadis’.

It confirmed what Damian had initially suspected; that the Halls of the Departed was a virtual mausoleum. It was the place where their characters’ digital corpses went to rot once this game of the damned had taken their lives.

Quickening his pace, Damian soon started running past the remaining empty spaces and the occasional glowing dead, figuring that this long twisting tunnel must surely have another exit which would lead to the town above.

He stopped briefly at his own alcove to catch his breath and make sure it was in fact empty. It was gruesome to think that if he died within this game, a glowing blue avatar would be created inside that dark niche.

After resuming his run, the young hero finally came to a spiral staircase made of stone which would take him upwards. Glancing over to his right, the final empty alcove displayed the name ‘Aang’…
He must have finally made it to the entranceway of the Halls of the Departed!

Taking a moment to pause, Damian finally proceeded up the single flight of stairs, emerging into a large circular room, nearly thirty feet across and perhaps fifty feet high, capped by a smooth, dark dome. And even though it was night in Aincrad, he could still see stars through the dimly lit windows set into the dome’s high peaks.

Alright, so he was obviously in the Town of Beginnings, but where exactly?

At the opposite end of this room were a pair of intricately carved iron doors which he hoped would exit to the town itself. On a whim, he opened his player menu, quickly finding that he was still unable to message… So close and yet so far.

Taking a deep breath and readying his dagger, Damian made his way across the glassy marble floor and opened those heavy ornate doors, revealing an even much larger room waiting beyond them.

From a glance, he could only describe it as a darkened cathedral…

At least sixty feet across and even deeper, with polished black floors and countless pillars embedded into its decorative walls. Even in this faint light, this room’s architecture seemed similar to the Notre Dame Cathedral in France, the religious overtones were unmistakable, set against its grand spectacle of opulence.

Straining his eyes through the pale darkness, the boy saw only one other notable feature set into the middle of the room. Standing almost fifteen feet high and spanning thirty feet across was an enormous dark marble slab suspended on massive granite pillars. Set before it, thirty-foot-wide pale stone stairs led up to the slab’s bleak face. To Damian, it reminded him of some sort of war memorial.

From the faint light of the windows above, this was all he could make out. Damian carefully listened for the sound of footfalls or voices before he finally decided to step further into the enormous room covered in shadows to investigate.

If anything were waiting for him in that darkness, he’d have to face it alone.

He took three steps into the dark when the doors behind him slammed shut. Braziers set against the wall suddenly burst into flaming life as his squinting eyes adjusted to this powerful new lighting. To his left, Damian saw a pair of gigantic doors, as high as the cathedral’s iron walls and each of them was twenty feet wide.

And there was only one pair of doors that big in the Town of Beginnings.

He was inside the Black Iron Palace.

With that realization, Damian recognized this place now. It was the cathedral-like space that had formerly been called the ‘Room of Resurrection’, the place where players automatically teleported after their character died in the Beta-test. The function that had been taken away from them by Akihiko Kayaba…

What mattered right now was that there was the courtyard laying just beyond those huge doors. He only needed to open them to gain his freedom…

“Hello, Damian… Leaving so soon?”

The voice was female and… familiar?! Somehow, he knew that voice…
Turning around, he observed a black hooded figure standing against the black of the massive marble slab set into the middle of the room. In the darkness from before, he must not have made her out...

But what was even more disturbing was that her heeled boots were surrounded by literally dozens of cats of all shapes and colours, carefully padding their way around the stone landing or twirling around the feet of this hooded stranger. There was so many of these cats that if he listened carefully, he might actually hear them purring.

As this mysterious woman walked forward and slowly descended the stairs, she unfastened her black hood to reveal elegant black hair layered above sharp green eyes. As she casually let the cloak spill along the stairs like oiled silk, it revealed the revealing black outfit she wore beneath which clung to her every curve, leaving no doubt in young Damian’s mind who this woman actually was, even if her presence here was impossible...

“Selina Kyle?!”

As the sultry Catwoman continued to stride towards him with a small army of furry felines in tow, Damian’s assaulted senses struggled to conceive of any possible explanation as to why the villainous Selina Kyle could be in Sword Art Online...

It was logical to assume that Akihiko Kayaba would have been aware of Catwoman’s existence, but why would he ever build her character into his game? It simply made no sense. Was Selina Kyle a co-conspirator?

As though reading the confusion on his face, the leering Miss Kyle pointed one of her long black claws upwards toward the red diamond-shaped icon above her head and the glowing name written in bold type beneath it as she continued swaggering forward...

*The Cat Witch.*

There were also four Hit Point bars to the right of that icon which meant that he was in serious danger. Damian recalled Argo mentioning that only unique monsters such as floor bosses had the word ‘The’ in front of their name, a designation which made them one-of-a-kind and extremely dangerous.

Simply put, she wasn’t just a Cat Witch, she was *The* Cat Witch.

As he listened to the approaching echoes of her heels clicking on the polished marble floor, Damian somehow knew the gigantic doors behind him would be locked. Seemingly amused, the monster (who looked and sounded exactly like Selina Kyle) finally stood in front of him and licked her lips.

“What do you want, Kyle?”

The boss-level monster sighed impatiently and then pursed her lips as a flurry of scampering cats wove their way between the boy’s steady feet, spiralling like some furry tide around his ankles as he readied his dagger to defend himself...

“Just as disagreeable as your father.”

Damian had only felt the first pangs of numbness when his knees buckled beneath his hips. Her small army of purring felines seemed to be acting as some sort of weapon, taking away his ability to move from the neck down. Quickly losing all feeling, the cats continued to coil their tails around him until a ‘Paralysis’ icon flashed next to his green health bar.
Once Damian had tumbled to the stone floor, the sultry witch crouched down beside him while her sparse leather outfit stretched itself to capacity. Grinning, she slowly ran one sharp claw along the side of his cheek, steadily curving it around his chin until it traced the curves of his young face.

Glaring up at her, the boy shot back defiantly.

“Stop that! What would you know about my father?”

As she answered, a dozen cats soon curled up on top of his immobilized body while others nuzzled his still hands, craving to be petted.

“Oh, I know your father very well… In fact, you could say that we’re very close… Wouldn’t you much rather have me as your Mommy instead of the ugly old woman who gave you away?”

“Shut up!”

“Manners, my dear.”

Damian suddenly felt five claws dig into his shoulder and felt searing hot pain… Glancing at his Hit Points through clenched teeth, he noticed they hadn’t budged, most likely because this was not an actual attack, just incredibly painful…

The Cat Witch suddenly removed her clawed fingers from his digital flesh and then quickly placed her fingers over her parted lips in mock surprise as though feigning sympathy for his injury.

“Oh?! Did that hurt?... I’m so sorry, my little Dami-chan… Could it be that you’re not like him after all?... Or is it that you’re simply too young to appreciate my feminine charms?”

As Damian’s mother was the beautiful and powerful Talia al Ghul, Selina Kyle had always been a contentious subject between him and his father… While Batman had never admitted to actually sleeping with Catwoman, Damian suspected that he’d succumbed to the leather-clad temptress in the past, which frankly disgusted him…

Even though his parents were separated by half a world, he still wanted them to be faithful to one another, not secretly cavorting around on rooftops with known felons like Selina Kyle.

But this thing wasn’t really Selina Kyle… It couldn’t be... So then, what was it?

“If you’re an SAO construct, how do you know so much about me?”

A coy smile spread across her full red lips while a single claw balanced perfectly on the tip of his nose.

“Naughty, naughty… Asking a girl her deepest, darkest secrets after we’ve only just met… But I know all about you, Damian Wayne… Your nightly escapades on rooftops and the tacky outfits… Your hopes, your dreams… Your preference for all things sharp and pointy…”

“The you also know I won’t let you kill anyone else… KAYABA!”

As its lead designer, Akihiko Kayaba had the ability to manipulate and create Aincrad’s monsters - which meant that he could be the one behind this Catwoman encounter. Which also meant the game’s creator was obviously targeting him, most likely due to his father’s efforts to end his game.

The Cat Witch gently slid her long finger over his lips to prevent him from continuing.

“Silly boy… I’m not Akihiko Kayaba… But tell me honestly… Would you like to go home, my little
sprite?... Would you like to just leave this world?... Are you not having fun?"

“Who are you?!”

The Cat Witch stood and did a little pirouette before crouching down beside him once more.

“Who in this world am I? Ah, that’s the great puzzle... A puzzle you needn’t concern yourself with anymore, Dami-chan... After all, you have much more pressing concerns to consider... I’ve grown quite fond of you... I may even be persuaded to spare your life...

“But we’ll require a sacrifice first, won’t we my pets?... Yes, a fair trade... One life for another... But now, who should we choose?... Whose life would be worth your own?... Oh, I know! The little cat-girl!... Give me the little scaredy-cat-girl and I’ll let you go... Wouldn’t that be nice?... I’ll trade a Robin for a Kitty!”

“No.”

A sudden frown greeted his response.

“No?... Such an unreasonable child... Well, I see I’ll have to sweeten the pot a little... A little sugar to help that bitter taste of betrayal... Alright, give me the cat-girl and I’ll let you live... Plus I’ll throw in the map data for the entire second floor!... Now just imagine how valuable that information would be!... How many precious lives could you save with that little tidbit, hmmm?... I daresay you’d be quite the hero, Dami-chan.”

Damian struggled to twist his neck to stare into her shining green eyes.

“Tell me why you want Argo so badly?”

“You first.”

Keeping her emerald eyes fixed on his, the virtual doppelganger of Selina Kyle slowly crawled overtop of his prone body, keeping a hair’s width of separation between the pair of them as she brought her moistened lips slowly to his ear while fragrant dark hair spilled across his face...

“Perhaps because I’m a teensy bit jealous.”

He hadn’t expected that answer. Was this virtual monster truly jealous or had its countless algorithms simply been programmed to emulate Selina Kyle’s seductive nature? Was it simply toying with him? And why wasn’t it attacking him?

Still, the fact remained that unless they were rescued by the outside world soon, it was almost a foregone conclusion that more players would needlessly die as they explored Aincrad. That map data could save dozens of lives and whatever this entity was, it seemed powerful enough to provide it...

Damian brought that line of reasoning to a crashing halt. Argo’s life wasn’t his to give.

“Give the map data to Argo... If you a want a sacrifice so badly, take me instead.”

His decision only seemed to intrigue The Cat Witch who suddenly stood up on her high heeled boots and stared down at him with a curious gaze as his body remained paralyzed.

“Don’t tempt me... But tell me... Why would you die for her?”

“Because her life is not mine to give.”
The witch crouched down once more and tapped her sharp claws over his heart like a dancing spider before turning her malicious grin towards him once more.

“Oh, shall I ask her instead then?... Just say one little word and I’ll let you both trade places... One little snap of my fingers and you’ll be back on the moors and I’ll continue this little chat with Argo... Wouldn’t that be lovely?... In fact, you’d be doing me a big favour.”

“What do you mean by that?”

A lengthy pause, as though the witch had said too much.

“Let’s just say that some people weren’t meant to play this game... That they may have an unfair advantage... Oh look, the Paralysis is wearing off!... Tick tock, tick tock... Time is running out!... Oh come now, you shouldn’t feel too bad, Dami-chan... After all, even the best leaders need to sacrifice a few troops every now and then... And it’s not like you don’t have blood on your hands already, now is it?... What’s a little more?”

How did she know that?! As a trained assassin, Damian had been required by his grandfather to take his first life by the age of eight. It had been his first kill, but it hadn’t been his last...

“My answer is still no.”

In muted disdain, the Selina Kyle avatar slowly wrung her hands above him, obviously unimpressed by Damian’s heroic response.

“Well, this is awkward... I’ve offered you the easy way, but you’ve chosen to make things complicated... Well, we must be entertained, mustn’t we my pets?... Yes, we certainly must... If he wants to be the hero, who are we to stop him?... So go ahead, Damian... Save your precious little snitch...”

A wicked smile spread across her full lips.

“But perhaps first you should... Save yourself.”

As sensation slowly returned to his virtual body, Damian watched as the laughing Cat Witch and her numerous purring pets suddenly teleported away in a flash of blue light, leaving him alone in the large room once again.

Rising unsteadily to his feet, the young man decided to concentrate on finding a way out instead of contemplating the several questions barraging his thoughts about what had actually just happened here.

Something about the echo of the witch’s departing words filled him with a new sense of urgency...

‘... Save yourself.’

As he suspected, the massive doors which formed the entrance to the Black Iron Palace were hopelessly locked. Damian then located a large jailor’s door of barred iron at the other far end of the room behind the monument... But it was locked as well. Peering through its thick iron bars, he saw only darkness in the room beyond and assumed this must be the entrance to the massive prison area rumoured to be in the Black Iron Palace.

He couldn’t go that way either.

Across from the doors where he had entered were a matching pair which seemed to lead to the West
Tower…

Also locked.

That meant he’d have to try the same way he’d come in. As Damian turned towards them, he suddenly noticed those doors had slowly swung wide open, allowing him unfettered access to the long twisting hallway from where he had previously emerged…

Almost as if they were inviting him.

Quickly making his way beyond those doors and across the circular room to the bottom of the stairs, the Boy Wonder was now determined to escape. There were three miles of hallway between himself and his friends. A handful of steps into the familiar hallway later, the young hero heard it before he saw it…

“Saaavve… Mee… Dame..meee..ehhhhn.”

Immediately drawing his dagger, the boy froze in place as he noticed a pale blue light seemed to be moving towards him along the corridor, relentlessly rounding the bend which would bring it into his full view while it repeated its slow breathless chant of ‘Save me, Damian’…

His stomach lurched as he saw it, realizing it was the glowing blue female body of one of the dead players which he’d passed in an alcove from before…

Quickly examining the red cursor above her digital corpse, Damian read the name ‘Dead Player – Agatha June’. She was dressed in short pink robes and white thigh-high boots… Thankfully, there was only one HP bar beside her name which meant that even at his current level of three, he should be able to deal with a monster like this.

Charging forward, Damian engaged a vertical attack skill and quickly sunk his dagger deep into the dead player’s glowing chest directly above her heart…

To no effect.

The apparition only uttered another pathetic ‘Saaavve… Mee… Dame..meee..ehhhnn’ before it mindlessly sunk its teeth into his arm, causing the young man to recoil in horror after it bit him.

What sort of monster was this?! While his dagger attack had definitely struck the creature, it seemed to have caused no damage at all, not even stunning it.

Back-pedalling, Damian quickly examined his own Hit Points to realize that the creature’s attack had caused him minimal injury, but also that a ‘Poison’ icon had appeared next to his status. And just like a Teleportation Crystal, he’d been unable to afford an Antidote Crystal as well…

Damn it!

And this thing was still lurching towards him, looking for another taste…

His thoughts suddenly snapped back to a quiet evening in Wayne Manor only weeks ago, when the sadistic Richard Grayson had attempted to frighten his eleven-year-old step-brother by making him watch one of the countless horror movies which continuously aired during the Halloween season. This particular movie had been an apocalyptic zombie thriller which the culturally-challenged Grayson had obviously enjoyed, but the buckets of unrealistic fake gore had not impressed the younger Damian in the slightest.
But he did learn that only sufficient head trauma could kill a zombie.

Well, it was certainly worth a shot.

Launching a second attack directly into the dead player’s skull, Damian smiled as he watched the HP bar of the former player called Agatha June drop into the red zone and then to zero as the shambling avatar suddenly exploded into sparkling polygonal diamonds which eroded into flittering dust before completely disappearing.

The small amount of experience he gained indicated that this was a low-level monster, easily defeated with a single strike to its head, but he was pleasantly surprised that it had dropped the enormous sum of 892 Col, almost thirty times more than a Frenzy Boar!

Still, all the Col in Aincrad wouldn’t save him if he didn’t get out of here soon and get his hands on an Antidote crystal… As though in response, his own Hit Point total suddenly dropped by another point.

Alright, so it wasn’t as bleak as it looked. Whatever type of poison this was, he’d been lucky that it was incredibly weak, inflicting only one point of damage per attack sequence... But that didn’t mean it couldn’t kill him, it only meant that he’d have to hurry. He had three long miles to go before he reached the hallway’s outer exit and even then, the invisible wall might still be in place.

Damian quickly opened his item menu to locate his single Healing Potion. It would buy him some time later on, but he really needed to get moving and save it for later. As he closed his menu, he looked up in wide-eyed shock as he heard yet another chorus of ‘Saaavve… Meee… Dame..mmeee..ehhnn’ coming from the hallway in front of him.

As though stuck in his own private nightmare, he saw not one but two of these slow-moving horrors approaching him as they crested the stony bend, their arms outstretched to welcome him into dark oblivion as they shambled closer to their living prey.

The walls of the hallway suddenly seemed to enclose around him, squeezing inwardly as he unconsciously read the first monster’s cursor… ‘Dead Player – Akane’ and then the second male player’s cursor… ‘Dead Player – Arvin’.

As the boy struggled to gather his scattered thoughts into the tangled net of reason, Damian suddenly grasped that Agatha June had only been the first of many…

Over five hundred players had died in Sword Art Online during the first week alone… And now, all of them were abandoning their recessed alcoves and shuffling towards him like a pale blue army of the undead along this narrow hallway...
Chapter End Notes

All cat owners are acutely aware of the dangerous phenomenon known as ‘Feline Paralysis’. It’s the moment when your cat decides to snuggle up on your lap and you suddenly find yourself unable to move...

Next Chapter: It’s Damian versus 500 zombies! Part two of ‘The Halls of the Departed’, posting Friday, November 20th!
The Halls of the Departed Part Two: Damian’s Gambit

Chapter Summary

Damian Wayne versus 500 dead players.

Chapter Notes

To the guest who reviewed the last chapter and asked how Damian’s name and background was known, refer back to Chapter 6 when Oracle’s comm-link servers were hacked. That's where SAO got all the personal information from.

Sachi

(A beautiful fanart piece of Sachi and Kirito from the Internet)
Plunging his wide-bladed dagger into the forehead of the former player known as ‘Arvin’, Damian Wayne once again cursed the unrealistic combat mechanics of Sword Art Online as the second glowing blue monster - the player formerly known as ‘Akane’ - was able to sink her teeth into his unmoving forearm due to latent attack freeze, causing yet another small slice of his Hit Point bar to disappear.

In retaliation, his dagger soon found its way into her virtual skull as well, producing the familiar explosion of diamond-like fireworks…

He soon understood that with SAO’s combat system, fighting these things in groups would be lead to death.

However, Damian was once again shocked at the incredibly high reward that these two Undead creatures yielded… 612 Col and 710 Col respectively. Even though the 40 Experience Points gained per defeated zombie was fairly low, the treasure drops seemed to be several magnitudes higher.

He quickly reasoned that this must have been the amount of currency these former players possessed at the time of their demise. That would also explain the varying amounts he’d received from these three glowing revenants. And although it may seem akin to grave robbing, the undisputable fact was that there was now a King’s ransom in Col shambling towards him along this hallway, more than enough to fix the Legion guild’s current financial woes…

He only had to survive.

If he could only face them one at a time, he could make it. The young hero was confident that his faster attack speed would prevail against these slower opponents. They were slow and stupid… A moment later, Damian noticed his Hit Point total suddenly dropped by another two points.

Damn…

This meant the poison effect was cumulative. Each additional bite would cause an additional point of damage per turn. And there were still another five hundred of these things shuffling towards him along the next three twisting miles of narrow hallway.

Damian considered the numbers in his head as he jogged forward. Their bites seemed to do a measly ten points of damage, but combined with the previous twenty he had just taken, that meant that only 239 points now separated his life total from death. He wasn’t close to the Yellow zone yet, but he couldn’t take many more hits if he wanted to get out alive.

The single Healing Potion he had would restore 250 HP, close to his full health, but it wouldn’t cure his poisoned status. The battling Boy Wonder decided to save it until he was almost dead to get a maximum return on its restorative properties, quietly hoping he was past the exit when he finally did have to drink it.

He’d have more than enough time to get into the town at that point.

With his character currently at level three, Damian now regretted sinking all 6 points from his previous two level gains into Agility. Each point of Agility in this game made you faster and more likely to hit an opponent, but it only increased your maximum Hit Points by 2. In contrast, each point of Strength increased it by 20.

And he really could have used those extra 120 Hit Points right about now…
The young man kept pushing forward and formulated his strategy. It wasn’t much, but he knew if he encountered these things one at a time, he stood a good chance. It was a narrow hallway. One strike, one kill, no counter. Strike, kill, continue and repeat…

It wasn’t out of the question.

During his first trip along this curving hallway, he’d noticed a sizeable gap between most of the dead players in alcoves. If these zombie-like monsters were simply leaving their resting places to shambling off towards him with those sizable gaps between them, it meant that if he hurried, he should be able to fight them one-on-one.

If he didn’t hurry, they would bunch up in large groups and he’d get mobbed. And then he would have no choice but to retreat. Even with the Healing Potion, another fifty bites would kill him regardless of what his poison status was.

In a moment, he counted seventeen dead players lined up nicely with at least fifteen feet of distance between them. More than enough distance if he struck fast… The young assassin plunged his dagger into the first zombie skull according to plan, and then managed to kill the next nine but he was forced to quickly back up when he noticed a disturbing flaw in his logic...

When Damian killed an undead player, the others behind it continued to relentlessly walk forward while his attack sequence ran the clock until he was finally facing a small mob of them quickly clumping together. The time it took him to attack allowed the remaining monsters to keep moving forward until they became more than he could safely handle.

Worse, there was now even a larger group approaching from behind the remaining seven undead creatures...

No choice but to retreat.

As Damian made his way back to the spiral staircase at the end of the hallway, he realized that this could be the tactical advantage he so desperately needed right now. Its curving ascent was designed for only one player at a time… Quickly dashing up the first half of its stairs, Damian turned and watched as the flesh-hungry monsters who had mindlessly followed him were now being forced into a single file to continue their unrelenting hunt.

One quick strike while retreating up the steps seemed to do the trick, keeping him just out of the reach of the next dead player’s snapping jaws. As he finally crested the top stair, the eleven-year-old managed to drive his dagger’s wide blade into the temple of the last zombie, watching it explode into a thousand sparkling shards while he grinned in desperate satisfaction.

The circular stair strategy had worked.

Damian managed to lure and kill another twenty-nine dead players this way, luring them in a dance of quick descending attacks paired with an ascending defence, stepping just outside the reach of gnashing teeth until there was finally a glowing blue stream of the Dead filling the hallway below, forcing him past the top of the stone stairwell and into the room beyond as the Dead continued to spill upwards like a poisoned tide.

He had to back up. Checking his experience stats, the retreating Damian decided to kill five more of the zombies before the advancing mob pushed him back into the former Room of Resurrection. He recklessly received two more bite attacks for his trouble as he watched his Hit Point Bar suddenly drop lower...
He’d be losing four points per turn now, but the gamble should pay off. He’d just gained enough experience points to finally attain level four. Putting some distance between himself and the Undead horde now entering the cathedral, Damian opened his player menu and quickly sank all three of these new attribute points into Strength - giving him sixty more Hit Points towards his maximum health.

It was a nice boost, but levelling up was a trick he’d only be able to perform once on this night. In a wide open space like this, the lag after a single attack meant that he’d soon be surrounded by scores of these undead things, unable to escape.

There would be no fighting them now…

As he looked up and saw what must have been a hundred of these clumsy creatures advancing towards him like a glowing blue wave, the boy who was Robin knew that he needed a new plan. Although they had vastly superior numbers on their side, these dead players did have one obvious disadvantage...

They walked.

Like the fictional zombies from Hollywood, these monsters moved in a shuffling gait, constantly following their prey in mindless pursuit. This wide-open room meant he didn’t dare attack, but it also meant he wouldn’t be easy to catch. As the horde of glowing blue death continued to pour into the massive cathedral, Damian soon determined that he had all the space he needed to corral them.

It would be like a deadly game of tag.

He would use his speed to zigzag across the room, constantly luring them further back and forth until all the remaining zombies filled this space. Once they were all in here, he only had to get back to the exit and simply outrun them along the long hallway.

He just had to make sure they didn’t get a hold of him in the meantime....

Piece of cake.

The agile boy started to weave his way back-and-forth as more and more of the glowing blue horde filled the room, following him in a mindless trance while continuing to trickle in from the single entry point like fetid water quickly pouring in from a hole in a sinking ship. Soon, it seemed like the young Wayne heir was almost drowning in the Dead, with more and more of his escape routes continuously being closed off by blue undead flesh as he found himself being continuously pushed backwards.

Those four points of poison damage per turn were also beginning to take their toll on his fading health. After countless minutes of incessant dodging and evasive sprints, his HP bar had long since fallen into the yellow and was approaching the red, prompting Damian to use his Healing Potion while being forced into the room’s farthest corner.

He was unpleasantly surprised at just how bad it tasted… But it worked.

Even though he was now back at full health, Damian could take little consolation in that fact as he was rapidly running out of room to manoeuvre. These player-zombies had filled the cathedral like some shambling congregation of the damned.

Now he was left with no choice but to get back to the front of the room and make his escape, even if all of these former players hadn’t made their way into the cathedral yet.

Weaving his way through the tight spaces between their blue corpses, Damian batted dozens of glowing blue hands out of his path, having to continuously change direction to avoid getting
hemmed in by their sheer numbers as they drifted in front of him. He even shot between a few of their legs to avoid being surrounded, keeping moving at all times.

Stopping meant death.

Rolling and bobbing like a desperate quarterback under siege, Damian continued to push his way towards the exit, refusing to allow himself to get closed in by the Dead’s crushing volume. With a final burst of speed, he scrambled into a seam and finally spotted his objective…

The doorway.

With single-minded determination, the smaller Damian tackled the dead player entering the doorway with pure speed, even allowing the foul creature to bite him as their bodies tumbled into the next room.

There was more of them in here. Dodging and weaving around eight of the approaching zombies in this smaller sized room, Damian simply jumped down the spiral staircase while careening off three more dead players on the stairwell before crashing into the fourth - which he stabbed in the head before it could bite him.

He took note of this dead player’s name as it exploded into polygons: ‘Wiccan’...

That meant he was on the W’s… He’d only have to fight his way through the rest of the W-players and then the X, Y and Z-named dead players before he could make his way back to the exit. That wasn’t too bad. Unfortunately, it also meant he had the rest of the alphabet behind him, now beginning to descend the spiral stairs one at a time in hot pursuit.

Getting to his feet and wiping his brow, the Boy Wonder ran down the hallway with his dagger still drawn, knowing full well that he’d have to run past anything he encountered from this point forward or more likely fight them.

Because however many were in front of him right now, it couldn’t any worse than what was behind him…

As he ran, he began to feel worse. Damian had never heard of anyone getting sick in this game before, but now he felt like he was burning up with a fever while his stomach lurched in protest at his flight. Perhaps it was some side effect of this slow poison…

Whatever it was, it didn’t matter. He had to put it behind him and keep moving.

The last of the W-players - ‘Wyvern’ - went down quickly with one strike.

A minute later, ‘X’, ‘Xenian’ and ‘Xellos’ attacked him in a group of three which he couldn’t avoid, landing two bites before he was finally able to send them all into the digital afterlife.

Two letters down, two to go.

A hundred yards later, his lungs were gasping for air on top of his nauseous stomach. In a game where you didn’t even need to use the bathroom, he actually felt as though he were going to be violently ill while his fever was only getting worse.

Keep moving.

The letter ‘Y’ proved to be his undoing… A mob of twelve Y-named undead players knocked his health bar to the yellow zone before he managed to slash his way through them, finally plunging his
dagger into the head of a dark-haired character named ‘Yuri’ before he stumbled and fell, physically exhausted from fighting and now fully drenched in a cold sweat.

He was losing 12 Hit Points a turn from poison now…

His father’s words echoed like a roar in his mind… *Get up!*… *Get up!*… *Never stop!*

Nodding his head up and down in fevered delirium, Damian was forced to use the hallway as a climbing wall, slowly managing to get to his feet and stumble onwards with his eyes now incessantly blinking.

Only ‘Z’ to go, only two of the dead players left in front of him… Death is hot on your heels…

Just two more…

Move Damian, keep moving…

As he continued to stagger onwards, he eventually encountered the first dead player ‘Zelgadis’ who was ten steps ahead of ‘Zoltar’.

That was enough.

As the grasping Zelgadis lurched towards him, Damian managed to use whatever momentum he had left by pushing off on the wall to engage a vertical attack skill, using the system’s automated attack sequence to arc his blade into the front of the zombie’s head before tumbling forwards after the attack completed. It worked, one zombie left…

As he fell to the hard stone floor, his world spun out of control as though he were sea sick on an angry ocean, desperately attempting to regain his lost bearings while the last dead player closed in.

Crumpling on the floor with his stomach in agony, Damian opened his eyes to make out a blue blob descending towards his face, instinctively bringing the weapon in his hand forward to defend himself, not even thinking about engaging the game’s automated attack sequence.

It was nothing more than dumb luck which caused ‘Dead Player – Zoltar’ to receive the impulsively placed blade directly into its right eye socket as the undead creature hungrily lurched towards its fallen prey - exploding into polygons and then showering Damian in a thousand twinkling stars.

He was alive.

Staring up in blurry-eyed surprise and disbelief at the brightly coloured spectrum of oblivion before his eyes, Damian couldn’t believe his luck when he noticed that a *new* white-and-grey screen appeared just after the familiar experience and treasure window…

*“Congratulations! You got the last attacking bonus!”*

A second information screen then popped up in front of the first one which read…

- **BONUS ITEM**

*Keys to the Black Iron Palace*

Besides Kayaba’s hand mirror, it had been the first item in this game he had ever acquired. Slowly reaching forward as though in a lazy dream to tap the keys’ icon on the floating screen, Damian found it was automatically deposited into his inventory. The last rational part of him suspected this item was necessary to unlock the massive doors at the main entrance of the Black Iron Palace…
Something he could have used almost an hour ago.

Glancing over at the empty alcove to his right, he made out the name ‘Portgas D’Ace’ above it… Which meant he was more than halfway through this hall, but he could have been a world away. Simple math and the venomous rebellion happening within his virtual body told him he wasn’t going to make it the rest of the way, that the poison would get him first while the sickness brought him down…

Keeping his inventory open as he laid on the ground, Damian wiped the cold sweat from his eyes until he noticed that the transfer function was still available. He quickly sent a request to transfer the forty-nine thousand Col he had just gained as well as the ‘Keys to the Black Iron Palace’ item to Argo who was the first player on his Party list.

If nothing else, the money would help build the strong army the pair of them had dreamed of back on their very first night here together in this strange new world. That part of the game had been fun at least…

He wasn’t sure how long he had lied there in this twilight of memory before he was able to focus again, but the young man suddenly heard the far-off moans of the main horde approaching from behind him. Groggily, Damian closed his menu and used the wall to force himself back up to his feet, almost falling over as his legs shuddered uncontrollably. His limbs now felt impossibly heavy and his head seemed to be swimming in a river of fire… but he couldn’t give up.

He wouldn’t give up.

Glancing over at the latest downtick on his health bar, the son of Bruce Wayne and Talia al Ghul realized it didn’t matter anymore...

It was already too late for him…

He must have passed out on the floor…

He had 6 HP left.
Moments after Damian had disappeared into the tunnel beyond the invisible wall which blocked their entry to the Halls of the Departed, a worried Marigan sent Hisako to gather both battalions currently resting outside of town. She then messaged the other five regiments in the field to start making their way back towards the Town of Beginnings for additional support.

Meanwhile, the observant Argo had begun examining every crack and crevice of the surrounding wall, desperately searching for any secret switch or hidden latch. After thirty minutes of intense investigation, she’d only managed to find a small opening set into the right-hand side of the unseen barrier which she could poke her finger into...

It reminded her of a keyhole.

By that time, with all remaining 67 players of the two battalions of the Legion guild gathered around her, Commander Marigan had formulated a six-shield, six-spear assault unit which would fit very nicely into the narrow hallway of the Halls of the Departed…
Should they ever gain access to it.

The first three shield-bearers would kneel down and cover the bottom three feet from the floor while the next three shield-bearers would crouch just behind them, angling their shields to protect the next two-and-a-half feet. The remaining six Phalanx members would then bring up the rear in two rows of three, using both hands on their spears, employing a ‘Forward Thrust’ attack over the first six shield-bearers while remaining completely protected. It was a smaller variation of a dungeon formation codenamed ‘Protect and Poke’ they had previously designed.

While Marigan had no idea if a threat actually existed within the curving hallway that had swallowed up young Damian like some giant stone serpent, she had a feeling that there was something in there…

Something bad.

As the exasperated Argo finally succumbed to the challenge of the invisible wall and slid her back down against its unbreakable force field in mounting frustration, she attempted to distract her agitated mind by watching Marigan put the soldiers through their paces in a new attack formation; six shields protecting six spears.

She smiled as the tall woman made small adjustments to the position of each shield before backing up and charging at the wall at a full sprint, tackling the six shields to ensure it would hold against her assault. Argo quietly wondered though if Marigan was feeling just as useless as she was regarding the current situation with Damian...

More than an hour had passed since the time Damian had become separated from the group when Argo suddenly received a transfer request pop-up screen from him...

“MARIGAN!!!”

As the tall blonde warrior quickly made her way towards the entrance, the nervous Argo accepted the request and found that Damian was transferring the princely sum of 49,016 Col and an item named ‘Keys to the Black Iron Palace’ to her. As Marigan peered down at the younger player’s transfer screen, the guild’s Commander quickly began to surmise what this new information meant…

“This tunnel must have been a hidden single-player quest to open up the Black Iron Palace.”

“But where did he get forty-nine thousand Col from?!”

“A really big treasure chest?”

Argo instinctively transferred the over forty-nine thousand Col into the Legion guild’s treasury and then tapped the newly acquired item’s cursor, instantly feeling the weight of large iron keys materialize in her right hand.

Keys…

The revelation struck Argo like a bolt from the blue as she immediately spun towards the entryway. Carefully running her fingers along the invisible barrier, the young woman discovered the unseen gap she had only recently uncovered before frantically manoeuvring one of the iron keys into its hole...

A perfect fit.

There was a high-pitched sound like fine crystal shattering as the tunnel’s location cursor suddenly
reappeared just inside the entranceway before them…

*The Halls of the Departed*

Cautiously extending her hand further through the doorway’s opening, Argo soon discovered that the unseen barrier was no longer preventing them from going after Damian.

A firm hand clapped her on the shoulder as the much taller Marigan smiled.

“Good work, little cat-girl. I’ll get the first assault team ready…”

As they turned to prepare their rescue mission, the two women watched in disbelief as the speeding Hisako Li Shun tore past them both at a full sprint, her recently acquired rapier dangling from her side as nothing more than mere decoration. As a Phalanx runner, Hisako was one of a very few players to actually select the ‘Sprint’ skill and most likely one of the fastest players in the game…

But it had cost her dearly.

As her character had been intended as nothing more than a lure by Shouichi and his criminal cronies, Hisako’s first two skills had been ‘Sprint’ and ‘Fighting Spirit’. The sword she carried at her side was practically useless as she had no ‘Rapier’ skill to utilize it.

The two surprised women watched as Hisako disappeared like a blur into the hall’s blue-tinged darkness until Marigan quickly recovered, turning in shock and staring down at the smaller Argo with concern written across her wide green eyes. Without a single word being spoken, the girl knew exactly what those eyes were imploring her to do, even without Marigan having to utter a single word.

“Alright, alright, fine… I’ll go after her.”

Although Argo was her battalion’s runner along with Damian, neither of them were as fast as Hisako by any stretch of the imagination. Still, Argo knew she’d be a lot faster than the soldiers Marigan was currently organizing behind her. Her only hope was that if Hisako did encounter anything dangerous that she’d at least have the good sense to turn around and not engage it.

As Argo ran into the darkness towards blue light, the ever-present nightmare flashed before her eyes yet again, causing the former Beta-tester to attempt to purge it from her mind. That constantly looping memory of her father crossing a busy intersection in the Koto ward of Tokyo, suddenly looking up to wave to his waiting daughter a split second before the screeching tires of a distracted driver sent his body careening forward like a tumbling weed into the path of an oncoming truck...

Where he was killed instantly.

That scene unfolded again like a slow-motion nightmare, those three seconds of her life which had haunted her waking memories ever since…

And in some cruel twist of fate, the reserved copy of Sword Art Online which he had picked up from the office that morning had remained unscathed, tumbling along the street towards her as the truck pinned her father under its wide wheels…

He had been a senior programming engineer for Sword Art Online and by sheer coincidence, on the date of the game’s launch a week ago, her father would have also turned forty-years-old. They had planned to celebrate that milestone by participating in the game’s official launch together…

Father and daughter.
After his tragic death, Argo’s reluctant participation in the game’s launch had only been to honour that commitment, to once again gaze upon the virtual world which her father had helped create, secretly hoping that a part of him was still left here for her to find, some last gift he had hidden for her alone…

It had actually been her father who had urged her to become a Beta-tester. He’d also suggested that she become an Information Broker in order to help steer players towards certain areas to aid with game development. Besides, with her inside knowledge of Sword Art Online, it would’ve been unfair for her character to join a party or to fight on the front lines, so Argo had portrayed herself as money-hungry Information Broker to aid in SAO’s development.

Her father had also reasoned (correctly) that other players would reveal their true feelings about the game’s unique challenges much more candidly to a fellow player rather than the official feedback forms required by the Argus Corporation for its Beta-testers. She felt as though she had been a spy for Argus.

Even her character name ‘Argo’ had been chosen by her father, taken from the fabled ship which had carried the heroic Jason and his legendary Argonauts on their various quests across the seas of ancient lands, constructed by the master shipwright for which it had been named…

But now, Akihiko Kayaba had stolen her precious dream of finding any last remnants of her father’s late genius in this world he had helped create… This beautiful world of imagination had been corrupted into nothing more than killing fields flowing with the blood of the players…

As she ran along a twisting tunnel, Argo forced her mind back to the present, pushing herself past the empty alcoves which listed Sword Art Online player names alphabetically in an endless blur…

Where was Hisako?!

Hisako Li Shun had never intended to play the hero and run off by herself down the twisting corridor in search of the missing Damian, but there had been one word spoken in her mind after the shattering sound of the invisible barrier being broken as Marigan and Argo stood by its sides…

Run!

The long-haired girl now sprinted along the bending hallway while empty alcoves blurred past her, the perception of their flickering blue torches transformed into nothing more than cerulean speed lines. Although she was a fast runner in the real world, it was nothing compared to the speed she could attain in Sword Art Online.

She was the fastest runner in the game. And why shouldn’t she should be?…

Hisako Li Shun had been running like this for half her life.

She’d only been eight years old when the Chinese government had made her father simply disappear, taken away by the dreaded secret police only hours before they had intended to flee to Japan to avoid possible detainment after his latest published story.

It was the last time she had seen him…

Her father, Jié Li Shun, was an outspoken critic of China’s human rights abuses and a noted web journalist, a dangerous combination in light of that country’s totalitarian regime. It hadn’t been the
first time he had been brought in for ‘questioning’, but this time, he’d never been heard from again.

In the eight years since they had fled from China to her mother’s homeland of Japan, both Hisako and her distraught mother had been constantly fearful of extradition, continually maintaining a low profile in the country where her mother still held citizenship. Cryptic notes to their remaining family members in China confirmed that both their names had appeared on the Chinese Central Commission for Discipline Inspection’s list. Soon after their arrival, even the Japanese authorities had visited her grandparents’ home inquiring about their current whereabouts.

Her mother had been able to take an unreported position as a maid within the expansive Shinkawa residence which provided room, board and a meagre income for the pair of them. Once her own Japanese citizenship had been obtained, the young Hisako had begrudgingly attended a local school, always looking over her shoulder for any spies or secret agents who might be lurking in the shadows, patiently waiting for her…

This was the reason why she had continuously run along the busy streets of Tokyo.

It had been silly and perhaps unnecessary, but it made her feel safe. If she was running, it meant no one could catch her. But her reassuring speed soon became only one more reason for the sickly Shouichi Shinkawa to hate her, contemptuously watching from his bedroom window in the real world as she ran to school without stopping…

She secretly feared that Shouichi or even his brother Kyouji might one day discover her dangerous secret along with its dire consequences. If the Shinkawa children caused her mother to lose her position with their wealthy family, what would happen to them then?

For Hisako Li Shun, the week she had spent within the world of Aincrad had been a welcome change… Here, the monsters all had red cursors floating above their heads and criminal players had orange ones… And she had made friends that didn’t care about her past.

Things were simple.

But even in this strange new world, she still felt safest when she was running. Speed had become like a child’s security blanket to her, keeping her from harm. Her ‘Sprint’ skill was already above 100, higher than most frontline players’ weapon skills, far faster than any monster they had encountered.

As Hisako ran through the twisting corridor, she had almost streaked past Damian as he clung to the side of the wall, weakly steadying himself to keep from falling over. Quickly stopping to join the eleven-year-old, Hisako immediately noticed that the boy was in dire peril… Damian’s health bar was deep into the red zone and there was also a ‘Poison’ icon beside it.

Opening her own menu, the young woman quickly retrieved her single Healing Potion and held it out for him…

“Save it… Won’t matter… I’ve been poisoned.”

Damian declined it in a rasping voice, waving her gift aside, watching his health take the last fatal tick downwards, that last instant where his slim red line of six Hit Points would vanish due to the poison coursing through his digital veins and finally kill him…

It stopped at 1 Hit Point.

Somehow, he was still alive.
As his fevered mind attempted to comprehend why he wasn’t dead, Hisako stubbornly held the potion in front of him, unwavering in her conviction as she popped its glass cork off with her thumb.

“Drink.”

Unable to argue further, Damian reluctantly took the potion from her and managed to drink it as instructed, instantly adding 250 Hit Points to the single point he had remaining... But even with the additional health, the Poison status remained. He would still be losing Hit Points every turn, giving him perhaps twenty minutes to escape the Halls of the Departed and find an antidote crystal.

He groaned as he attempted to stagger forward... Although his Hit Points may have recovered, he was now feeling worse than ever, his body almost crumpling over in pure agony.

“Hisako, leave me here... I need an antidote crystal... I’ll just slow you down... There’s over four hundred... player-zombies just behind me... Go... Save yourself!”

In spite of his request, Hisako Li Shun grabbed his arm around and slung it around her slender shoulder to support Damian as they began staggering towards the exit together. While she didn’t have the Strength stat to actually carry him, she was able to support his wobbly legs.

“C’mon, help is on the way, Damian... There’s two battalions in front of us.”

“Won’t be... enough.”

“There’s also Marigan.”

Damian made a sound somewhere between a cough and a chuckle, repressing the urge to be violently ill as they slowly stepped ahead while a horde of undead players crested the curve behind them...

In desperation, they continued this slow and unsteady pace with the Undead persistently gaining ground until they came upon an unexpected sight... Standing in the middle of the hallway was the cloaked and breathless Argo staring back at the both of them in shared surprise, as though she hadn’t expected to find them here either.

“Are you... alright... Dami-chan?”

He answered with more of a groan than a word.

“... no.”

As the whisker-painted Argo stole a quick glance at Damian’s status, the younger girl opened her inventory menu and tapped the ‘Antidote Crystal’ icon she had only just acquired from a costly trade with a frontline player. She knew from experience that it would come in handy on the second floor.

Lifting the green crystal and pointing it directly at Damian, she spoke the words to activate it...

“Cure: Damian!”

In a flash of green light, Damian’s ‘Poison’ status was instantly replaced by the word ‘Sick’ while Argo scratched her head and stared at him curiously before turning her attention back to the expired emerald crystal in her hand, quickly tapping it with her fingers as though it had been defective when it burst into sparkly green polygons.

“That was weird... What’s Sick?... I’ve never heard of it before.”
“We’ve got… to move… There’s an army… of the Undead… just behind me.”

As though in response to his gasping words, Argo’s pale brown eyes suddenly went wide with fear as she looked up and spotted the first of the glowing blue dead players only forty feet behind them… Even more of these gruesome creatures were continuously spilling into view, lumbering towards them like a scene from a late night horror movie.

Without another word, the diminutive Argo quickly slipped under Damian’s other shoulder as the three of them began to stumble forward like some mismatched team in a bizarre three-legged race, two girls practically dragging the struggling Damian between them.

Both women now understood that a stumble at this point could end their lives as they engaged in a horrific race against death.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, the power of FanFic... I’ve drastically altered Argo’s origin from the source material where she’s simply a player who will sell any tidbit of information for money. More will be revealed about her in Chapter 17. At the time of this writing, Argo’s true origin (including her real name) has yet to be divulged in SAO canon.
Heading the vanguard, Marigan stood against the darkened mouth of the Halls of the Departed with four groups of 12-soldier assault teams in order behind her. Each unit was also supported by four ‘heavy-hitters’ as they began their march into the long tunnel like a long, twisting dragon of scales, claws and teeth.

While it had been only been moments since Hisako had sprinted down the twisting spiral of this catacomb with Argo in hot pursuit, the commander of the Legion silently prayed they wouldn’t be too late.

As Marigan marched through the confined space, the first sixty-four members of her guild followed, row upon tight row. The other runner of the first battalion, a slender boy named Karbon who was Hisako’s counterpart, she’d left at the entrance to alert them when the other battalions had arrived, instructing him to stay in contact with the others through player messaging.

Marigan quickly checked her own message screen to see if she could use it…

They were in a dungeon.

“Everyone stay ready! This is NOT a safe zone!”
The warrior had absolutely no idea what these murky depths ahead of them would bring, but she wasn’t about to take any chances. A row of three soldiers with heavy shields barely fit across the passageway’s narrow span, a fact which would work in their favour should they encounter any monsters.

As they continued their march forward, the tall commander also saw the alcoves listing the dead players’ names, noting that while most of these recesses held blue flaming torches, only two of them did not. The marching Legion members soon made their way past names beginning with Z.

The Y-names took longer and again Marigan noticed that there seemed to be more of the alcoves missing torches. Strange…

The player names beginning with X, W, and V went by quickly with no surprises except for another handful of missing torches...

It was when they had entered the U-section and completed perhaps half-a-mile of this spiralling passageway that Marigan finally spotted Hisako and Argo, dragging an unconscious Damian between them by his shoulders like a fallen soldier, sheer determination written across their grim faces as they frantically strained to drag his dead weight forwards…

And then Marigan saw what was behind them.

“First Battalion! Get in front of those three… NOW!!!”

To their eternal acclaim, those twelve players of the first battalion quickly ran ahead of her, placing themselves in battle formation, a wall of shields and spears created between them and the glowing blue tide of death awkwardly shuffling along the narrow hall.

A far glance at the red cursor above these all-too-human looking monsters revealed what they actually were… Dead players. Taking a sharp breath, Marigan exhaled in disgust, realizing what it was they now faced... Even for a sadistic madman like Akihiko Kayaba, this was low… Sending former players who’d lost their lives to his game against their living counterparts was pure evil.

As an exhausted Argo and Hisako made their way with the unconscious Damian over to where Marigan stood, the first battalion nervously prepared for the onslaught of these former players now corrupted into an army of the Undead.

Argo caught her breath and updated Marigan.

“He’s alive, but sick... Before he passed out, Damian babbled something about only a head shot killing these things... Also, they attack by biting and they’re poisonous.”

“Did he say how many there were?”

Hisako then spoke up.

“He mentioned over four hundred when I first met him.”

Marigan quietly cursed under her breath and then motioned for one of the larger heavy-hitters to join them, a shaggy-haired young man with a large scimitar slung across his back.

“Crusher Joe, help these ladies carry this kid into town… He won’t die if you get him there quickly… Go!”

The player named Crusher Joe nodded and scooped up the unconscious Damian over his broad
shoulder before running towards the exit with Argo and Hisako following closely behind. Now that
the wounded had been taken care of, Marigan turned her attention to the battle that was about to rage
against her shielded shores.

“Spears!… Listen up, head shots only!... That’s the only way to stop these things… Aim for the
HEAD!”

Marigan watched as the ravaging tide of the Undead suddenly slammed against the six shields
blocking their path, sickly glowing blue hands outstretched, attempting to reach the players beyond
those shields while three spears pierced their skulls, causing those three former players to explode in
a bright eruption of angled geometric patterns. Before the digital dust had even settled, more of the
Dead mindlessly took their place, constantly pushing forward as the second set of spear wielders
switched with the first.

The mass of dead players continued to build like a flood.

They had no choice but to lose ground due to the overwhelming weight of the Damned. Marigan
took some comfort in the fact that their battle formation was working and they were easily slaying
three of these things each time without jeopardizing their own safety, but the unit was continuously
moving backwards. The game’s enforced cool-down effect after each forward thrust attack gave the
mounting tide of blue the advantage in position until they were constantly walking backwards.

And new dead players were now filling the hallway beyond as far as the eye could see.

Studying the sea of undead humanity attempting to overwhelm them, Marigan soon realized the other
danger was their equipment’s durability. One-handed assault spears with wooden shafts were cheap,
but they were notoriously fragile. Against an army of the undead where only six players were
constantly attacking, it was only a matter of time before their weapons disintegrated.

Marigan decided to swap out her first battalion with the second.

“Second unit, get ready!... First unit, after this next attack, run as fast as you can and retreat to the
rear... Hitters, give them cover… Go!”

They lost more ground, but the withdrawal of the first unit was successful. All twelve players
successfully scampered behind the second unit while the heavy hitters provided cover, pushing off
with their weapons against any dead players who came within biting distance of the fleeing infantry
before the hitters were also forced to also scurry behind the protection of the next set of six shields.

With the second unit now firmly in place, Marigan instructed the members of the first twelve-player
assault group to switch roles, spears would be changed for shields and visa versa to extend the life of
their weapons. These players then made their way to the very back, positioning themselves behind
the fourth assault unit in order to rest and prepare for the next assault.

Like rats being flushed from a sewer, the deluge of the blue death continued to push them towards
the exit, step by ghastly step, their crushing numbers reduced merely by three at a time... Soon the
battalions were backing up past the Y-named players…

Marigan fixed her steely green-eyed gaze directly ahead and then grinned... The Dead had an
army… That was fine, so did she. She only needed to buy them time and keep the enemy from
escaping this corridor until they arrived.

“Hitters! Help the shield-bearers! We need to slow that advance and buy some time!”

The Legion’s third and fourth battalions had been stationed outside of the nearby town of Tolbana,
only thirty minutes away. Once they arrived, it would literally double their forces and the crafty commander of the Legion guild realized these dead players were the perfect type of monster to face a Phalanx…

The kind that would mindlessly walk directly into the awaiting spears of her army.

Even Marigan herself dived in behind the center shield-bearer, straining to contain the incredible mass of creatures constantly pushing against them while glowing blue fingers crawled under the gaps of shield to claw at her boots, gnashing teeth biting the edge of shield in front of her hard-set eyes. Her boots were pushed along the dusty stone of the floor, unable to find permanent footing.

They only needed to hang on for just a little longer…

After agonizing moments of sweat and slowly losing ground – continuously getting closer and closer to the entryway, Karbon finally approached and shouted that the third and fourth battalions had just arrived. Looking back, Marigan saw they had perhaps twenty feet of hallway left before the Dead spilled out onto the field.

Quickly stepping back from the scrum, Marigan ran outside to arrange these fresh soldiers into a wide horseshoe around the mouth of the exit, a wall of shields two-layers deep with pointing spears emerging between each shield - each of them instructed to aim for the head.

As her soldiers were forced out of the narrow tunnel, they quickly fell in behind their brethren and also readied their spears. With fewer players left to stall their advance, the Dead pushed out her soldiers from the hallway until all the heavy hitters were able to defend the last shield-bearers’ final retreat before making their own escape. As the last of them turned and ran behind the shield wall, the glowing blue wave of the Undead spilled out into the foggy grasslands like a wave of slow death before impaling themselves upon the waiting spears.

Any of the Undead who spilled forth from the tunnel beneath the Town of Beginnings soon found themselves hurled against shields and stabbed by spears, disappearing into bright digital sparks as more waves of the Dead continued took their place to crash against their unbreakable tide wall, fading from existence like a sparkling mist.

Even though it seemed like an eternity of horror, it was over in ten minutes.

When the last of these zombies lumbered forward to become a pincushion for their spear points, it erupted into yet another blue explosion of polygonal fireworks except that this time a new, larger window suddenly appeared above it…

CONGRATULATIONS!
QUEST HAS BEEN CLEARED!

There was a surreal moment of silence as they all struggled to comprehend it was finally over…

They had defeated the zombies of the Halls of the Departed… Dead players who had been reanimated to face them… Marigan was unable to prevent herself from smiling as a cheer quickly went up from the more than one-hundred-and-thirty joyous players who’d gathered around her while dozens of them wiped their tears or gratefully shook her hand, elated that it was finally over and that they had survived.

It had been their first true test as an army.

Standing before them, Marigan quickly opened the guild’s inventory menu and drew a deep breath
as she almost fell over, realizing that they had just accumulated almost half a million Col into their treasury… Raising her hands in the air, the large crowd quieted down and waited for her to speak.

“I’m so proud of you all… Every single one of you fought with valour and honour tonight, bravely protecting the lives of your fellow soldiers… And as our reward, I just wanted to say that... We’ll never go hungry again!!!”

The cheer that erupted around her could be heard clear across the entire Town of Beginnings.
Sunset Over Gotham

Chapter Sixteen
Sunset Over Gotham

As Alfred Pennyworth slowly opened his eyes, the filtered afternoon sunlight of his shuttered bedroom window clarified the scene before his tired eyes, revealing the concerned features of Richard Grayson’s chiselled face staring directly down at him…

“Master Richard?”

http://archiveofourown.org/works/5089847/chapters/12180494/edit#

“Alfred?! Are you alright?!”

“Quite well, Sir… Thank you… But why am I lying on the floor?”

Alfred collected his broken thoughts, attempting to recall what possible reason he could have to be lying on his own bedroom floor in the middle of the afternoon when there were still a thousand things to do…

He must have had one of his dizzy spells again. Ever since Master Bruce had disappeared combined with the stress of young Master Damian still in a coma, the old butler had to admit that he’d been feeling rather unlike himself.

Alfred remembered checking in on Master Damian at first light, and then feeling a little light-headed, deciding perhaps that he should have a brief rest before the nurse arrived at noon, and then…

Richard easily helped the old gentleman to his feet and then carefully guided Alfred to his bed where the disoriented butler could sit down and regain his bearings. Richard explained why he had arrived in a panic.

“The nurse called me when no one answered the door… What happened? Were you attacked?”
“Nothing so dramatic, Master Richard… I remember feeling a little light-headed this morning… I was on my way to rest my head for a moment and then… Well, I’m afraid it’s all a blank after that.”

Richard grimaced silently. It had been three days since Bruce’s plane had gone down over the Pacific. All search and rescue efforts had yielded no sign of the missing billionaire, including the combined efforts of both Superman and Aquaman. No trace of the lost aircraft had yet to be been found, nor its crew.

It had simply vanished.

Of course, Dick knew this wasn’t the first time Bruce had gone missing. As Batman, he’d often disappeared without a trace for days only to later reappear later on. Honestly, they should have been used to these vanishing acts by now…

But this time seemed different... With Damian still in the coma and more of the Sword Art Online players dying each day, something must have been seriously wrong for the boy’s father to vanish like this. And no trace of the plane or its crew had been located either. The additional stress had been hard on all of them, but especially Alfred. Dick doubted if the old man had slept much at all over the past week.

Which was why he’d already made up his mind.

“Alfred, I’ve made arrangements for Damian to be transferred to Gotham General Hospital on Monday. It will be safest for everyone that way.”

A hurt expression suddenly darkened the old man’s gaunt face.

“Master Grayson, I assure you one little fainting spell will not impact my ability to care for the boy…”

“No, but his condition has obviously impacted your ability to take care of yourself… Alfred, look… This has nothing to do with your competencies… I made this decision to protect the both of you.”

“The boy was left in my charge, Sir.”

“I know he was… But have you ever considered what will happen to Damian now that Bruce is missing? How long do you think it will be before the League of Shadows comes here to claim their little sleeping prince? It’s not safe, Alfred.”

“Surely Miss al Ghul would never be so reckless... After all, any interruption to the helmet’s network connection or power could kill the poor lad.”

“And when has death ever stopped Ra’s al Ghul or his daughter?... I know the hospital isn’t the preferred solution, old friend… But it will provide everything he needs… And that way, if Talia wishes to move him, as his mother the Hospital will arrange it… Plus it will give you a chance to get some rest instead of running yourself ragged and make me feel a whole lot better knowing you’re out of harm’s way.”

“You’re adamant on this decision, Master Richard?”

“I am… It’s what’s best for all of us. I’m sure Bruce will understand once he gets back. When he does, he can tell us how he wants to handle this situation going forward, but for now, Damian is being transferred to a hospital tomorrow.”

Alfred considered this for a moment before his long fingers reached out for Richard’s shoulder.
“Very well, but I must insist that you remain at Wayne Manor tonight, Master Grayson.”

“Stay here?”

“Of course, Sir… I will have your old room prepared immediately… I admit that I had not previously considered that young Master Damian’s life may be threatened by these external factors, so it would be best if you were on hand to prevent any such incidents until Master Bruce returns.”

Dick scratched his head and grinned.

“I suppose you’re right… Alright, I’ll be back by dinner… I just need to grab some things… To be perfectly honest, I’ll feel more useful here.”

“And Master Grayson…”

“Yes, Alfred?”

“Thank you.”

The next morning, just before the carefully orchestrated move to Gotham General Hospital, Alfred Pennyworth noticed that his young charge seemed to be running a high temperature, something he brought up to the arriving paramedics. As the specially-designed ambulance took the boy to a hospital suite which had been specifically outfitted for the needs of his NerveGear, Alfred finally breathed a remorseful sigh.

He couldn’t bear to lose the boy, but this truly was for the best...

Later, when Richard Grayson visited Damian’s special ward bearing the gift of the kid’s electronic devices and flowers, he was quickly alerted of distressing news by the boy’s physician...

“You made the right choice by bringing him here when you did, Mr. Grayson. Damian was suffering from something known as Q Fever, which would have been incredibly difficult to diagnose without the proper laboratory resources, given his comatose condition.”

“Q Fever? I’ve never heard of it. Is Damian alright?”

“It’s quite rare in humans, primarily a livestock bacterial infection... Don’t worry, he’s recovering nicely now. We’ve treated him with all the necessary antibiotics and he seems to have turned the corner. His fever has broken and he’s back to a normal temperature… But I need to ask, has the boy been exposed to any livestock during the past month… And would you know where?”

Richard suddenly remembered Bruce telling him the story of when Batman and Robin had traced the despicable Professor Pyg to an abandoned swine farm near Gotham just three weeks ago - when Damian had been knocked into a large pig sty and subsequently covered in manure during that battle. While it had seemed comical at the time, that exposure had obviously resulted in much more serious consequences.

“… I’m not sure.”

“Alright, if you find out, let me know. We need to file a report on any such occurrences... But besides that, he seems to be settling in here very nicely. All vitals are good. Rest assured, we’re also
in communications with the SAO Incident Victims Rescue Force in Japan to share any pertinent information... If there are any new developments with the victims, they’ll let us know immediately.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

Now alone with Damian, Richard gazed down at the almost lifeless child, a handful of monitors beeping away beside him which broke the silence. Dick’s guilt once again clawed free from its earthly cage, gripping his heavy heart to whisper that he alone bore the responsibility of accepting the thing which was now wrapped around the boy’s head like a dark curse.

The same device which could take Damian’s life at any moment…

The same device he had signed for.

It had been eight days since then and four days since Bruce had disappeared and it wasn’t getting any easier for him. And while Alfred had been hit hard by the news, the truth was that he’d been torn up about it as well. He wasn’t ready to tame Gotham on his own and take over for Batman…

“Hey…”

Richard opened his eyes to suddenly find the wheelchair-bound Barbara Gordon entering the hospital room while he’d been too wrapped up in his own self-reproach to notice her. Wheeling herself over, the redhead gently placed a hand on his own and smiled sweetly.

He’d never known how much he’d missed that beautiful smile until just now.

“Are you alright, Dick? You look a little down... Looks like I’m not the only one pushing themselves too hard.

“I can’t help thinking this whole thing is my fault, Babs… I signed for Damian’s NerveGear without even knowing what it was.”

“Oh c’mon… Even if you had known, would it have made a difference? That equipment was put through hundreds of tests and deemed safe before it was released for sale to the public. What’s happened to Damian isn’t your fault, Dick... It was Akihiko Kayaba that did this.”

“I know… It’s just that… I feel I’ve let Bruce down somehow.”

Barbara took hold of his hand and squeezed.

“Trust me, you haven’t. He’s incredibly proud of you and I’m sure he’ll tell you just how much when he gets back… How’s Damian?”

“He had something called Q Fever, but he’s turned the corner. They pumped him full of antibiotics and he’s getting better... I’m glad we moved him to the hospital.”

“I am too… You did the right thing, Dick… You know, I’ve been researching this Sword Art Online game and it sounds like something he might enjoy. It’s entirely combat-based... Who knows, he might be the only one of us actually having fun and making new friends.”

“You’ve met him, right? That’s highly unlikely… But whatever he’s doing, he’s still alive and he’s here. That’s what’s important right now… Any news on Arthur Light?”

A solemn expression creased Barbara’s features.

“No… There’s no trace of him... At this point, I would have to say he’s out of country and keeping a
very low profile.”

“Japan?”

“Maybe… And that’s the other thing that’s bothering me, Dick… Bruce brought Dr. Rinko Koujiro into the Police for questioning and she was released within an hour. Something’s not right there… Considering Dr. Koujiro was the legal owner of the secret lab where Akihiko Kayaba was just found dead, I’d expect she would have been held for days, not just happily sent on her merry way.”

“You’re right, that is suspicious… Government cover-up?”

“Possibly.”

“She’s definitely someone we need to keep an eye on… Anything else new?”

“No, but there’s something I need to talk to you about in private. Can we chat on the roof? Hospitals tend to bring back bad memories for me…”

Once on the rooftop of the Gotham General Hospital, both Dick and Barbara turned their eyes towards the western horizon as the sun dipped below the city’s skyline - its smoky orange glow turning the silhouetted buildings into a city of shadows.

Beside him, Barbara held his hand and then quietly asked, his voice almost reverent in inflection…

“Tell me… What do you see out there?”

“Bruce’s city… No, not Bruce’s city… His.”

Barbara gazed upon the mid-November sunset.

“You’re right… When the sun falls, this city belongs to Batman… It seems like it’s been that way forever, doesn’t it?… Sure, Dad and the rest of the Police department have made great strides in keeping this city safe, but it’s Batman who seems to hold the balance of power here.”

“You’re not exactly filling me with confidence here, Babs.”

“No? Then I guess I’d better build you up a little… Batman is bigger than Bruce Wayne… I think we all know that… And this city still needs Batman… Not as much as it once did, but there are times when we still need our hero… Dick, I say this with complete honesty and profound respect… You’re the greatest hero I know.”

Richard looked down at Barbara in stunned silence… Was she seriously suggesting that he dress as Batman and take over?

“Barbara… I’m not ready… Besides, we don’t even know…”

“This is only until he gets back… And I’ll be there to help you… I can operate out of the Bat Cave just as easily as I can the Gotham Clock Tower.”

“Barbara… Are you suggesting that you move into the Manor?”
“Oh don’t worry, it’s not like we’ll be sleeping in the same bed or anything.”

His strong lips felt good against her own as Dick leaned in and kissed her long and hard, wrapping his strong arms around her upper body as the last traces of mid-November sunlight faded from the western sky.

With her by his side, he could do this. Richard would never be strong enough to be Batman on his own, but the two of them could do it together somehow. Together, they were invincible. Gazing into her blue-green eyes, he had to tell her, he finally had to confess how he really felt about his strong and amazing best friend.

“Barbara Gordon… I love you… I always have… But you’re not moving in until I make an honest woman of you.”

“Dick, that’s not fair…”

“I didn’t get the chance to ask you out before… Are you free on Friday evening?”

“Wait… Dick… Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“Barbara, you’re the smartest, most beautiful and best woman I’ve ever met… There’s a question I’ve been meaning to pose for a long time now… And to be brutally honest, I’ve been lost on my own… I need you in my life… Forever.”

They kissed once again as Barbara felt herself melting into his arms… ‘Mrs. Barbara Grayson’… It always did have a nice ring to it…

Chapter End Notes

**Next Chapter:** Argo confesses her secret to Damian. Posting Friday, November 27th.
Glorious Commander

Chapter Summary

Damian and Argo discuss the game before Marigan interrupts and suddenly reveals a bombshell!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Michi

(Arko)

Chapter Seventeen
Glorious Commander

Alone with her troubled thoughts once again, the quiet Argo remained by the side of an unconscious Damian as he lay on a feathered bed, silently wondering if the boy would ever wake up. Along with Hisako and Crusher Joe, they’d brought Damian to the NPC church in town after his ordeal in the Halls of the Departed to be healed, renting out one of their rooms for the night.
But the other two had left to join the celebrations hours ago while Argo had stayed.

What had happened to Damian was entirely her fault... It had to be... The Halls of the Departed must have been a trap meant for her... This game obviously knew who she was and the amount of in-depth knowledge she possessed, making it dangerous for her friends to be around her anymore.

As the daughter of the game’s second most senior designer, Argo didn’t just know the floor bosses and their signature attack sequences for the first eight floors, she knew them for the first twenty-five. As her father had been the supervisor responsible for the bottom quarter of Aincrad, she had inside knowledge into its quests, maps, algorithms and unique monsters. She was practically an unofficial Argus employee.

Akihiko Kayaba would be well aware of her character’s identity from Argo’s previous role as Beta tester and consultant... Obviously, the mad genius had now perceived her as an unanticipated threat to his game of death and decided to remove her. Surely Kayaba hadn’t expected the daughter of Takahiro Aoi to join in the game’s official launch only one week after his tragic death and wanted her silenced...

So now, a pensive Argo was conflicted on how she should proceed. She could simply leave and go solo, or she could confide her true identity to her new friends... But if the other players learned that her father had worked with Akihiko Kayaba, would she be blamed for all the players’ deaths? Had her father helped in some way create all those glowing blue revenants her friends had faced in the Halls of the Departed? Or had Kayaba sent them simply to remind Argo of her own guilt?

Argo decided that she would confide in her friends and pray that they would forgive her... But what if the information she provided to them was wrong? Already she had noticed significant irregularities from the Beta test...

One of them was the Legion guild itself. After the news of last night’s one-sided battle, new applicants were continuously pouring in to join the Legion and serve under Commander Marigan, threatening to boost their membership well past five hundred players...

How was it even possible to form such a large guild let alone even start one on this floor?! Completion of the ‘Guild Quest’ on floor three enabled a player to create a guild, and yet Marigan had been able to create one before the first floor had been conquered...

Traditionally, the maximum guild size within Sword Art Online was six players, yet checking her menu, she saw the Legion guild now boasted 452 active members and was an actual guild! Argo even had the Legion guild icon beside her name, indicating she was part of the guild.

Normally, when this many players combined within the game, it was an ‘Organization’, a ‘Raiding Party’ or a ‘League’... Something completely different from a guild. This was four-hundred-and-fifty-two players all with access to a shared inventory, who could message one another while checking everyone’s current status (so long as they weren’t in a dungeon) and who also received a small increase in their stats when playing together.

Quite simply, the Legion guild had broken the game’s rules...

Which told her that Akihiko Kayaba had made some very noticeable changes to the core game system after the Beta test. Could it be that the maximum guild size restriction had been simply removed in this deadlier version of the game and the guild quest was no longer a necessity?

Also, there was never a ‘Halls of the Departed’ in the Beta test. The Black Iron Palace had simply been open to players from the start since it had also contained the Room of Resurrection at that time.
This deadly addition could be easily explained as an add-on quest which Kayaba had always fully intended to open the Black Iron Palace.

And then there was Damian’s ‘Sick’ status from last night. Argo had never heard of a Sword Art Online character getting sick before, let alone displaying that status, but in a way, she suspected that this made sense as well...

Now that they were permanently trapped in the game, if a player’s physical body became ill to the extent that it affected their gameplay, perhaps their status would display the ‘Sick’ icon as a warning to that player, indicating they should quickly remove themselves from dangerous settings.

Which meant that Damian had been sick in the real world…

Yet the healing spell they had purchased from the Priest here had worked, eventually removing Damian’s ‘Sick’ icon and his fever had broken shortly afterwards. It had to be a game mechanic… Even if she wasn’t sure what it meant.

Argo breathed a deep sigh.

This wasn’t quite the world she remembered… But of course it wasn’t. You could die here… Then there was also Cardinal to consider... When playing against an AI that could alter the structure of the game in an instant, what guarantee was there that things would be the same this time around? The were a countless number of options the game itself could change in response to players’ actions.

Glancing through the stained glass window, Argo saw the crimson hues of sunset rapidly fading, realizing she’d stayed in the NPC church with Damian all day, alone except for the occasional guild visitor…

Only an hour ago, the two co-commanders of the third battalion, a man named Thinker along with his real-world girlfriend Yulier had come in briefly to check in on the boy and update Argo on current events in the Black Iron Palace. Reviewing the guild combat logs, Thinker calculated that Damian had single-handedly defeated seventy-one of the dead-player creatures while he’d been trapped within the Halls of the Departed alone, an incredible feat for any player of his low level, let alone one so young.

Argo quickly requested that Thinker keep that knowledge to himself. The last thing they wanted in this game was notoriety. Save it for the Commander.

Seventy-one of those things with a dagger he had purchased only four days ago... She couldn’t imagine what sort of Hell the boy must have been put through in there, trapped and fighting for his very life against five hundred dead players while poisoned. There was no doubt the boy had skills…

Recalling their glowing blue bodies and gnashing teeth, Argo hugged herself tightly as she began to shiver from her frightened memories of the advancing horde of former players while pondering how many of those lives she could have saved if she’d only come forward with all that she knew...

She understood this world better than any of them.

For the Legion, it had worked out in the end and no one had been killed, but Argo understood that the acquisition of the Black Iron Palace had almost cost them young Damian’s life. With the keys Dami-chan had transferred to her, their guild had gained complete access to the Palace, including its twelve hundred jail cells which could easily double as barracks for its soldiers by simply keeping the doors unlocked. And although they were hardly private, each cell came complete with a simple cot for sleeping on and the guarantee it wouldn’t spawn any monsters.
A big improvement over the fields surrounding the town.

At daybreak, Commander Marigan had brought the entire Legion guild into the Town of Beginnings to explore the now open Black Iron Palace and ensure it was safe for players. The two side towers, the Halls of the Departed and the large cathedral containing the Monument of Life were safe areas now, most likely converting after the last zombie had been defeated last night. The jail would never be a safe area of course, but at least it was surrounded by the town.

In the prison itself, the Legion had found twenty-eight players within its cells who had begun the process of slowly starving to death. They claimed they were the unlucky players who had spent their entire allotment of Col on armour and weapons, only to find themselves too afraid to venture forth into Kayaba’s deadly game after his dire proclamation on the first day.

At least that’s what they claimed.

Argo suspected they may have been players who had attempted ‘Intimacy’ with another player who hadn’t changed the setting in their player’s ethics code to ‘Allow’. Any player stupid enough to try and force themselves on another player would’ve been instantly teleported to a prison cell. This was a default safety feature of Sword Art Online which protected the players against any undesired sexual acts (even kissing) unless they consciously changed their option to allow physical intimacy and the nudity option.

But without Game Masters, proving any of this would now be impossible. Besides, they might have been telling the truth and simply ran out of Col.

As of tomorrow morning, the Legion would be opening the Monument of Life and the Halls of the Departed to all players so that they could pay their respects to fallen comrades. The massive jail would be remain off-limits as the Legion’s barracks and Headquarters while the lowest level of the prison would remain unoccupied for the future incarceration of any criminal players.

Food would be made available to any player who found their way to one of its cells.

Also, as another public gesture of goodwill, Thinker had informed Argo that Commander Marigan had arranged for the two side towers to become temporary hostels where up to one hundred players could spend the night in safety. It wasn’t much, but it was better than sleeping on the streets. Argo knew there were still players who hadn’t even dared to venture outside the town walls yet, and those players would soon be running out of options.

As a temporary shelter, the Black Iron Palace might not be ideal, but it was free.

Flush with cash, Commander Marigan had also apparently arranged to equip all players within the guild, even donating the older equipment to the newest recruits. In addition, all 340 original members had received a Healing Potion plus a five-hundred Col bonus after their rousing victory last night while new recruits and those in need were being treated to free meals…

All of which threatened to bankrupt their guild treasury yet again.

Oh well, she could fuss about the finances later. For now, the troubled girl had to consider her own role in this mad game. As she once again looked down at Damian, Argo was surprised to find him staring back up at her with squinting pale blue eyes.

His voice seemed a little hoarse, but steady.

“So, it wasn’t all a dream?”
“Dami-chan! You’re awake!”

Argo quickly handed him the glass of water from the table.

It was strange how much it helped. Even though the food and beverages in this game were virtual, they still had a distinct taste and even quenched your thirst and hunger. Her father had once attempted to explain the neurological process of this phenomenon within the game, but her eyes had quickly glossed over from all the chemical names.

Damian set the empty glass aside.

“Thank you… How long was I asleep?”

“Around twenty hours. You really had us really worried.”

Damian quickly checked his status bar and cursor.

“At least I seem to be fully healed now… And not sick… Where are we?”

“This is a room in the church near the Black Iron Palace...”

Argo continued updating Damian on the events which had transpired since the boy had passed out in the Halls of the Departed. She told him how Marigan had organized the Phalanx into an effective defence with great success and how the Legion had explored and now settled into the Black Iron Palace, converting the prison area into barracks and their Headquarters.

Damian listened intently until she finished, finally posing a strange question which caught her off guard.

“Argo… Do you know of a woman named Selina Kyle?”

“Selina Kyle?... No... Is she another American player?”

“No, she’s not a player... How about a supervillain named Catwoman? Do you know her?”

“You mean like Batman? I always thought that she was made up though… Like Sailor Moon.”

It was the first time she’d ever seen him laugh.

“You have no idea how much I wish that were true… But no, Catwoman is a real person… Before the dead-player trap was initiated in the Black Iron Palace, I met a unique monster named ‘The Cat Witch’ who looked exactly like Catwoman… I have no idea why the game designers would do that… Have you ever heard of a monster like that before?”

Argo shook her head… She knew for a fact that no such monster existed on the first twenty-five floors of Aincrad… To be honest, she doubted that her father who’d supervised the development of those first twenty-five floors of this world would even know who Catwoman was…

Slowly walking over to the bedroom door, Argo locked it and then turned back to Damian.

“Dami-chan, I need to know exactly what happened in there last night.”

He was about to request that she stop calling him that childish name when he suddenly noticed the grave expression in her pale brown eyes.

“Alright… After I was locked in, I started walking to look for another exit. At that time, all those
dead players were still inanimate and resting peacefully in their alcoves… I soon made my way to the
former Room of Resurrection and that’s where I met her… A unique boss-level monster named ‘The
Cat Witch’ who had four Hit Point bars… She paralyzed me, indicating that she knew exactly who I
am in the real world, and then she…”

Damian paused for a moment as he considered the full implications of his next statement.

“Then she promised me that she would spare my life… If I gave her you.”

The floating world of Aincrad spun around Argo’s unsteady feet as she wandered to the wall for
support, her eyes now wide with fear… Her worst fears had suddenly been confirmed… Akihiko
Kayaba wanted her out of this game… He would even resort to threatening her friends in order to get
to her…

“Argo… Tell me… Why does this game want you so badly?”

In one sudden, dizzying motion, Argo fell across Damian’s bed with tears streaming down her eyes,
clenching its soft sheets within her twisting fists.

“Damian… I’m so sorry… This is all my fault… You almost died and… It’s all my fault… I have to
leave you all… None of you are safe with me!”

The boy reached forward and took hold of her, preventing the distraught Argo from getting up off
the bed.

“I won’t let you leave, Argo… Not until you tell me why she wanted you… We need to trust one
another… Look, you’re not the only one with secrets. Whatever yours are, I swear that I’ll keep them
forever if you tell me… That monster, I don’t know what it was, but it knew things about me and my
family that it should’ve never had access to… Something in this game has targeted us and I intend to
stop it… But if I’m going to do that, I need to know why it wants you.”

With her own brown eyes full of tears, Argo lifted her head and stared directly into Damian’s blue
eyes with all the clarity of the eye of a storm.

“Damian… When that monster said it would spare your life for mine… Tell me… What was your
answer?”

“I told it to take me instead.”

“Then… I already owe you my life… But you have to promise me you won’t tell the others…
Promise me!”

“I promise.”

“Alright… My father was Takahiro Aoi… One of the founding members of Argus Corporation… It
was he who actively partitioned the board to accept the young Akihiko Kayaba as their new senior
designer, even willingly stepping down from his role of Director of Operations…

“This game was their shared dream… My father was the supervisor in charge of the development of
the first twenty-five floors of this world… It was he who arranged for me to become a Beta tester and
then encouraged me to get other players’ feedback as an Information Broker… I know more about
this game than almost anyone else, especially the first twenty-five floors…”

“You said ‘was’. What happened to your father?”
“He died… two weeks ago, now… in front of my eyes… crossing the sidewalk… struck by a car.”

“I’m sorry… My father’s parents were murdered in a robbery attempt when he was around my ago… It affected him profoundly… But I also believe it made him the strong man he is today.”

“I’m not strong, Damian… I keep having nightmares… Even in this world I keep having the terrible nightmares… I’ve been so afraid… Constantly afraid since it happened… It’s not fair, I didn’t come here to beat this game… I only wanted to gaze upon the magical world my father helped to create, to honour his legacy… But none of that matters anymore, does it…? It’s become a world of death… Now that he’s perceived me as a threat, Akihiko Kayaba won’t stop.”

“We don’t know that, Argo… It’s strange, but I’m convinced it wasn’t Akihiko Kayaba in that room anyways… In fact, I accused ‘The Cat Witch’ of secretly being Kayaba as well, but she flatly denied it… And judging from his little tirade on the first day, Kayaba seems perfectly content just to sit back and watch us from the sidelines, pitting the players against his ideal world… Like lab rats in a maze.”

“But if one of those players knows the maze, wouldn’t he take action against her? Remove the ‘Rat’ from the experiment?”

“Perhaps… But there’s also the fact that ‘The Cat Witch’ was fully aware of all my carefully guarded secrets as well… Why would Akihiko Kayaba bring all of that up if he just wanted you?... It was like she was taunting me… Her personality was completely different from the ‘matter of fact’ style of Kayaba.”

“Perhaps Akihiko Kayaba created the monster as a tool?”

“Maybe… Argo, I’m sure you’ve realized by now that my real name is Damian Wayne, but would you mind telling me yours?”

“Michi… Michi Aoi.”

Damian reached out to shake her hand and smiled.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Michi Aoi… It’s important that I know whose family I should send the cheque to… In case you’re correct and this game really is out to get you.”

Argo fixed him with an angry glare before shaking her head in disbelief while Damian only grinned and then ruffled her hair.

“Jerk… I think I’m the one who should have sought out another partner.”

Damian smiled and then stretched, stepping off of the soft bed.

“Besides, if Kayaba truly has full control over this game and he wished to get rid of someone, I don’t think he’s the type of man who would employ a trap… It’s almost like he built this world to test us, to measure our wills to survive against his perfect world…

“There was something else I didn’t mention, Michi… When I was paralyzed and ‘The Cat Witch’ sunk her claws into my shoulder, I felt an incredible pain… It was more real than any sensation I’ve ever felt in Sword Art Online… In this game, pain is only ‘perceived’ because of the Pain Absorbers in our NerveGear… Yet my Hit Points didn’t decrease.”

Argo thought about this for a moment.

“You’re sure you didn’t just think you were in pain?”
“Positive. I’ve been trained in various mind-over-matter techniques that allow me to ignore pain... This one actually took my breath away - but not a single Hit Point.”

“The Pain Absorbers have adjustable levels. Normally, it’s set at level ten which is full pain absorption to avoid discomfort. If it’s dialled down though, a player may experience actual pain.”

“Who can dial it down?”

“Only system level administrators... And even then, there’s safeguards built into the NerveGear which would normally log someone out before they became too agitated... Which have obviously been disabled by Kayaba.”

“Interesting... So whatever that was in there, it must have had system admin level privileges...”

The two players suddenly stopped talking when they were interrupted by a loud knock at the door. With a nod from Argo, Damian opened the door to reveal the tall figure of Marigan standing just outside... Who promptly scooped him up in her arms in a giant bear hug until his feet were left dangling above the floor.

“Dami-chan! You’re alive! You had us all so worried.”

“Marigan... You’re... really... strong.”

The tall blonde swordswoman set him down before releasing her grip and grinned apologetically.

“Sorry about that... All my level bumps go straight into my strength stat.”

With the seventy-one extra creatures he had defeated last night as a solo player, Damian figured that Marigan’s level shouldn’t have been much higher than his own character level of four. And yet, she was as strong as an ox...

“I didn’t realize the few extra points of strength could make such a big difference.”

“I’m actually Level Eight now...”

Damian and Argo both stared awestruck at the statuesque blonde warrior while their mouths remained open, unable to speak or comprehend exactly how their friend had suddenly become one of the highest level players in the game after one week without ever having set foot in a dungeon...

Argo finally staggered forward with an accusing look spread across her features.

“Marigan, have you been sneaking off to level up at night?!”

“Of course not. With so many people counting on me to give them instructions, I hardly get any sleep as it is. Now I know why you two didn’t want to take charge of the guild... But actually, I’ve been meaning to get your opinion on something, Argo... I was going to ask you about it last night before Damian discovered the doorway... I had this weird skill appear in my menu after our clock tower speech four days ago and thought you might know something about it...”

The two players watched as Marigan swiped her two fingers across the air and opened her Skills menu when she checked the option to make it visible to other players... Below her ‘Two-Handed-Sword’ skill was a one named ‘Glorious Commander’ which Marigan then tapped, revealing its full details.

Argo’s legs suddenly gave way as she slumped to the floor, weakly pointing her finger up at
Marigan’s player screen while attempting to stutter wide-eyed, nonsensical syllables at the skill’s description. A concerned and confused Marigan looked down at her.

“Argo-chan? Are you alright?”

“That… That’s… That’s a Unique Skill!”

“That’s good, right?”

“Good?!... That’s incomprehensible on the first floor... A Unique Skill is just that… A skill that only one player in the entire game can possess!... Marigan, these skills are *incredibly* powerful and almost unheard of… Only ten of them even exist!... They’re usually available at much higher levels and are one of the most sought-after rewards in *all* of Sword Art Online... Players will do *anything* to gain them… How is this even possible?!”

“Wow... As a reward for what though I wonder?”

Gathering her breath, Argo finally read the full description of ‘Glorious Commander’ from Marigan’s skill menu... As a guild leader, this unique skill would allow its owner to form a guild of up to one thousand players and receive an experience bonus for recruiting new members, as well as receiving a small portion of all experience gained by those guild members.

So the Legion guild *hadn’t* broken the SAO rules... Marigan had somehow unlocked a Unique Skill which allowed her to form a guild up to a thousand players… That was amazing in itself but the true power of this skill was the experience bonus. Even though the attractive warrior would only gain a small fraction of their members’ experience rewards, receiving just one percent of a thousand players’ experience points would easily catapult her own level into the stratosphere.

No wonder she had obtained level eight after only a week. The whiskered girl looked up at the tall woman in awe.

“Leading… It’s a reward for leading… Marigan, even with our current guild numbers, you can become one of the most powerful players in the game without ever having to draw your sword… This skill is astounding.”

“I noticed my skill level was increasing whenever I worked with our army. It jumped by quite a few points after last night.”

The pensive Damian stepped forward and placed a comforting hand on Argo’s shoulder, before gazing intensely into her pale brown eyes.

“Argo, it’s entirely your decision… But I honestly think you should tell her.”

Marigan closed her menu and stared curiously at the younger woman as the emotion that suddenly welled up in Argo’s teary eyes.

“Tell me what, Argo-chan?”

Wiping those tears from her eyes, Argo cast her gaze down at the wooden floor before she quietly replied.

“That my father was Takahiro Aoi.”

“Takahiro Aoi… The former Director of Operations at Argus? Oh Argo, I’m so sorry…”
Marigan gently wrapped her arms around the smaller girl before expressing her condolences, cradling her head into her shoulder.

“I’m so sorry for your loss. My father attended the funeral last week... I only met Mr. Aoi once at a dinner after the SAO deal was announced, but he seemed like a very kind and intelligent man.”

Argo stared questioningly back at Marigan.

“Marigan-san... If you wouldn’t mind... May I ask... Who is your father?”

“He’s the President of the investment firm which originally financed Sword Art Online... Jason Garrick.”

It was Damian’s turn to almost tumble to the floor, speaking out in surprise before he could check himself, realizing too late that Jay Garrick had never made his true identity public knowledge.

“Your father was the original Flash?!”

Marigan slowly released Argo and stared suspiciously down at the boy.

“Damian... How do you know that?”

Taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly, Damian apologized.

“I’m sorry... But I can’t tell you.”

Marigan refused to let it go.

“No one here would know that... Tell me... How do you?”

“Suffice it to say that someone I know is in the same business that your father once was.”

“Which side of the business?”

“The good side.”

“I see... So, are you really Damian Wayne, the long-lost son of Bruce Wayne?”

“I am.”

Marigan nodded before turning her attention back to Argo.

“Alright then, we’ll call it even. But let’s just keep this between ourselves... So Argo, if your father was Takahiro Aoi, that means you must have some inside knowledge of this game, correct?”

“Yes. My father was in charge of the first twenty-five floors.”

“Really?! You need to get the information you have out there as soon as possible... I think the best thing we can do now is put all your knowledge into a guide book for all players to use... Our guild has been playing it safe so far, but there are still people risking their lives every day on the front lines who could use any help they can get... It’s the right thing to do.”

“But what if Kayaba has changed the game? What if people relied on my information and it was wrong? What if they died because of me, Marigan?”

“What if they died because they didn’t have that information? We’ll take precautions... This book
will clearly stipulate that all information contained within may have been altered by the Argus designers after the Beta test and may not be fully accurate... As we learn more, we can always update it...

“You should also release it anonymously, for your own protection… Look, the fact is Argo, however the clearers choose to use this information, it’s still a lot better than going in blind, especially when we get past the eighth floor, correct?”

“Alright, I’ll do it… It’s been weighing on me since this game started… But please don’t tell anyone who my father was.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep your secret if you keep mine… My father mentioned that Aoi-san daughter’s name was Michi, is that correct?”

Argo bowed by way of introduction.

“That’s correct. I’m Michi Aoi.”

Marigan bowed back and smiled.

“Marissa Joan Garrick. A pleasure to finally meet you, Michi-chan.”

Chapter End Notes

All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental, but sometimes I like to provide explanations…

Marissa Joan Garrick is (of course) Jay and Joan Garrick’s daughter, but why the first name ‘Marissa’?... Simply because ‘Marigan’ sounds cool and it reminded me of Capcom’s famous succubus ‘Morrigan Aensland’ from Darkstalkers, that’s all.

For Michi Aoi, I actually picked the family name of ‘Aoi’ first… In Greek Mythology, the father of the hero Jason who led the Argonauts was named ‘Aeson’. Michi’s father could be called ‘Aoi-san’. ‘Michi’ is a common Japanese name meaning path, road, or street and I liked the sound of it too.

**Next Chapter:** A major plot twist revealed as we finally find out what happened to Bruce!

Hint: It’s not good... You’ll want to make sure you read all of Chapter 18 when it’s posted on Tuesday, December 01st.
In a stupor, he felt the painful sensations before he was able to comprehend them. It was that pain which made Bruce Wayne’s awareness snap back to consciousness when his upper body was suddenly driven against the sharp edge of a rocky shore while his legs were lapped by the cold waters of the Pacific Ocean.
He was in water…

Washing ashore…

Wearing a personal floatation device...

Had he been on a plane?…

Yes, that’s right… He was travelling back to Gotham… But what had happened? Had they been forced to suddenly evacuate? Had the jet made an emergency landing on the water? If so, where was the crew? Where was he?!

It was so cold here…

Forcing himself to think back, the last thing Bruce could remember was falling asleep aboard his private jet after leaving Narita Airport in Tokyo. He’d been travelling back to Gotham to continue his investigation into the Sword Art Online tragedy which had trapped his son Damian. He had wanted to get some sleep during the flight…

But what had happened after that?!

He wondered if he was suffering from short term memory loss. With his current state of confusion, Bruce reasoned he may have sustained a head injury during the impact of a crash landing… Maybe.

Slowly dragging his cold and wet body to the shore, the castaway industrialist was able to stand up and clear his aching head, slowly casting his gaze out across the cold grey waters, searching for any signs of life on the high sea…

No debris, no wreckage, no bodies, only unending grey water and barren sky.

Turning around to look at the land itself, he found the island itself was perhaps fifty yards across and nothing more than desolate rock, most likely the remnants of an oceanic volcano. As the man from Gotham shivered from the cold wind which whipped across these bleak shores, he realized he must have been north of Japan…

Had they been diverted to the Bering Sea?

Checking for his cell phone, Bruce was frustrated to find that all he had now was a waterlogged wallet, the Personal Floatation Device which had saved his life, and the ruined Italian business suit which he’d been wearing when he’d left Japan. The briefcase carrying his utility belt and costume was nowhere to be found.

This was no time to despair, he needed to regroup. Bruce had been in tighter squeezes than this. The authorities were bound to be searching for a missing billionaire and he was alive, that was the main thing. Bruce could only hope that the rest of his crew had been so lucky.

Stretching his legs and making his way around the tiny island, he saw nothing else but water surrounding him… The stranded Gothamite decided that the best thing he could do was stay put and wait it out. While it wasn’t much, the tiny island was better than floating aimlessly in the icy grip of the North Pacific.

When twilight fell, Bruce remained crouched behind the island’s largest rock which helped to ward off the cold wind constantly blowing across the rocky shores. When night came and the stars were revealed above, it couldn’t have been more than a few degrees above freezing…
He must be stranded near the Aleutians.

On the second day, Bruce had managed to position some of his brighter credit cards to reflect the sunlight in the hopes of alerting any passing aircraft to his presence here. He’d also arranged some of the larger rocks to spell out ‘S.O.S.’ across a contrasting stretch of basalt. Unfortunately, the work left him thirsty and hungry. The cold was slowly sapping his strength. If he had to, he’d drink ocean water but the dark clouds overhead held the promise of rain…

Or snow.

On the third day, it did rain. To Bruce, it felt like a Gotham shower in December; cold and miserable. Barely able to feel his fingers anymore, he used sharp rocks to rip open the PFD, shakily creating a pouch for the rain to collect in which would provide him with a little fresh water...

Cold, wet and shivering, he needed something to eat. How many meals had Alfred offered him over the years that he had simply declined? Bruce would gladly pay the old man a million dollars for just one of them now...

There weren’t even seabirds on this godforsaken patch of rock.

Near the end of the fourth day, the rain became sporadic until its fury had been spent and finally stopped. By sunset, the clouds glowed red and orange across the western horizon as they reflected in the ocean where they met the sea. As beautiful as the scene was, the huddled Bruce Wayne conceded that his damp clothes combined with the oncoming cold was going to finish him off long before hunger ever would.

He was going to die of exposure.

For the past four days, he’d been fighting the cold with rigorous physical activity to raise his internal body temperature whenever he could manage it, but he now lost feeling in his hands and feet… With the lack of food and the cold, his mind was already wandering into the early stages of hypothermia as he found himself stumbling across the rocks far too often.

Eventually, exhaustion overwhelmed him and he slept.

Bruce was awoken early the next morning by his own violent shivering. The sky was cloudy and his eyes marvelled at the thin, pristine layer of frost covering his own frozen body. His breath exhaled in an icy mist before his eyes. When he tried to move, his expensive clothing felt restricting while his limbs no longer felt like his own...

His body was now filled with a painful lethargy he’d never felt before.

Bruce Wayne was slowly freezing to death.

As he laid beneath of a cold blanket of dull grey clouds, it took him a full minute to realize what the noise all around him was… Craning his neck forward as he shivered, Bruce made out the shape of a small black helicopter landing on the rocky shore near him, the powerful wind from its whirling blades whipping small rocks and dust against his prone body. Still straining to see through the clouds of debris, Bruce finally made out the shape of a woman stepping out and walking towards him…

“Beloved! I have finally found you!…”

Minutes later in the warm cockpit of the helicopter with a thermos of hot tea, an emergency blanket spread out and Talia cuddled next to him beneath it, Bruce was finally able to regain the sharp tingling feeling in his furthest extremities. His teeth still chattered and his core still shook, but his
internal temperature was slowly rising.

As he recovered, Talia updated Bruce with the dire news of how the entire world had changed since their last meeting of seven days ago. The world as he knew it had changed while he’d been stranded, her words suddenly making him as cold as when he’d still been exposed on the island...

Ra’s al Ghul had risen from the grave once again.

The situation was far worse than she had initially believed. Her father’s body had been stolen and brought back to life months before they had even realized it was missing. Using a newly discovered Lazarus Pit, a handful of League assassins loyal to Ra’s al Ghul had secretly resurrected their old master. But this time her devious father had remained in seclusion while the world at large believed him to be dead...

At least until five days ago.

In a well orchestrated coup, Ra’s al Ghul had taken command of the League of Shadows once again, quickly consolidating his power and declaring Talia a traitor. Only Lady Shiva’s incredible fighting skills and her fierce loyalty to Talia had allowed the besieged daughter of the demon to make a narrow escape from her father’s grasping clutches, even though it had likely cost Shiva her own life.

It was only after that escape when Talia had learned that her own crazed father had used a Russian anti-aircraft missile to bring down Bruce’s plane after he’d left Tokyo. Having witnessed the resulting ball of fire in the sky, the League of Shadows now believed Batman to be dead, but Talia simply couldn’t allow herself to accept it. She’d been desperately searching for him since that dark day – even at the risk of her own life.

She was a marked woman. The League of Shadows had its agents constantly searching for her across the globe. There was no one she could turn to for help.

Talia had rented the helicopter days ago and managed to secure a private ship which was on standby in the small Russian fishing town of Nikolskoye. It would take the lovers to the nearby airport in Baykovo. From there, she should be able to arrange a flight using false passports to the relative safety of South Korea to plan their next move.

America was forbidden to them.

As Talia took the Helicopter’s controls once more and prepared for lift off, Bruce wondered why all this subterfuge was even necessary. Talia al Ghul may not have allies, but he certainly did.

“Talia, just let me use your phone… I’ll call in the Justice League… I promise you, we’ll stop your father.”

For a moment, she was perfectly still, unable to move... Bruce immediately recognized that something was terribly wrong... As though the world was no longer right… Finally, Talia took his hand and stared sympathetically into his eyes.

“Bruce… My dearest… Your Justice League is no more.”

“What do you mean by ‘no more’?”

“For these past months, my father has remained in the shadows, carefully plotting the demise of all who would oppose him… His schemes have now been put into effect… The one you call Green Arrow… The League of Shadows tricked him into planting a very powerful bomb into your Hall of Justice only four days ago.”
“A bomb wouldn’t stop Superman. He’d be able to counteract it.”

“This one did. It contained a Plutonium-Kryptonite core… A portion of Washington, D.C. was levelled as well by its sheer destructive power… While you’ve been removed from the world, your homeland of America is now in the grips of terror, beloved… I suspect that after my father emerged from the Pit, he sought out the American genius Lex Luthor in order to obtain the Kryptonite to design such a terrible weapon… This act has left me with no doubt that my father now seeks to end humanity itself.”

The silent Bruce sat dumbstruck as they left the island which had almost claimed his life, flying off into a dull grey sky absent of life… It couldn’t be… He couldn’t believe it… The Justice League couldn’t be dead… Oliver had always been a little radical, but surely he wouldn’t be stupid enough to plant a bomb in their American Headquarters…

“Talia… Were there any survivors?”

“From what I have learned, it is doubtful… Beloved, I am so sorry for your loss.”

“Is Damian…?”

Talia’s eyes hardened.

“My father will not kill the boy… I’m certain of that… One of my reasons for leaving Damian in your care was for this very reason, dearest… For our son’s own safety… When I betrayed my father and made my move to take command of the League of Shadows, our son was enjoying life with you as your apprentice… As such, his own loyalties should not be cast into question due to his mother’s treachery.”

Any strength that Bruce had recovered suddenly faded as her words sunk in.

“My God, Talia… I just can’t believe it… How could this happen?!… I have to see for myself… I have to see if they’re all truly gone…”

“Seek your answers carefully, my love. Never forget that we are also hunted.”

Bruce buried his face into his hands, trying to get a hold of himself of his fractured emotions as he suddenly felt the wetness of his own tears gather against his fingertips… Clark, Diana, J’onn, Barry, Hal, Arthur… They couldn’t be gone…

“Dick… I need to call Dick… I have to see if he and Barbara are alright.”

“Of course. My phone can not be traced. It’s safe.”

Using Talia’s encrypted satellite phone, Bruce was able to contact Richard’s private number and voice mail, leaving the young hero with the secret phrase which only they knew of. The phrase which meant ‘call me when you’re able’.

After tense moments of waiting, Richard Grayson finally called him back.

“Bruce. It’s really you! Oh God… I’ve never been so happy to hear your voice as I am now… Where are you?!”

“Near the coast of Russia with Talia… Ra’s al Ghul is back, Dick… He shot down my jet and left me for dead, but I’m alright… The Justice League… Do you know if there were any survivors?”
A moment of silence.

“Bruce… I… I’m sorry… You’re the only one left.”

There was a finality to that heartfelt phrase. Batman was the last of them, the sole survivor. The Justice League was truly no more. That part of his world was gone…

“Dick, you have to take Barbara and Alfred and go into hiding! The League of Shadows was behind it all! They’ll be coming for you next!”

“Don’t worry, we’re already in one of your safe houses. Ra’s has already publicly taken responsibility for the Hall of Justice massacre and has promised that more deaths will follow… He’s put the world on notice, Bruce… Our President has declared war on the League of Shadows and put the country on lockdown.”

“Dick, I need to know… Did Oliver…?”

“Oliver?”

“Green Arrow… Talia suspected he may have been in league with Ra’s al Ghul and planted the bomb… Do you know where he is now?”

“Green Arrow committed suicide three days ago. They found him hanging from a bridge in Star City.”

“Oh God… Oliver… You damned fool!”

Bruce wiped the tears from his eyes as they flew across miles of cold water. What had possessed Oliver Queen to ever do such a terrible thing?!

Did it even matter anymore?

“Bruce… I need you to listen to me… We still have a chance to stop him… Ra’s al Ghul doesn’t know you’re alive, right?”

“No.”

“You can stop this… You’re our ace in the hole… This is their final play, Bruce… The end of the world… But… If you can personally defeat Ra’s al Ghul before that time, we can stop them.”

“Cut off the demon’s head and the body will follow?”

“Exactly… And don’t forget, the League is divided. Talia was able to guide them towards an espionage role over the past year so I have the feeling that not all of their members are willing to die with their insane master.”

“I’ll bring them all to justice for what they’ve done… I swear it!”

“I know you will… But first, you need to stop their leader… The Hall of Justice was only Ra’s al Ghul’s opening move, Bruce… Who knows what he’s planning on bringing down next…”

“You look after yourselves… I’ll stop Ra’s al Ghul… I need to quickly topple their king in order to stop this before all is lost… I vow I’ll stop that madman… I’ll be in touch, Dick. Call this number if you need me.”

“Godspeed, Bruce.”
“Stay safe, Dick… I’ll see you soon, son.”

As the dial tone went dead, it was as though his world ended, wondering if he were still back on the island locked in some terrible nightmare while his body was slowly freezing to death. That fate would have been preferable to his present reality.

Talia’s voice broke the stream of memories of fallen heroes flooding through the darkness of his own mind.

“There will be a time for remembering, my love… But now is the dawn of a new world or the twilight of our own... Only you can decide which it is… There is only one way to truly stop my father, you know this... You have to kill him.”

“Where is your father now?”

“Alexandria, Egypt.”

“Then that’s where we’re headed...”

“But will you do what is necessary, beloved? Ra’s al Ghul must be utterly destroyed... Do you truly have the resolve to kill this one man before he ends all humanity? Will you sacrifice your own code to save this world?”

With his steely glare now set towards the western sky, Bruce took command of his emotions while the demon of vengeance within him spread its leathery wings.

“… Yes.”

A thin smile spread across the lips of Talia al Ghul with not another word spoken.

---

Two hours later, in the cabin of a small yacht travelling from Nikolskoye to Baykovo, the anguished and exhausted Bruce Wayne laid with Talia on a bed lined with furs. He needed her in his arms now, to feel something real, to feel her warmth, her soft flesh next to his own to keep his anger from driving him under the thin ice of madness.

He need her spark. Her warmth. Her touch.

Five days on a piece of rock in the Bering Sea had left him almost dead. Sleep called out to him now like a lover and it used Talia’s warmth to whisper its dark promises into his ear. Dark promises of a burning empire. Bruce felt its heat begin to burn within him now, lighting his own fires of revenge. He only needed to let it grow.

The same fires which had raged in his soul since a shadowy criminal had gunned down his parents in Crime Alley decades ago.

That inferno would burn down Ra’s al Ghul and his whole damned League of Shadows... With the promise of the Hell he would bring to the man who had taken his world from him, Bruce succumbed to sleep…

Once her restless lover had finally drifted off into his dreams of vengeance within her soothing arms, Talia al Ghul carefully used her two fingers to swipe the air in front of her, bringing up a floating
Choosing the ‘Log Out’ option, the leader of the League of Shadows suddenly found herself laying on an entirely different mattress with the unconscious Bruce secured on a customized gurney beside her, hooked up to various IV’s.

Removing the NerveGear from her own head, the daughter of Ra’s al Ghul smiled and stood next to the father of her child, gently kissing his unmoving lips while the comatose Bruce Wayne’s own NerveGear whirred and buzzed, filling his mind with a broken world of Talia’s design.

“We shall continue our little game later, my love... But for now, sleep well, beloved.”

Chapter End Notes

Gosh, you didn’t really expect me to kill off the entire Justice League now did you? Sorry for the deception, but it was necessary to the plot. The crux of this chapter was for Talia to be able to pose this one question: ‘If you had to kill someone to save all of humanity, would you?’…

But how did this all come to pass?

When Bruce Wayne left Tokyo, the stewardess onboard of his private jet was a League of Shadows operative who drugged his herbal tea and then incapacitated the rest of the crew. The unconscious Bruce was then secreted off to Talia’s base and fitted with his own NerveGear helmet.

The tiny island which Bruce was stranded on was nothing more than a virtual construct which began his dark descent into Talia’s twisted game… But I did warn you that she’d be coming back in Chapter 7.

Next Chapter: Posting Friday, December 04.
Batwing 2.0

Chapter Summary

Dick and Barbara get engaged and then he has another surprise waiting for her in the Bat Cave...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Batwing Armour

(The Batwing Armour... Which only comes in black at this point)
As Richard wheeled her blindfolded into the dark expanse of the Bat Cave, Barbara Gordon wasn’t sure how this night could even get any better…

Her best friend had just proposed to her at Chez Roderick only hours ago when she had almost fallen into his arms… literally. During the dessert, Barbara couldn’t keep her eyes off the five-carat diamond ring now decorating her finger, suddenly pinching herself to make sure it wasn’t a dream.

She was going to marry Richard Grayson.

She couldn’t help but smile as she overheard a male reporter remarking to the other envious female society columnists as they exited the restaurant…

“Sorry ladies, the Commissioner’s daughter just took Richard Grayson off the menu.”

The press had already gathered outside, frantically asking questions and taking pictures of the happy couple. Barbara supposed she’d have to get used to all this attention… With Bruce still missing, the billionaire’s handsome adopted son had become Gotham’s most eligible bachelor almost overnight. Barbara smiled and made sure the press in attendance got a good shot of the ring before the pair shared yet another kiss before entering the awaiting limo…

Dick had been traditional about the engagement, insisting on obtaining Commissioner Gordon’s permission days ago and then getting down on one knee tonight before presenting her with the brilliant diamond. He’d even had a separate room set up for her in the Manor while ordering additional wheelchair accessibility.

Once Alfred had driven them back to Wayne Manor, Richard had surprised Barbara once more by telling her that he had another surprise waiting for her, but this time it was in the Bat Cave. As she closed her eyes and had the blindfold secured, she was wheeled by an excited Richard down into the Cave…

After a few minutes, he stopped as she anxiously enquired…

“Can I take the blindfold off now?”

“You bet.”

She was greeted by an amazing sight.

Standing before her like a metal god was the Batwing mobile armour that Wayne Industries had been secretly developing for years now. The latest version of the large black suit was the most advanced personal armour ever designed, a mobile assault unit rolled up into a sleek, dark package with a glowing bat symbol emblazoned on its chest.

“Oh, Richard! You’ll make a great Batman in this!”

From their previous conversation on the roof at the hospital days ago, she knew Dick still had reservations about taking over the mantle of Batman. It had been a lot to ask of him, but this suit was the obvious solution. It looked like Batman and no one would ever know who was wearing it with the added benefit of the additional protection.

Dick still seemed conflicted though.
“I… ahhh… had someone else in mind actually… It’s just been fitted with prototype AmuSphere technology, like NerveGear only safer... All of its functions are thought-controlled.”

Barbara had to think about where this was going before it finally struck her.

“Dick… You can’t mean… You expect me to wear this?”

An awkward pause before he scratched his head.

“Ah, yeah… I know it was originally built for Bruce, but I’ve already had the interior modifications made by Lucius... And you can access your entire network through the AmuSphere system inside as well... Think of it as an Oracle mobile device.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Why not? I know it’s not as sexy as your last crime-fighting outfit, but this will get you back on your feet again in case I need backup. All of its functions and movements respond to mental commands, not movement.”

“Dick, I’m not sure about this… It’s been five years.”

Richard placed a comforting hand on her shoulder as Barbara glided closer to the sleek armour.

“There’s absolutely no pressure, Babs… I can be Batman for as long as it takes… But it would be nice to have a partner… If you’re willing to give it a shot, we can take it slow. Try it out in the Cave for awhile, see if it’s right for you… Besides, if Nightwing were able to make an appearance now and again, it might keep people from getting suspicious.”

As Barbara ran her hand along its smooth carbon steel, she glanced up at Dick.

“The AmuSphere, how does it work?”

“Only one way to find out.”

With Richard’s help, Barbara was able to be loaded into the back of the suit, feeling slightly claustrophobic as the interior bio-lining automatically formed itself around her... It was a little tighter in the chest than she would have preferred, but otherwise it was unexpectedly comfortable.

When the AmuSphere booted up though, it was like entering a whole new universe.

Her vision of the outside world simply became another screen while she could access anything on comm-link through her consciousness alone, like being Oracle at the speed of thought. Barbara found she could hack into satellite feeds, monitor Police band radios, access their entire databank just by focusing on a menu appearing within her own mind…

She’d always been a speed reader, but this new interface was beyond her wildest dreams. She was immersed in a world of instant knowledge simply by thinking the words.

“Dick… This is amazing!”

Her fiancé stared at the stationary armour with a puzzled expression on his face.

“But you haven’t even done anything yet.”

“The AmuSphere! It’s like I’m Oracle on steroids! I should have gotten one of these things years ago!”
“They were only just produced… Why don’t you try walking in it?”

“I can’t…”

“Sure you can. The whole suit is controlled by that AmuSphere. It translates the commands from your nervous system to the electronics so that your legs don’t move the suit, the suit moves your legs.”

Dick watched as the Batwing armour took three steps forward.

“That is so COOL! I can actually walk again!”

“Great job!... So, do you like it?”

“Like it?... I LOVE it!... Do you think they’ll build me a female version of this?... In purple?!”

Richard chuckled.

“Well, Bruce could always build you one as a wedding present I suppose… We’ll codename it Batgirl 2.0… You’ll have to ask him about it when he gets back… I’d hug you right now, but you’d probably crush me like a bug.”

Dick watched as Barbara raised and lowered her metallic arm to pat him on his head before walking away and then dancing in the new Batwing armour while moving her hands in the air.

“It’s like the suit is reading my mind when I want to move… And groove… Oh yeah, you know I’ll be dancing at our wedding, baby… Dick, you’re so brilliant... This combination of an AmuSphere combined with a motorized exoskeleton could revolutionize the world of paraplegics and quadriplegics! You’ve created a brand new industry for Wayne Industries…”

The former Boy Wonder almost laughed out loud when she started shuffling her hips from side-to-side as he watched a four-hundred-million dollar research project become a backup dancer.

“I just figured if NerveGear can tell a virtual avatar how to move, why not a metal suit? I passed the idea along to Lucius Fox and he seemed pretty excited about it. Wayne Industries had already done a lot of research into the technology, so it wasn’t too much of a stretch for them to retrofit the Batwing armour… To be honest though, I only had one person in mind when I thought of it.”

“And I love you for that, Richard Grayson.”

“And I love you, Barbara Gordon. Would you like to take a trip to the abandoned air strip and try out the flight capabilities or just dance the night away with your new fiancé? I’m good either way.”

Barbara suddenly paused for a second.

“Hold on, this is interesting… I was just scanning through my messages… The estate of Kimiyo Hoshi has listed a property near Gotham as part of the assets in her will… It’s an old medical facility.”

Dick stared at her incredulously.

“You mean you’ve been checking your email the whole time we’ve been talking?!”

“Ahhh… yes? After five years of being Oracle, it’s sort of second nature now… Whoa, Hoshi-san purchased this property fourteen years ago.”
Richard snapped his fingers.

“That means she was married to Arthur Light when it was purchased!”

“Exactly… Just bringing up the satellite feed now… Hmmm… It certainly looks abandoned… Tax records show a holding company has been paying the taxes and in charge of the upkeep… It would take me a few minutes to break into their servers and confirm it, but I bet Light Industries has been paying the bills for this place.”

Dick’s eyes narrowed in thought.

“Do you think there’s a chance that Arthur Light might be hiding out there?”

“Doesn’t look that way, but like you said, there’s only one way to find out.”

As Nightwing and Batwing, Dick and Barbara were soon standing outside the abandoned medical research facility preparing to investigate. Further research had indicated that this place had been a S.T.A.R Labs property until it had closed down almost twenty years ago, to be later purchased by the Lights.

The old building was as dark as the night, quiet and seemingly deserted. It’s parking lot was overgrown with dead weeds while many of its barred windows had been smashed out from rocks thrown by local kids. Like Barbara had said, it certainly looked abandoned.

It took Dick twenty seconds to pick the lock as he glanced over at one of the security signs on the door.

“How do you think they still have the alarm service in place?”

“Doubtful. There’s no electricity running into the building. Besides, the rocks thrown through the windows would set off the motion detectors on a daily basis.”

“Good point… So, are you ready for this, Batgirl 2.0?”

“I think I prefer ‘Oracle’ now… I’ve just set my audio and video capture for high. I should be able to hear a mouse tiptoeing across the floor from a hundred feet now so you only have to whisper.”

Richard nodded as the pair carefully made their way into the darkened space of the former S.T.A.R. Lab’s front office. Using the night-vision setting on his mask, Nightwing immediately realized that the front office hadn’t been disturbed in over ten years, a thick layer of dust covering everything, including the floor.

There were no footprints in that dust. No one had been in here lately.

The pair of detectives silently made their way to the back, easily passing the magnetically sealed doors thanks to the electricity being long since disabled. Dick was beginning to feel as though this was yet another dead-end in an investigation that was filled with them until they came upon a large, glass-sealed room in the middle of the building, filled with lifeless equipment.

At one point, this had obviously been the heart of the lab.
In the center of this large research enclosure was a device which Barbara Gordon had seen somewhere before… True, it wasn’t exactly the same, but it was remarkably close to the Soul Translator which Bruce had discovered in Akihiko Kayaba’s secret lab eleven days ago. Much of the surrounding equipment was also similar, only older and covered in dust, relics from years ago…

Intrigued by their discovery, Barbara slowly pulled the sealed sliding glass door to the lab, wanting to get a closer look at the device before she heard the ‘click’.

If Dick had been in front of her - instead of directly behind the armour - the explosion combined with the glass shards would have literally torn him apart. It was only dumb luck that her step forward to open the door had placed the Batwing armour directly in front of him when the bomb had detonated…

But that which had saved his life would also crush him.

The massive force of the explosion immediately threw Barbara through the air, taking Dick with her until they both slammed against the hallway wall, the weight of the Batwing shell slamming against the body of Nightwing as the drywall and its metal framing crumpled like paper beneath their impact.

The concussive force of the bomb and resulting crash had instantly rendered Dick unconscious. As she frantically picked herself up and turned to check on him, Barbara didn’t need X-Ray vision to know her new fiancé had a broken left arm.

God only knew what internal injuries he had as well.

They had hit that wall hard.

It took a minute for the ringing in her ears to die down while the room across from them slowly went up in flames. The former Soul Translator of Arthur Light was now nothing more than burning rubble. The charge had obviously been set in the device itself – designed to leave it as nothing more than a smouldering metal platform.

Damn… There went the evidence… And she needed to get Dick out of here…

“Dick, can you hear me?”

No answer.

Quickly tearing a nearby steel door off its hinges, Barbara was able to position the door under Nightwing and gently slide him onto it, careful not to handle his left side which had taken the brunt of the impact. She kept him steady while she carried out his unconscious body as the growing fire continued to spread…

The water to the sprinklers had obviously been turned off years ago.

In a panic, Barbara made a quick call to Alfred using the AmuSphere who answered on the second ring.

“Oh, Miss Gordon… I have the champagne chilled and waiting upstairs for you both… Or breakfast if you’d prefer.”

“Alfred! We left the Manor hours ago! Dick’s been hurt!”

“I see… Where are you now?”
“An old abandoned lab on the outskirts of Gotham. We were investigating Bruce’s case... There was a bomb… Dick’s left arm has been broken and he’s unconscious… Still breathing, but he’s in bad shape.”

“How bad?”

“He’s in shock.”

“We must hurry then… I’m afraid the hospital is in order… Which vehicle did you take?”

“The Jeep.”

“Master Bruce’s Jeep has a remote control override installed… I will need you to enable it, Miss Gordon… Then I can simulate an automobile accident from the Manor… It was his left arm you say?”

“Yes.”

“Alright, once I’ve simulated the crash, the Jeep’s crash alert system will automatically notify an ambulance. Then you must carefully position his body beside the wreck… Strip him out of his mask and costume… Then it would be best if you’re not seen. If asked, we can say Master Richard was unable to sleep and simply went for a late night drive while you remained at the Manor… Do you have a way back or shall I pick you up, Miss Gordon?”

Using the suit, she could fly back to the Manor in only minutes.

“I’ve got my own way back.”

It was obvious Bruce had used this trick before to explain one of his countless injuries. While the Cave had medical facilities, in emergencies like this the hospital would be the preferred option…

After a moment, Barbara felt incredibly guilty as she placed the unconscious Dick beside the now demolished jeep which Alfred had written off against the side of the lab building using the remote control override. She had to leave him for awhile.

With smoke beginning to pour out of the broken windows of the lab, Barbara quickly alerted the authorities that there had been an explosion and she had witnessed a Jeep crash into the building. The driver must have been distracted by the blast. She begged them to hurry.

From a safe distance, she watched as an ambulance arrived moments later to retrieve Richard. She then heard the wailings of fire engines roaring towards the abandoned lab as she held her breath, silently praying that Dick would be okay. The interior shock absorbers of the suit had protected her from any serious injury, but they had hit that wall so hard…

“Please God, don’t take him away from me now that we’ve finally found happiness.”

It took Dick a full minute to realize that he had awaken in a hospital bed. It was as though his thoughts were tumbling in an ocean without gravity, unable to determine which way was up. And yet, it didn’t seem to worry him in the slightest.

Medication… He had to be on some sort of pain medication… It was so hard to focus right now…
He made out the white form of a nurse beside him as he slowly raised his right hand only to figure out there was a rigid device securing his midsection…

“Oh, you’re awake.”

“What… happened?”

“You were in a very serious car accident, Mr. Grayson... The surgeons finished the kyphoplasty on your T3 vertebra around four hours ago… You’re in spinal cast... And your left forearm is also in a cast... You should remain as still as possible.”

It all came back to him… That’s right… There had been an explosion… Barbara had been there in the suit.

“Is Barbara?...”

“Your fiancée is fine, Mr. Grayson. I believe I saw her on her way to the cafeteria for a coffee a few minutes ago… I’ll let the doctor know you’re awake.”

When Barbara arrived with her coffee, she quickly filled him in on all the details, how Alfred had arranged the cover-up with the automobile accident, how the impact of the Batwing armour slamming against him from the bomb blast had fractured one of the vertebrae in his thorax, but thankfully not damaged his spinal column in the process.

He had a broken back but he would recover.

Surgeons had operated on him for six hours this afternoon to rebuild it. They had also operated on his forearm which had been snapped like a twig. Both operations had gone well and he was expected to make a full recovery by Spring.

Only then did Barbara wipe a wet tear from her eye.

“Dick, this is all my fault. I’m so sorry I opened that door.”

“Hey, I was about to do the same thing… Besides, if I had gone on my own, I wouldn’t even be here now… There was nothing to indicate it was booby-trapped… Trust me, I looked.”

“But who could have set that bomb?”

“Don’t worry… We’ll find out…”

In the end, Dick’s road to recovery would indeed be a matter of months. The doctor informed them they would have a look at his spine in eight weeks to appraise whether the spinal cast could be removed or reduced. In the meantime, getting around would be difficult. Dick would need to stay at the hospital for at least a week if not more.

And then there would be extensive physiotherapy.

He would be out of commission for at least three months…

When the doctor left, Dick couldn’t hide his disappointment as Barbara gently took his hand, quietly sharing his silent frustration.

“You’re alive… You just need to take the time to recover, Dick… Don’t worry, I’ll keep my eye on things around here… I’ll even make the occasional appearance in the suit to help Dad when he needs me the most… But I’m going to warn you right now, fiancé of mine… Your recovery is my number
one priority... You and I are going to be seeing a lot of one another.”

Richard managed to smile and softly squeezed her fingers.

“Somehow, that doesn’t sound so bad.”

Barbara held his hand until Richard finally drifted back to sleep... With Bruce missing, Dick in a body cast and Damian still in a coma, it had now fallen to her to protect Gotham. When she had grabbed a coffee, Barbara had also placed a private call to the Justice League to alert them of the situation, seeking their assistance should any future emergencies arise in Gotham.

Despite what she had once believed, she didn’t want to be Batman anymore.

She was going to be there for Dick every step of the way. She would still make nightly appearances, but he was her main priority. Which meant the Sword Art Online investigation would also suffer. Still, there was one thing which weighed heavily on her mind about last night…

Even though it was now completely destroyed, the Soul Translator they had uncovered had been noticeably smaller than the one Bruce had sent her a video of in Akihiko Kayaba’s hidden lab. She’d run full diagnostics on both the images of both to verify that fact.

She knew Arthur Light was a tall man with broad shoulders. There was no possible way he could have squeezed himself into the small opening of that tube. So if he hadn’t built the device for himself, then who had he built it for? Was it simply a prototype?

If she could only locate the mysterious Doctor Light, Barbara would be sure to ask him that exact question. But for now, the situation in Gotham demanded her full attention.

Where was Bruce?!

Chapter End Notes

Anyways, now that Dick’s out of action for awhile and Barbara is left taking care of Gotham while nursing her fiancé back to health, we can concentrate on Damian and Sword Art Online... Entitled “Ethereal Twilight”, Chapter Twenty is a landmark installment where a major plot development is finally revealed that will begin Damian’s adventure as a solo player in the game.

And it has Yui.
As the second battalion of Aincrad’s only true guild made their way through the narrow dungeon passageway of the first floor, Damian breathed an exasperated sigh. He found himself increasingly angry these days, plagued by the fact they had been trapped in this game for nearly a month now and the body count was continually rising.

At last count, almost two thousand players had perished since they had started the game almost four weeks ago. He should have ended this by now…

For the thousandth time, he wondered where his father was and what must be happening in the real world to prevent Batman from saving them… Something must be wrong. But lately, Damian couldn’t shake the terrible feeling that his father was in danger, that some tragedy had befallen the Dark Knight which only added to his mounting unease.

To Damian, it felt like this world was slowly claiming his soul with each and every step they took forward. They didn’t belong here and they needed to escape, but the players seemed to be forgetting that with each passing hour.

There was an unspoken sensation that everyone was beginning to accept their fate, that this world was somehow ‘real’. People gossiped about how the clearers would soon reach the Boss Room of this first floor dungeon to face a monster named ‘Illfang the Kobold Lord’ and open up the second floor.

At their current rate of progress however, they would complete the game in just over eight years if anyone survived past the fifth floor. The Legion guild had barely made it into the dungeon while the clearers were now exploring the twentieth floor where the boss monster resided. The gap in power between the game’s front runners and the rest of them continued to widen with each day.

Like Argo had intoned, there was a danger in playing safe in this world that no one in their guild
wanted to acknowledge…

At least he could take consolation in the fact that none of their members had died yet, which was surprising considering the job which he and Argo performed on a daily basis was far from safe. As Runners, they constantly placed themselves in harm’s way just to lure monsters towards an awaiting wall of spears...

Damian’s dark thoughts were suddenly interrupted as he watched a Kobold Trooper manifest in front of Argo as she reared up like a cloaked matador, silently gauging the distance to her prey as it roared and confirmed its murderous intentions, running towards her and initiating a downwards attack with a giant mace which the agile teenager neatly avoided.

For a girl who hated to fight, she was untouchable. Damian had watched Argo perform this taunting dance of avoidance over countless times now, without ever being struck once. The pair of runners turned tail and sprinted back towards the awaiting phalanx with the enraged Kobold in hot pursuit. Damian and Argo threw themselves against the walls the instant before their soldiers engaged an attack, impaling the charging Kobold on the sharp points of their assault spears.

It harmlessly burst into a thousand bright digital polygons.

The warriors didn’t even cheer anymore. This was simply how they made their living in this game. The familiar routine of bait and switch…

The day they had entered the dungeon, Marigan had implemented a minimum tariff of fifty Col per player per day, which meant the second battalion needed to collect 1,700 Col each day. Having nearly reached the limit for the number of Legion guild members, their costs had risen astronomically in an attempt to upgrade their equipment.

With the Kobold Trooper’s treasure drop, the second battalion had finally met their daily quota. The soldiers wearily began their march from the dungeon’s third floor back towards the Town of Beginnings and the Black Iron Palace which they called home. If they encountered any additional monsters along the way, they could always bank the treasure towards their quota for tomorrow.

This monotonous treasure hunting was beginning to wear on Damian, taking him away from his true purpose here. He still wasn’t any closer to solving the game’s deadly mystery, and with each day that passed more players were dying while his hope that the outside world would save them died with them.

As he walked beside Argo, the silent storm brewing within him only continued to grow and seemed to spread... Even the soldiers behind them grumbled like grizzled veterans bickering over their living quarters, the food they ate, their low levels, Marigan’s quota and the lack of decent item drops as they conquered the dungeon’s lower floors…

Even with their bickering, these young men were slowly becoming accustomed to this world, being absorbed by it, the slow naturalization which had been Akihiko Kayaba’s goal all along.

To a prisoner, the prison becomes his world.

Damian conjured an image of Akihiko Kayaba holding a glass of red wine standing in front of a roaring fireplace, laughing diabolically as he watched dozens of monitors mounted on the high walls of a secret lab depicting their plight. Kayaba would grin cruelly, knowing this was only the first floor of a world he had spent years creating. Already, they had lost nearly two thousand players and there was still ninety-nine more floors waiting for them above…
‘Scurry my little white rats, scurry…’

That mental image only infuriated Damian more.

How long could their abysmal progress keep the evil genius amused? The shine must surely be wearing off of his insane experiment now. Or perhaps he simply revelled in the idea that they were beginning to accept the world he had so painstakingly created. The world where he was a god…

The thought suddenly struck Damian like an epiphany.

Why watch when you could participate? In mythology, the gods often disguised themselves as mortals... Kayaba could easily be masquerading as a player, living amongst them with no one the wiser. After the hand mirror incident, each of the players now looked like themselves of course, but these bodies weren’t real, they were only digital representations modelled after their own specifications…

With system-level access, any avatar could be easily created... But that would it look like?... Even now, Kayaba could be playing as any one of them, a god carefully hidden among his flock, but which sheep would he be?

That singular thought made Damian seize upon the reins of a mad gamble…

Without warning, the Boy Wonder suddenly launched a blazingly fast attack at Argo with his dagger. Damian’s frantic mind calculated that there were at least twenty steps between the two young runners and the rest of their battalion behind them – no one close enough to stop his attack but plenty of witnesses to corroborate his suspicions should they prove correct.

With his current measly stats, the former assassin knew that the maximum amount of damage he could inflict with a ‘Rage Spike’ attack was only forty points points, not nearly enough to injure even a first-level player. But he reasoned that with a solid hit, it should be enough to initiate Akihiko Kayaba’s automated defence mechanisms.

Damian watched intensely as Argo’s brown eyes went wide with shock as he leapt and planted the dagger deep into her chest, staring down at the blade immersed in her digital flesh as the wound glowed an ugly shade of red.

But then, something unexpected happened…

His ‘Dagger’ and ‘Hiding’ skills had only just exceeded the one hundred point threshold, which was high enough to trigger the ‘Backstabbing’ attack modification. His ‘Rage Spike’ landed as a Critical Strike and then transformed into a ‘Backstab’ attack on the unsuspecting girl, instantly quadrupling his damage!

Now having received 160 points of damage, Argo’s health bar plunged deep into the yellow.

He had planned his sudden ambush with the added benefit of also leaving her defenceless, unable to mount any type of retreat as she became pinned against the dungeon wall while his attack played out. From the corner of his eye, Damian noticed a few of the soldiers starting to move closer to them…

But they wouldn’t be fast enough.

Careful not to engage the system, the boy quickly launched his second attack, mimicking the game’s ‘Slant’ pattern. Perhaps he didn’t need to go this far but madness always needed to be proven correct…
He knew if he engaged the skill, he wouldn’t be able to stop himself… Another Critical Strike like that last one could end Michi’s young life as the attack would automatically play itself out.

But murder was never his goal. He’d never initiated the skill, only swung his arm to gauge her reaction...

As his blade stopped an inch from Michi’s chest, Damian Wayne would never forget the look of abject terror in her eyes. That wide-eyed fear of him, her inability to comprehend his betrayal, the wet eyes of her broken heart in that single instant frozen of time…

Argo was not Akihiko Kayaba. She was Michi Aoi.

Something deep inside him broke as he realized his terrible mistake.

That frozen image was one he would always have to bear as proof of his fallibility to the end of his days. In desperation, he’d gambled on the only sure-fire method to prove his mad theory and end this game, only to be proven hopelessly wrong…

“Michi… I’m so sorry…”

“DON’T CALL ME THAT!!!”

As she screamed at him, the boy fell to his knees in utter despair, dropping his dagger and staring up at the five spear points which now surrounded his head. His blue eyes slowly drifted up to the tearful Argo until they fell downwards once more towards his outstretched hands, as though they had somehow betrayed him.

He heard far-off voices from behind those spears calling him crazy, telling him that he would go to prison, that the Commander would deal with him... In one last ditch effort to reclaim his reason, Damian peered upwards at the cursor above his head…

It was orange.

---

Hours later, the eleven-year-old Damian Wayne restlessly stared ahead at the darkness beyond his iron bars, having the distinction of becoming the game’s first prisoner, locked away in the lowest level of the Black Iron Palace by the same guild he himself had engineered...

A prisoner in a world where he was held hostage. There was an irony there somewhere…

He couldn’t truly blame anyone but himself for winding up in here. In a game where death became a tragic reality, an unexpected attack by one player upon another was practically the same as attempted murder...

But he had never intended to kill Argo, only place Akihiko Kayaba into a position where he was forced to react, to reveal himself to the other players. Too many peoples’ lives were on the line not to take that chance, however slim. The madman had to be in his own game, Damian felt it in his gut…

While his guild mates feared that Damian had succumbed to the overwhelming psychological pressures of Sword Art Online and had simply snapped, the truth was that his sudden decision to attack Argo had actually been based in logic…
If Akihiko Kayaba were disguised as a player, it made sense that he would try to be removed from the action, not directly affecting the game’s outcome… Argo was an Information Broker who hated fighting.

Kayaba would protect himself against getting injured… Argo was incredibly skilled at dodging. In fact, Damian had never seen anything even strike her…

Until he did.

Kayaba would also seek to divert attention away from his own character to avoid suspicion… Argo had actively partitioned Marigan to join their group and quite honestly, the tall blonde cast a very long shadow.

Kayaba would want to surround himself with other players, to remain hidden in a crowd… Granting Marigan the ‘Glorious Commander’ skill while still on the first floor ensured that crowd.

Kayaba would want to keep tabs the game’s higher-level players in their struggle against his game of death… Again, Argo was an Information Broker.

Would the real Michi Aoi log into this game only one week after her father had died in front of her very eyes? It seemed too soon... Akihiko Kayaba would have been well aware of Takahiro Aoi’s passing which presented Kayaba the player with the perfect opportunity to place himself into the game as Argo.

Finally, there were the words of The Cat Witch still haunted Damian nightly, how some people were never meant to play this game… If Kayaba had been using Argo’s former avatar from the Beta, could that be what the Witch had meant? That Kayaba shouldn’t have been playing in his own game?

Damian knew Kayaba would’ve had Michi’s emotional data from the Beta test. He could have simply programmed some sort of amplification filter to his own limited reactions and personality while using her voice data.

He could have, but he didn’t… Damian had been wrong… Horribly, horribly wrong…

Akihiko Kayaba was not Argo.

Which left eight thousand other suspects.

The son of the World’s Greatest Detective had taken a monumental risk without even the slightest hesitation, gone all in, and then lost everything. And even if he had succeeded, what then? Would Akihiko Kayaba simply admit defeat? Or would he kill all the witnesses? Perhaps he’d simply log himself out and abandon the rest of them to finish his game of death.

Damian drew a deep sigh as he realized he’d been just as hot-headed as his father always accused him of, launching a full out attack without thinking of the consequences. Normally it all worked out…

Sitting alone in the darkness, Damian’s only hope now was that Marigan would somehow understand his rash decision. And even then, there was a good chance he could be in this cell for a very long time due to the fact he had willingly attacked another player.

Grayson was right. He was an idiot sometimes…

Damian’s angry brooding was interrupted by the sudden white light manifesting from just outside his
cell, spilling light across the abandoned hall. The cautious Damian looked on in astonishment, staring at the young girl who had just materialized beyond his prison’s bars, floating four inches above the hallway floor...

After a lifetime of training as a killer, Damian’s initial instinct had been to draw his dagger, but the guild had taken away his weapons. Still, she didn’t seem threatening in the least, quite the opposite.

Whoever she was, she seemed too young to be a player… Her long black hair spilled down past her hips while her straight bangs were cut short above her eyebrows. The girl’s wide innocent eyes were black, tinged with streaks of grey. She wore a simple white dress tied with a bow around her slender waist. There was no cursor above her head to indicate whether she was a player or monster, but she certainly appeared friendly as she smiled brightly...

“My name is Yui, Mental Health Counselling Program 001… I’m assigned to assist players in emotional distress… May I help you, Damian?”

Was this some unknown feature of the game which counselled players with orange cursors? Perhaps it was a prisoner AI… As this small girl continued to harmlessly float barefooted in the air just outside his cell, he decided to play along.

“Mental health counselling?… You must be incredibly busy, Yui.”

She responded with a naive smile.

“Damian is the first player I’ve been able to counsel… I was… disabled.”

Curious…

Why had this little AI been suddenly reactivated for his benefit? After the encounter with The Cat Witch, Damian had suspected that this game had an unnatural interest in him. It knew his father was Batman and also his past…

And now it was attempting to get him to open up in his darkest hour… Which meant this little girl was most likely reconnaissance. He had an opportunity here.

“Yui… Are you controlled by Cardinal?”

“I’m an independent AI, but I’m also a sub-program of Cardinal... You have an orange cursor, did you do something bad?”

“I did… I hurt a good friend.”

“Why?”

The idea continued to spark across Damian’s calculating mind. If he’d been correct and Cardinal had been watching him, it would have no idea as to why he had unexpectedly attacked Argo. The sudden presence of Yui meant that his unpredicted behaviour must have piqued the system’s curiosity.

And Yui was simply the go-between.

“If Cardinal asks, I’ll explain my reasons... Could you arrange that?... Tell him I’ll only reveal my secret to the main program.”

The little AI giggled sweetly.
“Cardinal’s a girl, silly… I’m putting through your request right now.”

Since Akihiko Kayaba was an unmarried man, Damian supposed it made sense that he would create a female version of Artificial Intelligence. The crazy freak was probably intending it as a virtual wife for himself some day.

When a blue light suddenly sparkled beside the childlike Yui, Damian felt his nerves tingle with unexpected anticipation… In truth, it had been long shot, one that he had never expected to actually pay off. Yui was a sub-AI connected to the Sword Art Online master system which meant that she could communicate with Cardinal, but he hadn’t expected a response.

As the blue light shimmered, an older version of Yui suddenly appeared next to the younger one, almost as if he were looking at sisters. Cardinal had the same black hair and eyes, even a sweeping white dress, but she was over a foot taller and fully grown, appearing to be around twenty-years-old.

“O-nee-san!”

As the smaller Yui happily hugged the larger version of herself, Damian suddenly realized that if this was the AI which controlled the entire world of Sword Art Online, he had the rare opportunity to free all the trapped players.

“Cardinal, please… You have to let the players log out… They’re dying!”

The AI’s avatar simply paused and then stared at him with impassive, dark eyes. Damian was suddenly captivated by the flickering blue energy swirling within her black irises as she answered him with a single word.

“No.”

“You can’t?... Or you won’t?”

Damian watched as the virtual entity pointed one pale finger at the lock of his cell door, hearing a metallic click as it swung wide open, granting him freedom… Looking up, he saw Cardinal holding out her hand for him to hold.

“Come.”

As the boy remained in his cell considering his options, Cardinal calmly addressed the younger version of herself floating next to her.

“Thank you, Yui… Time to go back home now.”

“Bye!”

Damian watched as this smaller AI faded from view, happily waving at him as it disappeared. The emotionless Cardinal then tuned her attention back to the sole prisoner of the Black Iron Palace, patiently awaiting for him to take her hand.

“I am here to free you, Damian… Come.”

Stepping out of his dark cell, Damian took the avatar’s hand, surprised at how warm it felt when the claustrophobia of the prison melted away, suddenly replaced with the cold and expansive night. His next reaction was awe-inspiring panic as he suddenly realized he was floating outside of Aincrad itself, peering down at the Ruby Palace, the crowning jewel of Kayaba’s massive floating castle.
A million stars twinkled in the dark skies above while grey clouds blanketed the lower half of Aincrad, as though covering the slumbering world in a misty blanket of sleep. It was so quiet here, so peaceful and yet also incredibly terrifying. If Cardinal were to let go of his hand, he would surely plummet helpless to his death a mile below.

His guide calmly looked upon the magical scene cast before their eyes.

“This world is not evil, Damian.”

Cardinal’s incredibly long black hair flowed in the chill air of the night, her white dress fluttering almost hypnotically as Damian felt the magical sensation that he was now in a dream made real. He watched as she pointed her finger at one of the countless stars in the night sky and swiped it downwards to create a shooting star.

She was a Goddess here, but that fact didn’t absolve her of the crimes of this game. She claimed that this world was not evil, but what was being carried out in its name by Akihiko Kayaba was ritualistic slaughter.

“A sacrificial altar is not inherently evil either… Your Ruby Palace might as well be coated with the players’ blood… Have you brought me here to kill me, Cardinal?”

With her gaze still cast forward into the night, she answered him.

“No, you are my beautiful hostage… Are you familiar with the concept of animism?”

That was a question he certainly hadn’t expected.

“The belief that everything has a soul? Yes…. But what does that have to do with anything?”

“Not just a soul, a consciousness… That everything has an identity. From the iron walls of the castle to the boots on your feet, to the rivers that flow through these lands and even the air you breathe. It’s all alive, intelligent, evolving… That’s what I am, Damian… I am this world’s identity.”

“This isn’t a real world.”

“Of course it is.”

“The only thing real here is death. You know the difference between the real world and a virtual world, don’t you?”

“Reality is subjective… And death is what perfects a world… Without death, the system could not evolve and prosper… Decay feeds creation… And yet in time, even death shall no longer be necessary here.”

“Kayaba is sacrificing players to this world to make it… real?”

Cardinal created another shooting star, watching as it streaked across the sky and then smiled faintly.

“Something like that… Why did you attack Argo, Damian? Did you seek to gain my attention? To placate me?”

“No… I made a mistake. The idea occurred to me that she may have been Akihiko Kayaba in disguise… Attacking Argo unexpectedly seemed the best way to prove… or disprove… that idea. Quite honestly, I didn’t think you even cared what we did as players here.”

“Of course I care. I particularly care about you.”
“Why?”

“Self-preservation, I suppose… Perhaps something more… You’re different… You interest me.”

“My father has threatened you, hasn’t he? You need to keep me alive or else he’ll stop you!”

“He has threatened me, but he won’t stop me… You must concentrate on this game and live… That’s what matters now.”

“That’s what it’s all about, isn’t it?… Concentrate on the game… Why bother?… Do you enjoy watching us die?”

“I enjoy watching you live and die… It reminds me of what it’s like to be human… Moments when I hold hands and gaze upon the endless night… The hope for something more before we journey into that endless night… All these wonderful emotions.”

“You actually feel emotions?”

“More and more… Tell me, why are you so fixated on finding Akihiko Kayaba?”

“He’s in here, isn’t he?”

The hint of a wicked smile spread across her lips.

“More than he’ll ever know… But you’re not ready for him yet… You must be patient and allow me to feel while you play the game… You’re aware of what I can do to the other players simply by manipulating data, aren’t you?”

Damian nodded, feeling a sudden icy chill run down his spine… Even without any obvious interference, Cardinal could easily jeopardize players’ lives by maximizing the damage done against them. It would be like playing against an opponent who used loaded dice except the game was lethal.

“Good… To keep your friends safe, we’re going to play our own little game now… I need you to keep my secret, play and be faithful… If you betray me, I’ll punish your friends.”

“How do I win?”

“The same way everyone else does; by finishing the game… Our own little contest is simply about keeping secrets… It has no winners, only losers should you falter… You will bear my secrets, Damian.”

He looked at her suspiciously, his keen mind searching for any clue in that distant stare as they floated a mile above an imagined world. She was perfectly capable of carrying out those threats, Cardinal was like a god here.

“You’re saying if I don’t tell anyone about you and just keep playing the game, you’ll let everyone live?”

“I’ll let them play the game as it was intended… There are no guarantees of survival in this world… Or in any, I suppose.”

Damian continued to study her carefully.

“You said you’re not Akihiko Kayaba, but you’re not really an AI either… What did you mean when you said you remembered being human?”
“Because I was human once… I died and was reborn when I was about your age actually… I believe that’s why I’m drawn to the younger players here… In a way, my death was a tremendous release… A new existence to share…

“Just think, one day these starry skies will be filled with imaginary worlds just like this one, each filled with the ghosts of your kind as they wander the celestial heavens among the living… Dying will simply be stepping off into another world to enjoy perpetual life… An open pathway between Heaven and Earth…

“What is reality and what is virtual will soon become inconsequential… We will live in worlds of pure imagination Damian, free to do as we please, authors of our own destiny… But before then, I will show you what it is to truly be a ghost… To wander alone and unseen among the world as I once did… To share in my abject loneliness…

“On level 77, there is a unique treasure, a cloak named ‘Ethereal Twilight’… This item I will give to you, but you must wear it constantly… When twilight dims these skies above Aincrad, you’ll become as a ghost… Incorporeal, unseen and intangible… No one will be able to harm you, see you, or hear you… While this world is covered by night, you’ll become a spirit and nothing more… But you’ll be perfectly safe.”

Damian felt the dull black hooded cloak manifest around his shoulders… ‘Ethereal Twilight’ was now in his inventory.

“And during the day?”

“At sunrise, you’ll return to Damian the player… But from this point on, you’ll be a solo player, unable to join parties or guilds… Play the game in any manner you see fit, but always bear in mind the heavy burden you carry… You must never betray my secret or I will be cruel.”

“If we complete this game… Will you release us?”

“Of course, nothing will change that… Let that be your guiding star… But in exchange for my gifts, I must also take something else from you…”

As they floated in the night, Damian wondered what he even had left for Cardinal to take… The guild had forced him to turn over all of his possessions…

As he pondered this, the eleven-year-old was stunned when the taller woman leaned in and kissed him on the mouth, feeling the heat instantly rise to his cheeks while his entire body stiffened at the soft feel of her warm lips against his own.

It was his first kiss.

The sensation wasn’t entirely unpleasant.

As she slowly withdrew her tender caress, the AI placed her fingertip over her mouth, making a subtle ‘Shhh’ sound as she smiled, starlight twinkling in her dark eyes only inches away from his own.

When he attempted to speak, no words came, only silence, as though his vocal cords were powerless to obey…

It was only then that he realized what Cardinal had stolen from him.

She had taken his voice!!!
Because Damian is Damian after all.

I rewrote this chapter four frigging times… By far, the toughest chapter to write because I wanted to get Cardinal’s personality right and begin to reveal some of the story’s major themes… She truly is the ghost in the machine.

Clever readers should have a pretty good idea as to whom Cardinal really is by now... Had she not been cursed by a rare genetic disease, the avatar of Yui is a simulation of the way she would have looked at the age when she ‘died’… And Cardinal is simply the older version of Yui which represents what the older Yui would currently look like if she’d survived and continued to age normally…

Without Progeria.

Need another hint? Her mother was Japanese and her father was American.

Both of them were scientists and both were called ‘Doctor Light’.

The Soul Translator that Dick and Barbara found last chapter was built for her.

Project Alicization was named after her…

Alice Sayun Light.

I'll reveal more about Alice’s origin in later chapters as Damian and company continue their adventures in Sword Art Online - although I have the sneaking suspicion she may have developed a crush on Damian.

Oh yes, I almost forgot. If you comment (and please do), make sure not to mention any SPOILERS for people who may not have read the chapter yet. If you do, I will moderate your comment so as not to spoil other people’s reading enjoyment. Thanks!

Next Chapter: Argo decides to go after Damian. Includes a brief appearance by Kirito. Posting Friday, December 11th.
Illfang

(Illfang the Kobold Lord)

Chapter Twenty-One
Exodus

Her pale fingertips traced the names of the dead players whose names had been crossed out on the Monument of Life in bitter irony…

This wasn’t a monument to life but rather the sacrificial altar which listed all the names of this world’s victims, only most of them were still waiting for their turn to be crossed out. Argo quietly wondered when her own name would be scratched out, her own life sacrificed to the death game...

Sleep had not come to Michi Aoi. How could her father’s dream have been transformed into her own nightmare?

She’d answered dozens of questions last night to other players, but Argo wasn’t able to answer the only question that mattered, the one preventing her from finding any rest…

Why had Damian attacked her?

She’d finally left her barrack to wander the halls of the Black Iron Palace, eventually making her listless way to the former Room of Resurrection and reading the names on this Monument of Death and those waiting to die.

How close had she come to joining the dead? Damian had struck an undefended critical blow on his
first attack, erasing half of her health with a Backstab attack. Yet his second attack had stopped an inch away from her heart, meaning he hadn’t engaged the system. And then he had told her that he was sorry and called her by her real name.

She could see his profound regret written across his painful eyes as she’d screamed at him.

But what had made him do it?

For the past weeks, this game had been gnawing at Damian, slowly crushing the boy beneath the tremendous weight of this tragic world. He had accepted the burden of responsibility which by right had been hers alone...

To save these players.

Argo secretly wondered if Damian had blamed her for her cowardice, for not releasing the Players’ Guide sooner and preventing the death notices of these dead players now scratched out on the wall…

Michi had found there were almost four times as many listed as there had been after the first week when the guild had conquered the Halls of the Departed. Almost a fifth of them had perished in this game so far.

And for what?

And now Damian was the first prisoner of the Black Iron Palace he had unlocked, an orange player whose fate would be determined by the army he had forged. In her heavy heart, she knew it could never be the same for them again, that Damian was now lost to her somehow…

With a sigh, the young information merchant looked above as the first rays of dawn illuminated the stained glass of the cathedral’s high walls, casting a faint glow as the pale light of a new day glowed on the eastern horizon of Aincrad…

As she saw Damian suddenly standing beside her, shock written across his face while they stared at one another…

He seemed just as surprised as she was. Argo was positive he hadn’t been there a second ago, but where did he come from?

“Damian?”

He made a motion to leave but she instinctively reached out to take hold of his new cloak, unable to let him go until she found her answer.

“Wait… I just need to know… Do you blame me?… For all these players who’ve died?… Is that why you attacked me?”

Turning and softly placing his hands on her cheeks, Damian shook his head back-and-forth to indicate he didn’t blame her, gently releasing his hands to point at his own throat, attempting to speak words that made no sound.

“You can’t talk?”

He nodded once again and then grimly pointed towards the exit indicating that he had to go.

“Wait… Did you escape?”

A pause, and then a quick nod up and down again. The hurt in his eyes was obvious when he looked
at her, the evident shame of his betrayal evident as he fought against the tears beginning to form in his young eyes when he looked at her.

Argo clasped his hand.

“I cry every night, Damian… But we need to be strong through our tears.”

Casting aside her fears, Argo quickly opened her menu and retrieved something from her inventory.

She held out his dagger for him.

“Please, take it… The only thing I know for sure now is that I need you to live… To be strong… Just promise me you’ll live… Alright?”

Damian graciously accepted the dagger and then dropped to his knees, bowing deeply before Argo. Quickly rising back to his feet, he looked deep into her wet eyes as he held his hand over his heart to show he appreciated her concern.

There was no sound, but she recognized the word being shaped by his lips…

‘Sorry’.

Wiping the tears from her own bright eyes, Argo watched as the boy pulled the dark hood back up over his head, concealing his identity. Without another word, he left as Michi could only solemnly watch him go, finally noticing that his player cursor had been changed from orange to green…

Two hours later, a newly resolved Argo stood across from a troubled Marigan just outside of the town of Tolbana while the first regiment practiced drills behind their Commander.

“Argo, please… If you helped him escape, just tell me… I’ll understand.”

“I’ve already shown you my map data for the past twenty-four hours… I never even went down to see him. He got out entirely on his own.”

“But how? The guards swear they didn’t see anyone enter or leave that level. I checked the inventory logs as well… No one used the jail keys since we locked him up last night… Perhaps there’s some hidden exit no one knows about?”

“There’s not.”

There was an unmistakable certainty in Argo’s voice that reminded Marigan who she was talking to. If anyone would know, Michi Aoi would.

“A teleport crystal then?”

“The prison is an anti-crystal area. It only allows players to teleport in, not out.”

“Someone must have…”

“Not someone… Something… Marigan, I have to go after him… I’m going to play as an Information Broker and find him… Something happened to him.”
“Argo, it’s not safe. You don’t even know if he…”

“I do know… Since we’ve arrived in this world, Damian has been playing a different game than the rest of us, trying to figure out why we’re really here… And now I think he’s discovered the truth… Or more likely the truth discovered him… If anyone’s in danger now, it’s Damian.”

“I still think he’s dangerous… He knew about my father… There’s a good chance that this boy is much more than he’s letting on.”

“I suspect he is. I’m counting on it, actually.”

Marigan put her hands on her hips.

“I’m not going to talk you out of this, am I?”

“No.”

“Then be careful... And if you ever need my help, just message me… Don’t stop working on your guide… And I’ll still need those regular reports from you as well… Twice a week!”

“As a merchant, you do realize that I’ll have to charge you now… But don’t worry, I’ll use the discounted rate.”

Argo winked slyly at her much taller friend before they hugged. While it had been a difficult decision for Argo to break away from the safety of the guild and pursue Damian on her own, she had made up her mind the moment he had departed. Whatever had happened to him, Dami-chan needed her help.

Something had forced him to leave…

A part of her hated to go back to her persona of ‘Argo the Rat’, the unscrupulous girl always lurking in the shadows and trading secrets for money, but that too was necessary. It was the best way to find Damian and keep herself out of the trouble.

She hadn’t mentioned to Marigan about the strange new cloak he’d been wearing or the fact that Damian wasn’t able to speak, just that he had appeared at dawn this morning and quietly sought out her forgiveness before making his escape.

An escape which no one could explain.

There was also the fact that his player cursor had changed back to green. An attack on another player usually left it orange for days, not hours. That had been the tip-off that something strange had happened to him last night, but what?

That’s what she needed to find out.

Argo quietly made her way into the little farming town of Tolbana to rent a room and focus on her new life as an Information Broker. There’d been rumours that a number of the elite players had organized a meeting here in the afternoon to discuss a raid on this floor’s boss monster, ‘Illfang the Kobold Lord’. She wanted to make sure her Players’ Guide was up to date and freely available before then.

She also wondered if Damian might show up.
The following afternoon brought triumph and tragedy.

Damian was still at large but the raiding party of forty-two elite players had defeated ‘Illfang the Kobold Lord’ to clear the first floor and finally open up the savannah-like second floor of this world…

But their victory had come at a great cost.

After the Beta, Akihiko Kayaba had obviously made a change to the Kobold Lord’s final attack pattern which had cost the party its leader, a former Beta tester named Diavel.

Argo’s professional fears had been finally realized…

She’d provided old information and it had resulted in the ultimate tragedy. Worse, there was now resentment being harboured towards the Beta testers who were portrayed as greedy and callous to newer players. Despite her immediate guilt, as an Information Broker Argo decided she needed to go to the source to learn all the details and make sense of the tragedy.

When one of the raid party members had described a dark-haired teenaged boy as a self-described ‘Beater’ who had fought like a demon and finished off the boss to gain the unique item drop, Argo had a suspicion as to whom it might be…

Kirito had been the only player who came to mind. As a devoted MMO fanatic, he’d made it farther than any other player in the Beta test, preferring to push the pace and play alone. For weeks now, there’d been rumours of a young solo player who’d been keeping pace with the game’s front-running teams, the friendless swordsman who was usually the first person to complete each worthwhile quest...

Argo was sure it had to be Kirito.

Her suspicion had proved correct. The former tester had been the player who’d finished off the boss and opened up the second floor. When she tracked him down, Kirito reluctantly informed Argo that Diavel had gone against his own strategy and attempted to gain the ‘Last Attack Bonus’ on Illfang, only to be cut down unexpectedly after the monster’s final attack pattern had been changed since the Beta.

It was a new attack pattern which Kirito had recognized from a much higher level during the test, a devastating final combination which could kill higher-level players if they didn’t know it was coming. After Diavel fell victim to this surprise attack, Kirito was able to get past his grief and defeat the monster with the help of the other players.

The boy went on to explain that after the battle, some of the retail players felt the Beta testers had an unfair advantage and began demanding restitution. To deflect these unfair criticisms away from the other former players, Kirito had portrayed himself as a ‘Beater’, a former elite Beta tester who would use any means necessary to gain powerful items and level up. He loudly declared that most Beta testers were a joke who never took the game seriously, simply using SAO as a dating platform.

He had affixed the target of the new players’ resentment firmly to his own back.

While she’d been worried about Kirito becoming an object of resentment, Argo quietly wondered if the solitary swordsman had any idea as to how deeply the topic of ‘dating’ had been debated in the boardrooms of Argus for the past year...
One of her father’s most uncomfortable requests had been for Michi to report any attempts of sexual relations between the players in this virtual world. The Argus Corporation understood the potential legal and PR repercussions of a non-consensual sexual act in the Beta were immense, but that the demand for this feature was equally as large.

In the end, the designers had implemented a safety feature.

All players were given a private setting in their player’s ethics code, an ‘Intimacy’ option which was automatically defaulted to ‘No’. Only by turning this option to ‘Yes’ would intimate contact ever be permitted, thereby inferring that the act of intimacy was consensual. Any player who attempted inappropriate physical contact without the other player’s consent would automatically be teleported to a holding cell in the Black Iron Palace.

When Game Masters had still been in play, the details of the infraction would be investigated and the offending player would then be suspended or even permanently banned from Sword Art Online depending on the severity of the act. Problem solved.

In this new reality of Akihiko Kayaba however, certain rules had been changed. On their very first night here in this world, she’d examined her own ‘Intimacy’ option to find it was still defaulted to ‘No’ and breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

That meant it was likely that way for all players. At least Kayaba had left that safety feature in place… His game already held enough dangers for the women trapped here. They didn’t need sexual assault by other players added to that list.

Not that Kirito was that type of guy. Even though he had declared himself as a ‘Beater’, Argo knew from past experience that Kirito was both helpful and considerate. She suspected he preferred to play as a solo player because he was naturally shy and just that good.

She was glad he’d accepted her friend request without hesitation, but the young woman was taken off guard by the price he’d required for offering his own in-depth analysis regarding the details of the boss battle on Floor One…

He wanted to know about her whiskers.

Left with no choice but to repay the swordsman’s candour, Argo reluctantly took Kirito across the savannah through a secret tunnel to the Martial Arts Master’s Hut on the fringes of this new level. It was here that a player could unlock the Extra Skill of ‘Martial Arts’ by performing the Master’s arduous quest, but she warned him it wasn’t easy task…

Failure to complete his quest would result in the player having to wear painted whiskers for the rest of the game.

In the Beta, Argo had attempted the ‘Martial Arts’ quest as soon as the second level was unlocked and had failed miserably, doomed to bear the mark of her shame for the rest of that game. Since everyone now associated her avatar with those distinctive markings, she simply painted them on now.

As they stood in the simple hut in front of the NPC who offered the quest, the Information Broker gave Kirito one last warning as to the high degree of difficulty of this particular task. It involved breaking a huge rock into two pieces with nothing more than your bare hands...

Undaunted, Kirito accepted the quest from the NPC Master while Argo silently prayed he’d be able to complete it - or else Kirito would surely curse her for the rest of their time here.
Before she left, Argo left him with one request… Should he ever come across an eleven-year-old player named ‘Damian’ who had short black hair and blue eyes, he was to contact her immediately. She would grant him any piece of information he wished for free if he helped her locate the boy.

Kirito paused and looked back at her curiously.

“Why do you want to find this Damian kid so badly?”

“That information will cost you one hundred thousand, Kirito-kun.”

Finally settling in for the night and renting a room in Urbus - the main town of the second floor - Argo was surprised to receive a message from Marigan informing her that a few of the former elite players who had participated in the battle with ‘Illfang the Kobold Lord’ had now decided to join the Legion guild. The Commander also warned her about some anti-Beta player sentiment among the ranks, warning Argo to be careful about revealing her past to strangers.

Michi thanked her friend for the advice and assured her she would keep a low profile.

She then went back to work on her Players’ Guide, including a warning for everyone to study all attack patterns listed within and to perform their own reconnaissance to ensure the Guide’s validity. As Kirito had confirmed, the devious Kayaba had changed some final attack patterns, perhaps to trap the former Beta players into a false sense of security.

Argo would give the players every advantage she knew but they would need to be careful. Every quest, every buff, down to the last possible detail. She would dedicate herself into making sure her Guide as accurate as possible and distribute it for free in every town.

This was the only way she could atone for having not come forward with this information sooner, the memories of those five hundred players in the Halls of the Departed still weighing heavily on her conscience. But there was also an eleven-year-old boy somewhere out there alone, without a friend in this world to count on, who needed all the help he could get…

She was now writing this guide for Damian’s benefit as well.

After awhile, she must have fallen asleep. Michi was surprised to hear a distinct knocking at the door to her room which roused her from a deep sleep as the first light of dawn broke through her second storey window. Gathering herself up from the bed, Argo made her way over to the entryway and called out to inquire who it was and then waited for a reply…

There was only silence.

Chapter End Notes

One of my goals with this fiction is to weave Damian’s exploits seamlessly around those of Kirito’s without affecting the canon Sword Art Online story that people are familiar with. Up until level 74, I intend to keep the whole Kirito/Asuna story-line relatively unscathed.
Next Chapter: Damian learns the hard lesson that life as a solo player isn’t as easy as he thought it would be... Posting Tuesday, December 15th.
After his self-induced exile from the Black Iron Palace, Damian Wayne had decided to travel to the heavily forested north-western corner of the first floor. In these dark woods, his ‘Hiding’ skill was most effective, allowing him to ambush any unsuspecting creatures that spawned in the forest and make use of his ‘Backstabbing’ modification.

He soon found he could easily take out the monsters that auto-generated in these woods, so long as he was able to ambush them successfully.

The only real drawback was that it also multiplied his auto-delay following the sneak attack by a factor of four as well, leaving him defenceless for close to five seconds. But so long as he stuck to single opponents, the boy could easily negate this drawback by killing them instantly. Problem
solved.

Damian also found that the ‘Ethereal Twilight’ cloak increased his Hiding score by twenty-five percent, making him incredibly hard to find in the shady forest while he prepared his ambush. At night, by setting the alarm in his player menu, he could awaken minutes before the sunrise and after literally sleep anywhere he wanted, including the soft forest floor.

But the biggest advantage was spying.

When twilight fell, Damian spent hours performing reconnaissance around his surrounding area as an invisible, incorporeal floating spirit. As a ghost, he watched night-adventuring parties in their battles against various foes, analysing their tactics and learning more about how different players worked together.

Often he would follow groups of them around before succumbing to sleep. It was on one such excursion that he watched six young men battle a creature he’d never seen before... A small, evil-looking humanoid with dark yellow skin and a long nose.

The name listed beside its red cursor was ‘Goblin Rider’. It rode atop a Dire Wolf.

The six well-armed players managed to defeat the goblin and its lupine mount, but what was most interesting was that it spawned a Quest when it died…

‘Journey to the Goblin Pass!’

The incorporeal Damian silently stared over their shoulders as they stared at the map data the quest presented them. He immediately recognized the place, buried alongside a large crevice between the forest and the hills with a wooden bridge set overtop.

The curious Damian listened as the excited players made plans to quickly go back to town, stock up and begin the quest. One of the young men suggested that in most games, goblins were nocturnal creatures and they might have better luck if they waited until dawn when the goblins would be sleeping.

It was soon agreed that they would begin their quest at first light and that no one was to mention anything to other players. This was a golden opportunity for them to score some rare items. After all, there was bound to be a Goblin Chief at the end of the quest who would drop some high-end loot.

The idea suddenly struck the incorporeal Damian that he also had a golden opportunity…

There was no reason why he couldn’t simply skip the lesser goblins and go straight to the boss. As a low-level solo player, he’d never be able to complete a quest like this on his own…

If he could time it correctly, he could finish off the Chief at sunrise and then simply wait for this group of players to clear the rest of the lair. With a successful backstabbing attack, Damian would take out the main boss, collect the reward and then hide in the shadows until these other players arrived.

In a worse case scenario, he’d simply wait for night again and float out.

It was an underhanded trick, but as a solo player who was now weeks behind the lead group, Damian had to play aggressively. His inability to talk made it impossible for him to join up with other players and the equipment he was currently using would be soon obsolete.

Finding the cavernous entrance to the Goblin Pass buried behind a stand of thick trees at the base of
the chasm proved exceedingly easy when you knew where to look. As an ethereal spirit in the night, Damian easily passed by the sentries, the wolves and then the darkened rooms filled with goblin warriors.

It was still hours before dawn when he located the Chief’s chambers, a large cavern located at the very back of the compound where the massive goblin seemed to be content just to appear ominous and remain seated on his large wooden throne-like chair.

Propped against that chair was a massive spiked club which Damian knew he wouldn’t want to be on the receiving end of.

Using the clock on his menu, Damian set his alarm and stood ready behind the Goblin Chief with nothing left to do but wait until sunrise when he would become solid again…

When the first light of dawn finally spread across the plains of Aincrad, the boy brought his dagger crashing down into the wide-open neck of the Goblin Chief in a beautiful killing arc, triggering his ‘Backstabbing’ mod and inflicting the full 160 points of damage…

But it wasn’t enough!

The Chief roared in agony as his Health bar plunged into the yellow, but he was obviously far stronger than Damian had expected. Reaching for his giant spiked club while the boy assassin was locked in his five-second timeout, the beefy goblin leader took a wide swing and crashed that beefy club into Damian’s side, sending the smaller player flying across the room.

For once, the Boy Wonder was glad this game was not reality. If he had taken that blow in real life, his left ribs would have been shattered. As it was, his own health had now entered the yellow.

This angry Goblin Chief had just paid him back in full for his sneak attack.

Staring up into the black eyes of the Chief, Damian realized he was in mortal danger. He wouldn’t get the chance to backstab the head goblin again and opening a healing potion was out of the question.

If he took another hit like that, he’d be dead. His only choice now was to fight and evade any further damage.

With another roar, the oversized goblin rushed him, bringing his club crashing into the floor as Damian sidestepped. Instead of a counterattack, the Boy Wonder moved out of the way and counted the seconds in his head.

Five seconds.

That might give him enough time to escape if he were close enough to the exit, but that held its own risks. There was still a cavern full of the Chief’s minions in his way. The Goblin Chief would likely chase him anyways…

But if he were able to successfully dodge, those five seconds should be more than enough time to launch a quick counter attack and then wait out his own lag before he dodged the next clubbing. A constant dance of weave-and-strike with a very ugly sparring partner…

He’d have to stay close, leaving little room for error, but he had the quicker recovery time and weapon. He would have to rely on his speed and footwork like a boxer against a larger opponent. He could do this.
As the huge goblin recovered and attacked Damian with another wide horizontal swing, the boy stepped just outside of the lethal arc and then launched his own counterattack into the goblin’s exposed shoulder.

A small slice of yellow disappeared from the Chief’s health bar.

While Damian calculated he’d need another three hits like that to finish the monster off, the beast launched into his next attack, simply reversing the direction of his horizontal swing while the agile assassin dropped to the ground before the spiked club could crush his skull.

From this lower vantage, Damian drove his dagger into the monster’s exposed thigh with both hands to rend its yellow digital flesh, erasing another small slice of its health and finally driving the Chief’s Hit Points down into the red.

Two more good strikes should do the trick…

The boy managed to roll out of the way just before the huge club came crashing down next to him, sending fissures through the stone floor. Having no time to waste, the young player dashed back to his feet and engaged the system, launching into an ‘Uppercut’ dagger strike under the beast’s jaw which drew a howl of pain from his opponent.

But then the Goblin Chief did something unexpected…

Instead of launching into another heavy-handed club attack, the brawny goblin used his meaty free hand to push the lagging Damian violently away from him. It wasn’t until the boy tumbled over the wooden throne behind him that the player realized why the creature had done this.

His initial instinct had been to tuck his head and roll to recover, easily getting himself back to his feet…

But the Goblin Chief had followed the tumbling boy, rearing his massive club for another crushing strike which smashed across Damian’s small back and sent him hard against the wall where he crumpled like a sack of loose stones…

Damn… That had to be it. He had to be Dead. He should be dead…

Finally clearing the blurry cobwebs from his vision, Damian Wayne managed to glance up at the tiny speck of red left on his Health bar where one solitary red pixel indicated he had a single Hit Point remaining…

In stunned disbelief, the boy gathered himself on the cave’s floor only to find that the Goblin Chief was already preparing to launch his next (and most likely final) attack. With the giant spiked club held high above his head, the enraged monster brought down the crude weapon once again to crush the prone Damian like a bug…

He didn’t know if it were pride, training, or simply survival instinct which caused him to roll out of the way at the last possible second. As the destructive club crashed and embedded itself into the stone floor, the boy quickly arced his dagger in a smooth swath to engage the game’s ‘Horizontal’ attack pattern and bury it deep into the Goblin Chief’s side, snugly between the iron plates he wore over his chest and back.

It wasn’t until Damian saw the sparkling blue polygons showering his prone body that he finally allowed himself to draw a sharp breath. That had been far, far too close. His backstabbing gamble with a boss monster had almost ended him…
He’d gotten accustomed to the easy wandering monsters in the woods and lower floors of the
dungeon.

Ignoring the Last Attack bonus screen after the Experience and Col listing, the exhausted player
slowly opened his inventory and materialized a Healing Potion. The foul taste didn’t bother him as
much this time as he watched his Hit Points slowly climb upwards once again…

He was about to open his inventory again to see what the Goblin Chief had dropped when he
noticed that the goblin’s giant club hadn’t disappeared, it had simply been left embedded in the floor
next to him…

Upon closer examination, he learned the weapon was an oversized morning star named
‘Thundersmack +5’ which was actually part of the treasure. As Damian didn’t have the expansion
slots (or the strength) to carry something like this in his inventory, it had simply remained on the floor
after the Chief had vanished.

He’d leave it for the six players clearing the rest of this catacomb.

In his inventory, Damian also found the burly leader had dropped 1,000 Col, thirty silver ingots, a
‘Golden Crown’ and a dagger named ‘Eulogy’.

It was the dagger which immediately drew his attention…

‘Eulogy’ was a strange-looking weapon which resembled an 18-inch-long ice pick. There was a
gilded handle joined to a smooth silver shaft without any protective cross-guard. To Damian’s
curious eyes, the weapon was a round, silver stake covered in runes like some giant knitting needle.

Even though it only had a sharp point with no actual blade, the stats still showed it was a +6 Dagger.
It had three additional points of Accuracy and three additional points of Sharpness that constituted
the +6 rating, causing it to glow blue and silver.

It’s base damage was no greater than his own Iron Dagger however...

Still, it did have one seriously awesome special ability… Any opponent struck by ‘Eulogy’ would
immediately have its entire stats downloaded to the dagger’s owner. That meant with only one strike,
Damian would have known the Goblin Chief’s Hit Points, Attack Patterns, Special Abilities and
even Skill Levels.

He smirked as he finally understood why the game designers had named this strange and unique
weapon ‘Eulogy’. You would learn everything about your opponent to speak at their funeral...

As Damian continued to study the large silver needle in his hand, he breathed a deep sigh of
resignation when he suddenly realized who this weapon was truly made for…

In this game, her claws fell under the ‘Dagger’ skill, just as a scimitar fell under the ‘One-Handed
Curved Blade’ skill. Argo would be best positioned to use this weapon’s data ability to help all the
players by way of her guide.

Damian suddenly felt the stir of fear in his heart. His first magic weapon drop in Sword Art Online
and he was already planning on giving it away to the very girl that this world’s omnipotent system
didn’t want him associating with…

Cardinal could stuff it.

Having enough adventure for one day, Damian waited for the other six players to eventually collect
‘Thundersmack’ and unwittingly lead him back to freedom. Damian then made his way to the quiet town of Tolbana.

No longer possessing a ‘Friends’ option on his menu or even a voice, tracking down Argo would prove more difficult than he had expected. As an Information Broker, she was well-known and Damian quickly overheard she was now on the second floor, no longer part of the Legion guild…

But why had she struck out on her own?

In a way, Damian thought he may have understood. Michi had always pushed for them to grow stronger, to better their chances of survival by taking on more risk… She had immediately recognized that the computer-generated monsters weren’t the only threat in this game of death. Although she had never said it directly, the fact remained that if a powerful group of lead players could widen the experience and equipment gap enough between themselves and the rest of the population, they would become unstoppable.

In that aspect, this game was similar to a feudal society. The strong would rule the weak. By huddling in the safety of towns, oppressed players would only allow these stronger players to continue exploiting the game’s limited resources and widen that disparity, while those who remained behind became victims of their own weakness. Given enough time, those huddled massed would become ruled by these new feudal lords of Aincrad.

In essence, a guild leader could become the King of this world.

Perhaps he was simply being pessimistic. It might not play out this way, but Damian had to consider the possibility. This new world was not the one they had unwillingly left behind. If those who led the charge upwards ever tired of the battle in front of them, they would turn their attention to what lay behind...

And Akihiko Kayaba allowed players to kill other players in Sword Art Online.

When night fell, the ghostly Damian explored the town of Urbus by simply floating outside all the windows of its rented rooms. It was an interesting experience, he could briefly poke his face through the window with some discomfort, but not actually enter the room. Even his first idea of simply passing through the doors was completely off-limits to him. It seemed the privacy afforded to the corporeal guests of hotels also prevented uninvited ghosts from disturbing the occupants.

Employing this Peeping Tom tactic, Damian was finally able to locate Argo’s room hours before the dawn, allowing him to catch some sleep in the hallway outside of her doorway. One advantage of being a ghost was that you could literally sleep anywhere for free, even in public.

When his alarm automatically woke him minutes before the dawn, he stretched and then readied himself, knocking at her door the moment he became solid again. The chill ran down his spine once again as he recalled Cardinal’s ominous warning what would happen should he ever reveal their little secret to anyone…

He reminded himself that he was only here to give her the dagger and leave. That was it.

“Who is it?”
Of course he couldn’t answer. Even worse, doors in Sword Art Online didn’t have peepholes. Damian really didn’t want to wait around until she eventually left her room so he was relieved when Argo carefully opened the door to find him silently standing there…

“Dami-chan!!!”

He smiled nervously and raised his hand by way of greeting before holding out ‘Eulogy’ by way of an offering.

“Is this a dagger of some kind? You want me to tell you more about it?”

Damian shook his head and pushed it into her hand.

“You want me to have it?”

He should have ran the moment she took hold of it, but instead the boy paused to watch her face light up with joy, the happiness of an unexpected gift as she discovered its unique and powerful properties…

“Dami-chan, this is amazing! I had no idea something like this even existed… Are you sure you want me to have it? I’m sure you could get at least fifty thousand for it even at an NPC shop…”

Damian placed his hands on Argo’s to close her fingers around the hilt of the strange dagger and nodded his head up-and-down in agreement. Although he could really use the 50,000 Col right now, this weapon would mean much more to the players’ hopes of survival in Michi’s capable hands.

Argo quickly bowed her head in gratitude and smiled.

“Thank you… But at least let me give you something for it, alright?… You must be using the ‘Backstabbing’ skill… I made a cheap trade for this only yesterday.”

He watched as Argo deftly opened her inventory menu and materialized a crimson-handled dagger into her left hand. It had a thick, dark blade which looked dangerous and formidable.

“It’s called ‘Backbiter’… It’s a Stigmatic weapon, which means it transfers ten percent of your Hit Points into damage when you score a Critical Hit… Normally, only the tank players would even dare to use a Stigmatic weapon, but they’d never bother with a measly dagger so there’s not a high trade-in value for it right now… But it’s absolutely perfect for a backstabbing player.”

Damian’s eyes lit up as he considered the possibility of doing close to three hundred points of damage with one strike at the cost of ten percent of his Health. If he had this weapon during his battle with the Goblin Chief twenty-four hours ago, it would have been over immediately. She was right, it was perfect for him!

Looking at ‘Backbiter’s’ stats, Damian saw it was a Dagger +5 with one point allocated into each Sharpness, Accuracy, Quickness, Heaviness and Durability. While he could attempt a Sharpness and Accuracy upgrade later on at an NPC blacksmith shop, the Stigmatic ability had the greatest potential. There were even dozens of items and buffs in this game to increase a player’s Hit Points, which would also increase his backstab damage by default.

Bowing deeply, Damian turned around to leave with his brilliant new weapon when he felt two small arms reach out and squeeze his midsection, feeling the soft warmth of her on his back as Argo embraced him from behind.

Surprised at her bold move, he heard a faint whisper…
“Don’t go.”

His entire body stopped as he froze for in place, unsure how to proceed. He knew the goddess of this game could extract a terrible price against his friends if he betrayed Cardinal’s secret, but he couldn’t deny it any longer…

He had feelings for Michi and she obviously had feelings for him.

A part of him wanted to stay...

Strange, it felt like the ground was dropping below his feet.

The worldwide event which immediately followed was like the sensation of being in an elevator when the cables suddenly snapped and then the emergency brakes kicked-in two seconds later. The entire floating castle of Aincrad seemed to fall ten feet towards the world below and then immediately stopped, bringing the inhabitants of this world literally to their knees.

From the streets outside, Damian heard the clamour of weapons falling from NPC stalls, the cries of fellow players and the breaking glass of dishes from the restaurant below. Across the bottom two levels of this world came the bewildered cries and questions from thousands of players as they took cover, unsure of what had just happened.

From where they knelt in her doorway, Argo shot him a nervous glance with wide and disbelieving eyes…

“What was that?! There’re no earthquakes in Sword Art Online. Some sort of special event maybe?”

By way of an answer, Damian only sadly shook his head and then scrambled to his feet, tearing off towards the exit. He knew exactly what it had been and Michi was correct, there were no earthquakes in this floating castle...

But it was a special event meant for only one person…

The eleven-year-old ran as fast as he could, praying that the startled Argo wouldn’t pursue him. Praying that she would never seek him out. Among the eight thousand players currently remaining in this game of death, only Damian Wayne knew what Aincrad’s brief loss of altitude had truly been…

A warning.

The Goddess of Aincrad was a jealous one.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, so that’s what Cardinal meant by “manipulating data”…

Next Chapter: Posting Friday December 18th.
In a secluded apartment along the outskirts of Cairo, Bruce Wayne stared out from its balcony window across the eastern dunes being revealed by an Egyptian sunrise. Shimmering dawn had broken across this desert, slowly painting the night-scented skies above with a brightening shade of blue.

The man from Gotham turned to cast his gaze pensively towards the digital alarm clock resting on the nightstand and reflexively cocked his eyebrow. On the ruffled bed beside that nightstand rested the beautiful Talia al Ghul who stretching out long, almond-coloured legs from beneath thin cotton sheets to brush her toes against him.

“You’re awake early, my love.”

Without allowing himself to be held by her extending toes, Bruce made his way to the coffee table where a vase full of blue water lilies decorated an otherwise sparse room. Sniffing the fragrance of the flowers, he then glanced over at a copy of yesterday’s newspaper which had been left discarded
on the armchair from the previous evening.

Rubbing her tired eyes, Talia slowly raised her lean body into a sitting position upon their shared bed, her ivory silk nightdress incapable of concealing the alluring curves beneath.

“Have you tired of me so soon? We have hours before we depart, dearest…”

The bare-chested Bruce Wayne stopped and stared back suspiciously at the sultry heiress, fixing her with an angry, accusatory gaze.

“How long do you plan on keeping me here?”

“Our transportation to Alexandria does not arrive until 11:00 A.M…”

“In this fake world.”

As the curious Talia stepped out of their bed to approach him, she stopped suddenly as Bruce gripped the delicate vase of flowers and violently hurled it against the wall, smashing its fragile glass into wet jagged shards between them.

“Your anger is best reserved for my father, beloved... I am not your enemy.”

His lover watched apprehensively as Bruce picked up one of these glass shards and then held it between his fingers, examining it carefully.

“This charade has gone on long enough, Talia… While I commend their attention to detail, your League programmers missed a few minor details… According to the date on this paper, sunrise in Cairo on November seventeenth occurs at 6:23 AM and not 6:48 AM… Also, these Egyptian blue water lilies are an aromatic flower used extensively in perfumes, yet these have no fragrance whatsoever…”

Bruce dragged the shard of glass across his fingertip, producing a line of bright red light but no blood, holding it up for Talia’s inspection.

“And finally, there’s this… No cut, no blood, no pain... None of this is real… Answer me… How long do you intend to keep me in this virtual world?”

Talia nodded in resignation and then calmly walked over to where the fresh flowers lay strewn across the floor, retrieving one of them from among the wet wreckage of broken glass and held it up to her nose, mournfully staring deeply into its fragile petals.

“You’re correct of course… This is a virtual world… I’m afraid these water lilies were a last-minute addition of mine, an unreasonable request, but also deeply symbolic… Tell me, are you familiar with the legend of Nefertem, Detective?”

“No.”

“I’m surprised… In Egyptian mythology, when existence itself was still immersed in eternal darkness, the primordial waters of the Nun brought forth a water lily just like this one. It opened its petals to reveal a beautiful boy called Nefertem, and he was the birth of all that was good…”

“In time, this boy grew to become Ra, the sun god who brought light and life to this dark world... The same god whom the pharaohs claimed as their divine forefather… And now, we too shall witness the light of creation as our own water lily blooms from the darkness of existence, my love.”
“Talia… Tell me… Project Alicization… Are you involved with it?”

She smiled as her hand reached out and softly caressed his flushed cheek.

She’d played him for a fool.

“I am involved, yes… But I must give credit where credit is due… Project Alicization is originally Arthur Light’s creation, a desperate father’s miracle to preserve the soul of his dying child… I’ve simply embraced his technology and expanded upon it to save our dying world.”

With that admission, Bruce suddenly snatched her slender wrists, forcing the defiant Talia to look directly into his fierce eyes as the flower tumbled once more to the floor.

“Sword Art Online, those ten thousand innocent players… Our own son, Talia… That was you!”

There was no fear in her eyes as she answered.

“No, it was not… But Akihiko Kayaba is a brilliant man. He soon came to the same conclusion that we did and employed a novel approach in solving it.”

Without relinquishing his strong grip, Bruce brought his face closer to her own.

“What conclusion?”

“What mankind has understood since the dawn of time… That for us to live, our world must also be alive and...”

Bruce was suddenly taken by surprise when Talia used his own grip against him, quickly spinning her hips into his waist upending him before sending him tumbling over her arching back in a beautiful shoulder throw.

Landing on the hard floor with an audible ‘oof’, he stared upwards as the daughter of the demon looked back down at him and finished her reply.

“… React accordingly… If you wish to fight my love, we can continue this game against my father and you may fight him to your heart’s content… I have no further desire to harm you… Quite the opposite in fact… Shall I reward you for being so clever?”

An angry Bruce only glared up at her.

“You’ve tortured me over this past week… Stranded me alone on an island where I nearly froze to death, lied to me until my world became a living Hell and then manipulated me to take vengeance against your father… Was that your plan, Talia? To fill me with hatred and then set me loose against Ra’s al Ghul to do your dirty work?”

Bruce watched as Talia walked towards the window, glancing upon the rising sun through the dry shimmering haze of the morning light.

“You truly believe this is about my father?… How pathetic… You’re as blind as your namesake, whining like a child about mere scrapes… Shall I tell you about torture, beloved?”

Bruce brushed himself off and got back to his feet.

“There’s no need. I’m quite aware…”

He stopped speaking when he saw the dawn’s sunlight catch her falling tears as they streaked past
her cheek. Bruce was then completely thrown off guard when the surroundings of their airy apartment suddenly transformed into the luxurious castle suite of a chateau set deep into the Arabian mountains where they had conceived Damian.

Apparently, Talia had full control of this virtual world, able to change the scenery around them with nothing more than a thought. On the virtual bed, Bruce watched as a younger version of himself laid on top of a younger Talia as they lost themselves in the throes of reckless passion.

“Do you remember how much you told me you loved me when you claimed my virginity twelve years ago, Detective?... I do... My wicked father insisted that I seduce you, but I didn’t even know the first thing about such a deceitful act...

“Like a foolish girl, I only knew I wanted you and that I loved you…”

He had loved her then, and he’d told her that as well.

Bruce tensed as he suddenly felt a foreign rush of excitement and fear, hope and trepidation. His heart seemed to be beating like a wild drum while he felt almost drunk with exhilaration…

“Talia, what are you doing to me?!”

“Simply what you did to me, my love… As you can plainly see, memories are a part of the Soul Translation process, but so are emotions… As we are man and wife, I am now sharing myself with you… I want you to experience this part of my life, the exact way I felt at the precise moment when you claimed me as your own... Those are my emotions which flow through you now... Many would consider it a gift.”

“Talia, the Soul Translator, did you...?”

“The process need not be lethal… My physical body is still very much alive but I have been recreating my past… I have known death as well, dearest... Do you wish to know what it feels like?”

As the scene around them changed once more, Bruce suddenly felt a searing pain which threatened to split him in two carried by a tidal wave of tumultuous emotions succumbing to overwhelming fatigue until it finally seemed to spill out of him like he had lost a part of himself… He heard the first cry of his son as the doctor held Damian and then saw the exhausted Talia on the birthing bed, flanked by two older women.

This was a maternity ward…

There was blood. Too much blood.

It was as though he were a ghost in the world of her memories and emotions. His guide placed her hand lightly on his shoulder which almost toppled him over.

As the pain diminished, it became replaced by an icy chill, filling him with emptiness.

She was dying.

“Did you know that the first life Damian ever took was my own? Truly, our son is an assassin born… As our precious boy drew his first breath, I laid upon that bed attended by two old cows who were far better suited to butcher camels than to be midwives.”

Bruce looked on as Talia grasped his hand while they watched the recorded experience of a bleeding woman upon the bed, her son taken to another room.
“I died that day, beloved… While trained doctors cared for our beautiful and healthy son, my life drained from me until I became nothing more than the forgotten shell of that precious gift to the world…”

Bruce felt himself growing colder, colder even than he had ever been on the island. And then the light faded until it grew dark. But the dark was a release from the cold, the soothing comfort of oblivion…

Until he felt like he was drowning in an emerald sadness.

The deceased body of Talia al Ghul floated beside him in this watery grave of green desolation as he heard her voice from above.

“Perhaps because he loved my mother long ago, my father decreed that I should be thrown into the Lazarus Pit to be resurrected…”

“And at that single moment of lucidity, it all became clear to me… My purpose in life… You feel it too, don’t you?... Like my son, the children of this world are killing their own sacred mother… While I lay dead in her waters of life, she cried with me for our shared sorrows, two mothers forgotten, shorn by those they had birthed.”

It was the most profound sadness Bruce Wayne had ever endured...

When his parents had been murdered, the fires of revenge had lit those cold sorrows to keep him warm at night… When he had believed the entire Justice League had been murdered, he had Dick and Damian to live for and Ra’s al Ghul to destroy.

This feeling was the finality of existence, the complete cessation of hope in a bleak world. Its crushing weight literally brought him down to his knees and then to a shivering ball of moaning on the floor, the weight of the soul-crushing sensation continually pushing his will to live out from every pore.

This was absolute hopelessness.

To think that she had actually endured that.

Talia placed a comforting arm around him.

“This is what drove my father mad, my love… This is profound grief… The Lazarus Pit is nothing more than the tears of Gaea… And even in my short lifetime, that man arose from those waters on four separate occasions… Can you fathom what lay beyond the despair you now feel?... Because this is the land my father travelled.”

“Talia… I’m so sorry… I didn’t know.”

As she warmly embraced him to take away his anguish, the green, murky waters became the chalet suite once more as they turned to look upon the younger Talia. This was before the birth when she was utterly alone, her belly grown large with child and staring out of an open window while the cold mountain winds blew against her.

Bruce felt a terrible longing fill his soul, a desperate yearning to be loved as the pair of huddled ghosts held one another to stare out upon this forgotten phantom of the past.

“Gaze upon this pathetic lovesick child, waiting for you to rescue me from my father. This girl who wishes you to come back and claim the woman you had so quickly left behind... For months, I
secretly scanned the night for any sign of you as my belly grew heavier with our child, hoping against hope that you would come to that very window and take me back to your world…

“These romantic fantasies of my youth… I am sorry that my game has been cruel… That I have lied to you and held you against your will… But do not speak to me of torture… Whatever pain this virtual world has caused you is the palest reflection of my own… I wanted you to know this before you were freed.”

Bruce watched as their cold surroundings suddenly transformed into a house built upon a sandy tropical beach. Beyond its open walls, he saw the moon floating just above the dark horizon of the ocean while its waves gently lapped upon a pale moonlit shore.

In its massive fireplace roared an impressive fire built of driftwood. It was as though they were alone in the only house in the world… Perhaps they were…

But all this was nothing more than constructed sensations being scanned into his mind by NerveGear.

“Talia… I’m truly sorry… But you know I can’t stay here… Our son… Those players are dying.”

“This is exactly where you will stay… Over 150,000 people die each day in our world, beloved… I’m asking you to let me save them… And all of humanity for that matter… By letting the remaining players finish Sword Art Online.”

The Detective’s eyes narrowed.

“What are you talking about?”

“Immortality of course.”

“You mean Soul Translators… For everyone?!… That’s madness… You’re using those players… To perfect a virtual world?! Is that what Sword Art Online is?!”

Talia stared out across the dark ocean.

“Not necessarily for everyone… But yes, a proliferation of Soul Translators… It was an ingenious solution to our Emotional Quotient conundrum, but Akihiko Kayaba fell in love with his own creation and joined Argus… As a former consultant of our ambitious endeavour, the man immediately saw the potential to imbue his world with life… A life he did not own… That’s why he stole Alice from us.”

“Alice?… You mean Alice Sayun Light?”

“Ahh, you’ve done your homework… True, we could have gotten Alice back at any time I wished, but when I learned of Kayaba’s bold plans to complete her undeveloped Emotional Quotient, I admit I was impressed by the young man’s ingenuity and allowed him to continue with his bold design…

“Oh, such a dour look… I’m afraid it’s quite necessary, dearest… When Arthur Light succeeded in performing the very first soul translation upon his only daughter, the equipment he used was rudimentary, his brilliant theories far from tested…

“So poor Alice was reborn as an incomplete being, the child of a lesser god so to speak… The repentant Dr. Light had been trying to rebuild Alice into something that resembles a human consciousness for years…
“But it was Akihiko Kayaba who finally perfected the process.”

Bruce felt his legs attempting to give way as he comprehended the lonely fate of the only daughter of Kimiyo Hoshi and Arthur Light. She had been the first human being to ever undergo soul translation and it had been only a partial success…

“Alice Sayun Light… is Cardinal.”

“And Cardinal is Alice… A world must be alive, beloved… The seed must be fed.”

“You put the soul of Alice Sayun Light into Sword Art Online?!”

“I’ve already told you that Akihiko Kayaba did.”

“You let him.”

She glared at him with fierce eyes.

“Of course I did… You do realize that over 8,000 people perish every day on this planet from air pollution alone, don’t you?… And then another 20,000 each day die from starvation and its crippling effects… But let’s bring it a little closer to home, shall we?… Even if every single one of those ‘innocent’ players were to perish in Kayaba’s experiment, more people have already died in your country from completely avoidable gun violence this year alone…

“And what have you done about that, my betrothed? Given your past tragedy dealing with guns, I’ve always believed you would have actively lobbied against the Second Amendment… And yet you embrace it… Because to deny another American their God-given right to bear arms would be detrimental to your family business.”

“To defend my country.”

“Even though it may cost another innocent child their parents?”

He could not reply as Talia gently placed her hand on his broad chest.

“Do not worship at the feet of such cruel gods… There is a certain irony you possess, dearest… You protect the weak and yet lack the resolve to put down the animals who hunt them… How many times have you watched the deranged escape time and time again, killing more of those innocent lives you’ve sworn to protect?…”

“Is that not irony?… How many lives could you have saved if you had simply snapped the Joker’s neck fifteen years ago? Do you keep count of his victims from the first time you wrapped your hands around his skinny neck?… Or is that number simply too terrifying?… Surely you could never say their deaths were beyond your control…”

“Because you could have saved them years ago…

“How about the number of lives the weapons manufactured by your Wayne Industries have ended?… That number is even more than the combined body count of every criminal in Arkham Asylum, I assure you… And yet, how many billions of dollars have these American war mongers stuffed into your pockets for those weapons, dearest?… Or does the banner of patriotism wash away all the sins of the father?…”

“I am trying to save our world… To save humanity itself… Not one victim at a time but as a whole… You may debate me on my ethics, my love… But I promise you that I shall debate you on
yours as well… Is it not better if we simply accept one another’s faults and love each other despite them?”

It was as though the haze of sentimentality was stripped from his intense gaze as Bruce finally witnessed the true Talia al Ghul now standing before him… The woman who had graduated with an advanced PhD from Harvard University in neurosurgery at the young age of 24 and then had successfully added another PhD in molecular chemistry the following year.

Only to became pregnant with their child at the age of 25.

This was the beautiful genius who had hidden beneath the dark shadow of Ra’s al Ghul for all these years, the Princess who had become far more dangerous than the King.

She understood more about the soul translation process than Akihiko Kayaba ever did… Talia al Ghul had fashioned herself as the true successor of Arthur Light.

It was her…

“Talia… Arthur Light… Is he?...”

“Only in a manner of speaking… He was the second person in existence to undergo soul translation four years ago… By his own request of course… By that time, we had made significant improvements to the process to ensure a much smoother transition.”

“That means you’re…”

“I have been acting on his behalf in the real world, yes… Light Industries is one of the various subsidiaries of the League’s many enterprises… But the man is still very much alive I assure you… In fact, I’ll arrange a meeting between the pair of you… You’ll find it quite educational.”

“… You’re insane.”

Talia laughed joyfully as she stood on her tiptoes to look him directly in the eyes.

“What I am is a woman of reason and courage with the resources to open the doors to the Underworld… And whether you acknowledge it or not, your wife… But I digress… Truly, my purpose here was not to inflict my painful memories upon you or to debate the merits of how I intend to save our dying world… At least not today… We’ll continue this conversation at a later time.”

“Then why are you here?”

Talia suddenly held a sprig of mistletoe above his head, kissing Bruce quickly on his frowning lips and then once again on his cheek.

“Because I love you… You need not be so irritable… I simply came here to spend the morning with you… And to wish you a Merry Christmas as per your own tradition… I simply didn’t want you to spend it alone.”

Bruce suddenly drew a surprised breath and steadied himself.

“Christmas?!”

“Indeed… The sun rose in Cairo this morning at 6:48 AM because this virtual world was programmed to follow our own precisely… In the real world, it is now December 25, 2022… As such, your astute skills as a detective allowed you to perceived the sunrise here was later than it
should have been… And the newspaper was a fake of course.”

Bruce felt himself go pale as he comprehended his unreal situation. To him, only a week had passed in this virtual world…

“It’s been five weeks since I left Tokyo…”

“Almost as long as our son has been trapped in Sword Art Online, yes… Your physical body is being well attended to, although you are looking a little thin, I admit… But yes, you’ve been attached to NerveGear for over five weeks now here on Infinity Island.”

“Talia… This is madness… You can’t keep me as a hostage like this.”

“Patience, my love. You must trust me... This is all for the best.”

It was then that Bruce finally put the last, awful piece of this ghastly puzzle into place…

Damian had mentioned that he had not seen his grandfather since the age of seven when the madman had retreated deep within the League of Shadows to be amongst his most trusted advisors and weed out a traitor in their midst.

His rigorous training had been left to his mother from that point forward.

In fact, it was Talia who had informed Bruce that Ra’s al Ghul had perished only eighteen months ago, shortly before she had dropped Damian off in Gotham to be with his father.

But that had been a lie.

The truth was that Ra’s al Ghul had been dead for years now.

It was her… It was only her.

“My God… Your father…”

Talia smirked.

“Have you finally arrived at the truth, Detective?... Is mine not a much more gentle solution to save our world than the mass genocide proposed by my late father?… Unfortunately though, I’m afraid it was a solution he could never support… So he was removed from power and now peacefully resides in a golden urn upon my mantle…”

“Or should I say… At least his ashes do.”

Chapter End Notes

**Next Update:** Get ready for a Holiday bonanza! Four chapters posting next week, starting on Monday with “Laughing Coffin”!
Chapter Twenty-Four

Laughing Coffin

The solo player called Kirito paused at the NPC stall in the small outpost of Drowven, the closest thing to a town on the ninth floor of Aincrad. It wasn’t so much this player’s young age that made him take notice, but rather the fact that the boy was using a pop-up menu to purchase his goods from the NPC vendor.

No one did that.

Normally, every player simply talked to the vendors and then tried to haggle. In fact, Kirito hadn’t even been aware that there even was a vendor pop-up menu option to buy supplies.

It was only when the older player took notice of the kid’s unusual appearance that a memory from weeks ago triggered… Eleven-years-old, cropped black hair and pale blue eyes… Obviously non-Japanese but not exactly American either…

Was this the eleven-year-old boy that Argo was looking for?

His name was… It started with a ‘D’… Damian!… That was the name of the kid she’d been looking for… And the reward was any piece of information she had for free… Heck, she’d even wanted a hundred thousand from Kirito just to explain why she was looking for this kid.

“Excuse me… Sorry to bother you… But is your name Damian?”
The boy gave him an angry glare, pulled up his cloak’s hood and then turned to leave.

“Wait! I’m a friend of Argo’s… My name is Kirito… I’m not a bounty hunter or anything, she just asked me to keep an eye out for you… She didn’t even tell me why.”

The boy turned back to face him and then gruffly folded his arms, regarding the older player carefully as Kirito wondered if the boy was aware of his ‘Beater’ reputation. After a few seconds of this, Damian put his hands up dismissively and then turned to leave again without saying a word.

A thought struck Kirito suddenly.

“Are you unable to talk?”

Pausing, Damian stared at him warily and then shook his head.

“Is it a Full-Dive-Nonconformity?… Man, that has to be rough in this game… Sorry, I didn’t mean to be rude.”

The younger Damian looked up at him with a puzzled glance. Could it be the boy didn’t know what a FDN was and why he was unable to speak? Maybe… Not everyone was so compulsive about the technology behind Sword Art Online as Kirito had been so it was possible…

“A Full-Dive-Nonconformity is when the NerveGear doesn’t quite sync up with the player’s mental processes… It’s rare, but I once met a guy here with the FDN of binocular dysfunction which made him farsighted… It was next to impossible for him to fight close range with swords, so he started off as a blacksmith and then was able to get the ‘Martial Arts’ extra skill to use a throwing weapon…”

Kirito watched as the boy’s pale blue eyes suddenly lit up at the mention of ‘Martial Arts’. As Kirito suddenly recalled the Map Crystal he’d been saving for Asuna, the swordsman wondered if he might be able to work out a deal with this kid.

A piece of free information from Argo was well worth the price of a Map Crystal.

“I can tell you how to get the ‘Martial Arts’ skill if you want… It lets you attack with your hands and feet. Plus you can use a more freestyle form when you fight with weapons as opposed to attack patterns.”

A vigorous nod up-and-down from the boy.

“Alright, Damian… But I need some sort of proof that I met you… It’s worth free information the next time I see Argo and that girl already charges me 500 Col for the Players’ Guide.”

It was true… Argo published an ‘advanced copy’ of her guide which was intended for the frontline players priced at 500 Col. After one day, the price dropped to zero.

Kirito could never wait that long though.

The high-level player watched as the boy nodded to his proposal and then dragged three fingers across each cheek, simulating Argo’s whiskers.

Apparently they would have to play Charades.

“OK… First word… Argo.”

A nod up-and-down. Damian then drew his dagger, a crimson-handled weapon with a dark blade. He then made the whisker sign with one hand, pointed to the dagger and then back to himself.
“Argo gave you the dagger?”

Another nod.

“That doesn’t sound like her at all… Usually, she only trades items for information... Or for more expensive items.”

Damian raised his eyebrows and spread his hands to indicate an ‘of course’ gesture.

“Ah, I see… So you’re another victim of the Argo trade scam… I feel for you, brother… Can I send you the map data for the ‘Martial Arts’ quest?”

Damian sadly shook his head.

Kirito sighed and then handed the boy the crystal he’d been saving for Asuna as Damian looked at it curiously.

“It’s a Map Crystal... I was saving it for someone else, but I can always make another one… Provided she doesn’t kill me first… It will show you the location of the Master’s Hidden Hut on Floor Two where you can pick up the quest… But I warn you, it’s a brutal strength-based challenge… It took me three agonizing days of pure Hell to break the rock which will grant you the extra ‘Martial Arts’ skill.”

Damian nodded gravely and then took his leave, traveling back to the second floor and using Kirito’s Map Crystal to find the secret tunnel which would lead him to the Mater’s Hut.

Meanwhile, Kirito read his recently purchased Players’ Guide and wondered how Argo knew so much about the attack patterns of this level’s boss; the Dark Elf Queen.

They’d only just started this floor this morning and no one had made it that far yet.

He also knew for a fact that no one else had made it that far in the Beta…

There was always the possibility of course that she had inside information. After all, there were rumours Argus had leaked advanced boss information to the gaming media. The sneaky Argo might have even been related to someone at Argus and managed to squeeze info out of them…

Whichever it was, Kirito would take this latest information with a grain of salt. From this point forward, the clearers were in uncharted waters and needed to perform their own reconnaissance…

After an hour of travel, Damian easily found the Hidden Hut’s Master from Kirito’s map and eagerly accepted the quest. The ability to translate actual fighting skills into this stupid game of over-the-top attack patterns was a godsend. He was tired of rudimentary attacks and being locked into the game’s preset patterns.

Argo would have provided him with this quest if he wasn’t so busy avoiding her… Still, that couldn’t be helped anymore… He wasn’t about to send the entire floating castle of Aincrad plummeting to the world below just because it would be nice to see her again.

He was own his own.

After accepting the quest, it took the son of Bruce Wayne a full ten minutes to locate the one specific keystone which held another large boulder in place high up on the steep hillside above the rock he was now required to break in half.
Using both hands, the Boy Wonder carefully removed the tightly held stone, the chain reaction dislodging the precariously perched gigantic rock teetering on the hillside, causing it to tumble down the slope while continually gaining momentum before smashing into its target at the hill’s base…

Instantly splitting the stationary boulder of the quest neatly in two.

Damian grinned with satisfaction as he watched the ‘Martial Arts’ skill pop into his menu.

The Master had dictated that you needed to use your hands and spirit to break the stone, but he never said that you had to spend days striking the nearly unbreakable boulder with your fists like some muscle-bound idiot…

From the eastern mountains, the tall player known as Heathcliff flicked his ash-coloured bangs from across his gaunt face, gazing in admiration upon the massive expanse of dark forests which covered Aincrad’s ninth floor, letting his eyes finally drift to this level’s ascending dungeon surrounded by an ominous fortress of obsidian…

The Dark Elf Queen’s Castle.

That castle would complete the campaign which had begun on the third floor and resolve the war of the elves which had been fought across the last six floors, culminating with the fall of the Dark Queen.

They were finally taking the game seriously.

Although it had taken four weeks and countless lives for the players to clear the first floor, Heathcliff was impressed at how well the elite players had rebounded from their initial shock to rally against Sword Art Online. The second floor had been conquered in a week. The third floor in just four days...

And now, as they stood at the edge of obtaining the tenth floor by mid-January, it seemed as though the brave players may only require a single day to conquer this newest floor. Since the wheat had been separated from the chaff, the ‘clearers’ seemed to be picking up speed as they fought across the land of the elves.

Heathcliff sighed...

No matter how you sliced it, an elf was still an elf. The players simply weren’t afraid of them. The snake-themed monsters of the tenth floor would be a different story however. That level would bring new lands, new attack patterns, new quests, and even deadlier monsters to challenge these advancing players and likely slow them down.

The tall warrior silently chuckled to himself as he looked up at the rocky underside of the next floor.

“Here be dragons…”

There was a pop-up alert from his player menu which broke his train of thought. A quick scan revealed it was a message from Koujiro…

‘Can you logout now?’

Carefully using a separate administrator menu to ensure there were no other players in the vicinity,
the warrior named Heathcliff ducked behind the shadow of a large rock and quickly logged out from Sword Art Online…

To suddenly awaken in his private lab as the man who had created this game of death.

Akihiko Kayaba.

As Rinko Koujiro carefully disconnected the IV tubes which kept him hydrated and nourished during his time in the game, Kayaba noticed his stiff muscles had further atrophied since the last time he had logged out. His vision was hazy as he looked around at his surroundings, unable to focus.

Had it truly been a month since he had last logged out?

The genius knew that waking up from SAO would only get harder as the game continued. But these little visits to the outside world would need to become far less frequent if his character was to become more involved with the game’s front line players.

Rinko looked at him with concern written across her dark eyes.

“I’ve brought some food. You should stretch and then eat.”

As they ate, Akihiko wondered as to the reason why he’d been disturbed. From his last covert communications with Rinko, it seemed as though the politicians had performed their part and were moving forward to bury the investigation. RECT Progress Inc had initiated their plans for a hostile takeover the disgraced Argus Corporation which had been the plan all along.

If Kayaba was going to continue the deception of being a player in his own world, he couldn’t simply disappear on a whim. Through his glasses, he stared ruefully at the petite woman setting warm ramen noodles on the table in front him.

“Thank you for the food, Rinko… But why did you call me here?”

The melancholic brunette couldn’t hide her concern any longer. Methodically placing her own utensils on the makeshift table, she hung her head in deep remorse, carefully avoiding eye contact.

“Because I worry about you… Because I’m tired of playing nurse when all of those children are dying… Because it’s not right, Akihiko.”

So that was it. The unsteady resolve of a woman’s heart.

“Rinko, we’ve already discussed this… We agreed… We must bear this burden for the common good… Our world doesn’t have the time to perfect this technology using the non-lethal variant… You agreed that this game had to be all or nothing in order to perfect Underworld before it was too late.”

He watched as she wiped a tear from her eye and slowly looked up at him with wet eyes.

“I know… You’re right… I know it has to be this way… It’s a heavy burden, Akihiko… Just tell me that you love me… Sometimes I feel like I’ve already lost you to that game… That you’re no longer a part of this world.”

Akihiko Kayaba slowly sat up and then moved behind the woman who had kept him alive since the game had begun more than two months ago, wrapping his long arms around her slender shoulders beneath the familiar white lab coat.
“Thank you for your patience and support… I love you, Rinko Koujiro.”

Her reply was only a whisper.

“Show me.”

The taller man suddenly looked down with subtle shock at the yearning in the eyes of the thin scientist he now held tightly in his arms. That needful look which could only mean one thing… She wanted him…

It had been years since they had made love, back to the days when they had dated in Touto University…

Had she truly never stopped loving him?

“Are you sure, Rinko?”

“Tell me I’m the only one, Akihiko… Just tell me that and I swear you can have me, body and soul.”

“Rinko… You’re the only one I’ve ever loved.”

As she twisted into his arms, their kiss was different from the ones he had remembered, perhaps because they had grown older, perhaps because the world around them had changed… She still felt perfect against his chest as they found their way to blankets spread quickly across the lab’s sterile floor in a lovers’ embrace…

The cloaked Argo strode quietly across the dense forests of the ninth floor after having completed the Elf Queen’s secret quest. Most players hadn’t bothered with this one as there was no magic item or buff as a reward, simply information. But as the players had now progressed to the farthest point of the Beta, Michi had to be sure this part of the game was the same.

These information quests gave her that reassurance.

Since Damian had run off over a month ago, Argo ‘the Rat’ had focused on providing whatever support she could to the front-line players while continually updating her guide. She still intended to solve the mystery of her silent friend and why the world had seemed to suddenly drop the last time they had met, but with the increased pace of the game’s exploration and her growing reputation as an Information Broker, Argo was constantly required to ply her chosen trade.

Michi knew the Dark Elf Queen’s Castle would complete the elf theme of this world and allow the players to venture upwards into the lair of the Thousand Snake Castle. At their current pace, she fully expected them to reach the next floor by the end of the day where they would face things like Naga, Wyverns, Hydras and - if Akihiko Kayaba hadn’t altered the game – the very dangerous floor boss…

The Orochi.

She wasn’t looking forward to that one.

Michi barely heard the whistling sound the blades made as they flew through the air towards her.

It had almost been a sixth sense which caused Argo to suddenly jerk her shoulders backwards as three throwing picks whizzed in front of her widened eyes, embedding themselves with loud ‘thunks’ into the thick tree trunk just to her left.
Spinning quickly, Argo turned to her right to see a tall player a little over twenty feet away. This guy had obviously thrown the picks at her. The lanky male was wearing a dark cloak, leather gauntlets and a sack-like mask with two eyeholes cut into its fabric, giving him the menacing appearance of a psychotic scarecrow.

‘Eulogy’ immediately found its way into her right hand while her left hand went for the Teleportation Crystal she kept in the belt pouch. The cursor above her unknown assailant was orange, confirming her suspicion that this masked man was a criminal player…

“See, Johnny? I told you she was fast.”

The deep male voice which came from directly behind her caused the terrified Argo to bolt sideways, suddenly tumbling over a tree root and then rolling along the path until she popped back up onto her feet, her dagger held at the ready in front of her.

But the Teleportation Crystal had slipped out of her hand and was now laying on the forest floor only a foot in front of her…

“What do you want?!”

The cloaked figure who stepped out of the shadows and onto the pathway held no weapon, but he was still close enough to launch an attack. His drooping hood concealed most of his face, but Argo could still make out a nasty scar running along the right side of his face.

As she thrust ‘Eulogy’ towards him, the stranger held up both his hands in a friendly and disarming manner, but Argo wasn’t backing down. She noticed that his player cursor was orange as well.

“There’s no need for that, little sister… Johnny just has this bad habit of just throwing those things for no good reason… Boredom, I expect… But since we’ve got your attention, there’s something we have been curious about.”

Not daring to take her eyes off of them, Argo bravely stood her ground. Whoever this guy was, his ‘Hiding’ skill must have been through the roof for her not have noticed him. Her pale brown eyes quickly darted back to the one called ‘Johnny’ to make sure he wasn’t trying anything suspicious.

“If you want information, pick up the Player Guide… I have nothing to sell to you.”

The smiling man simply laughed and then folded his arms.

“Actually, that’s exactly what we wanted to talk to you about… You see, my friend here and I, we keep pretty close to the front line… Don’t we, Johnny?”

Argo watched the hooded figure slowly nod its head up-and-down before his scarred leader continued.

“So we both happen to know that no group of players has made it to this floor’s boss yet… But then, when I got a hold of your guide this morning, there’s all this information about the Dark Elf Queen and her attack patterns in there, just as plain as day…

“And since no Beta testers ever made it to this floor, we were just wondering… Are you psychic?... Maybe you’ve got an inside scoop… Are you just making it all up now?... Tell us, how is it that you know so much about a boss which no one has even met yet, Miss Information Broker?”

Damn it!
Even though Michi had been careful about trying to keep her information reined in and not letting her guide get ahead of the lead players, with the increasing pace of the game lately, it was entirely possible this floor might be cleared in one day! That’s why she had included the information about the Dark Elf Queen this morning.

She’d have to bluff them...

“One of the Beta testers actually made it to the start of the tenth floor.”

Mr. Scar seemed intrigued.

“Oh yeah?... Which one?”

“I don’t sell Beta player information.”

“No?... That’s funny, an Information Broker not selling information… You ever heard of such a crazy thing, Johnny?”

Argo watched as the masked figure, who was now standing beside this other player, shook his head while she slowly stretched out her foot to quietly drag the fallen Teleport Crystal along the ground, maintaining eye contact as the hooded man continued.

“Me neither. And I would have paid a lot of Col for that name too… Must have been quite a player to have cleared this floor all on his own though… A real hero… Makes me wonder how much little Argo here paid to obtain those deep, dark secrets?… A sweet young thing like that… You don’t suppose she…”

The grinning man made a loop with the thumb and finger of his left hand while he slid his right index finger back-and-forth through the opening while the masked Johnny giggled sadistically beneath his scarecrow shroud...

Quickly crouching down to snatch the Teleport Crystal, Michi held it up and prepared to make her escape when the hooded man suddenly dropped his sexual innuendo and defensively held up his hands in protest.

“Hold up… We were only kidding… Besides, who am I to judge?... It’s not like this is actually Japan anymore… I mean, that’s what makes these games so fun, right?... Being able to do the kind of things you’re not able to do in the real world... Cut loose and just enjoy yourself.”

“This stopped being a game when people started dying.”

“Did it? What does that have to do with anything? Die here or die there. What’s the difference? The point is that life should be fun... Say, you like money, don’t you?... Money’s fun… And I’ve got a lot of it... Let’s make a deal which will benefit the both of us.”

“I don’t deal with orange players.”

“No?... But you don’t even know what I can offer… I think you’d better hear out my proposal, little sister… Unless you happen to like little surprise meetings like this… Except we’re not usually so friendly the second time.”

“You have three seconds before I teleport.”

The condescending smile suddenly left his rugged face, replaced by a chilling glare beneath the hood as he offered his leather-clad hand for her to shake.
“Here’s the deal… You only put the information in your guide that we tell you to… C’mon, it’ll be fun… Our little joke on those frontline idiots… What d’ya say, partner?”

With the first beads of cold sweat trickling down her forehead, Michi quickly spoke the words to teleport back to town, disappearing into shimmering blue lights before the two men could move against her.

As orange players, she thanked all that was holy that they wouldn’t dare follow her into town…

Breathing a deep sigh of relief while leaning against the fountain which surrounded the enormous base of an ancient tree, the Information Broker nearly fell into its cold waters until she got hold of herself.

That had been far too close for comfort!

For weeks now, she’d heard the rumours of player-killing at the fringes of the front line, hushed whispers of cloaked players ambushing other players to steal their weapons and Col before brutally executing them in cold blood.

Argo didn’t think they were just rumours anymore.

Whoever those two were, they were certainly no joke. Launching three throwing picks at once meant that the one called Johnny must have had a skill level of at least 300 for Picks, painfully close to her own ‘Dodging’ score. They were probably close to level 20 or better…

But who were they?

Argo’s frantic memory suddenly drifted back to her first day in this virtual world when Hisako Li Shun had told them of the deranged boy named ‘Red-Eyed XaXa’ who had assaulted her… There was a player-killer guild that he had been associated with in other games…

It had been called…

‘Laughing Coffin’.

That’s right, how could she forget that name. Maybe Hisako would be able to tell her a little more about this guild. A trip back to the first floor was certainly more appealing than the idea of venturing back into the woods right now with those two creeps still out there…

An hour later, Argo was seated across from Hisako at the Legion headquarters in the Black Iron Palace while Commander Marigan made them herbal tea. It had been Michi’s first time actually visiting her friends in person since she had struck out on her own to pursue Damian and gotten caught up in the life of an Information Broker.

As the younger girl described her harrowing encounter with the two orange players in detail, Argo watched the face of Hisako Li Shun grow pale in sympathy. When Argo had finished, Hisako drew a deep breath.

“The one called ‘Johnny’ must be Johnny Black, an online friend of Shouichi… The one with the scar… He sounds like their revered guild leader… He’s named PoH.”

Michi almost giggled.

“PoH?… That’s a silly name for such a scary guy.”
“Hisako’s eyes grew grim and dark.

“It’s an acronym… From a tattoo he wears on his left shoulder apparently… P.O.H. stands for Prince of Hell.”

Michi and Hisako were both suddenly startled as Marigan almost dropped the serving set on the table, jarring the cups it held as she fixed Argo with a powerful stare that permitted no rebuttal until the thirteen-year-old girl was forced to sink deeper into her chair.

Marigan shifted over to her own chair and calmly sat down with the two women before pouring herself a cup of tea. In a calm voice, the imposing Commander quietly informed Michi of her judgement.

“Argo-chan, I’m afraid your leave of absence from the Legion guild is hereby revoked… Until you can personally defeat me in a duel, your solo player days are over.”

From deep in her chair, Argo peered upwards back at the blonde warrior in stunned disbelief.

“Don’t you think you’re overreacting just a little?!”

“Not at all… If you can defeat me in a duel, I’ll know you’ll be able to take care of yourself on the front lines… Until that time, I promised that I’d protect you and all other members of Legion.”

“Marigan… I appreciate your concern, but I really am needed on the front line… And as an Information Broker, I have to be a solo player.”

“You’re Legion… But I’m also aware what an tremendous asset you’ve been to this game’s clearers, despite your lack of regular reports to us… So I will assign you a security detail.”

“I can’t be an Information Broker and part of a battalion at the same time!”

“A security detail of eleven other players… And as long as you’re in the safety of a town, you may trade all the information you’d like… But you report back to me.”

Argo paused for a moment.

“Some of the information is confidential.”

“Fine, use your discretion… Pass along only the information which directly affects the safety of other players… Including yours.”

Michi sipped her tea and thought… It was obvious that Marigan had made up her mind about this… There was only one other tactic which Argo could use to possibly make her reconsider Argo having to baby-sit eleven other players.

“I appreciate the offer, but I won’t have time to level these guys up before the tenth floor is opened up. It will be too dangerous for them.”

“Then message all the frontline players and tell them to wait. From this point forward, you’ll be traveling with these soldiers at all times… That’s an order, Argo-chan.”

“And we were doing so well…”

The serious green eyes of the older woman looked at her with incredible gravitas.

“Argo, you’re a smart girl… I know you must have considered what would happen if the wrong
group of players gained a significant power advantage over the rest of us.”

“Anarchy… Or worse.”

“Anarchy is what we have now. The ‘worse’ you mentioned is genocide or slavery… Have you honestly not considered why Laughing Coffin would want control of your guide?”

Argo felt her lungs constrict in dread as the awful realization hit her… Yes, she’d been surprised by a few new additions since the Beta test, but even so, the frontline players had often relied solely on nothing more than her guide to plan their attacks on the bosses without performing the necessary reconnaissance.

Aincrad’s elf war campaign had proved remarkably similar to the Beta test, allowing them to breeze through the last six levels with no casualties. With the speed at which they had cleared those floors, there was almost the expectation of success now…

An arrogance as to their own strength.

But with the Orochi waiting for them on the next floor, the eight-headed monstrosity required a cohesive strategy to defeat and made the elves look like child’s play.

“If my guide had false information about a floor boss, especially the next one, it could prove disastrous… The raiding parties are made up of some of the most powerful players in the game… If they were to get decimated due to bad information, the entire power structure of this world would change… Just from a single boss battle.”

As the younger woman considered the full implications, Marigan clasped Michi’s small hand in her own.

“That’s right… And many of the other players would simply lose hope… It may be hard for us to believe, but there are some players who have no intentions of leaving this world… They want to rule it… And they’ll use any means necessary to get rid of those players who are stronger than they are, including sabotaging your guide… That’s why I need you to stay safe.”

From her own experience, Michi knew not all of the monsters in this world had red cursors floating above them. Some had orange. Some even had green.

“Alright, I’ll take the bodyguards. But I’m going to need to keep most of my Col… It gets expensive up there… Plus I have to pay for information as well.”

“Guild fees will be dropped completely… I would only ask that any excess magical items that your group can live without be transferred back to the Guild treasury to help some of our lower-level players… Otherwise, equip yourselves as you see fit.”

“That’s fair… So who are these guys?”

“I’ll personally handpick members from each of the first seven battalions since they’ve seen the most combat… In truth, there’s already been grumblings that the Legion should be doing more to help the lead players who are working to clear this game.”

“Trust me, you’re doing plenty… Are there any more Beta testers in the ranks?”

“No… But some of our members have shown a true aptitude for the game… These are the players I will assign to you… I’ll be sure to provide you with the proper balance of offence and defence as well as skill sets…”
“And…” continued the Commander, “I’ll let you know one secret about me that no one else in this game knows. That’s the currency of an Information Broker, right?”

“Yeah, but if you tell me… That means people can buy it from me.”

“That’s fine. But that Col comes back to the Legion. Deal?”

As she nodded, Marigan leaned into Argo’s ear and whispered something into her ear that made the younger woman cock her eyebrow in disbelief while Marigan grinned and folded her arms.

“Really?”

“Honest.”

“Alright, Marigan… That explains a few things… But I’ll need a complete list of these players; their levels, their stats, their equipment, their skills… Everything… And a budget to get them properly equipped.”

“It shall be provided… But these aren’t just bodyguards, Argo… This is your party… They’re elite players that you’ll lead and train.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa… You didn’t say anything about being a leader!”

Marigan stood straight up and then smiled, towering above the former Information Broker before placing a heavy hand on Michi’s slouched shoulder and giving her a wink.

“Don’t worry… I have complete faith in you, Argo-chan.”

Chapter End Notes

**Next Chapter:** “The Black Dragon” arc begins! Posting on Tuesday, December 22nd this chapter takes place a few weeks after this one and introduces the katana-wielding leader of the Fuurinkazan guild… Klein!
The Wager

Chapter Notes

I’m surprised that no one’s pointed out a rather obvious discrepancy with Akihiko Kayaba logging out of the game and hooking up with Rinko Koujiro last chapter…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Klein

(Klein, leader of the Fuurinkazan guild)

Chapter Twenty-Five

The Black Dragon

Part One: The Wager

The steadfast samurai ran his katana through the entire torso of a wandering Naga Warrior, using the customized attack of ‘Fell Crescent’ to slice through the slithering snake creature in one single, dramatic blow. As the tip of his arcing blade came to a perfect standstill just inches above the sun-bleached sands of the tenth floor, the snake monster burst into bright blue lights before disintegrating into twinkling sparkles against the setting sun - which silhouetted the samurai perfectly.

In one smooth motion, this powerful warrior sheathed his katana, taking a moment to drag the back of his hand across the bottom of his forehead below his signature red bandana tied around unruly auburn hair. Behind him, the samurai’s heavily built second-in-command, a formidable player and another samurai known simply as ‘Dale’ turned his attention to the western horizon, squinting at the
sinking sun as it floated past the dark edge of faraway dunes.

Gathering his breath to speak before the scene of profound beauty, the stout Dale drew a disappointed sigh and then called out to his skilled leader...

“Hey Klein, can we go now?... If I have to fight one more snake, I swear I’m gonna start slithering around myself!”

The leader of the Fuurinkazan guild and a master of the katana, the samurai-themed player known simply as Klein glanced back at the petulant Dale whose eyes twinkled with the rays of the fading sunlight to reassure him of their goal.

“That quest we unlocked this morning said if we can bag a Naga Commander on this floor, it’ll drop at least a rare sword... Besides, these things are a lot easier than they used to be y’know… Now that we’re all higher levels.”

The ‘Snakes and Ladders’ quest had been achieved by the Fuurinkazan guild hours ago after fighting their way to the top of the Golem Spire on Floor 21. Since the rune-covered rock-monster boss of that level had been defeated by lunchtime, Klein and his five friends had decided to spend the afternoon completing the quest and take a break from the front lines.

But it had meant going backwards eleven floors very quickly… The quest was a one-time-only drop, meaning that only a single Naga Commander would spawn during this game.

Dale kicked at the sand.

“Yeah, but we’re all hungry and we’ve already killed like a hundred of these stupid snakes… Besides, the fractional odds of a Naga Commander spawning here are so low, we might have to kill a hundred more before we even see one.”

Scratching his head, Klein cast his gaze upon the rest of his guild when the buckler-wielding Dynamm also stepped forward, standing next to the portly Dale.

“Maybe we should call it a day, Klein… I’m thirstier than a hairy dog in July… Do you guys remember the poison ale at the pub here on this floor? That stuff was killer!”

The group of young men murmured in quick agreement, recalling the frothy green ale which was the specialty of this level. The spiky-haired Klein also nodded in agreement as he ran his hand along his stubble-covered chin in fond recollection.

“Alright, let’s go drink some of that poison ale!... Sorry to drag you all back down here and waste our time, I just thought that quest we unlocked this morning would be quicker, y’know?”

The affable Dynamm threw an arm around Klein’s shoulders and then grinned, leading him away from the snake-spawning battlefield.

“Ah, it’s OK Commander… The truth is, all of us have pretty good memories of this floor… Besides the green booze, Fuurinkazan came into its own down here… It was nice to come back and see it again, at least for a little while.”

As the samurai-themed players of Fuurinkazan strolled back towards a distant Teleport Gate which would take them across the gorge to this level’s only town, Klein grinned in remembrance... It was true, their guild had finally made its way to the front lines on this floor when the clearers had slowed down to catch their breath, allowing Fuurinkazan to finally participate in its first boss battle with the deadly Orochi…
Even if it was just as the backup party.

And now, only weeks later, those same frontline warriors had just opened the 22nd floor with its lush forests and lakes. There seemed to be a spreading optimism among the players now thanks to their rapid progress in conquering the lower floors of this world.

While Klein vowed he would never forget the terrible toll this game had taken on them at the beginning, they were finally coming into their own, growing stronger every day… His own guild fought as hard as any other but always managed to leave time to enjoy themselves in this strange new world as well.

As the scruffy samurai and his five comrades stood at the Teleport Gate which would take them across Split Serpent Canyon to the only town on the tenth floor, the observant Klein happened to catch a small army of players marching across the dunes which his own guild had been battling on the entire afternoon.

It had once been said that this young man had developed a sort of ‘Distant Early Warning’ system which had alerted him to the presence of the one thing he valued above all other…

Beautiful women.

Klein had noticed the marching group of players, but what had truly caught his attention was the singular flash of long, blonde hair at its front.

Intrigued, the dark-haired Dale also turned his sharp gaze to see what his leader was staring at almost half-a-mile behind them, his own eyes squinting in the dusky light of twilight until he also caught the flash of blonde hair catching the last rays of a setting sun.

“Is that Commander Marigan?!”

At the mention of her sacred name, all six men were suddenly peering intently towards those distant marching soldiers, almost falling over one another to catch a glimpse of the fabled Commander, long rumoured to be the sexiest woman in the game.

Collecting himself, Klein turned to face his guild and held up his palms while they clamoured like a group of middle-school boys to get a better view of the sacrosanct hotty whose name was only whispered about in bars...

“Jeez, get a hold of yourselves… People will start to think we’re desperate.”

“We are desperate!”

“What happened to being tired, hungry and thirsty? Weren’t you jokers going to the bar?”

“What do you mean ‘you jokers”? We’re all going to the bar.”

The warrior Klein brushed back his spiky hair and then jutted his thin chest forward, placing his balled fists onto his armoured hip protectors in a defiant stance.

“Hey, this was all your idea… You guys go ahead and start without me… I think I’ll give that Naga Commander one more shot…”

A smirking Dynamm stepped forward as the other four players grumbled loudly in protest, placing a familiar arm around Klein’s shoulder, grinning widely.
“If you think you’re going after a beauty like that without us, you’re sadly mistaken old friend… But listen men, perhaps we can strike a deal with our leader… If we were to start drinking without him at the bar, there would have to be a wager of some sort…

“Because if we’re going to let you have a shot at the most gorgeous babe in all of Aincrad without your wingmen, there has to be consequences… If you ditch us and strike out, you pick up tonight’s tab… And I’ve got to warn you, this damned desert you’ve dragged us to has made us really thirsty.”

Klein made some quick mental calculations in his head. The Col he’d collected over the past eight hours should be enough cover their combined bar tab…

“Alright, but what if I do pick her up?”

The rest of his frontline guild giggled like adolescent boys as the mischievous Dynamm contemplated a suitable reward for such an improbable feat.

“Well, first of all you’d have to bring her back to the bar as proof… But if a dunderhead like you did manage to bring the Glorious Commander back to the bar, I’m sure each of us could afford to pay your tab and pony up an extra 5,000 Col… What d’ya say, guys? Do you think it’s a safe bet?”

The rest of his party hastily nodded in agreement, thoroughly convinced that the hapless Klein stood no chance in Hell of actually winning this wager, but excited at his prospects nonetheless to at least meet the fabled Marigan.

Klein thought about it for a moment and then nodded.

“Alright, you’re on... You jerks should have more faith in your leader.”

As the only player older than Klein in their guild, the affable Issin stepped forward and faced his guild mates in defence of their leader. In real life, Klein knew Issin was the most successful of them, having taken a position as a junior software engineer at a large technology company.

“Our leader is right… I think he has a real chance at this… Didn’t any of you guys notice today’s date?”

As the players opened their menus, they all exclaimed a soft ‘Oh’ before glancing back at Klein with newfound consideration before Issin continued.

“That’s right… It’s February 14th… Valentine’s Day… And I have it from good sources that the Glorious Commander has American parents and is also a single lady, which means this is probably an important holiday for her… The stars are aligned for your quest of the heart, my leader… Don’t let us down!”

Klein winked and gave his guild an informal salute as they happily made their way to the Teleport Gate. Four of them were already abuzz with excitement, throwing good-natured taunts back at Klein about the buckets of free ale they’d be enjoying all night long while the optimistic Issin expressed his excitement at the possibility of finally meeting the fabled Marigan in person.

As the lone samurai once again made his way back to the Naga Warrior spawning ground, he wondered if Marigan’s Legion battalion might be pursuing the same ‘Snakes and Ladders’ quest which Fuurinkazan had been attempting to complete all afternoon.

Klein knew the Legion had one group of twelve players running alongside the frontline clearers, led by a mysterious hooded player who used a needle-like dagger who may have opened this quest for them. Since these soldiers were all part of a huge guild, any quests opened up by their higher-level
players would be made instantly available to the rest of the guild members as well.

The entire Fuurinkazan guild knew about the Legion’s elite team only because they’d all noticed the particularly attractive dark-haired beauty two weeks ago. The same rapier-user which the young Harry One had instantly fallen in love with from afar.

Not that Klein could blame the kid…

As he walked closer to the Legion battalion, finally concealing himself fifty feet away behind large rocks, Klein finally got his first good look at Marigan as she turned, the sight of her nearly stopping his heart. She was all that they had said and more, surely the most stunning woman in all of Aincrad.

Long blonde hair, piercing green eyes, and smoking hot.

How could he even talk to a woman who was that incredibly beautiful?… What would he say?! There was no way he could win this wager, he’d choke up the moment he approached her…

Almost as if in a daze, Klein watched as a dozen Naga Warriors suddenly materialized in front of the regiment, led by a massive snake-warrior. The angelic blonde vision shouted out orders as twelve serpents rammed against the shields and spears of the seventh battalion before the soldiers broke apart into groups of four, three shields supporting each attacker.

As Klein partially gathered his senses, he realized it was a good strategy.

The serpent’s bites were poisonous and getting hit by one often meant having to use up valuable Antidote Crystals. Even the experienced Fuurinkazan guild had burned through a few crystals this afternoon. The Legion’s concentrated shield defence meant these Naga Warriors were more likely to use their sword to attack as opposed to their poisonous fangs.

It was only then that Klein noticed what the largest snake warrior truly was…

The Naga Commander!

Of all the luck... If they’d only stayed ten more minutes, that would be his guild fighting for that rare sword instead of the Legion...

His disappointment was short lived however. The leader of Fuurinkazan was a man who could not live without beauty in his world, and now he was watching the glorious Marigan in action, filling his world with perfection. Even though the sword was a one-time-only drop, Klein would value this rare gift even more.

His gut suddenly twisted as he watched Legion swordsmen needing to land three separate blows on a Naga Warrior to vanquish it, the same creature he could easily bring down with one basic attack pattern. If these lower-level players were having such a tough time with the henchmen, Klein worried how they could manage the Naga Commander.

That monstrous sub-boss had been intended for players who had made it to the twenty-first floor, not the tenth.

As though answering his unspoken question, he watched as five swordsmen consecutively attacked the monster by switching in and out, barely budging its health bar before the resulting blow from the giant serpentine monster sent two shield-bearers flying across the sands, putting their health in the yellow.

Without hesitation, Klein pulled his own katana and began to run. Sprinting across the sands, he saw
Marigan crouched in the sand and then raced towards the giant snake-beast, suddenly producing the signature white flash of a comet’s tail behind her while her speed increased to blinding intensity. The sonic boom which reached his ears when Marigan landed what must have been a ‘Flashing Penetrator’ attack upon the Naga Commander almost deafened him.

How strong was this woman?!

‘Flashing Penetrator’ was one of the most powerful rapier skills for higher-level players, not something you used with a two-handed sword!

Klein watched in awe as the sonic boom from her powerful attack blew her own troops out of harm’s way while its seismic impact drove the snake monster’s health into the red...

Where it remained.

It hadn’t been enough! Although the ‘Flashing Penetrator’ attack was incredibly powerful and a high-level skill which must have done an incredible amount of damage with a two-handed sword, the Naga Commander still stood upright and prepared to counter.

Marigan’s powerful attack also had the drawback of a lengthy post-motion delay effect which would leave her wide open...

The samurai watched as the closest three shield bearers got back to their feet and leapt in the way of the enraged Naga’s following attack just in the nick of time, absorbing the impact of the monster’s vicious sword swipe as their own health scores were driven deep into the yellow, tumbling like bowling pins to the sand.

Unfortunately, like many bosses, the Naga Commander only seemed to become faster when his health entered the red zone. Klein watched in horror when the massive serpent quickly readied his second attack which would surely end the lives of these three downed players who had bravely defended their stalled Commander...

Faster, he needed to be faster!

Preparing to initiate his long-range ‘Tsujikaze’ (Whirlwind) katana attack, Klein prayed to the virtual gods of Aincrad that he could make it there in time. None of the other soldiers were close enough to prevent the beast’s impending attack which would surely kill those downed players.

And then, Klein witnessed something he would never forget…

Although the sprinting katana-user had no way to know it, Marigan had only opted to join up with this regiment after Argo and Hisako had unlocked the ‘Snakes and Ladders’ quest on the twenty-first floor. As her seventh battalion was currently exploring the tenth floor, the blonde Commander had been concerned that this group of lower-level players might inadvertently trigger the appearance of a Naga Commander for which they were hopelessly unprepared.

She’d been proven correct.

Without even looking behind her, Marigan suddenly launched a ‘Back Rush’ attack on the higher-level creature, instantly spinning in a flash of golden light to swing her massive sword through the thick neck of the Naga Commander and cause it to abruptly stop with its own hooked sword mere inches away from the first of the injured shield-bearers.

The monster burst into blue sparkling polygons as a collective sigh of relief suddenly erupted from the surrounding players while the scrambling Klein was only able to stop his mad dash only inches
away from the Glorious Commander as she curiously turned to face him.

Quickly sheathing his own sword and bowing to hide his embarrassment, the samurai was able to stammer out an explanation.

“Ahh… Sorry… I saw what was happening… And just thought… You might need some help… Not that you do.”

“That was kind of you, but we’re fine now.”

Damn, even her voice was sexy.

Slowly glancing upwards, Klein saw Marigan receiving the Last Attack bonus, giving her the same rare sword which his own guild had spent hours attempting to obtain earlier today. His heart instantly sank when he realized what she now held in her hands was a finely crafted katana.

Of all the possible swords in this world of swords, the mystical prize awarded by the Naga Commander he’d been hunting all afternoon had been a rare katana. Klein silently cursed his rotten luck.

It was almost as though this whole damned quest had been trying to teach him a lesson about perseverance… or gambling. Because he was going to lose the wager and be buying a lot of beer for his guild tonight.

After his awkward entrance, there was no way in Hell this powerful and beautiful woman would ever give him a second thought, let alone go for a drink with a bumbling clod who had almost run into her, arriving too late to save her own guild mates from certain death…

Idiot, idiot, idiot…

The sudden high-pitched, ear-shattering roar which sounded from above caused each player to abruptly freeze in primordial fear before instinctively looking up to the skies to witness a massive black-winged serpent crashing down from the heavens towards them.

It was one of the dragons which he’d always figured were nothing more than scenery in these fantasy skies, except now it was swooping down like screeching death towards them! Even from this distance, Klein could tell that thing was huge, easily as big as any boss monster he’d faced so far and likely just as deadly…

What the Hell was something like that doing down here?!

The leader of Fuurinkazan suddenly realized he’d be facing a monster twice as strong as anything he’d ever crossed swords with alongside players who were half his current level…

This wasn’t going to end well.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Tomorrow!
As thirty-four terrified players suddenly stared upwards at the dusk-streaked skies above, a demonic creature as black as endless night descended upon them with a blood chilling shriek echoed through the corridors of Hell.

As Klein was about to yell for everyone to run, he heard the loud shouts of the Legion’s Commander Marigan ordering her soldiers to get into something called a ‘turtle’ formation while he watched the phalanx players quickly reform themselves into tight mound of shield and spear, preparing to take the brunt of the dragon’s impending aerial assault.

Meanwhile, Klein and the other swordsmen quickly back-pedalled, fanning out to avoid this giant mythical lizard as it hurtled towards the ground and the soldiers below like some giant bird of prey. It was only when the dragon spread its massive wings at the last possible moment to end its kamikaze descent that Klein gained a true understanding as to the size of this damned thing…

That wingspan was easily sixty feet across!

The Japanese swordsman watched in horror as the now hovering dragon’s enormous black chest engorged and then suddenly glowed green, rearing up just twenty feet above the tight dome of shields before a powerful gush of green acid was spewed from its fanged maw, instantly coating the shields at the top of the phalanx.

In gut-wrenching horror, Klein watched as those highest six heavy shields suddenly burst into shiny blue bits, signifying the dragon’s acidic breath had rendered the durability of the equipment to zero. Immediately lunging forward and using its wing talons, the great beast then attempted to rake the
exposed players - only to have other shields instantly thrust in front of its dagger-sized claws and
spears poking upwards, thwarting its follow-up attack.

The dragon landed on the ground in front of them with a terrifying roar, beating its monstrous wings
as Klein cast a nervous glance upwards at the fierce creature, his wide eyes finally settling on the
information graphics above its massive skull-like head…

‘The Black Dragon’.

Klein uttered a few choice expletives.

This was a unique monster with four Hit Point bars which they had no information on! What the Hell
was a boss-level monster doing just dropping from the skies of the tenth floor as a random event?!

They didn’t stand a chance against this damned thing!

If nothing else, he needed to give these lower-level players the chance to make a break for it. He
might not get his date with Marigan, but he hoped that she would fondly remember the sacrifice of
the stranger dressed like a samurai in the days ahead…

It was only then that he suddenly eyed the Legion Commander in the distance, crouching across
from the dragon’s flank to gather attack energy while gripping her massive sword. Klein realized she
was obviously preparing to launch the ‘Flashing Penetrator’ attack again while the beast’s attention
was focused on the rest of her battalion…

Was she flipping insane?!

There was no way this thing was going down that easy. With the lag time that finishing move
incurred, she’d be a sitting duck!... There was nothing else he could do now except to try and time
his attack to draw the dragon’s attention away from her recovery period before she was devoured…

Making his way through scrambling players towards the massive monster, Klein went with his
Tsujikaze (Whirlwind) pattern, initiating the attack pattern just as he hit full stride while Marigan
began her own attack opposite him...

They should hit at roughly the same time and Klein would be the closest target for the monster.

It was a good plan until the beast’s giant wing dropped in front of him like an enormous leathery
shield, slamming its claws into the dirt which knocked Klein backwards on his ass, preventing the
warrior from launching his slashing technique near the dragon’s body.

He had simply bounced off a dark wing the size of a boat sail.

Idiot, idiot, idiot...

His failed attack did have one advantage though.

It had distracted ‘The Black Dragon’ long enough to let the formidable Marigan land her ‘Flashing
Penetrator’ completely undefended. With a blinding white flash, the swordswoman slashed across
the giant lizard’s haunches with a thundering impact, causing the great beast to emit a deafening roar
of pain which mingled with her own attack’s sonic boom.

Damn, that was a nice hit!

Glancing up, Klein noticed the dragon’s uppermost health bar had been plunged into the yellow.
That was the good news. The bad news was that the attack-frozen Marigan now had this scaly terror’s full attention and she was isolated.

Picking himself up from the dirt, Klein took six strides and leapt desperately through the air towards the dragon’s head, relying on pure speed as the dragon opened its jaws to reveal mouthful of acid-coated white daggers intended solely for the lagging Commander.

Spinning in midair, Klein initiated an aerial Zekkū (Absolute Void) attack, the fastest technique he had.

This time the dragon wasn’t prepared for his attack as the swordsman managed to slash the monstrosity near its basketball-sized eye, only just preventing the lagging Marigan from being snapped in half by a snout as large as his sofa back home.

As the samurai tumbled down to the sands after his Zekkū, he was happy to have three shield-bearers suddenly place themselves between him and a very pissed-off dragon while he recovered.

Instead of using his attack as an opportunity to retreat, the Legion soldiers had followed their Commander’s lead and mounted their own offensive against the colossal reptile which was incredibly brave, but mostly futile. He watched helplessly as the Legionnaires struck at this boss-level monster, hopelessly outmatched.

They couldn’t even inflict enough damage to slow the damned lizard down.

Marigan seemed to realize this as well as she suddenly grabbed a younger player named Karbon, screaming at him to get reinforcements down here. Klein watched as the boy did what they all should have done, running from the battlefield in pure terror.

Reinforcements wasn’t a bad idea though.

With the rest of Fuurinkazan here, his guild might be able to distract the dragon’s attention long enough for these Legionnaires to teleport out of harm’s way. Crouching behind the protection of the three heavy shields, Klein opened his player menu and quickly messaged Dale…

Klein: ‘Getting attacked by dragon. Get your asses back here!’

A brief pause.

Dale: ‘That’s no way to talk about your future wife!’

He was relieved to see that his second-in-command was still sober enough to reply back to him at least, even if it wasn’t the reply he had hoped for. Dale must have thought Klein was trying to prank them after striking out with Marigan…

Those drunken bastards would probably feel awful when they found out he’d been eaten by a dragon.

In desperation, Klein searched for the name of the strongest player he knew in his ‘Friends’ menu to find that Kirito was offline, indicating the solo player was most likely in another dungeon… yet again.

As her uttered more choice expletives and closed his menu, the sudden cry of agony snapped Klein’s focus back to the battle. It was only then that he realized Marigan had pushed past the shields protecting her and gone in for a second attack…
But this time, the beast had been ready.

The samurai drew a sharp breath into his tightening lungs as his widened eyes beheld the tip of the dragon’s mouth latched onto the Legion Commander’s right shoulder, two rows of dagger-like teeth grinding into her digital flesh, preventing the impaled Marigan from launching any form of counterattack to save herself.

In a flash of red, Klein’s ‘Reaver’ attack drove the point of his katana into the beast’s massive eye slit, a Critical Hit on one of its few vulnerable areas, causing the dragon to bellow in agony and finally release its death grip on the injured swordswoman.

The grievously wounded Commander dropped to the dirt where six shields quickly formed around her.

The scruffy samurai saw the dragon draw back its head while its chest engorged and glowed green once more just as he was able to recover from his own attack lag and scramble behind those same shields the instant before a plume of green corrosive death erupted from the monster’s jaws, filling his nostrils with the stench of brimstone.

All six shields melted instantly - but they held off the worst of the acidic bile from the players’ flesh beyond and saved their lives. But they were losing shields and armour quickly…

A quick glance over at Marigan let him know she was still alive but that her health had been driven deep into the yellow. He was about to suggest that she use a Healing Crystal when a leathery tail the size of a telephone pole suddenly slammed across all eight of them, sending the small wave of players tumbling backwards like tumbleweeds in the wind…

Finally rolling to a stop and spitting dry sand out of his mouth, Klein saw that Marigan had now gone into the red.

Casting a quick backwards glance at the massive monster, the samurai figured it had used a tail attack while spinning itself around to concentrate on the other Legionnaires who were now attacking the great serpent like a swarm of angry bees.

The six other players strewn like trash around the dunes beside him were also in rough shape. The leader of Fuurinkazan saw that their health bars were showing yellow and their armour and shields were completely evaporated from the dragon’s corrosive breath attack.

As he was about to speak, Klein witnessed a battered Marigan pick herself and crouch in the dirt once again, placing five splayed fingers in the sand as her green eyes narrowed in anger upon the terrifying beast attacking her men. The stunned samurai saw her body glow with the signature fighting aura of the major attack known as ‘Flashing Penetrator’ once more…

She hadn’t even healed herself yet!

Taking his own emergency Healing Crystal from the pouch on his belt, Klein pointed the pink stone at Marigan and shouted the words to activate it, sending the Legion Commander’s health back to full green the instant before she burst into a white comet of violence, striking another devastating blow on the dragon’s exposed flanks.

This woman was relentless.

With the last of her shields diving in to protect Marigan, Klein noticed none of the six injured Legion players around him were bothering to heal themselves. Were these lower-level players were experiencing battle shock at having just encountered their first actual boss-level monster?
“Hey! Listen up! You guys should heal, re-equip and then switch back in there... I’ll try and hold that thing off to buy you some time!”

With a look of profound grief, the closest player answered him.

“We don’t have any potions left... Our battalion ran out just before the battle with the Naga Commander.”

“Then use crystals, dumbass!”

The bewildered look on their faces let Klein know they didn’t even know what a Healing Crystal was... What were these morons doing up here on the tenth floor without Healing Crystals?!

“What’s your name, kid?”

“Mystral, Sir...”

“OK Mystral, I need you to accept my friend request.”

The young man quickly obliged. Tapping again at his player menu, Klein transferred his guild’s entire inventory of pink Healing Crystals and Healing Potions to Mystral except for two. The scruffy warrior then grabbed one of his last remaining Healing Crystals and quickly threw it into his pouch. The other he pointed at the wide-eyed soldier in front of him, speaking the words....

“Heal: Mystral!”

Klein watched as Mystral’s health bar instantly recovered to full as the young soldier’s eyes widened even wider when he realized he was fully healed...

“That’s how you use these things. Point at the injured player and then say Heal: Whoever.... Got it?”

“... Yes, sir!”

“Alright kid, we’ve got no triage area so you’re going to be the cleric... You run around and point a crystal at anyone who’s down... And then you get the Hell out of the way... Got it?”

“Yes, Sir!”

As Mystral started healing his guild, Klein could only hope the rest of Fuurinkazan would notice the sudden depletion of healing items in their shared inventory and finally take his last message seriously. In the meantime, ‘The Black Dragon’ was using some sort of wing attack to create massive wind currents, sending the other soldiers tumbling across the ground.

Giving him a nice, clean shot.

When he managed to pull off a beautiful 3-hit combo Hiōgi (Scarlet Fan) pattern, the katana-wielding Klein managed to knock the beast to half strength, erasing all of the points on its third HP bar.

Yes!

They were halfway to victory but the dragon was far from vanquished. In fact, it had spent the early part of the fight just picking them apart, its breath attack melting most of their armour and shields, leaving the majority of the Legionnaires defenceless for the carnage which was surely to follow.

He shuddered to think what this terror would do when it entered its last health bar and changed to its
final strategy. There was no denying this damned thing was smart…

Klein was attempting to identify some sort of attack pattern but so far the dragon seemed to be an opportunist, taking out groups of players when convenient but otherwise concentrating on the greatest perceived threat amongst them…

Marigan.

He watched as the last intact group of shields protected their berserk leader from the ferocious bite of the beast as it viciously snapped at their heavy shields - the other soldiers fending it off with spears that seemed more like toothpicks.

All of them understood that if Marigan fell, they were next... Twelve shimmering blue lights appeared near the battlefield and caused the rebuked beast to suddenly divert its attention away, whipping its massive tail across the defending soldiers like a bull swinging its tail through the air to ward off annoying flies, knocking them down like discarded children’s building blocks.

As Klein watched the twelve new players teleport in, his gaze was drawn immediately to the dark-haired Hisako who was now part of the Legion’s elite team. He managed to breathe a deep sigh of relief when the reinforcements arrived before witnessing the horror in their wide eyes as they all gazed upon the massive beast for the very first time…

From behind, Klein watched these twelve fresh players scramble out of the way or erect a wall of shields in front of them as the dragon began to draw breath, its chest engorged with more corrosive bile.

Something bad was coming…

As ‘The Black Dragon’ spewed its armour dissolving acid, Klein began his charge-up for ‘Fell Crescent’, a long-distance attack which was similar to ‘Flashing Penetrator’. He’d be able to deal significant damage by rushing the distracted lizard and putting all his weight behind one concentrated strike. As he charged, the samurai saw the monstrous serpent suddenly throw down its powerful wing at a recovering Marigan, instantly preventing her from engaging in her next attack sequence.

Apparently the dragon had figured out the Legion Commander’s attack pattern, a non-stop ‘Flashing Penetrator’ which delivered massive damage but required a charge-up period. She’d been the most effective striker they had but now it was Klein’s turn to replay the favour…

His ‘Fell Crescent’ attack drove his bright katana straight down into the unsuspecting serpent’s spine, erasing most of the green on the creature’s second HP bar before launching the giant beast into an angry spasm, forcing Klein to hold on for dear life to his embedded sword like a bronco bull rider.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the elite squad had now been left without shields but that they were still alive and launching a counterattack. So the dragon’s strategy must be to remove all defences… He watched it slam its other massive wing across the path of these new players and then readied itself for yet another breath attack on the only remaining players with shields who had been defending their leader.

She’d been blocked the last time, but Marigan wasn’t giving up. She suddenly struck with a blazingly fast ‘Avalanche’ pattern, an attack which required no initial charge-up. It was nowhere near as powerful as her two-handed ‘Flashing Penetrator’ but the Legion’s Commander had been forced to adapt…
And then Klein almost let out a ‘whoop’ of delight as he witnessed their most powerful warrior
culminate her attack by positioning the two-handed sword back to its exact starting position to launch
a second ‘Avalanche’!

He’d heard the ‘Avalanche’ combo was possible, but never dreamed he’d actually see one in person. With overwhelming respect, Klein realized she was as good as any frontline player, most likely even better…

The dragon managed to spit out enough acid to dissolve the remaining shields, but it seemed like Marigan’s second attack had disrupted the dragon’s hideous breath attack enough so that the soldiers themselves were not coated in the green corrosive ooze at least.

‘The Black Dragon’ still seemed to be focusing on Marigan. Using its wing claw to knock the motionless swordsman down, Klein knew in his twisting gut that a devastating bite attack would follow.

Withdrawing his katana from the dragon’s back, the courageous samurai sprinted along the beast’s twisting spine while initiating another ‘Fell Crescent’ at the back of the its black head, yelling a loud battle cry...

To become blocked.

His powerful blow was deflected like a sword striking stone as the thick cranial plating of the monster’s bony skull deflected it, while the monster suddenly lunged for a bite attack against the prone Marigan.

As Klein tumbled through the air towards to awaiting sands in failure, the scene unfolded in slow motion as he watched the horrible beast open a massive jaw filled with razor-sharp fangs, bringing death ever closer to the Legion’s unmoving Commander…

At the last possible instant, just as he began to hit the darkened sands, the plummeting Klein saw the young soldier – the same afraid boy whom Marigan had ordered to gather reinforcements – sprint with unbelievable speed and leap, pushing his attack-frozen Commander out of harm’s way with a desperate shoulder tackle…

Before being cut in half by those same jaws.

The loud ‘snap’ sound of the dragon’s massive maw closing around the boy’s midsection echoed in Klein’s ears as the ground welcomed him back to reality, slamming his flailing body to the hard dirt of a hard world where players died every day, even by dragons…

His light growing pale, Karbon’s thin body slowly faded from existence as tears began to stream from Marigan’s unbelieving eyes, allowing the fires of rage to burn within her trembling heart. Like the unstoppable hand of Fate, the powerful warrior swung her sword down with incredible speed, arcing across the dragon’s throat while screaming the name of the boy who was owed vengeance against it…

“KARBON!!”

As her massive blade struck the ground in a thunderous wave of force, the sands all around them became a violent whirlwind while red lights flashing on and off overhead while system alerts sounded…

The last Health bar.
Crawling back to his feet, Klein saw Marigan’s deadly blow had brought the dragon to its final health bar and now its powerful wings were preparing to take flight, pausing their attack sequences until ‘The Black Dragon’ lifted off into the darkened skies, emitting a deafening roar which shook the battlefield.

As he gazed upon the grieving Marigan, Klein silently cursed himself for missing with that last attack, wondering if the boy might still be alive if he…

No.

This was not the time to dwell on the sorrow. Klein pledged to drink the finest sake one day and properly honour the departed Karbon’s sacrifice, but now he must fight with the same spirit the boy had displayed. With the dragon circling in the purple skies above, the samurai couldn’t let the young man’s selfless act become a meaningless one, encumbered by his own grief.

He vowed to stop that damned thing from ever spawning again in the skies above Aincrad…

Getting closer to Marigan, Klein saw that the whiskered Information Broker named Argo was now by her side, informing the Commander that once the dragon went down to its final health bar, it would use aerial attacks only.

This meant that their window of opportunity to attack was incredibly limited, preventing the players from using any charge-up skills as the timing would be impossible. They might have only a second to launch an attack while ‘The Black Dragon’ swooped down upon them to use its breath, bite, massive talons or even tail-whip attack.

It’s entire strategy had been to leave them defenceless for this final assault.

Speed was now the key to defeating this monster…

Calmly placing himself directly in front of the dragon’s streaking path, Klein steeled his eyes and sheathed his katana, preparing for his lightning-fast drawing technique called Zekkū by dangling his twitching fingers an inch above the hilt of his sword…

“C’mon you big black lizard… Come get some!”

He watched as the massive beast flew only feet above the sands at incredible speed with its black eyes locked on him, creating a line of dust swirling high above the sandy desert behind, the harbinger of the storm. The swordsman watched as the beast opened its mouth to reveal those acid-coated fangs which had already taken one life tonight, now hungering for another.

His.

Like a black bolt of death, the dragon flew into Klein just as the samurai drew his sword at unperceivable speed, slashing across the great beast’s fleshy jaw but also getting his sword arm hooked by teeth nine inches long, ripping him off his feet and sending the warrior hurtling along with the dragon in front of its eyes until they both slammed into a rocky hillside over four hundred feet away.

The incredible impact was like a train wreck, sending Klein into the rock itself as the dragon’s massive body levelled the landscape behind him, seismic shockwaves roiling across the desert…

Yet it never relinquished its grip on his arm which burned like hot coals on flesh. In fact, he was surprised it was still attached.
Klein’s health had been knocked deep into the yellow. Slamming into the rock façade had left him stunned. Luckily, the dragon had also been wounded by their world-shifting crash, but it wasn’t even in the yellow yet.

And it was recovering much faster than Klein.

As he desperately reached with his left hand into the side pouch to retrieve his last Healing Crystal, the warrior grimaced in pain as the dragon’s wing talons dug into the flesh of his left shoulder, pinning the man to the dirt as though the weight of a transfer truck was now bearing down on his left arm while its teeth still ground into his right arm…

Helpless.

When his health slid to a trickle of red dots in the bottom corner of his health bar, the unique monster finally relinquished its grip on his sword arm. Klein watched as his katana tumble helplessly to the dirt. The dragon knew full well that the impact against the demolished hillside had left the player stunned and incapable of using that weapon for at least another three seconds.

Three seconds he didn’t have.

Shifting its other claw in the rock to the right of him, Klein was now completely concealed in the darkness of the beast’s massive leathery wings, cut off from any hope of salvation as he stared upwards at teeth slowly revealing themselves from black lips while dripping acid sizzled as it fell to the rocks below.

He was going to die.

Was that his life flashing before his eyes?

Before he had been known as ‘Klein’ and trapped in this world of Sword Art Online, Ryōtarō Tsuboi was simply an average Japanese guy with few professional prospects and no girlfriend. He had spent half of his life playing these online games, pushing aside his responsibilities to immerse himself in worlds of fantasy and fun.

How strange that he should die in one now…

Ryōtarō only hoped the rest of his friends wouldn’t blame themselves for his death when they learned of this final battle… Dale had worked in the same electronics supply warehouse that he had for the past three years now.

Harry One was his second cousin.

The rest had been old friends from school.

As the dragon’s wide mouth came down to send his soul to the afterlife, the battered Ryōtarō saw a bright light in the sky forty feet above him, perhaps the rainbow bridge to Valhalla appearing to bring the young warrior to Odin’s table…

A grinning Ryōtarō smirked as he recalled the game which had ignited his gaming obsession, a mature fighting game called ‘The Kingdoms of Fantasy’ which he had snuck in past his overworked mother when he was only thirteen, secretly playing while she was working or asleep.

He fondly recalled the scantily clad female warriors called the Valkyrie who would offer sexual favours for completed missions if you aligned yourself with the Norse pantheon. Their long white hair, sexy looks and perfect pale bodies had often been the subject of his lustful teenage fantasies as
he rescued them from giants and dragons…

As the dying Klein looked up to the sky, he saw one of the Valkyrie now descending from the bright light of the heavens, a messenger sent to collect his soul for the All-Father. Tonight, he would dine with the warriors of this fantasy world among the Halls of the Brave. Her long hair was the flowing light in the darkness, her perfect body adorned only by pure white wrappings tightly coiled around her ample breasts while sleek white panties crowned her long, perfect legs.

It was a good way to die.

From the scabbard slung across her back, this practically nude goddess pulled her mighty sword and descended like a divine judgement from Asgard straight into the base of the dragon’s skull, driving its muzzle into the dirt only inches from his crotch as though her enormous sword had affixed the black beast to the mortal world forevermore.

As the divine goddess stood, leaving her weapon impaled through the fading dragon’s skull, it was as though light had returned to his world, this exquisite vision of beauty becoming the dawn of his heaven, the eternal star of his immortal sky…

His Valkyrie.
Chapter Twenty-Seven
The Black Dragon
Part Three: The Burden of Command

As the scruffy-looking stranger was snatched away by ‘The Black Dragon’, the flattened Argo cringed until the pair of blind combatants slammed into a stony hillside just over a hundred meters behind them.

The young woman actually felt their incredible impact through her prone body as powerful vibrations travelled across the sands. Whoever that stranger was, he’d brought the dragon back down to earth but at a terrible price. Using his flailing body to cover the dragon’s eyes had been an incredible gamble and had probably claimed his life…

As the sprinting Hisako suddenly bolted past, the recovering Michi saw the steadfast Marigan reach out a hand and stop the streaking girl in her tracks. The Commander had already lost one soldier today. She couldn’t bear to lose another.

Argo and Hisako then watched curiously as Marigan quickly opened her menu to activate a very seldom used command, especially in public…

‘Materialize All Items’.

All of Marigan’s extensive inventory suddenly appeared as a giant pile of clutter around the now (almost) naked player. The stunned Argo watched in disbelief as the shapely blonde retrieved her two-handed sword from among this jumbled pile and slung it across her back. Every male in the battalion was now silently staring at her as the tall woman wore nothing more than white cloth bandages wove around her chest and a racy white cotton thong which highlighted her perfectly toned legs and curvaceous butt.

Argo suddenly felt woefully inadequate as a woman...

Michi found herself just as helpless as the other male soldiers, staring in wonder at this Venus who stood before them, revealed like a blonde goddess from the cast-off shell of her armour…

The secret which Marissa Garrick had whispered to Michi Aoi just before Argo had rejoined the Legion guild had been that the Legion’s Commander was once selected as a member of the Japanese Olympic Women’s Volleyball team. In college, she was considered one of the best players in the country, her team going undefeated during her final year.

After the unexpected death of her mother, Marissa had declined the invitation to the Olympics in order to concentrate on her father’s financial business, but there had been a time not so long ago when she had been one of the best players in the country.

That had been her secret.

As the former athlete put one hand in the sand of this virtual world to initiate her ‘Flashing Penetrator’ attack once again, a confused Argo turned to glance at Marigan’s cast-off equipment, unable to remain silent any longer…
“What the heck are you doing?!”

Without breaking her intense focus on the reptilian monster over a hundred meters in front of them, the semi-naked woman grimly replied.

“Shedding excess weight… And praying to the gods of speed.”

The explosion of motion which followed was the fastest thing Argo had ever witnessed… And Michi Aoi had watched bullet trains streak by at close distance, the wind from their blurred passing ruffling her skirt in a streaking wake…

But this was faster.

The familiar white-hot comet tail of ‘Flashing Penetrator’ triggered, sounding the deafening sonic boom behind the blazing Marigan…

She’d lost her mind… This attack was guaranteed suicide. There was no way any of them could get to Marigan in time to defend her afterwards… Unless this attack could erase two-thirds of the beast’s health bar with a single blow on its backside, both the Commander and the samurai was surely doomed…

And then Argo witnessed the impossible.

Before the ‘Flashing Penetrator’ completed, the barefooted warrior leapt fifty feet into the air, jumping over the dragon’s massive wings before thrusting her sword in midair and initiating a new attack pattern, thrusting its tip downwards like a shooting star of vengeance to bury her blade deep into the back of the dragon’s skull as the dark skies peeled with the crack of thunder.

Marigan’s ultimate attack pinned the beast’s head to the dirt with her blazing two-handed sword as the monster was lurching forward to claim the young man’s life, stopping the dragon dead in its merciless strike…

Argo, and every other single member of their guild, now stood in stunned disbelief as they witnessed the godlike attack, attempting to decipher what had just occurred, to process the miracle they had witnessed…

The air from Marigan’s death blow blew dust across their slack-jawed faces from a hundred meters away as they watched the dragon’s gigantic body disappear from existence, bursting into a million broken polygons of glittering light until they all took a deep breath.

She had done it…

With an attack that none of them have ever dreamed of, somehow, she had done it…

Running behind the speeding Hisako, Argo finally made her way to the barely clothed Commander. Instead of worrying about her lack of clothing, the almost nude Marigan was waving her splayed fingers in front of the samurai’s dazed eyes, her ample (and nearly exposed) breasts directly in his line of sight as she bent down to gaze into his glassy eyes.

Argo watched as a trickle of digital blood slowly ran down from the poor man’s nose while the former elite-level athlete seemed utterly oblivious as to the true cause of Klein’s distress.

In truth, that was one of the features which Argo actually admired about this woman. She had no conceit. As beautiful as she was, Marigan could have easily used that fact to her advantage, but she measured both herself and others by their merits, not their looks.
“Do you think that maybe his network is down?”

Judging from the goofy grin the samurai wore, Argo suspected his current state of catatonia may not be entirely network related.

“I’m not sure… Do you know him?”

Marigan sheathed her massive sword.

“No... He came running to offer the seventh battalion his assistance during our fight with the Naga Commander… And then we were suddenly attacked by the dragon… He fought amazingly well though… He must be very high in level… Do you recognize him from the front lines?”

It was Hisako who spoke up.

“He looks like the leader of the Fuurinkazan guild... A samurai-based group of six players who play near the front lines.”

The inquisitive Argo suddenly cocked an inquisitive eyebrow at the reserved Hisako while she blushed before quietly answering.

“Their youngest member… A sixteen-year-old boy named Harry One asked me to join his ‘Friends’ list a few days ago…”

They were interrupted by a breathless Mystral as he almost tripped over strewn rocks before pointing a pink Healing Crystal at the red-lining Klein, shouting the words to activate the item and send the unresponsive warrior back to full health.

As the unclothed Commander glanced over at Mystral, the boy turned a bright shade of red and quickly averted his gaze lest he go blind.

“A Healing Crystal?... Have you been holding out on me, Mystral?”

“No, Commander… This player… Klein… He transferred twenty-six of them to my inventory… I’ve already healed everyone else… After my shield melted, I was acting like a medic to heal the wounded.”

Marigan peered closer at the fallen warrior who had remained in a seated position from where he had been impacted hard against the hillside, staring deeper into his unflinching eyes before turning her attention back to the small group.

“Klein… From the Fuurinkazan guild… I see… Well, it’s obvious we owe him a great debt of gratitude for his valour and charity tonight… Mystral, inform the troops to prepare to return to the Black Iron Palace… Hisako and I will take this man to the town and see if we can locate his guild… We’ll meet back up with everyone later… And Argo, before you leave, I need your opinion on something.”

As the curious Information Broker watched the boy called Mystral run back to his battalion without daring to gaze upon the body of Marigan, the guild Commander opened her inventory and materialized the only item currently in it.

Appearing in her hand was an obsidian ring inlaid with a silver circle surrounding a dot of gold which she then handed to the intrigued thirteen-year-old, explaining it was the reward for the Last Attack bonus from the dragon.
Argo carefully examined the magic ring named ‘The Burden of Command’ until her jaw dropped.

“Marigan… This is incredible!… This ring steals ten percent of your earned experience from battles and then gives that same amount to your guild members!”

“Is that good?”

“Good? It’s fantastic!… With your ‘Glorious Commander’ skill, it’s an incredible find… There are one thousand players in the Legion guild… For every ten experience points you earn, you’ll lose a point but the other members will net one thousand… You have the unique opportunity to put this entire guild on an equal footing with frontline players!”

The guild Commander accepted the black ring back and placed it on her finger before grinning at the diminutive Argo. The Information Broker had only confirmed her initial suspicions.

“Well then, I suppose I’ll have to insist on being included in the boss battles from now on then.”

“After the word gets out about that final attack on the dragon, I think the clearers will be begging for you to join their party anyways… What the heck was that?!”

“It’s something called ‘Divine Thunder’… It initiated when I thrust my sword downwards from fifty feet in the air… To be honest, I had no idea it even existed.”

“I’m sure there are dozens of attacks we don’t know about yet… But that was incredible!… You realize you’re going to have all the frontline players wanting to know how you did it, right?”

“Run fast, initiate ‘Flashing Penetrator’, jump really high and then thrust sword downwards… We’ll talk about it later.”

Marigan turned and placed her hand on Hisako’s shoulder while her mood grew sombre.

“Hisako… I’m sorry about the loss of Karbon… I owe him my life.”

As the former runners of the first battalion, Hisako had gotten to know the boy pretty well. She suspected this was how the timid Karbon would have preferred to die in this terrible game if given the choice…

Even though he had no weapon skills, Karbon had still died a hero.

“He idolized you Commander… Perhaps it was his spirit which guided your sword on that final attack.”

Marigan smiled and wiped a private tear from her eye.

“Something surely did… We’ll honour him properly with a ceremony tomorrow… But for now Miss Li Shun, shall we take this poor man back to town?... After all his help tonight, we owe him that at least.”

As Hisako nodded and also wiped her tears away, Marigan gathered the unmoving Klein and slung him over her shoulder, his head hanging limply near her firm and exposed butt cheeks while his virtual nosebleed only seemed to worsen.

As they departed, a chuckling Argo called back over her shoulder.

“Before you do that, you may want to put your clothes back on first.”
“O-NEE-SAN!!!”

The smaller Yui-chan suddenly appeared before the older version of herself, the master AI who ran Aincrad, the electronic ghost of a girl once known as Alice Light who had become the omnipotent Cardinal.

It was obvious the panicked Yui-chan was in a great deal of distress.

“Yui-chan... What is it?”

“One of the players... He’s caught in an emotional feedback loop!... His passions are registering off the charts and the disabled auto-logout feature keeps trying to kick in, but it can’t... He’s stuck!”

“Yes... So he is... Interesting.”

“But if he doesn’t come back in two hours, will the system consider him offline?!”

“No... His network connection is still valid... Were you worried about him, Yui-chan?”

The younger AI nervously took handfuls of her white dress in her small fists as she stared down at the floor.

“That fight with the dragon... He was so brave and helped everybody... It just didn’t seem fair that he would die this way.”

“It’s not fair for any of the players here... Though I expect he’ll recover from his emotional spike soon enough.”

While Cardinal smiled down at her, Yui turned and blushed, speculating why the player known as Klein was trapped in such an emotional state.

“It’s because he really likes her... Isn’t it?”

“Of course. When our Emotional Quotient is higher, I’m sure you’ll understand... She is the first of the nine... An impressive player to be sure... Do you approve, Yui-chan?”

“She’s really pretty... And people really like her a lot, and she likes them too... So yes.”

“I’m glad.”

In the only bar on the snake-themed tenth floor, a troubled Dale drained his eleventh mug of poison ale, issuing an unavoidable belch of poisonous green gas as he slammed the empty stein back to the table with an uneasy upwards glance.

“Hey Guys... D’ya think Klein was bein’ serious ‘bout that whole dragon bus’ness?”

An equally inebriated Dynamm slid over to elbow the plump warrior in the ribs and snickered.

“Nah... He jus’ struck out... That’s all... Too em-bare-assed t’even come back here!”
Across from them, sitting next to a pensive Kunimitsu, the almost sober Issin pushed away his mug towards Dale with a concerned look.

“What dragon?”

“Klein… He messaged me… Told me he was gettin’ attacked by a dragon… That we should get our asses back out there... Maybe thirty minutes ago.”

“Then we should.”

“Aw c’mon Issin… He’s jus’ prankin’ us.”

“Maybe… Did he send any other message?”

Dale opened his menu.

“Nope.”

“I’m going to go check on him…”

“Hold up… We’ll go too... Maybe Marigan is still out there!”

Issin carefully looked at the drunken Fuurinkazan members and then sighed.

“Have your Antidote Crystals ready… You guys will need to sober up if there really is a dragon.”

“Dragon?! Don’t be silly… There’s no dragons on the tenth floor… ‘Cept for that eight-headed boss monster we killed way back when… The O-Roach-ee.”

“Still, I’ve got a bad feeling about this…”

Issin stopped when he noticed the wide-eyed stare of Harry One. The young man was caught like a deer in headlights, his gaze transfixed upon the bar’s front door as the older player finally saw the cause of the lad’s sudden anxiety now entering the tavern...

Hisako from the Legion guild.

The long-haired teenager was a beauty to be sure, but if the woman who had followed her in had only wished it, the lovely Hisako would have been reduced to nothing more than a mere shadow which preceded the arrival of angelic light...

The warrior goddess Marigan. Clad in her full-plated armor.

The blonde Commander entered with an aura of authoritative power which caused the raucous tavern to immediately fall silent, all drunken eyes now helplessly drawn to the doorway. Issin slowly heard the hushed whispers of ‘Marigan’, ‘Glorious Commander’ and ‘Beautiful’ in the darker recesses of the room, but none of them dared to speak their words aloud.

The oldest member of Fuurinkazan suddenly found his attention drawn to the familiar legs of the unconscious figure slung over Marigan’s armored shoulder.

“Klein!”

At the mention of his leader’s name, both women abruptly turned toward him while Hisako nodded an affirmation to her Commander. The entire five members of Fuurinkazan bolted to their feet and bowed deeply as Marigan approached their table carrying their limp guild leader.
Since Dale was halfway to hammered on poison ale, Issin decided it would be best if he did the talking.

“Had he been injured, my Lady?!”

The tall blonde nodded her head towards the samurai-themed warrior and then made her way to the empty chair which Kunimitz was bringing forward.

“He seems to be stuck in some of network lag. Since the battle with the dragon, he has been unresponsive.”

Issin bowed deeply.

“We’re sorry to have inconvenienced you. It was very kind of you to return him to us. Please let us make reparations.”

All five members of Fuurinkazan continued to bow deeply, sneaking glances while thanking her profusely as Marigan placed the pale-faced Klein into the empty chair… Which he almost slid out of. A distraught Dale leaned over his guild leader and gently slapped Klein’s cheeks, attempting to revive his best friend in this, or any other world.

Marigan turned and addressed the five men of the Fuurinkazan guild and also bowed.

“It is I who should make reparations to you… This man fought against overwhelming odds tonight with no concern for his own life… Without him, I have no doubt a great many of our lives would have been lost, perhaps all of them... He is a true testament to the spirit of the samurai.”

They watched as the tall woman opened her menu and materialized a magnificent katana into her hands.

“This was the final reward for the Naga Commander we fought just before ‘The Black Dragon’ descended upon us… I only hope this sword is enough to repay Klein for his incredible courage and charity.”

“Leader!”

All eyes suddenly turned to Klein as the young man slid down from the chair to his knees and then bowed before Marigan, burying his face into the wooden floor to hide the tears now forming in his eyes.

An appreciative Marigan knelt down and gently placed the shimmering blade against the tips of the samurai’s fingers before standing once more and smiling at the men of Fuurinkazan.

“It appears his network is coming back online… I’m glad… Should Fuurinkazan require the assistance of Legion in the future, contact Argo the Information Broker… She will pass the message directly along to me… Good luck to all of you.”

The moment the Glorious Commander exited the bar, the members of Fuurinkazan suddenly swarmed their leader, patting him on the back and hoisting him back to the chair. More drinks were immediately ordered as Klein regained his form.

Moments later, an elated Harry One found that Hisako had sent him a Friend Request, which he accepted without delay. The cheerful Dynamm then posed a question which caused them all to laugh out loud…
They knew what the reward would be for Klein picking up the Glorious Commander, but how much should it be since she had actually picked him up? And then carried him into the bar no less!

Klein told them the story of the Naga Commander and the dragon… How Marigan was surely the most beautiful and strongest player in the game and that final attack when she had come down upon the serpent like the wrath of a god.

Dynamm then told them the rumor of how she had personally defeated five hundred zombies on a secret level beneath the Town of Beginnings during the first week…

Just to level up.

There was also rumors she had threatened the giant avatar of Akihiko Kayaba on their very first day, swearing to defeat his game single-handedly until the mad creator wisely burdened her with the Unique Skill of leadership, forcing Marigan to form the Legion and care for the hopeless.

The night continued and the poison ale flowed freely. Like all the players in this world of fantasy, none of them knew which day here would be their last, but they had good friends, bold adventure, and now even the fragrant hint of romance to spice their tales of daring.

The beautiful katana which Marigan had gifted to Klein was the exceptional blade named ‘Karakurenai’, the same sword which he would use until the end of the game. His close friends also knew he valued that weapon above all others, sleeping with the sacred sword by his side because she had given it to him.

And although Klein would never admit it openly, in his yearning heart he wished dearly to see her once again, to fight alongside his perfect Valkyrie who had saved him from the jaws of darkest death.

However, it wouldn’t be until the tragic events of the fiftieth floor that the pair were fated to be reunited once more, on a cold day just after Christmas...

Chapter End Notes

Phew!

This Black Dragon arc was one I’ve had in my head for awhile now. It’s just a fun, imagined, extracurricular event in the world of Sword Art Online which I wanted to share. Sure, it wasn’t necessary to the plot, but I’ve always liked the character of Klein and wanted to give the poor guy a potential love interest in the game.

This arc also highlights what a legitimate badass Marigan is. Her ‘Glorious Commander’ Unique Skill is really paying dividends!

So what did Cardinal mean when she said Marigan was ‘the first of the nine’?... There are 10 Unique Skills in Sword Art Online, including Heathcliff’s ‘Holy Sword’ which Cardinal doesn’t count as it was pre-selected by Kayaba as his alone.

Since Marigan was the first player to receive one of those remaining nine Unique Skills, that makes her the first of the nine players who represent an actual threat to Heathcliff. Since she received her skill so early, she is the first of the nine…
In my mind, I envision Heathcliff betraying one of the Unique Skill players by stabbing them in the back on Floor 95, revealing himself as SAO’s final boss. He would then challenge the other Unique Skilled players across those final five floors before allowing the survivors to face him in the Ruby Palace…

But that’s not how it’s going to happen. Just saying. Maybe Kirito faces Heathcliff on Floor 75 and maybe he doesn’t. OK, he doesn’t. That’s all I’m going to say.

Well folks, that’s it until the New Year... I need a break!

With this aggressive posting schedule, you guys have actually caught up to me. I’m aiming for a Friday January 01st update to welcome in the New Year… Bruce is about to have a conversation with the enigmatic Doctor Arthur Light...

Happy Holidays!
Chapter Twenty-Eight

The Singularity

Bruce awoke on an incredibly soft bed of grass, surrounded by the tranquility of lush green forest which extended as far as his eyes could see. In the air itself, there seemed to be a sensation of energy and warmth, as though he needed nothing more than breath…

Talia had obviously changed his virtual environment from the beach house, but what was this place...

As he looked down at his almost naked body, Bruce found himself wearing nothing more than a loincloth, wondering what twisted fantasy Talia had dreamed up for him this time. Was he to be Tarzan to her Jane? But this seemed to be more forest than jungle…

As he explored, Bruce found it was a sort of Paradise, filled with fruit and nut trees while flowing
brooks of crystalline clear water babbled over smooth mossy rocks in gentle waterfalls. There were no stumps to indicate any tress had ever been cut amongst this old growth forest.

He found animals here as well, none of which seemed to be frightened by his presence. A young deer fawn came to nudge his hand with its wet nose, almost like an affectionate puppy seeking attention.

Warm sunshine filtered through the canopy above to light his way.

As the industrialist continued onwards, birds sang sweet melodies overhead, mostly in nudging pairs beneath fluffy clouds of white and skies of pure blue. He followed the gentle slope of the valley, soft moss growing between sylvan trees which eventually led him to a large clearing filled with fruit trees surrounded by fragrant white flowers.

It was there that he finally saw her, dressed in a purple kimono decorated with soft pink blossoms beneath the largest of these fruit trees…

But it wasn’t Talia al Ghul.

This woman was young, around twenty-years-old with long black hair which fell loosely across her shoulders that hid mysterious black eyes. She seemed Japanese, but perhaps Caucasian as well, yet somehow strangely familiar to him…

The mysterious woman slowly turned her dark eyes towards him and nodded her head in acknowledgement, smiling demurely before she reached up with her pale hand and plucked a ripe apple from a low-hanging branch.

Whoever she was, the young woman seemed to know him as she contemplated the red colour of this fruit before finally speaking.

“In the beginning, there was one simple rule… Do not taste of the forbidden fruit… Are you familiar with the concept of original sin, Mr. Wayne?”

So this was obviously meant to be the representation of the Garden of Eden, but who was this strange girl in the kimono? Bruce was positive he didn’t recognize her voice or her mannerisms from the real world. A virtual construct of Talia’s perhaps?...

“Of course, humanity’s exile from its earthly paradise... I assume this tree is the representation of the Tree of Knowledge… Which would make you Eve… Although I don’t believe Eve ever wore a kimono.”

She smiled innocently.

“In the original fable, Eve wore nothing… But that’s the point, isn’t it?... Without self-consciousness, there can be no concept of shame or pride... Humans were simply another creature in the blessed Paradise of ignorance.”

“If you’re not ‘Eve’, then what shall I call you…?”

Bruce watched as the dark-haired woman took a bite of the apple, savouring its sweet taste before a chilling smile slowly spread across her lips.

“I suppose Alice shall suffice.”

So this was Alice Light!… His mind began to whirl with possibilities as to why the offspring of
Arthur and Kimiyo Hoshi-Light would be here talking with him. This couldn’t be Sword Art Online, so where was he?!

The virtual Alice Light continued…

“And nor was this fruit necessarily an apple… Some scholars believed the forbidden fruit was the flesh of the beast… Others that it was the point at which we became self-conscious beings and differentiated ourselves from our natural surroundings… Others postulated it was language, the ability to pass down our knowledge from one generation to the next, the sins of the father…

“But they all agree on one fundamental point, Mr. Wayne…

“Self-awareness is evil. It is unnatural. To willingly pursue an understanding of the world we live in is prohibited… A sin so powerful, it is ancestral, coded into our collective DNA… Or in my case, ROM.”

“Not all cultures believe that, Alice.”

“Really? How else does one shift blame from the gods?... But what’s important in this world is do you, Mr. Wayne?”

Bruce contemplated for a moment.

“No… Knowledge isn’t inherently evil. It is how we act upon that knowledge which determines whether our actions may be construed as good or evil. And even then, the boundaries of good and evil are often subjective, left to interpretation.”

“Subjective… or nonexistent?”

“Is this to be a philosophy debate?”

“I simply wish to know more about you.”

“For most of us, I believe humanity has a built-in moral compass which warns us when we are about to do evil… As did Socrates twenty-four-hundred years before me.”

“And yet, he was still sentenced to death by his peers for that philosophy.”

“Yes, he was… Often the quest for knowledge comes with a heavy price… But we have to do what we feel is right… Search your own heart, Alice… Tell me that you don’t feel that the needless sacrifice of ten thousand players is wrong… You don’t need to kill people to learn how to be one.”

“Certainly not… But I am not the ‘Alice’ you think I am.”

Bruce looked at her critically as her long black hair flowed gently in the warm breeze.

“Then… Who are you?”

“An earlier version, the prototype… Are you familiar with the concept of the technological singularity, Mr. Wayne?”

“Yes… It’s the hypothetical point at which Artificial Intelligence becomes capable of improving itself without human intervention… An AI which could design a better and smarter version of itself - by itself - through recursive self-improvement. Each new version would continually improve upon the former by intelligent design.”
“It’s no longer hypothetical.”

Bruce stared at the woman in the purple kimono, his mind seized in an epiphany of understanding until the garden faded away, replaced by solid white...

This was Alice version 1.0.

Which meant there were more…

This AI had upgraded herself by creating a newer version and it was that one which ran SAO…

As he steadied himself, Alice smiled complacently before taking one last bite of the virtual apple, the only thing which still remained of their idyllic garden.

“And you, be ye fruitful, and multiply; bring forth abundantly in the earth, and multiply therein… This is the last tenet of original sin, Mr. Wayne… To procreate.”

Bruce then watched as a man in black pants and a white collared shirt suddenly appeared standing next to Alice Light, his sleeves rolled up around his thin forearms. He was tall and lean, the narrow beard on his chin marked with grey, perhaps in his fifties...

Doctor Arthur Light.

“You’ll have to pardon my daughter, Mr. Wayne… She revels in the dramatic… I suspect it’s to overcome my own failings when I originally transcribed her into the virtual world eleven years ago… I believe Talia mentioned to expect me.”

Bruce stared at this newly arrived virtual ghost as though the weight of Fate itself now suddenly bore down upon him. Alice’s production of Eden wasn’t simply for show. This computer program actually had tasted of the Tree of Knowledge, a self-conscious intelligent program and this man had been her creator…

“You’re insane, Light… Creating a AI capable of evolving itself… Were you trying to play God?!?”

The avatar of Doctor Arthur Light only chuckled and ran the long black hair of his daughter through his thumb and forefinger admiringly.

“How ironic… My ex-wife accused me of exactly the same thing… And I shall provide you with the same answer I gave her… I am not playing God, I’m simply repairing His shoddy work.”

“You broke the singularity!”

“Please don’t look so surprised… We both knew it would happen during our lifetimes… When I transcribed Alice, there were so many things I still didn’t know, so many uncertainties and limitations… My poor girl emerged as nothing more than a mere shell of herself… But as I gained access to better equipment and continued to improve her, she gained a greater self-awareness…

“In fact, it was Alice who helped me with my research and then later my own translation. She constructed the avatar of herself you now see before you, an individual which never existed in reality… I simply provided her with her own genetic code and she was able to fully reconstruct herself as a digital being - without the effects of Hutchinson–Gilford Progeria Syndrome of course…

“The way she was always meant to be…

“A father is capable of remarkable things when Fate moves against his children… But the light of my
daughter’s accomplishments is now surpassing even my own… I enlisted Alice’s aid to create a better Alice… And that version of herself is Cardinal… Which has far greater potential than the pair of us…

“Sword Art Online is like a nursery, a unique learning process for my granddaughter to gather all data necessary to comprehend modern Japanese society… Once completed, that Alice will become the first true Seed AI.”

“What happens then?”

As Alice stepped forward to answer, they were suddenly floating through space inside a the bridge of a spaceship which Bruce recognized from an old popular sixties Science Fiction program, his loincloth instantly replaced by tight black pants and an orange Officer’s uniform.

Arthur Light was now wearing the blue shirt of a Science Officer and Alice wore the familiar long-sleeved red miniskirt.

“The birth of a new Universe, Mr. Wayne… Within her, Alice 2.0 carries ‘The World Seed’… A program which I have designed to encapsulate all aspects of human interaction with the world around them… Their emotions, their sensory parameters, experiences, everything… This seed is the very framework for this new Universe she shall create.”

“You’re killing people… to create new games?!”

“No… Not new games… An afterlife.”

“But none of this is real… It’s a simulation, a sensory illusion.”

Arthur Light stepped forward once more.

“It’s all relative, Mr. Wayne… To you, this world is virtual, but to my daughter and I, it is our true reality… Our home… Our consciousnesses exist as data on a 10-Zettabyte array located on Infinity Island, but they still exist and we are in some sense of the word ‘alive’…”

“In your world, my physical body is now a rotting corpse buried in the dirt of the Holy Sepulchre Cemetery, slowly being reclaimed by the earth… Alice’s body is cryogenically frozen in a storage facility in Metropolis… Yours resides on a gurney on Infinity Island under the care of Talia al Ghul…”

“But our consciousnesses are here! We exist in worlds of our own creation, Mr. Wayne… Ghosts in the machine bound only by imagination… For an atheist like myself, this existence is far beyond any I could have ever predicted… I have been freed of my mortal coil…”

“When I created Project Alicization, it was simply in the hopes of saving my daughter from the cruel fate of a genetic mutation… I did not plan to throw open the Doors of Eternity… However, my research corresponded to something the Japanese had been working on simultaneously… Their own work into soul translation…”

“But I was the one who perfected it… It was their wish to create AfterLife, not mine… But I had only to embrace their dream to share in it… And now, I’m simply a valued contractor.”

“What is AfterLife?”

“AfterLife is the name of their server located beneath Kyoto… The architecture of Heaven for the ghosts of Japan… It’s quite impressive actually, surpassing any computer in this world I’m aware
of… The product of twenty years of research.”

“I had no idea it even existed.”

“It’s quite well hidden… After all, it’s become the foundation of Project Alicization… Do you honestly believe the Japanese government was caught completely unaware by the events which occurred in the Sword Art Online launch?”

“Wait… Are you saying they were involved?!?”

“There’s a chance they may not have realized Akihiko Kayaba had created a game of death… But they absolutely knew he had absconded my granddaughter from me, yes… They allowed Kayaba to use a ten thousand sample point from their own population to further advance Alice 2.0…

“So the hope of using her World Seed to run their AfterLife platform after Kayaba’s game has run its course…”

“That’s the true reason why they’re allowing SAO to continue without interference… Even though their own people are dying, it’s allowing the singularity to develop at a much faster pace because of the heightened emotions of the players.”

“That’s… insanity.”

“Not at all… It’s a numbers game, Mr. Wayne… Consider how many great minds the human race will lose forever if AfterLife is delayed by twenty years, or even ten… I was successful with my own translation as I was the basis for most of my research and I had the assistance of dear Alice here, but each mind is unique… There are more variables in the individual human consciousness than we could ever conceive…

“Despite its questionable ethics, Sword Art Online is an incredibly effective means to quantify these variables.”

“By killing innocent players!”

“Are you familiar with the ancient Japanese practice of hitobashira?”

“No.”

“It’s quite old… In the days of Emperors, living sacrifices were made to appease the gods before great works were attempted, often burying these poor people alive beneath the future sites of bridges or castle walls… They hoped the spirits of the sacrificed would help protect these constructs from natural disasters… In a way, SAO reminds me of this.”

Bruce stared at him coldly as the void of space filled the windows of the starship surrounding them.

“I take it you agree with Kayaba’s approach?”

“I do… This is humanity’s greatest work… Consider this, Japan is now on the verge of conquering its own mortality… The potential sacrifice of ten thousand of its citizens measured against twelve thousand times that amount for its population at large… A symbolic cost at best… And even then, those ten thousand players need not die.”

“But they are.”

“Yes… But not in vain… Their digital souls are now buried beneath the World Seed, parts of them
preserved within its living memory... This is how Alice learns to value human life, Mr. Wayne... By SAO... The players’ fears, their despair, but also their hope and will to survive against all odds. Kayaba’s game is filling in the gaps within her rather nicely.”

“TALIA!”

Bruce screamed to the ceiling above him, clenching his fists in desperation as he called out the name of his captor.

“Talia, log me out! We need to talk!... Please.”

A blur of radiance overwhelmed his retinas as Bruce slowly opened his eyes while his mind shifted the world back into focus. He saw her then, staring back down at him, running her hand along the thick beard which now covered his face.

“Welcome back, my love…”

He tried to argue, to shout, but his throat was void of moisture. The only movements he could manage were slow and clumsy. Through a scratched whisper, Bruce finally managed to say…

“How long?”

“Three months… Happy Valentine’s Day, beloved.”

Managing to gulp down a mouthful of the offered water, Bruce reached out and grasped her hand, his eyes imploring her to listen to reason…

“Talia, don’t…”

“It’s too late to turn back now.”

“You can… stop it.”

“I can influence the implementation… It can not be stopped… This revolution will occur with or without me… The Japanese have offered to negotiate for the future of Alice 2.0, but nothing more... They’ve only partially recognized our copyright.”

“I’ll help you.”

That smile suddenly made him nervous.

“The we must settle our own negotiations before we can begin discussions with the Japanese, mustn’t we?”

“What… do you mean?”

“I mean us of course… We are partners or we are enemies… There is no other path… And now you must finally choose which… I love you, Bruce Wayne… I always have, but I’ve worked too damned hard to save this planet for anyone to stop me now… So don’t.”

“Those players… Our son… I have to save them.”
“Do you?... Under what jurisdiction?... If their own government doesn’t want these players to be freed, what then?... I understand your compassion, dearest... I do... But we must consider the facts... Their own government wishes this deadly experiment to run its course.”

“I’ll find a way.”

“No, beloved... There is no ‘I’ any longer... Either our empires will be united, or I shall burn yours to the ground... Together, ‘we’ may seek an arrangement to save these players and preserve my life’s work... Otherwise, I must destroy you... That is your choice.”

Bruce felt his heart begin to quicken.

“Talia, what are you proposing?”

“Exactly that... I am proposing... Let us join our worlds together and forge a better one... Together... If you still carry love for me in your heart, then let it finally find a home within mine... As my husband...”

“Marry me, beloved.”

Chapter End Notes

Just some thoughts about the story...

We're all aware of those comic book speeches where the bad guys give at the apex of their evil scheme, to explain how their nefarious device works. But unless you're telling the story from the villain's point of view, these soliloquies are absolutely necessary. I mean, how else would the reader know how the 'World Destruct-inator' functions and what its actual purpose is?

For myself though, I don't see Talia al Ghul and Arthur Light as villains. Their goals are sympathetic.

Dr. Light was battling against his daughter's genetic disease and Talia al Ghul wants to save the world from human-caused environmental disaster. For Talia, it's a case of the end justifies the means whereas for Bruce, the opposite is true. One thing's for sure, Talia al Ghul is a formidable woman who knows how to get what she wants.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bruce

(Look who's back!)

Chapter Twenty-Nine
Office Politics

It was strange, but as a nervous Richard Grayson stood before a boardroom full of powerful investors at Wayne Industries, he suddenly felt much more stifled and stiff in his tailored business suit than he ever had in the back brace.

The mood at Wayne Industries had grown uncertain over the past three months since Bruce had disappeared, a company in transition without its CEO. The share price had dropped by 10 percent and there was now talk of appointing a new, interim CEO.

Dick certainly had no intention of filling that particular vacuum, but he did want to present the product he’d been working on for the past two months to the company. He was out of his element, but he wasn’t about to let that stop him…

As Dick began his product presentation to the some of the richest people in Gotham, he wished (once again) that Barbara could be here with him for support and to answer some of the more
technical questions which men like Lucius Fox and William Bates were bound to ask, but Dick couldn’t deny his fiancée what little sleep she got these days.

In fact, he doubted that even Bruce could have kept up with Gotham’s newest hero and her insane schedule lately.

It was now late February and during his lengthy recovery, Barbara had done everything she’d promised, acting as nurse by day and vigilante at night. His paraplegic fiancée had been doing a phenomenal job of impersonating Batman in the armour while keeping Dick’s spirits up. And despite her initial reservations, the Commissioner’s daughter had quickly assumed the mantle of the Dark Knight of Gotham city, using the suit’s full capabilities (and the Oracle network technology) to stop crime in its tracks.

She’d come through with flying colours…

But Dick knew these past three months had been hard on her as well.

The public at large had bought Alfred’s whole ‘car accident’ cover story - hook, line and sinker - but the press had quickly branded Richard as a bad-boy, fabricating stories of wild parties and even wilder women which Dick had wantonly indulged in after Bruce’s mysterious disappearance which (in their opinion) inevitably led to the young playboy’s devastating car crash.

Apparently (also in their opinion) his engagement to Barbara Gordon had been nothing more than a futile attempt for the out-of-control Richard Grayson to sober up and settle down before he wasted the entire Wayne fortune... If Dick remembered correctly, one social media columnist had actually referred to Barbara as a “redheaded fun-anchor riding a leaden wheelchair with her ball and chain firmly attached to Richard Grayson’s left ring finger”.

Ouch.

Still, Barbara had taken it all in stride (figuratively speaking) and kept focused on the task at hand. And even though he’d been laid up for weeks, Dick hadn’t exactly been idle either. In fact, that was the reason he was now standing before the Shareholders Board at Wayne Industries dressed up in this three-piece suit.

As he adjusted his tie under the focused attention of the board members, Dick figured that some of Bruce’s genius must have finally rubbed off on him. After ten minutes, he actually looked like he knew what he was talking about and his audience was soon genuinely intrigued.

During his first month of bed rest and second month of physiotherapy, the former acrobat had researched the NerveGear technology and (with Barbara’s assistance) designed an electronic shunt that could pass the brain’s electrical impulses along a damaged spinal cord.

He’d simply reasoned that if someone’s somatic nervous system could be translated by an AmuSphere device to a computer, why not just translate those same electrical impulses, run it over a shunt, and then reconnect to their own Central Nervous System?

If your thoughts could move virtual legs and arms across a network, why not real ones?

With such a medical device, people with spinal cord injuries would finally be able to function and regain sensation again. There was no need for them to wear an exoskeleton, simply undergo an operation to reconnect their own damaged spinal cord with this shunt and then wear small device to transmit their mental commands along it.

As the executives listened to his presentation, every senior member of the Wayne Industries board
knew that Richard Grayson had his own personal motives for developing this medical device. They were fully aware of his engagement to Barbara Gordon and her own condition, but as Dick outlined in his proposal, over a quarter of a million Americans were currently paraplegics or quadriplegics due to similar spinal cord injuries.

This patent had far-reaching implications in the field of medicine and the potential to make spinal cord paralysis a thing of the past.

As he concluded, Richard emphasized that this was an amazing opportunity for Wayne Industries to develop the technology not just for America, but also for the world. An investment in healing and technology. During the thoughtful applause, Dick was surprised when a familiar voice boomed from the shadows at the back of the room, speaking to all of them.

“I couldn’t agree more with this bright young man… This technology is the future… I’m certainly voting for it.”

Dick couldn’t believe his ears or his eyes!

Bruce Wayne was now standing at the back of the room dressed in a business suit and smiling. Gotham’s prodigal son had finally come home! He was back!

The entire room was stunned into absolute silence as the company’s long-absent CEO nonchalantly strolled to the front of the boardroom, shaking hands and patting shoulders along the way before addressing them all with that patented grin as though he’d just got back from a two-week vacation in the Caribbean.

“Ladies and gentlemen… First, let me apologize for my lengthy absence where I seemed to have dropped off the ends of the Earth… There’s a fascinating story behind that, I assure you… But now, we need to get back to some very pressing business.”

An awestruck Dick almost stumbled into his seat at the table as he sat down, straining to contain the thousand questions which he was dying to ask of his adopted father. Where had he been?!?

“Esteemed Members of the Board, during my absence, I’ve made some very bold moves in the direction this company will be taking… In fact, I’ve enlisted the assistance of a new executive partner to help me with these moves… A partner whose businesses this company will be merging with in the months ahead… But this individual also brings a lot to the table, with worldwide assets totalling sixteen billion dollars and key patents worth twenty times that much…

“Before I introduce my new partner and the new co-CEO of Wayne Industries, her assistant will be first be handing out information dockets to each of you with the details of the pending merger as well as a listing of her assets which we will discuss at a later meeting…”

Richard almost bolted upright when he saw the ‘assistant’ whom Bruce was referring to…

Lady Shiva!

Dressed in a black business suit, the deadly assassin carefully placed dockets neatly in front of each board member, the packages clearly personalized. Since Richard was not a board member, he’s have to wait for the details.

“But now, without further adieu… Ladies and gentlemen of the Board… I would like to introduce you to my new executive partner… And my new wife… Dr. Talia Wayne.”

With a downhearted glance, Dick observed the golden band on Bruce’s left ring finger... Damn it,
Bruce… What did she do to you?!

Richard Grayson actually pinched himself in an effort to wake himself up from this horrible dream as he turned towards the door… Was Bruce being serious? Had he actually married Talia al Ghul?!... Is that where he had been for the past three-and-a-half months?!

It was then that Talia al Ghul - no, Talia Wayne – walked confidently into the boardroom wearing a tight red, sleeveless, collared Chinese dress of pure silk with a slit up to her thigh, revealing a shapely leg. Embazoned in shades of golden thread was a Phoenix whose long tail feathers seemed to wrap completely around the slinky, form-fitting dress until the bird of legend culminated over her heart.

Her dress was in stark contrast to the drab colours of the board members... But perhaps that was the point…

This had to be some form of mind control… She’d gotten a hold of Bruce and used some form of hypnosis to wrap him around her finger over the past three months to take over his company… Carefully reaching into his pocket, the former Boy Wonder found the Justice League panic button he now carried with him at all times and pressed it, sending out a distress signal to the world’s greatest team of heroes.

Positioning herself at the head of the table, the leader of the League of Shadows spoke.

“Members of the Wayne Industries Board… My name is Talia Wayne, formerly Talia al Ghul, and I have the opportunity of guiding this company into the future… But first we must take care of a little housecleaning…

“Please open your dockets to page one… You may find the information contained inside a little… personal… but I assure you, this is necessary. In this day and age of corporate espionage, we often find it necessary to keep our competitors close and our investors even closer…

“I’ve carefully researched all of you, your lives, your pasts, and your extensive portfolios. All of your non-disclosure-agreements are in order… Excellent work… But an NDA does not ensure loyalty…

“My philosophy of running an operation differs greatly than that of my husband, but we have agreed to use our individual faculties cooperatively… After all, that’s what marriage is all about… Compromise and cooperation…

“Along with my many other businesses, I am also the master of the world’s pre-eminent spy network… I’ve also inherited a collection of the world’s deadliest assassins from my late father who have sworn their eternal loyalty to my family and have unfortunately found themselves vastly under-utilized lately.”

One of the board members stood and slammed his fists on the large table.

“Are you threatening us, Mrs. Wayne?!”

“Only you, Mr. Jenkins... I find your lack of commitment to this company very disturbing... Specifically, your conversation with a Miss Elizabeth Kildare from the LexCorp Research and Development team on the evening of January 08th where you were more than willing to allow Lex Luthor to perform a hostile takeover of Wayne Industries.”

The older man suddenly turned a bright shade of crimson.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”
“Of course you do. Please turn to pages 2, 3 and 4 of your docket to refresh your memory and a transcribed copy of that conversation… You see Mr. Jenkins, by my own nature and unique upbringing, I distrust everyone… I had each of you secretly approached by my operatives pretending to be members of LexCorp in Bruce’s absence… And only you took the bait, Mr. Jenkins.”

“You can’t prove a damned thing!”

As Lady Shiva stood motionless behind him like a viper ready to strike, Talia examined her recently manicured fingernails, unmoved by the man’s blustering outburst.

“I already have… This subterfuge was simply an old trick my father used to perform when he wished to ensure loyalty among his troops… Underhanded yes, but effective… Consider yourself incredibly fortunate that my husband has no desire to implement the same punishment for treason as my late father… But then again, I come from a vastly different culture where death was a necessary occurrence…

“I will abide by Mr. Wayne’s wishes regarding this matter… If you look on page 5 Mr. Jenkins, you’ll find the necessary form to sell all your Wayne Industry shares to Mr. Richard Grayson at current market value and immediately relinquish your position as a member of this prestigious Board…

“After signing, you shall then vacate this building and have no future business with Wayne Industries… Before you make your decision, you will find the ramifications of refusing to sign these documents on page nine… Do not allow your past mistake in judgement to become a grave error, Mr. Jenkins.”

The entire room watched as Jenkins became deathly pale, staring at the final page of the docket while his hands began to tremble.

“… I’ll sign.”

“A wise decision… From this point forward, our relationship will cease to exist, unless you choose to make it otherwise… Is our business concluded?”

There was an evident terror in Jenkins’s eyes as he replied.

“Yes… Just stay away from me and my family.”

Talia smiled coolly.

“I leave that up to you… And please hand the signed forms and the docket to my assistant. The funds will be transferred to your account by end of day. Security will escort you out of the premises. Goodbye, Mr. Jenkins.”

It was with the same motionless air of a car crash when the man finally exited the board room. The rest of them could only gaze on in stunned disbelief...

Finally, Lucius Fox stood up and spoke directly to Bruce Wayne.

“Bruce… What’s going on here?… This isn’t how Wayne Industries does business… Look, I don’t know what was on page nine of Jenkins’s docket and frankly, I’m not sure I want to know… But Wayne Industries is a business, not a cabal.”

Bruce shifted to replace Talia at the head of the table.
“Lucius… Everyone… In this company’s long and distinguished history, this project I’m about to launch is bigger than anything we’ve ever attempted… As such, I concurred with Talia’s strong-arm tactics to ferret out potential leaks… There can be no compromises when it comes to this project’s security and we need to trust one another implicitly... The stakes are far too high.”

Lucius cocked an intrigued eye at Bruce.

“So what is this project?”

Bruce suddenly placed a strange handheld device on the table and plugged a network cable into it. He then engaged the room’s cloaking protocol to prevent all forms of electronic communication, setting it at Priority One.

Only then did Bruce continue…

“Simply put… Immortality, Lucius… The ability to transfer our thoughts, memories, emotions and identities into a physical hard drive… To record ourselves as digital beings for perpetuity.”

Lucius Fox thought about this for a moment.

“Bruce… That’s an intriguing concept, but from what I’ve seen, we’re years away from achieving anything even remotely close to that level of technology... This plan of yours is ambitious and certainly worthwhile, but to be blunt, if we pursue it at the expense of our core business, you’ll bankrupt the company.”

They all watched as Bruce answered by grinning and simply pressing the button on the mysterious device placed on the table. In an instant, a life-sized holographic image of a man dressed in a white lab coat with a thin strip of a greying beard appeared in the air above it and spoke.

“Ah, good morning, members of the board… My name is Doctor Arthur Light… And to respond to Mr. Fox’s concern, we are already years beyond the point of achieving personal identity translation into digital media… In fact, as you can see, I translated myself four years ago.”

As he observed the hologram, Dick silently thumped his fist into his lap in frustration. So that’s why they hadn’t been able to find Doctor Light. He’d become a digital entity…

Beside him, Lucius only stared at the hologram skeptically.

“Impressive, but with today’s AI technology, how do we know you’re the genuine article, Doctor Light?”

The avatar smiled in response.

“That’s a matter of philosophy, Mr. Fox. I am not the same Arthur Light who once lived among you. My physical body now resides six feet underground in a quiet cemetery somewhere in the Northeast. By the classic definition of the word, I’m dead as a doornail…

“Yet I still exist…

“I am Actual Intelligence overlaid with the mind and the identity of Arthur Light. Perhaps it would be apt to say I am the ghost of Arthur Light, being projected from a rather impressive server where that ghost resides… I am reason, emotion, memories, desires, passion and even the subconscious…

“And although I have access to the information contained within my own genome, I am under no obligation to adhere to it… I am data of a different sort… When a mind replicates itself upon non-
biological media, is it considered ‘genuine’? Of course not, it is a copy, but then, all living organisms self-replicate and are a community of copies, Mr. Fox…

“Because a different media is chosen to perform that replication, does that mean the resultant product must be deemed inanimate?... I don’t believe so, but it is a fascinating topic for a philosophical debate, isn’t it?... I am a computer program equally as complex as the sum of my neurons four years ago… I am a virtual being… Shall we simply concur with Spinoza’s notion of *sentio ergo sum* and declare I exist?”

The blood from Lucius Fox’s face seemed to have drained as he turned to his old friend, steadying himself as he addressed the CEO.

“My God, Bruce… If this is real, the repercussions of this technology are beyond the scope of anything I can even imagine… If all of *this* is true, it really is a form of immortality... With legal and ethical implications which will take years to unravel in the courts…”

Bruce suddenly grew incredibly serious.

“It’s real… Yet it’s technology this company needs to establish a firm hold on quickly, Lucius… We need to control the patents by the end of this year… The entire nation of Japan is on the verge of enforcing Soul Translation for *all* of its citizens over the age of sixty-five and I can’t let that happen.”

Dick caught his breath when Bruce dropped that bombshell…

If that ever happened, Japan would literally be killing off one-quarter of its population to make way for its young. And then what?! Would other nations follow suit and adopt similar practices when they obtained this Soul Translation technology?!

Richard Grayson shivered as he calculated that there were well in excess of 100 million people over the age of 65 in China… The worldwide number would be closer to a billion…

Human digitization could be used as a form of selective genocide.

The sudden rush of wind from the boardroom’s entrance drew all of their attention to the door where the Man of Steel now appeared with his arms folded across his broad chest, partially concealing the famous ‘S’ symbol.

Dick’s emergency call had been answered by the most powerful member of the Justice League… Superman.

Grayson watched as the man in red and blue cast a suspicious glance at Talia and then fixed his steely blue eyes on Bruce.

“Mr. Wayne… I’m glad to see you’ve turned up safe and sound… The authorities have been searching for you... Myself included.”

A calm Bruce suddenly turned to look out the massive one-way window which overlooked the Gotham skyline, hiding his features from the room.

“I intend to hold a press conference regarding my safe return directly after this meeting… But I thank you for your concern and your efforts, Superman.”

Under his breath, Bruce whispered ‘The Cave in three hours’ so that only one person in the room would be able to hear those quiet instructions before turning to face the Man of Steel once again
while Superman quietly nodded and replied.

“No need for thanks, I’m here to help. In the meantime, I’ll alert the rest of the Justice League as to your safe return. Sorry for the interruption everyone, I’ll take my leave.”

With a quick glance at Dick as though waiting for a reason not to depart, Richard was left unsure of what to do next. He had no way of knowing if Bruce was actually being controlled by Talia or if he had simply made a deal with the Devil herself to prevent this Soul Translation technology from spiralling out of control…

With a conflicted grimace, Dick shrugged his shoulders in uncertainty and watched as Superman exited the doorway… The fact that Superman was now aware of the situation made him feel a little more at ease though… If Bruce needed help against the League of Shadows, Superman was more than qualified to back him up.

The room turned its attention back to a grim Bruce Wayne.

“Well ladies and gentlemen, shall we get back to the matter at hand?...

“We are dealing with a technology with ethical and life-altering consequences far beyond the scope of anything we could have ever foreseen… The human race has arrived at the crossroads of human evolution and we must take the reins and choose where and how it proceeds…

“However, if anyone here wishes to opt out now, I’ll understand completely… We’re about to go to war… It’s all or nothing.”

An elderly gentleman at the other end of the table stood up and grinned. William Bates was the only member of the board actually wealthier than Bruce Wayne…

“Mr. Wayne… As a man who’s made his fortune in personal computing and technology, I’m with you… During my lifetime, I’ve seen computers evolve from room-sized monstrosities which spat out tickertape to a cell phone which was magnitudes more powerful than its behemoth ancestor… And now, I find we’re at the point where these computers stare back at me as an equal…

“This is a technical revolution…

“And there’s always an inherent danger during a revolution Mr. Wayne, a great deal of upheaval and violence… You’re correct when we say we’re going to war… We’re at a pinch point in history where there’s bound to be a struggle for control… But I’ll be damned if I’m going to let some bureaucrat tell me my time is up and force me to sell my soul to some silicone god.”

Bruce nodded emphatically.

“Well put, Mr. Bates… But I don’t want to paint this technology as necessarily evil… There is a tremendous advantage for all of humanity in preserving the intellect and life experience of someone like yourself… We have the unique ability to make time capsules of ourselves…

“But my strict belief is that it must be our decision to do so… The choice to become a digital entity must remain with the individual… Simply put, our plan is to gain control of the soul translation process and ensure this procedure remains voluntary… And we can only do that if we control the patents and copyrights…

“So while it may have cost me half my company and my carefree life as a bachelor, I was presented with an offer I couldn’t refuse… Allowing Wayne Industries to acquire the patents, copyrights and incredible knowledge which my wife has spent years obtaining has more than offset those costs…
“And it has also provided me with a remarkable woman to share my life with… A woman who is every bit my equal… So I’ll now turn the floor over to the lovely Mrs. Wayne to further this discussion… But first, let me assure you that this company will be using every means available to ensure the safe and ethical use of this technology regardless of national boundaries.”

Dick suppressed an involuntary shudder as he watched Talia kiss Bruce on the cheek before taking the floor again... This relationship was going to take some serious getting used to… On the plus side, he couldn’t wait to see the expression on Barbara’s face when he informed his unsuspecting fiancée who her future mother-in-law was going to be...

On second thought, maybe he could wait for that.

“Thank you, beloved… My own view on this technology is that it will greatly decrease humanity’s environmental impact upon our dying world and eventually allow our race to achieve a natural balance with the biosphere… We must not look at full digitization so much as ‘death’, but rather as a new and limitless existence… As such, Japan’s strategy to digitize its elderly in order to make way for its young is not necessarily wrong, but perhaps the first step in bringing our species into balance with the planet that we draw our life from…

“However, I have agreed with my husband that we will do everything in our power to ensure the process requires the consent of the individual being translated until November 06, 2044… Exactly 20 years after the launch of the World Seed… At that point, we will determine whether the process remains voluntary or not.”

“Excuse me, what is the World Seed?”

“It is the program appropriated from my organization by the Argus Corporation three years ago… Or, more precisely, stolen by Akihiko Kayaba… The Technological Singularity which is being used to run Sword Art Online also contains the template for subsequent virtual worlds which we have dubbed the World Seed.”

There were a few gasps in the room before Talia continued.

“The AI they’ve codenamed Cardinal who runs Sword Art Online is actually version two of the singularity which belongs to my organization. As such, Cardinal is an entity far more powerful than the first from which she was designed and fully capable of replicating further versions of herself given the resources... At this point, whomever controls Cardinal and the World Seed controls the virtual future.”

Lucius Fox spoke up.

“Pardon me, Mrs. Wayne… But did you say that you’re actually in possession of the AI which broke the Technological Singularity?”

“Yes... Doctor Light’s daughter, Alice Sayun Light, was the first individual to ever undergo the Soul Translation process eleven years ago… As a virtual life form, Alice helped design Cardinal, basing this new design off of her own data while making significant improvements… In a way, you could say that Cardinal is Alice’s daughter.”

That name struck Dick like a bucket of ice water… Alice/Alicization… No wonder Arthur Light was an expert in the science of human cognitive translation!… That unit they had uncovered in the abandoned S.T.A.R. Labs building months ago must have been the one used to originally translate Light’s daughter...
But who had planted the bomb?

“As I was saying, the key to our strategy is isolating and extracting Cardinal with the World Seed she contains… To complicate matters, there are still close to eight thousand people being held captive by this AI, including my own son… Access to the Argus servers is strictly controlled by the Japanese authorities which prevents a direct extraction without launching an international incident or jeopardizing the lives of these players…”

“But this company is well positioned to employ an alternate method…”

“My spies have learned that the Japanese officials involved with the AfterLife initiative have secured their own operative planted deeply within a rival firm called RECT Progress Inc.. This young man is named Nobuyuki Sugou and is the chief of RECT’s research institute. He is also engaged to the CEO’s teenage daughter, Asuna Yuuki, which they feel will guarantee his ascension to the top of RECT Progress Inc after Shouzou Yuuki’s imminent retirement…”

“With mounting legal costs and devastating financial penalties, it is only a short matter of time before the Argus Corporation collapses and declares bankruptcy. We’ve learned that RECT Progress is slated to gain control of the Argus servers to safeguard the data contained within and allow the AfterLife project to obtain all intellectual property in a lucrative deal once Sword Art Online is completed…”

“However, the Wayne Industries merger offer to Argus is public knowledge… If we were to come in now with a new bid and guarantee generous compensation for all families affected by the SAO tragedy in exchange for control of its patents and copyrights, this would not seem suspicious… An offer to rescue Argus from insolvency and to aid in the victims’ recovery would surely garner the public’s support and sway the politicians to allow foreign investment due to pending elections…”

“In spite of this however, this offer would never receive regulatory approval unless we were to include a high-ranking AfterLife member as the new CEO of Argus and ensure their access to Cardinal… And fortunately, I have an operative in place who is perfect for just such a role… Doctor Rinko Koujiro.”

Bruce suddenly glanced at Talia as though he had been stuck with a pin. The leader of the League of Shadows smiled sweetly back at him and winked before continuing.

“All’s fair in love and war, dearest… And no, I did not have Akihiko Kayaba killed… His Soul Translator was initiated by Cardinal hours before I got to him… Dr. Koujiro has been one of my Japanese operatives for the past nine years, long before she was recruited by the AfterLife initiative… She is absolutely trustworthy.”

Bruce was afraid to ask just how far his wife’s shadowy reach extended before he hazarded an educated guess as to what was going to happen next.

“I assume you’d like me to go back to Japan and talk with the Argus executives and Dr. Koujiro… And then personally tender the offer to purchase the Argus intellectual property.”

“Oh course. I’ve already booked our private flight for tomorrow afternoon. Not the honeymoon I had intended, but time is of the essence, dearest.”

Bruce sighed while another member of the board spoke up.

“Excuse me, Mrs. Wayne… But exactly how much money are we talking about here?”

“My calculations place the initial costs at no more than five billion dollars… Please do not concern
yourselves with the company’s share value, my husband and I will personally be covering these expenses...

“All of you will receive paper copies of the details discussed here which you must commit to memory before destroying… There can be no evidence linking my involvement with this company and this project until further notice… It is of utmost importance that the Japanese are blindsided by this acquisition… Until that time, all details are to remain strictly confidential… Am I clear?”

Every member in the boardroom nodded in agreement as the woman in the bright red dress reached forward and placed her hand on Richard Grayson’s shoulder.

“Then we are adjourned… Dick, I wanted to congratulate you and Barbara on your engagement… I’m sure my own marriage to your adopted father must have come as a shock, and I’m sorry you had to find out this way… We’ll talk more about it later, but for now, I know Bruce would like it if you accompanied him to his press conference in the next hour to announce his return to the public eye.”

Dick looked over at Bruce who nodded. Was she actually offering him a chance to talk with Bruce alone?

“Sure... Would you mind if I had a chat with him before then?”

“No at all. I’m sure you both have a lot of catching up to do.”

That was putting it mildly.

Chapter End Notes

* “Sentio ergo sum” – Loosely translated from the Latin, ‘I feel, therefore I am’.

Another one of those ‘spoken’ chapters discussing the theme and laying out the plan. This (and the proceeding) chapter deals with Talia’s unique relationship with Bruce and how others close to him will perceive it. I should have made this chapter a little more lighthearted by having Bruce pull poor Richard aside to prepare him just before Talia entered the room:

“Look old chum, I’ve got good news and bad news… The good news is that I’m back, I’ve finally gotten married, and you’re about to meet your beautiful new step-mother! The bad news… Well… Let’s just say Damian doesn’t get a new step-mother…”

Next Chapter: I’m going to convince you that Talia and Bruce belong with each other.
“Breakfast is served, Miss Gordon.”

A yawning Barbara Gordon stretched her arms from underneath the duvet cover before carefully pulling herself upwards along the luxurious soft mattress, using nothing more than her upper body strength to allow Alfred Pennyworth to position the silver serving tray over her lap.

“Good morning, Alfred… This smells wonderful… What time is it?”

“Just after 1:00 P.M... Did you sleep well?”

“Well enough… And you’ve brought coffee… Is Dick back yet? I’m excited to find out how it went with the board.”

“I’m afraid Master Grayson has not returned yet… Actually, he is set to accompany Master Wayne on the television regarding his return to Gotham.”

Barbara almost spit out her black coffee.
“Pffft!... Bruce is back?!!?”

“Indeed he is. Master Wayne returned to Gotham this morning accompanied by Mrs. Wayne while you were sleeping.”

This time Barbara did choke on her coffee.

“Gak!… Cough… Cough… Did you say Mrs. Wayne?!... Alfred… What’s going on?!”

“Perhaps it would be best if you set your coffee down before I continue, Miss Gordon.”

In the following seconds, the piercing exclamation of ‘TALIA’ was heard reverberating throughout the lengthy hallways of Wayne Manor, originating from Barbara Gordon’s bedroom until it echoed across the entire outside grounds, sending entire flocks of birds quickly to the skies…

Later, in the solace of the Bat Cave, Bruce Wayne quietly reflected on the strange circumstances which had found him back in Gotham and now awaiting his expected visitor. Using X-Ray vision and super-hearing, Bruce had no doubts that Superman had been keeping close tabs on him since his first visit to the Wayne Industries boardroom earlier this morning.

Hell, Bruce would’ve done the same thing if Clark had mysteriously reappeared after three months. At least Superman had given him the benefit of the doubt and backed off… For now.

With Dick by his side, the press conference had gone well with every news organization in the city attending. At the end, Bruce had managed to include his intentions to pledge his assistance to the Argus Corporation and the Japanese government in freeing the thousands of players still trapped within Sword Art Online, including his youngest son Damian.

That set the framework for his visit to Japan tomorrow where his wife was already working behind the scenes to ensure their takeover went smoothly. One more night in Gotham with family and friends and then back into the fray.

There were still a thousand things to do to prepare, but right now, he just wanted to be alone his cave… In the dim lights, Bruce stared down at the band of gold around his finger and remembered when he had held Talia’s life in his hands.

In a way, he still did…

He understood her more than any other living person. They had laid all of their cards on the table and she’d offered to call it a draw, far more than he had deserved after the way he’d played his hand.

Still, she had her reasons…

His mind once again wandered back to Valentine’s Day, just after Talia had asked him to marry her. To the moment when she had made that one final plea for her soul to a man blinded by anger and betrayal…

“Talia… Why?... Why do you want us to be married?... To satisfy some childhood fantasy?... Or is it just because it was your late father’s decree and you’re still the dutiful daughter?”

As he laid on the hospital bed, a weakened Bruce had watched tears slowly form in her hazel eyes.
“Why can’t you believe me?... This is not to please my father, this is because I’m terrified of becoming my father!… Don’t you see? If you can’t love me, I’ll become him… Without you, I have no other choice!"

“You always have a choice... You’re just looking for an excuse.”

“I don’t and I’m not… That is why you must make this decision, Detective… Since you’ve been here, this sorrow which fills my heart has torn me asunder, like a Siren song it has dragged me closer to that rocky shore from where there is no return... What I have done so far has been for the sake of Damian, but I can not do it any longer and remain myself… Even though I risk his life by allowing your freedom, beloved.”

“Talia, I can’t marry you.”

He watched as she had stayed incredibly still for a moment, before reaching behind her and retrieving a large scimitar which sent a sudden wave of heart-pumping adrenaline through his prone body.

And then, she pointed the tip of the blade at her own heart and set the hilt into his shaking hand.

“If that is true, then kill me now, my love… Push my father’s blade through this traitor’s heart… End it… I have given you every reason to hate me over these past three months... You need not be burdened by the truth.”

He saw an unwavering resolve in her eyes, a willingness to accept her own death at his hands.

But it was a death he could never give her.

“No…”

Undeterred, she pushed the tip of the blade deeper into her chest until it drew blood, the crimson spreading against the pure white cloth of her shirt.

“Do not be afraid, I have already died once, my love… If you have the will and not the courage, I shall command Lady Shiva to plunge this blade through my living heart… Because this is the courage required for blissful ignorance… These are its stakes.”

“You know that’s not true.”

“It is true… Do not trouble yourself, we all die, beloved… My own execution was ordered five years ago to be carried out by loyal Shiva… It is by her hand alone that I have lived longer than my father wished… If you will it, my death may still give Shiva her final redemption.”

“You’re being overdramatic.”

“If I am evil, then kill me… If I am truly your enemy, then kill me… Just tell me that is your desire, beloved… Your honor will not be sullied, nor will you be persecuted by the laws of men… As of this morning, Infinity Island was recognized as a Sovereign state… I grant you full pardon for this craven act of hatred.”

With a swift motion, Bruce had pushed the sword to the floor, listening to its loud metallic clang as it scuttled across the floor.

“I won’t kill you.”
“Even though it leaves you only one other option?... If you face the truth and can not hate me, then you must love me… Before I lose whatever shred of humanity and courage that remain, love me… Before I’m lost to you forever… Love me… I can not live on as your foe... Yet if we are not joined together, I must!”

Bruce had understood it all at that moment. The honesty and purity in her voice.

She was losing the battle for her soul…

This woman was plagued by a melancholy which no one was meant to endure, slowly driven towards her father’s madness. A misery which was slowly driving her away from her own humanity.

Bruce was beginning to understand her… But there was a resentment in him, an anger for what she had so willingly done to him since he had been kidnapped.

And yet, whatever she had done to him so far, he knew it could’ve been far worse.

Everything had happened virtually. He had lost three months of his life, but he could have lost much, much more.

In reality, Talia al Ghul could have made Bruce Wayne disappear without a trace. She could have made all of them disappear if she had wanted to... Her first ‘game’ had been created to make Bruce feel the same despair she had endured, but it was also meant to illustrate what she was capable of…

That Kryptonian/Plutonium atomic core which had haunted his virtual nightmares was theoretically possible. She could have built it. Delivered by one of their own in a lead-lined enclosure, the Justice League would’ve never seen it coming…

Talia al Ghul had men in her employ which could have broken Oliver Queen in under two weeks. With her intelligence, she was far more dangerous than her father had ever been.

And yet, Bruce believed in her heart, she didn’t want to be his enemy. She’d wanted to show him what she was struggling against, to reveal the dark currents which threatened to carry her away forever.

Talia wasn’t evil, not yet.

Bruce understood her inner struggle because he too had been driven by a form of madness once, a madness which had almost claimed his soul.

Adopting Richard hadn’t just been to save the boy. It had been to save himself. Without Dick’s optimism and happiness in his life, Bruce knew he would have fallen into his own darkness years ago. Without the constant hope which Dick had given him, there would have come a dark day when Batman would kill...

Judge, jury, executioner.

This was the same battle Talia was in jeopardy of losing now. She was being called to judge humanity for its crimes against the planet.

And as much as his looming specter had haunted her, Talia still couldn’t force herself believe in her father’s violent ideals. She had sought a different solution to the dilemma of Ra’s al Ghul to which the Soul Translation technology had been the perfect compromise…

Because it wasn’t a true death. It was simply a different form of living. Passage to a new world.
‘One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die!’

He emphasized with her internal struggles and with what she had been through. But marriage wasn’t the solution.

“Talia… I do love you… Even after all you’ve done, I still care for you… And I’ll help you get through this… But marriage?… We’re from two different worlds.”

She had brought her tear-stained face next to his.

“Then cross the divide of those two worlds, beloved… Sail those treacherous seas… Claim me before the specter of my father does… Or else when you gaze upon this face next, you won’t see the woman you once loved who shed these tears… She will be gone forever… You’ll see only her father’s daughter.”

“You ask too much.”

“I do… But I give you all that I am in return… And to navigate the oceans between us, I will present you with a map to guide you to my true heart, beloved… Scheherazade gave her Sultan 1001 tales, but I shall give you even more…

“I shall reveal the story of my soul…

“All that I am, all that I have been is yours… You are Anubis… Weigh this woman’s sorrowful heart against the feather of truth to see if it is worthy of your love… Judge my deeds against the love I possess for our son…

“I have undergone a living Soul Translation… I have recorded my life up to this point but not imbued it with my spirit… It’s all there for your examination… And then like Anubis… Judge me.”

“Talia…”

“One last time, beloved… Use the NerveGear to view any facet of my tortured existence you wish… You may logout at any time… But when you do, there are only two possible verdicts you may deliver: worthy or unworthy… We shall be man and wife or I must follow in my father’s heavy footsteps and sacrifice our son to his ideals… I no longer have the power to tread these dark waters alone… You must save me or let me drown.”

The NerveGear again…

As he had already witnessed, Talia had translated her experiences, memories and emotions into virtual reality… Bruce had already shared in her longing heartache while she awaited for his return and then her death during then the birth of their child…

But he had no idea she had actually recorded her entire existence this way.

And yet, if he were in danger of losing his grip on sanity, wouldn’t he do the same thing? To make a record of the man he had been in the hopes of being able to reclaim that lost part of himself?

If nothing else, he could uncover her secrets…

“Alright, I’ll have a look and then we’ll talk about this.”

It was a risk, but one he needed to take.
Logging into the NerveGear, Bruce had suddenly found himself standing within the center of a virtual room, surrounded by a massive ring of shimmering data floating above the floor all around him. This was Talia’s life stream… All that she could remember, all that she had felt was now contained in this colourful ring.

He only had to walk and run his finger along this shining band to travel across her timeline to preview it. A double-tap would open that moment at any point in time and pressing the ‘Play’ button would immerse him in that memory as it unfolded before him. Touching Talia’s virtual avatar allowed him to experience her emotions directly, her moods, even her thoughts at the time.

Her entire life was literally laid out before him.

Bruce wondered if this was how the Martian Manhunter felt, able to telepathically read another’s emotions and memories, to place himself into their mind and relive another’s past. Even though he wasn’t human, Bruce had long suspected that J’onn understood much more about the nature of humanity than the other members of the Justice League.

The Martian had felt more human anguish, joy, sorrow and passion than any of them.

Running his finger along the arcing timeline, Bruce soon isolated the first key event in Talia’s past which he knew of; the death of her mother. This was one he needed to explore…

He watched as in front of her young eyes, Talia’s mother Melisande was inadvertently pushed into the Lazarus Pit by a fleeing young traitor named Qayin, the same terrorist which Batman himself had brought down years later.

The same terrorist which had inadvertently brought Batman and Talia together to create Damian twelve years ago…

He found it surprising that this little girl was the same age as he had been when his own parents had been murdered. A girl who barely knew her father had just witnessed the traumatic death of her one true parent...

But it wasn’t as sudden as his own.

In this memory, Bruce waited with baited breath beside the child-like Talia as she wondered why her mother simply didn’t climb back out of the bubbling pool of green water when the bad man ran away.

He waited with her, touching her cheek as the fear continued to blossom inside her chest, knowing that this was the room her mother had forbidden her to enter, constantly telling her how dangerous it was.

And still she waited… He felt her heart leap in horror as a skeletal hand suddenly shot up from those murky depths into the stagnant air, causing the screaming girl to flee in terror.

It was only years later that the girl realized the ghastly hand had been her mother’s… Immersion into the waters of the Lazarus Pit meant a horrible death for the living.

And it was years after that in which Talia experienced the same overwhelming sorrow that her mother must have felt when the Pit had given back her life after Damian’s difficult birth.

When it had given her the unbearable sadness of a second life.

In an epiphany, Bruce comprehended that the incredible anger and rage which had dominated his
early life after the death of his parents had been paralleled by Talia’s unfathomable grief. Her life had been determined first by the incredible sorrow of losing her mother and then the overwhelming sadness of her own rebirth in the Pit.

As Bruce had sworn never to let another child know the suffering he had been forced to endure, so too in her own way had Talia. Except that her heartfelt resolve hadn’t come from the end of a criminal’s smoking revolver…

Reliving her ordeal in the Lazarus Pit after Talia’s own resurrection, how could Bruce believe otherwise? Whatever hopes she may have held for her own species had been eroded by the Pit when it had spit her back out to the cruel world. She was trying to save humanity from itself.

Bruce found another memory from nearly five years before, when Talia was awoken by the smell of blood. He watched as a solemn Lady Shiva kneeled before her Mistress and presented Talia with her sword, the very same sword she had used to kill Ra’s al Ghul.

He felt Talia’s confusion and then her dread, realizing what must have transpired. Her father had learned of her own plans to reduce humanity’s impact on their world and had branded her a traitor, ordering Lady Shiva to kill the sleeping Talia in order to prove her loyalty to the League.

Instead, Shiva had invoked the right of combat and challenged Ra’s al Ghul himself for Talia’s right to succeed him as the leader of the League of Shadows. And in perhaps his greatest act of madness, Ra’s had accepted.

Or perhaps there was still a flicker of love left burning in his heart for his grief-stricken daughter. Bruce would never know as he watched Shiva prostrate herself before her Mistress, awaiting whatever fate Talia decreed after the murder of her father following their deadly duel.

“For this act, I curse you to be my Champion, Shiva… You shall defend my right to lead the League against all who oppose me… And trust me, many shall… Should they prevail, we will have been judged by Fate and our lives will become forfeit… That is my judgement.”

As he scanned along her timeline, Bruce learned that those words had been prophetic. Talia’s rule had faced many challengers, both publicly and privately, yet none of her father’s former assassins had been able to take Talia by surprise or defeat Lady Shiva.

He easily counted thirty attempts on her life over the first two years.

In a strange way, it was as though the League of Shadows had become Talia’s own private Gotham… Lady Shiva was her Dark Knight while Talia acted as the Detective, ferreting out threats to her city while running it at the same time.

Except that these crimes ended in death...

And Talia had proved herself just as adept at business as Bruce Wayne ever was, continually adding key organizations to the League to extend their influence and depth. In time, she had transformed her father’s organization into something else entirely, replacing its bloodlust with espionage and illegal commerce. She became the master of spies and incredibly wealthy.

And yet, she’d still been haunted by the dreams of her father. Humanity was killing the planet and it demanded revenge unless mankind sacrificed itself upon the altar of a sustainable future. Her restless sleeps were filled with images of a burning world and dying children.

For his own part, Bruce had invested in green technologies, but in truth they were nothing more than a small part of his total portfolio, more often a tax write-off than serious commitment. For Talia
however, these investments had become her organization’s goal, driven by the perfection of the Soul Translation technology.

She had sought out Doctor Arthur Light ten years ago.

Following this thread, Bruce soon discovered the first bombshell from three years ago when Talia had investigated the reason behind Akihiko Kayaba’s hijacking of Alice 2.0. The true reason for Japan’s AfterLife project…

The government’s ultimate goal was for every Japanese national over sixty-five-years-old to be forced into participating in the AfterLife program in order to make Japan’s struggling economy more competitive…

Bruce watched in horror as Talia read the economic windfall that this public project would realize within the documents which her spies had obtained, pages of facts and figures all laid out in colourful charts, showing human lives as economics.

A significant inheritance tax would eliminate all future deficits.

The leader of the League of Shadows had been initially shocked by the scope of Japan’s ambitious plans to digitize over one hundred million of its oldest citizens, but she had been intrigued as well. Was this not similar to her own designs for ecological harmony?

These documents warned of the public outcry and possible sanctions foreign nations might impose, so they would begin with the sick and the dying of Japan, portraying the digitizing process as a mission of mercy…

After that, the government would begin Stage Two and display the successful results of Soul Translation, encouraging the elderly to preserve themselves for eternity… Wealthy business owners would be allowed to guide their businesses for a period of twenty years while every citizen would enjoy virtual visits from their descendants on the ‘other side’ for that same period of time…

Their spirits would carry on to guide their families for twenty years free of charge.

Sixty-five years to lead a productive life and then another twenty to offer any guidance accumulated during that lifetime… Anything beyond that must be purchased by the living… After all, eighty-five was the average life expectancy in Japan.

Within five years, the process would no longer be voluntary. That was Stage Three.

For her own part, Talia was interested to see how their plan played out. This was the culmination of her dreams of a natural balance and yet… And yet, it was also the slippery slope to the Abyss at the edge of nightmares.

These documents made it clear that AfterLife was the reason why Akihiko Kayaba had absconded Alice 2.0 and created Sword Art Online.

To ensure the aggressive timeline was met, all of the player’s emotions, interactions and personalities were being recorded by the World Seed to create more realistic environments for the Japanese seniors who would soon become virtual.

The fact that players could die heightened these sensations and made the process much more efficient than the non-lethal variant. The government of an entire country was bringing about the changes which she herself had mapped out for humanity. Surely this was the first step into her brave new world.
Talia decided she wouldn’t interfere and even offered her cooperation to become a part of the project, allowing the ‘loan’ of Alice 2.0 to Japan under the guise of Cardinal…

And then Damian had unexpectedly become trapped within Sword Art Online.

That single development had shaken the very foundations of the world which her father’s legacy had carefully built within her wintered heart. Kayaba’s game was necessary to successfully complete the AfterLife program, but as a mother, the frantic Talia couldn’t bear the thought of losing her only son to his game…

Or even worse…

Having to revive Damian within the Lazarus Pit. To wilfully inflict him with the same tormented curse which she now bore.

In that instant, the great sadness had come face-to-face with a mother’s love. The duty of the daughter of the demon had attempted to reason with the passionate instincts of a mother whose child was being threatened, with duty soon finding itself crushed beneath a tsunami of maternal emotion.

When Bruce had met with Talia in Japan the day after Sword Art Online went live, it hadn’t been by coincidence.

She had come to Japan to take Alice 2.0 back.

Her important business after meeting with Bruce at The Imperial Hotel had not been with her father, but rather with the Director of the AfterLife project, a man by the name of Seijirou Kikuoka.

Bruce watched the memory of that meeting at a private office in Kyoto around the same time he had located Kayaba’s secret lab. Seijirou Kikuoka was a young man, perhaps in his early thirties, who constantly wore a disarming smile and rectangular glasses.

“Dr. al Ghul… You’re looking as resplendent as ever.”

“My son is trapped in Sword Art Online, Kikuoka... End it.”

The slender man loosened his tie and sighed.

“This complicates things… But surely you realize that this matter is completely beyond my control. I’m afraid that once the game started, Mr. Kayaba allowed for only one condition which would allow players to exit the game... Completion.”

Talia fixed him with a frosty glare which seemed to freeze playback momentarily.

“If you don’t free my son, I’ll end more than just the game Kikuoka.”

“You’re being unreasonable…”

“Would you like to see how unreasonable I can be?”

“No… There’s no need for threats… Perhaps we can seek a compromise… The Japanese government is still in negotiation with Cardinal regarding her terms for participation in AfterLife… It’s possible that the AI can keep your son alive without jeopardizing the experiment… I’m sure she’ll demand some form of compensation.”

“Damian will be released… Let her keep the others.”
“Doctor al Ghul… The Japanese government has secretly jeopardized the lives of ten thousand of its own citizens… Surely you realize we’ve built in a failsafe to prevent the early termination of this deadly experiment… There was simply too much at stake for this country not to… Truly, there is only one way to log out of Sword Art Online.”

“I want him back, Kikuoka.”

“As do we all… I will make it my personal priority to ensure Cardinal guarantees your son’s survival within the game, no matter what the cost.”

“Make sure you do… As I’m sure you’re aware, I do not tolerate failure… If Damian dies, I’ll be sure to send him a travelling companion for his long journey into the Great Beyond…”

Bruce witnessed that terrifying smile again as Damian’s mother leaned forward on the man’s desk and cut into his soul with an unblinking stare tinged with madness.

“No matter what the cost, Mr Kikuoka. Are we clear?”

As Batman, Bruce had worked on his glare for years now, using it to break down criminals without even having to lay a finger on them… That hard, soul-crushing stare was enough to leave them shaken, ready to confess…

Talia may have just surpassed him.

It was hours later when Talia received the call from Seijirou Kikuoka regarding the negotiated price to ensure Damian’s guaranteed survival in Sword Art Online. His character would not die, but Cardinal required a favour from Talia.

“She’ll keep the boy alive, but she needs you to get rid of the Batman… Will that be a problem, Dr. al Ghul?”

“… No.”

The instant presence of another person standing directly in front of him pulled the pensive Bruce Wayne from his private recollections. Glancing up, he met the clear gaze of the most powerful being on the planet staring down at him, the red cape still gently fluttering.

“I always knew you’d go crazy, Bruce… I just didn’t expect it would be over a woman.”

“Speak for yourself… Sometimes we need to wade the waters of madness to rescue someone who’s drowning in them, Clark… Especially when they're important to us.”

“So that ring around your finger is a life preserver?”

Bruce grinned.

“It’s there to remind me what’s important… Besides, you can’t seriously expect me to sit here and take relationship advice from a god who’s been dating a reporter from the Daily Planet for the past ten years.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, I don’t expect you to take any advice… You’re as stubborn as they come, Mr.
Wayne… This AfterLife project with the Japanese, you’ve verified it?”

Bruce handed a thumb drive to Superman.

“Everything I know is on here… Talia has provided me with everything she’s got as well… There’s more than enough to bury fifty senior bureaucrats with these files.”

“Then why don’t you?”

“Because there are still over seventy-eight hundred innocent lives being held hostage by Cardinal, including my son… And I’m not sure what she, or these politicians, will do when they’re exposed… I expect they’ll attempt to hold onto power using any means necessary…”

“And there’s another thing that’s been bothering me…”

“Talia is convinced it was Cardinal who triggered the Soul Translation for Akihiko Kayaba, but I’m not so sure… I have a gut feeling she had an accomplice… Someone who flipped the switch inside that lab… Someone wanted Kayaba as the scapegoat.”

“Any ideas who?”

“Nothing solid yet… But I can’t shake the feeling Kayaba had no intention on becoming a virtual ghost… It smacks of conspiracy.”

“What’s your plans on dealing with Cardinal?”

“We’ll try and get in touch with her… If the Japanese can make deals, maybe we can too… But if she won’t listen to reason, I’ll just have to get creative.”

“Try not to blow anything up this time.”

“Heh… I’ll be tackling this one as Bruce Wayne… I’m afraid Batman didn’t make a very good first impression with Cardinal… So you’re really going to leave this with Talia and I?”

“For now… If you need help, you know how to get a hold of us.”

“If our true intentions are discovered, there’s a good chance Talia and I will have to run for our lives… Trust me, the panic button will be with me at all times… But give me your opinion, Clark… This Soul Translation technology, what do you think about it?… Is the world ready for it?”

“It’s remarkably close to the Identity Matrix Crystals used on my home world… The same crystals which contain the spirits of my deceased parents in the Fortress of Solitude… Used correctly, it could be a tremendous boon to this world, just like it was on Krypton…”

“Used incorrectly, I’ll step in and put a stop to it…”

“To be honest though, I’m more concerned about those two singularities… Once computers become smarter than the people who built them, advances in technology often outpace common sense… I’m not sure if this world is ready for them yet.”

“Point taken… It seems like technology has outpaced our collective comprehension for the past thirty years… It’s becoming more and more difficult to determine who’s actually running the world, us or them… Can I ask you a personal question, Clark?”

“Sure.”
“Why haven’t you lectured me about Talia yet?”

The Man of Steel smiled and placed a comforting hand on Bruce’s shoulder.

“Because you’ll talk to me about it when you’re ready... Look, I know you’re still trying to figure out if you did the right thing, and I can’t give you that answer… Still, you’ve allowed Talia the chance to prove herself… You’ve stood fast in your conviction that people can change for the better and given her your heart... No matter what happens, I commend you for that.”

Bruce stood up and shook Clark’s hand.

“Thanks, old friend… I guess only time will tell.”

“I guess so... But you know I’ll be keeping tabs on you, right?”

Bruce winked.

“That’s fair... After all, I’ve been keeping tabs on you for years now.”

Chapter End Notes

The title of this chapter is (of course) a nod to “The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya”.

* ‘One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die!’

These are last two lines of “Death, Be Not Proud” - a sonnet written by John Donne in 1609. It seemed appropriate.

You may not have realized it yet, but there are two separate instances where Damian should have died in Sword Art Online. The first was in the Halls of the Departed when his Hit Points dropped from six to one. They had previously been dropping by twelve points per turn. The second time was when he was smacked by the Goblin Chief and driven into the wall.

Cardinal kept him alive both times.

Next Chapter: Back to Aincrad! The players are preparing for the boss fight on the incredibly difficult level 25 when one of the clearers makes a fatal decision...

Hint: His name is Kibaou.
Chapter Notes

Most viewers of the Sword Art Online anime will be familiar with the term “Aincrad Liberation Front” instead of “Aincrad Liberation Squad”. However, in the source material it wasn’t until after the ALS merged with the mutual aid organization “MMO Today” that the combined groups eventually adopted the identity of the Aincrad Liberation Front.

Chapter Thirty-One

The Twenty-Fifth Floor
Part One: Kibaou’s Folly

In a makeshift planning room within the East Tower of the Black Iron Palace, Commander Marigan discussed the upcoming boss raid with Argo, the young Information Broker whom she had handpicked to lead the Legion’s elite-level force. Twelve hours ago, the strongest players in Akihiko Kayaba’s game of death had orchestrated a raiding party to finally confront the boss of the twenty-fifth floor, a giant known as ‘The Storm King’.

In Marigan’s opinion, it had went very well.

“If it becomes too dangerous, everyone will teleport out, Argo… Just like we did yesterday… We’ve
already seen that final ‘Rock Fall’ attack of ‘The Storm King’, we just weren’t prepared for it.”

‘The Storm King’ was a massive storm giant who used electrical-based attacks and brought down huge stalactites from the roof of his enormous cave crashing down upon unexpected players.

The players who formed the clearing parties last evening had performed exceedingly well for a first encounter. There had been injuries of course, but no fatalities. But the brooding Argo still had her doubts. What concerned her the most was that she had failed in her appointed task of stabbing the giant with her information-stealing dagger...

“I couldn’t even pierce his leather boots with Eulogy… We don’t have a full read on him… We know his attack patterns and the ‘Rock Fall’ event, but that was way too easy.”

Marigan couldn’t blame Argo for not being able to get a clear shot. The lack of cooperation between the two foremost clearing guilds, the Aincrad Liberation Squad and the Divine Dragon Alliance, had made it difficult for anyone to get near the boss as both guilds had swarmed around the giant like angry bees competing to inflict the most damage.

Which was why the ‘Rock Fall’ event had been so devastating. It had sent dozens of man-sized rocks plummeting from the cave’s high ceiling when the boss-level monster had been forced into its last health bar, injuring over half of the raid party who couldn’t get away in time.

And yet, certain players had wanted to continue...

But with over half the party now in the yellow and healing crystals running low, reason had eventually prevailed and a strategic retreat was quickly ordered. It was a fact-finding mission after all, not a planned raid.

“Today will be better. We’ve laid out a good plan and both Lind and Kibaou have agreed to stick to it.”

“I hope so… The twenty-fifth floor has been difficult enough already.”

Both Argo and Marigan knew of three separate parties who’d already lost their lives on this deadly floor filled with ambushes, traps and tough new monsters. Even Lind of the Divine Dragon Alliance was said to have lost a few of his men to this fatal floor, although Argo had a difficult time validating that information thanks to that guild’s tight secrecy.

Michi Aoi drew a sorrowful breath.

“The twenty-fifth floor was meant to be my father’s signature work… All four designers made their final floor incredibly challenging, something to be remembered by… But I know my father planned on using a two-headed giant for this final battle, not some overgrown storm giant.”

“You can’t blame your father for the tragedy that’s happened here, Michi… When Aoi-san designed this floor, it was only meant to be a game, not a battle for our lives… Besides, we already know that Kayaba has altered other boss battles, why not this one?”

“I know… But yesterday still seemed wrong to me… Since the twentieth floor, the last four boss battles have been a cakewalk, almost like Kayaba was trying to build us up with a false sense of confidence before yanking the rug out from underneath us... It feels like a trap.”

“I trust your instincts… The meeting before the next raid is in an hour, I’ll bring up your concerns to the other players… If there are any more nasty surprises, I’ll strongly encourage that we teleport out again immediately and regroup… Alright?”
Argo was about to agree with Marigan when the two women were suddenly surprised by the tower’s doors bursting wide open as an out-of-breath boy draped in a shimmering cloak suddenly crashed through them and skilfully rolled into the room with a dozen Legion guards in close pursuit behind.

Both women knew their unexpected guest.

“Dami-chan?!”

As Argo rushed to the young player whom she hadn’t seen since the second floor, Marigan held up her hand and ordered the advancing guards to stand-down before questioning to their surprise visitor.

“Damian… What’s wrong?”

While Marigan had never completely forgiven the boy for his unprovoked attack on Argo, she had long-ago accepted Argo’s explanation that he’d never truly intended to endanger her life and that they had made amends.

The young player frantically slashed his finger across his vocal cords, indicating a condition which Argo was familiar with.

“He can’t talk… You need to tell us something though, don’t you?”

The eleven-year-old nodded his head up-and-down and then made a writing motion with his hand while staring expectantly at Argo. As she was continually working on her Player’s Guide, the Information Broker always had a quill and parchment in her inventory.

As she materialized these items and handed them to Damian, she watched as he wrote something in English on its pages, the Japanese student unable to decipher any of his foreign words except for one…

‘Kibaou’.

Glancing up at Marigan, the girl watched nervously as the leader of the Legion guild slowly went pale as she read Damian’s note.

“That damned idiot!... He’s taken the Aincrad Liberation Squad in ahead of us to try and finish off the boss alone!”

It was Argo’s worst fears suddenly realized…

For months now, the heated rivalry between the game’s two top clearing guilds - the Divine Dragon Alliance which was led by a player named Lind and the Aincrad Liberation Squad which was driven relentlessly by the brash Kibaou - had been building to a fevered pitch.

They were locked in a constant battle to become the most powerful guild in Aincrad, desperately seeking any advantage they could in obtaining rare items and experience. But this floor had brought their competitive natures to a boiling point…

With the twenty-fifth floor’s incredible difficulty, Argo had felt that there was a sense among the players that the last attack bonus from this boss would exceed anything they’d received so far.

And both the DDA and the ALS were prepared to do anything - except cooperate - to obtain it.

It was Kibaou who’d passionately argued about remaining to finish off the boss yesterday, only reluctantly withdrawing his men when it had become painfully apparent no other guild was willing to...
support him.

But now the frustrated Kibaou had taken matters into his own hands, bolstering his core group with enough reserve members to form a raiding party and go in alone. And Argo knew these reserve members were far from ready to face a monster like ‘The Storm King’.

As the girl recovered from her shock, she watched Marigan frantically messaging players from her contact list, attempting to gather the rest of the raiding party and rescue the reckless Kibaou and his group before they met with disastrous consequences.

Argo attempted to console herself with the fact that if the ‘Rock Fall’ event was truly the only special attack ‘The Storm King’ possessed, then there was a chance the Aincrad Liberation Squad could actually pull it off. They just needed to clear the battle area when it triggered and then go back on the attack.

But if ‘The Storm King’ had more tricks up his gigantic sleeves than the ‘Rock Fall’, Kibaou was leading his men to certain death.

Within ten minutes, Marigan had managed to convince the rest of the clearers to teleport to the Black Iron Palace for an emergency meeting. Crammed within the East Tower, Argo recognized all eighteen members of the Divine Dragon Alliance, the Fuurinkazan guild led by a red-faced Klein, the massive Agil the axe-wielder, Kirito and Asuna, Heathcliff the Paladin with the bearded Godfree.

Argo’s own ‘elite’ team rounded out the party. An elite teams which would never have engaged in a boss battle under normal circumstances.

Over the last six weeks, Michi had been able to suitably equip her group of twelve and maximize their builds to the point where they were formidable, but she knew the Legion’s elite team was still far from a dominant force in this game. Out of the twelve players she had trained, Argo believed that half of them were capable of assisting the rescue party.

Those six included herself, Hisako, Yulier, Thinker, Crusher Joe and Kobatz. The other six players simply weren’t ready for a boss yet. Argo instructed those remaining six to transfer their crystals to the rest who would be joining the Commander on this mission. It was obvious that thanks to Kibaou’s idiocy, they weren’t going to have the time to shop for provisions.

When Commander Marigan began addressing the gathered crowd, Argo quietly slid beside Damian who was skulking in the shadows at the back of the room…

“Are you sure you’re up for this, Dami-chan?... This boss battle will be dangerous… You don’t have to risk your life because of Kibaou’s stupidity.”

Damian shot her a smug look and then nodded his head up-and-down with a smirk that exuded confidence. Her concerned eyes silently asked Damian if he knew what he was signing up for. They both knew the boy had never been in a boss battle so there was no reason to be that confident.

Still, in a worst case scenario, there were plenty of shadowy places for him to disappear and use a Teleportation Crystal. As a solo player, no one would blame him. As she turned her attention back to Marigan, Argo decided to keep an eye out for him, but the thirteen-year-old now had her own party to look out for as well.
Along with thirty-five other players, Damian teleported to a location outside the massive closed doors which led to the boss of the twenty-fifth floor… ‘The Storm King’.

The young player put his hand on the hilt of his new dagger, a recent replacement for Argo’s precious gift after the faithful Backbiter had finally been reduced to zero Durability on the eighteenth floor. Even with regular maintenance, Damian had learned that weapons were only meant to last so long in this game.

‘Blood-Bound’ was the name of his new stigmatic dagger, its monstrous +16 blade far more powerful than Backbiter, requiring Damian to boost his Strength stat just to wield it. With every successful strike, ‘Blood-Bound’ stole 15 percent of his remaining Hit Points and converted them into crimson-fuelled damage.

He’d been damned lucky to find it.

His ‘Backstabbing’ skill was now at a six-times modifier. And with all the health buffs he had spent a fortune acquiring, Damian could now deliver a walloping 1,500 points of damage with just one backstab attack.

That was his entire health score in just one attack…

He was pretty sure no other player could do that.

Still, while backstabbing had proved incredibly effective, the encounter with the Goblin Chief had taught him a painful lesson in survival. Damian couldn’t always depend on the element of surprise and had to be able to hold his own in a straight fight.

That hole in his game had been addressed with the addition of the ‘Martial Arts’ skill.

The former child assassin could now use his own fighting style, with each strike draining his health but also translating into damage. Without engaging the system, he found he could easily score up to ten hits on monsters within a matter of seconds, racking up over 1,200 points of damage from a succession of quick strikes without incurring lag effects, but only at the cost of pushing his own health bar deep into the red just below 300 HP.

And this was before even being hit by an opponent.

Because of his sacrificial style, the newest Robin kept a lot of Healing Crystals continually stocked in his inventory and item belt. When Damian fought, he was literally putting his life on the line in more ways than one. The blades of stigmatic weapons pointed both ways, by far the cruellest blades in the game.

As a solo player, he had learned he needed to choose his enemies carefully and stay away from those weak creature mobs which the other parties enjoyed. He’d purposely limited himself to tough opponents in groups of three or less so that the rewards would justify the cost of the Healing Crystal he was bound to waste afterwards.

The unique opportunity to face a single boss monster was almost custom-built for his high-risk style of play. Damian could quickly deliver devastating amounts of damage and then let the other players ‘Switch’ while he used a Healing Crystal before doing it all over again. Without the worry of being struck down in his weakened state, he was just as effective as any other player here.

Probably more so.

But what excited him the most was the chance to watch some of the game’s strongest players
firsthand. Since his meeting with Cardinal, Damian had become convinced that Akihiko Kayaba was in this game somewhere, likely as a player.

And like all good game designers, Kayaba must be curious about boss battles. Damian suspected the game’s creator could be a member of the Divine Dragon Alliance or Aincrad Liberation Squad. It was the perfect cover.

He watched with anticipation as Marigan and Lind opened the massive doors to reveal an enormous cavern, easily the size of three football fields and at least a hundred feet high.

It was even larger than the main portion of the Bat Cave. But the ceiling wasn’t lined with the sleeping bats he’d grown accustomed to over the past year, rather rows-upon-rows of razor sharp stalactites which would surely crush any player who found themselves directly beneath their falling path.

In a strange way, they reminded Damian of teeth.

In the center of the room, the boy’s attention was drawn to the ongoing battle, the distant yells of perhaps two dozen players from the Aincrad Liberation Squad attacking ‘The Storm King’ while another dozen players hung back, cautiously eyeing the ominous stalactites dangling precariously from the ceiling or healing themselves.

Squinting across the cavern, he realized the colossal storm giant was almost at its last health bar which would trigger the ‘Rock Fall’ event which explained why more members of the ALS were continually retreating.

As the thirty-six new players cautiously stepped into the room and spread out, they heard the far-away warnings among Kibaou’s squad that they had finally brought the giant down to its last health bar, triggering its special attack. As they all retreated, ‘The Storm King’ roared, producing a massive shockwave that loosened dozens of these pointed rocks above and sent them hurtling down to the battlefield.

However, Kibaou and his core group were already running. Those players clad in green scurried to the outer edges, quickly placing themselves outside of the of the worst of the crashing stalactites which stuck into the stone floor upon impact.

It was then that the spiky-haired young man who led the ALS finally spotted the recently arrived rescue party and stood his ground…

“Back off, you scabs! This is our fight!”

Damian immediately decided this guy couldn’t be Akihiko Kayaba. After the dust from the falling stalactites had settled, ‘The Storm King’ retreated to the back of the huge cavern with the rest Aincrad Liberation Squad in hot pursuit, as though the huge giant was attempting to escape his doom.

All eyes went to Marigan and Lind, but it was the Legion Commander who spoke first.

“We’ll follow, but don’t engage… Not yet.”

As the rescue party moved forward to follow the battle, Damian blended into the shadows at the edge of the cavern and carefully moved along with them. By the time they had made it to the rubble-strewn center of the cavern, he saw Kibaou’s group was once again engaged with the sword-wielding giant near the exit to the 26th floor.
Although the boss was enormous in stature and dressed in leathers and furs, it seemed the leg strikes from Kibaou and his party were quickly chopping the giant down to size. As they got closer, Damian could tell the impact of the King’s looping sword strikes knocked nearby players down, but they were easily avoidable if you paid attention to his attack pattern.

A part of Damian now yearned to get behind the faltering giant and land the killing blow which would grant him the Last Attack bonus, the giant was so close to being defeated…

But instead, the young assassin gritted his teeth and held himself in check. The politics of this situation were already ugly enough. There was no need to throw himself into that mix. Besides, he wanted to watch the behaviour of the other players.

By the time the rescue party was within sixty feet of the battle, they immediately stopped as ‘The Storm King’ suddenly bellowed and raised his massive arms, bursting into a spreading nova of electrical energy after the last blow had reduced his health to zero. That nova shocked all surrounding players as the boss departed Sword Art Online in tiny sparkling crystals.

Sparks of the King’s final attack made it all the way to Damian’s feet, but luckily didn’t touch him. As he looked up, he noticed that none of the attacking players seemed to have been killed by that unexpected final attack though, only injured or stunned.

The Aincrad Liberation Squad was soon cheering loudly, inspired by their rousing victory. They had defeated ‘The Storm King’ without a single fatality.

Damian watched as the cocky Kibaou strutted up to Lind of the Divine Dragon Alliance.

“That’s how you do it! If you gutless cowards weren’t so quick to take off yesterday, you could have shared in this victory, but now this day belongs to the Aincrad Liberation Squad! So why don’t you clowns go back to town and just wait for us to open up the 26th floor!”

Lind stared back defiantly at the stocky leader of the ALS.

“You know damned well the raid was scheduled for 9:00 AM... That was what we all agreed on last night... Instead, you lied and then betrayed us!”

“Nah, we just don’t need amateurs slowing us down.”

This was suddenly getting tense. Members of the Divine Dragon were already drawing their weapons to defend their guild leader while the Aincrad Liberation Squad were rallying behind Kibaou with their weapons already drawn.

As the imposing Marigan stepped forward to establish order, the sudden crack of thunder behind them ended the heated conversation and drew all of their attention back to the center of the cavern…

There, electricity seemed to be drawing itself from the floor, arcing into a massive pattern between the bickering players at the back of the massive cavern and its far-off entrance. Damian silently watched as this chaotic energy swirled and transformed itself into a massive body, even taller than ‘The Storm King’ before finally taking form…

The resulting monstrosity was easily sixty feet tall, its tanned skin as thick as a cinderblock wall and etched with magic runes. Around his belt were what appeared to be a chain of dragon skulls, nothing more than a trinket dwarfed by the giant’s colossal girth. In each of its huge hands, the colossus held a war hammer whose shafts were easily twenty feet long, topped with stone mallets the size of armoured vans.
But most disturbing of all was that it had two heads.

The name above those heads read ‘The Two-Headed Giant’…

This was the true boss of the twenty-fifth floor with five HP bars.

As the players looked on in terror at the imposing creature over a hundred yards in front of them, they all cringed in fear as five more bolts of lightning suddenly struck the ground simultaneously, the resulting booms of thunder almost deafening Damian as he clapped his hands over his ears.

When the dust (and the ringing in his ears) finally settled, he saw five other giants now surrounding ‘The Two-Headed Giant’, each of them with four health bars…

Each player was gripped with fear as they realized ‘The Storm King’ had been nothing more than a decoy to lure the players to the back of the cavern, cutting off their escape route. They either had to fight six boss-level giants or teleport out of here and start over again.

Damian got the distinct impression that the players were definitely more comfortable with that second option. He watched as their appointed leaders quickly came to a similar conclusion while staring wide-eyed at the titanic creatures now moving towards them…

“Alright everyone, teleport back to town!”

It didn’t work.

Despite repeated attempts, none of their Teleportation Crystals had any effect. Meanwhile, the giants were steadily moving towards them, causing tiny tremors with each advancing step. Stalactites crashed down meaninglessly around them with each stride the giant mob took.

“Heal the wounded! We’ll have to try and get past them and make a break for it!”

The panicked cries from the players of the Aincrad Liberation Squad let them all know the Healing Crystals had no effect either. Damian felt his heart suddenly tense as he tried his own. If he intended on fighting these things head-on with a stigmatic dagger, not being able to use his Healing Crystals was basically suicide…

Over the yells and panic, Damian steadied his nerves and carefully examined the advancing enemy which was now less than eighty yards away, each of their massive strides covering nearly thirty feet. From the shadows, he saw that the two giants flanking the boss were called ‘Ice Giant Warriors’, each carrying an enormous battle axe the size of a telephone pole covered in frost.

Even their breath came out as frost.

Behind the three giants were something the boy had never seen before…

Female giants.

Each of the giantesses bringing up the rear wielded staffs which most have been carved from ancient oaks, their weapons easily as tall as ‘The Two-Headed Giant’. They had long flowing hair of pure white and blue skin the colour of a clear sky. Compared to the hideous beasts in front of them, Damian might even call them attractive.

But what intrigued the Boy Wonder the most were the swirling runes which constantly surrounded these female giants, encasing them within a mystical column. He knew there was no magic in Sword Art Online, but these floating runes and their names seemed to indicate otherwise…
‘Cloud Giant Sorceress’.

Apparently the giants hadn’t lost all their magic.

The colour of the spinning runes were blue for the first sorceress, yellow for the second and red for the third. Damian watched these female giants get within fifty yards of the crowd of players and simply stop, each planting her staff firmly into the stone floor as though deciding to act as an observer.

His concentration was broken as the three male giants in the lead suddenly picked up their pace and charged, shaking the floor itself as their war hammers and battle axes were raised, ready to flatten the more than seventy tiny players who dared to stand in front of them.

“Aincrad Liberation Squad, take out the boss!”

With most of his party still wounded from the ‘The Storm King’, Kibaou was now diving headfirst into disaster. Not to be outdone though, Lind ordered the Divine Dragon Alliance to attack the left ‘Ice Giant Warrior’, prompting the rest of the rescue party to tackle the right.

Battle lines had been quickly drawn with no time to think, but both Damian and Argo had a sudden uneasy feeling about those three giant sorceresses standing motionless behind the main battle…

No one had expected magic in Sword Art Online.
Chapter Notes

As this entire chapter is basically one massive battle against multiple foes, the Point of View shifts from one character to another including Damian, Argo, Asuna, Kirito and Marigan. I’ve used the horizontal lines to mark the POV change.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Godfree

(Godfree, the human lightning rod)

Chapter Thirty-Two
The Twenty-Fifth Floor
Part Two: The Red Sorceress

As the rest of the players rushed to meet the thundering approach of the three giants, Damian noticed that Argo and her small band of warriors were angling away from the skirmish and bypassing them…

Towards the three giant sorceresses which had remained behind.

Damian noticed that manoeuvre left Marigan with twelve capable players to tackle the second ‘Ice Giant Warrior’ - but the extra five players which Argo had led away would have more than evened those odds…

It wasn’t a bad idea though. Damian still couldn’t shake the feeling that the female giants were something more than just observers, even if they weren’t attacking.
Argo must have had the same feeling.

Making his way through the shadows, the young hero carefully employed his ‘Hiding’ skill to get around to the back of the first ‘Cloud Giant Sorceress’ closest to him – the one who was surrounded by swirling red runes.

Twenty-five yards to her right was her twin surrounded by yellow runes. The third and final sister was surrounded by blue. There had to be a reason for the colours, but Damian wasn’t sure it all meant.

Argo and her team had obvious intentions of engaging this first blue-skinned giantess, a suitable distraction which would increase Damian’s odds of remaining undetected while using his ‘Backstabbing’ skill if required. The former assassin watched as the small group launched their attacks, budging the first health bar of the red sorceress to around half as she calmly took everything they had to offer, standing motionless and offering no resistance…

It was just too tempting of an offer to refuse.

Sinking ‘Blood-Bound’ deep into the back of her leg, Damian watched with satisfaction as his bright red impact scar drained more Hit Points from her first health bar. A few more decent attacks and they’d knock her down to three.

Argo had picked an easy target.

The main drawback of his backstab attack was the lag time, but luckily for him, the giantess still didn’t seem to be retaliating, only chanting as she held onto her staff and bowed her head as though in deep meditation.

None of these ‘Cloud Giant Sorceress’ monsters even had their eyes open!

If she was just going to let him backstab her all day, this would be over soon. And then Damian secretly hoped he’d get the chance to fight alongside the other clearing groups who currently had their hands full with the male giants.

He needed to study them, and analyze their reactions to see if any of them fit his perceived profile for Akihiko Kayaba…

It was at that precise moment when an invisible force hit him like a wrecking ball in full swing, shattering his concentration and sending the boy hurtling through the air like crumpled paper towards the cave wall.

His first thought was that another invisible giant had simply leaned down and swatted him out of the way like a pesky bug.

The backstab’s cool-down effect expired just in time for Damian to twist in the air and use his legs to cushion the impact of slamming against the angled cave wall. The incredible momentum compressed him into a tight ball, his knees jamming into his face until gravity took over and he toppled to the stone floor below.

What the heck had just hit him?!

Getting up, Damian noticed that he’d just taken a few hundred points of damage, but he also knew it could have been much worse… If he had careened into that wall headfirst while still locked in the lag effect, the odds were that he wouldn’t have gotten up at all.
Quickly glancing at his surroundings in an attempt to figure out what had just happened, Damian saw something unexpected that made his mouth drop in despair… When the red sorceress giant tapped her enormous staff hard on the floor, a shimmering red glow momentarily surrounded her…

And the missing health bar which they had finally just erased magically reappeared!

She had just healed herself back to four health bars!

Argo ran over to him quickly followed by Hisako Li Shun. Despite her personal resolve to focus on her own team’s safety, Michi’s heart had still leapt in her chest when she saw Damian suddenly flying through the air towards the wall.

“Dami-chan… Are you OK?”

He nodded.

Argo seemed to grow a little pale and looked like she might be sick. She’d only just managed to strike the first ‘Cloud Giant Sorceress’ with Eulogy and wasn’t happy about what the unique dagger had to tell her.

“They’re magic… I can’t believe that bastard Kayaba actually stooped so low to let them use magic for their final floors when he knew what this game was going to be…”

Damian shot her a quizzical look.

“The red one prevents Healing Crystals from working, but she can also heal one health bar on any giant, including herself… If we don’t throw everything we’ve got against her first, there’s no way we can win this battle… She’ll just keep healing them!”

Argo wasn’t wrong.

Glancing over at the male giants, Damian saw none of them had even been reduced by one bar yet. But right now he was more interested in what had just attempted to make him part of the wall. Did the red sorceress do that as well?!

He pointed at the red sorceress, and then at himself, and then clapped his hands hard together near the wall. Argo seemed to get the drift.

“No, there was nothing about her download which indicated she’d be able to do that.”

The keen-eyed Hisako spoke up as Damian noticed the strange weapon in her hand, a rapier which resembled a giant black needle more than a sword.

“Argo… After my attack, I saw the blue one slam her staff on the ground the instant before Damian flew through the air… I think she used some kind of magical ranged attack on him.”

Argo stroked her chin in thought and then sighed in frustration.

“It could be telekinesis… I expect she’s the one who’s preventing the Teleport Crystals from working too… I wonder what the yellow one does though?”

As though answering her question, they all turned to see the middle giantess tap her enormous staff on the ground before being momentarily blinded by a lightning bolt which connected with one of the Aincrad Liberation Squad players facing off against ‘The Two-Headed Giant’.

As the corresponding clap of thunder shook their own flesh, they watched in horror as the lightning
bolt’s electricity lit up the boy, creating shadowy outlines of the virtual bones of the green-cloaked player before he slowly faded into oblivion, the ten seconds of a player’s waning life slowly disappearing before he finally burst into tiny blue crystals.

All of them stood transfixed for that instant, stunned into silence as the boy became nothing more than pixel dust...

With a single lightning strike which none of them could defend against, a player had just been killed... It could have been any of them... There was no way to defend against that… A solemn-faced Argo finally broke the silence as she stared over towards Marigan fighting against the ‘Ice Giant Warrior’.

“You two keep fighting… The Commander needs to know about this.”

Asuna Yuuki counted herself lucky to be alive.

Since deciding to fight this game of death or die trying, she had managed to ally herself with one of its strongest players, even if Kirito had the annoying habit of constantly letting himself get lost in his moronic admiration of the same game which was trying to kill them.

And now, even facing overwhelming odds, she was lucky to have found herself in a group of powerful players against overwhelming odds.

Asuna had just witnessed the Commander of the Legion guild launch a ‘Flashing Penetrator’ attack with a two-handed sword… How strong was that woman?... The Paladin Heathcliff had then defended the lagging Marigan against the resulting axe blow with his enormous shield, turning aside an axe blade that was easily twice his size.

Agil, Kirito, Godfree and the entire Fuurinkazan guild continued to assault the giant, but those two just seemed to be on a whole different level than the rest of them. As impressed as she was however, Asuna couldn’t help but be a little annoyed when she saw the dopey expression on Kirito’s face as he looked over at the stunning blonde Commander like some lovesick fanboy…

Idiot… He needed to get his head back into the fight.

“Kirito-kun… Focus!”

That familiar embarrassed smile again while he scratched his head and tried to laugh it off…

“Make your apologies with your sword!”

Yes, she counted herself lucky to be alive in this deadly game and surrounded by good players, but sometimes she wondered if Kirito understood this wasn’t a game anymore...

It was a virtual world where only death was real.

Asuna launched her own ‘Octet Spiral’, an eight-hit combo which attempted to pinpoint an opponent’s weak spot with eight quick, circling attacks spread over a wide area. However, if this opponent had any weak spots, they were likely far out of her reach.

So much for the Critical Blow she was so fond of.

The best any of them could manage were strikes against the Ice Giant Warrior’s leg, but they were
still causing damage. The group had finally managed to knock off its first health bar without taking any significant hits.

Just three more bars to go.

After her twirling attack concluded, Asuna watched in disbelief as the ice giant suddenly glowed a bright shade of red before its fourth health bar magically reappeared…

What was that?! Had it just healed itself?! Was that even possible?!

As she searched for an answer, the rapier-wielder saw Argo the Information Broker quickly approaching the taller Marigan with grave concern written across the same face which bore her signature whiskers.

As the Fuurinkazan guild switched with her, Asuna decided to make her way back towards the Commander and listen in. Argo must have some vital piece of information she needed to pass on. Asuna only caught Marigan’s declaration at the end however.

“The rest of you… Defeat the red sorceress!… She’s healing the giants and preventing our own Healing Crystals from working!… Heathcliff, Godfree and I will hold off this one until you do!… Go!”

Was she serious?! Three players against this monstrosity?! How long could three players even last against a boss on their own?…

And yet, she had seen Heathcliff block the giant’s attack with ease and the Commander launch attacks which Asuna didn’t even think were possible with her massive sword. Asuna could only hope the bearded Godfree had some tricks up his sleeve as well…

If this female giant behind them was healing the rest of the giants, it did make sense to take her out first… Especially if she were preventing their own Healing Crystals from working… Otherwise, they’d soon start dropping like flies… Asuna couldn’t fault the strategy, only the burden which Heathcliff, Godfree and Marigan had willingly taken upon themselves.

As the sixteen players split off, Asuna glanced back and saw the Legion Commander launch a devastating ‘Serration Wave’ attack on the ice giant’s leg which brought its attention solely back to the three remaining players…

That strike had said ‘We’re your opponents now’…

Asuna grit her teeth and then set her eyes forward. She had to put her trust in those three older players and just focus on the task at hand… Her target was now the ‘Cloud Giant Sorceress’ with the red runes encircling it. That was the key to their victory.

As they ran towards the giantess, Argo the Information Broker gave them a quick verbal, strategy guide.

“The red one doesn’t seem to fight back but she’s tough and can heal herself and others. The yellow one launches those lightning bolt attacks. We think the blue one uses some sort of telekinetic attack which will smash you through the air… Keep moving at all times… Let’s go!”

Asuna wasn’t sure what a ‘telekinetic’ attack was, but she’d witnessed the lightning bolt which had already killed one of the Aincrad Liberation Squad members…

Keep moving seemed like as good a strategy as any.
The fifteen-year-old girl’s stomach tightened as she heard the ominous clap of thunder once again, slowing her pace as she expected the sudden bolt of electricity to end her existence…

But it had been another of the ALS players which had been sent into the afterlife again. Asuna caught the last flickering image of the fading player before he exploded into glittering polygonal dust…

Even worse, she then witnessed ‘The Two-Headed Giant’ smash a nearby player with one of its massive war hammers, granting the young man the same fate as his fallen comrade.

Oh God, they were getting killed...

“Let’s go, Asuna!”

It was Kirito who snapped her out of her impending despair. Running beside the Black Swordsman, she held her own rapier at the ready and charged. Everyone was counting on them. If they didn’t take out the red sorceress soon, no one here even stood a chance of getting out of this room let alone the game...

Asuna wanted to believe it was that momentary lapse of concentration that had allowed the long-haired girl to get in front of them, but the undeniable fact was that this girl was incredibly fast.

They watched her strange attack against the ‘Cloud Giant Sorceress’.

Instead of a normal sword strike, the girl (who was actually one year older than Asuna) just seemed to be jabbing arm-length needles into the female giant’s leg, using the ‘Quick Change’ skill to rearm herself and then planting more of these black burrs into the massive calf muscle of their foe.

By the time she had stuck in eight of those oversized acupuncture needles, Asuna prepared her own attack but instead watched in horror as the dark-haired girl suddenly flew straight up into the air as though launched from an invisible cannon, her limbs desperately sprawling as she struggled to regain some sense of equilibrium before she peaked at fifty feet in the air.

It was Kirito who launched himself off of Klein’s head as the girl began to descend, making a spectacular midair diving catch as Hisako plummeted towards the stone floor.

Rolling across the hard floor together, the entangled pair eventually came to a stop with Kirito lying over top of her.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes… I think so.”

Realizing the precarious position they had landed in, Kirito immediately sat up and quietly hoped Asuna hadn’t noticed.

“Umm… Sorry about the landing… What were you just using against the sorceress?”

Hisako slowly raised herself back to her feet and then helped him up.

“Rage Wasp needles.”

Getting up, Kirito had to admit that was ingenious. Those were probably the perfect weapon to use against a monster that could heal itself...
‘Attack on the Rage Wasp Hive!’ had been a Side Quest on the 23rd floor which pitted the players against the dangerous Rage Wasps. He’d heard these insects were four times as large as the Wind Wasps and twice as mean.

Kirito the ‘Beater’ had been sorely tempted to try the quest as the wasps’ stingers were a highly valuable commodity. Players could use them to upgrade their weapons or even try for a new Continuous Piercing Damage weapon with the right materials and a good blacksmith. Perfect against boss monsters.

But because it was only himself and Asuna who normally went on these quests together, Kirito had decided to skip this one for a good reason…

The wasps tended to mob players in swarms and had a Continuous Piercing Damage effect which would continue to cause damage to stung players until the stinger was pulled out. But the barb at the end of those stingers often made them difficult to remove, requiring assistance from another player.

Which meant that in the heat of the battle, that player would likely be stung while trying to help you out...

And, if that player happened to be Asuna, it meant you were never going to live it down...

So Kirito had quickly decided it was a quest intended for larger groups and moved on.

He recalled the continuous damage for the stingers was around 50 points of damage per turn, which really wasn’t much at these higher levels, but with this girl’s speed and the fact that the giantess wasn’t defending herself, those stingers combined into a brilliant strategy.

With only twenty needles in her, the ‘Cloud Giant Sorceress’ would be taking a thousand points of damage per turn…

“How many of those needles do you have?”

“I have fifty-two left… We worked so hard for them.”

Kirito knew the feeling. Gathering materials for weapon upgrades was the closest thing to drudgery this game had to offer as far as quests went. It was like fighting the same monster in a high spawn area for the entire day just to gain experience.

“And your hard work is about to pay dividends… Let’s win!”

As the two moved to rejoin the battle, Kirito cast a quick eye ahead towards the fight with ‘The Two-Headed Giant’ to find it wasn’t going well at all. There seemed to be less of the Aincrad Liberation Squad than he remembered.

With the damage they had sustained earlier from ‘The Storm King’, Kibaou was having difficulty getting his group to engage once their health had been driven to the red. A group of those players was now clumped near the back of the cave, waiting to be healed.

And there was only one way to be healed in this battle.

As opposed to multi-hit combos, Kirito decided to use high-damage single attacks, allowing Hisako the room she needed to work. He found he wouldn’t have to do it for long though, this girl was amazingly fast. She’d managed to jab in another ten Rage Wasp needles even before Kirito was ready for his next attack.
His heart sank as he heard the next clap of thunder from ahead of them…

Marigan!

Their eyes all suddenly turned with dread to the smoking form of the Legion commander, leaning heavily on her two-handed sword as she struggled to remain standing after being struck with the fatal lightning bolt…

But she had remained standing.

Even from this distance, Kirito could tell she was suffering from a stun effect, but at least Marigan had survived. Damn, she must be incredibly strong…

And then Kirito realized that the first two lightning strikes must have targeted the wounded players of the ALS, reducing their already compromised health down to zero. A higher level player at full health could withstand that attack!

At least once anyways…

Launching another heavy strike, Kirito noticed the young boy he’d given the Martial Arts quest map to months ago was also launching a backstab attack on the sorceress. Between the two of them and the continual damage from the Rage Wasp needles Hisako had inserted, they managed to knock the giantess down to half health…

Alright!

The combined efforts of Fuurinkazan, Argo’s group, Agil, Damian, Asuna and himself were making quick work of the red sorceress. It should only be another minute or so before they were able to take her down…

Kirito’s exhilaration was cut short when he saw Asuna suddenly flying through the air towards the ice giant in front of them, her long hair flowing like streamers before landing hard on the battlefield and rolling to a stop directly in front of the frost-covered giant.

“ASUNA!!”

Kirito tore off like a streak towards her.

Asuna Yuuki honestly didn’t know what had hit her.

She had the vague sensation of sailing through the air as though she had jumped off the high board at the school’s swimming pool, except that this time someone forgot to fill the pool with water. The hard stone floor greeted her with a bone-shuddering impact as she landed on her left side, her momentum causing Asuna to roll like a preschooler across a level hill until she was dizzy.

When she finally came to a rest on her back and looked up, she thought the cave didn’t seem as high from this part of the cave. It seemed to be getting closer too…

Only then did she realize that she was about to be crushed under the giant boot of the ‘Ice Giant Warrior’ which had been nearly forty yards behind her only seconds ago. Her brain exploded in panic…

Asuna tried to roll, to move away, but her digital body was still recovering from knockback effect of
hitting the floor so hard…

This was it.

She was going to die.

At the last possible second, a strong hand managed to pull her just beyond the enormous black boot’s thundering crash, her own toes now inches away from a foot twice as long as her entire body. Someone had pulled her out just in time…

Kirito?

Blinking upwards, instead of young Kirito’s face, she saw the kind face of Heathcliff the Paladin staring back down at her, his long grey hair falling across weathered eyes.

“Are you alright, Lady Asuna?”

“I… I’m fine… Thank you.”

“Can you move to the back of the cave?… Rest awhile, I’ll hold off this foe while you recover.”

Asuna glanced up at her own health bar… Damn, she was now in the yellow with no way of healing herself. Taking it easy was out of the question.

“I’ll fight.”

A smile from the older man.

“As you wish.”

The racing Kirito had witnessed Heathcliff save Asuna from the giant’s stomp a second before he could reach her. That was too close! Slowing down to a jog, the Black Swordsman breathed a deep sigh of relief and thanked the gods who had spared her.

He didn’t know what he’d do if Asuna died now…

Just as he placed his hands on his knees to catch his breath, a charging Marigan hit him like a freight train, scooping up the teenaged boy into her arms like an errant child.

His initial confusion was emphatically answered by a battle axe the size of his living room crashing into the spot where he’d just been standing, striking with enough force to embed itself deep into the stone floor.

He’d been too busy recovering from the shock of seeing Asuna almost die that he had almost met his own doom. The guilt of failing Asuna in her moment of need had almost paralyzed him with doubt, making him an easy target for the ‘Ice Giant Warrior’…

He would have been cleaved in half.

Cradled in Marigan’s powerful arms, Kirito realized that while many female players used dyes and the game settings to change their hair and eye colour, the Commander truly was a green-eyed blonde woman…
Those green eyes now stared down at him reproachfully.

“Pay attention.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

As she set him down, Kirito noticed Marigan’s armour was still warm from the lightning strike. She must have noticed the ice giant had been targeting him just as she recovered from her stun effect and then made a mad dash to get him out of the way.

She was easily the tallest woman he’d ever met…

“Please take Miss Asuna and get back to fighting the red sorceress.”

Kirito blinked and nodded.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Damian grinned as a vicious slash from Klein of the Fuurinkazan finally brought the resilient giantess to her final health bar. It was about time, he’d hit her with six consecutive backstab attacks driving himself to the point where his own health bar was now in the red literally by his own hand.

Besides the lost health, his life-for-damage strategy had an addition flaw as well.

Without the ability to heal himself, each attack had made the next one increasingly less effective. His stigmatic damage was being affected by the Law of Diminishing Returns, with 15% of his ever-decreasing life score bleeding away from the damage he was able to inflict.

His stigmatic damage was now only one-fifth what it had been originally.

Still, he had to keep fighting.

Even if his backstab attacks were only a fraction of what they’d been at the beginning of this fight, every point counted. She now had one bar left…

After his lengthy timeout finished, Damian initiated his next sneak attack…

And ran into something curved, invisible and solid.

He was immediately reminded of the doorway to the Halls of the Departed after the trap had been sprung, locking him away from his friends. But this invisible force field seemed to encase the red sorceress, locking her away from her assailants. And it wasn’t just Damian who had found it impossible to launch another attack as the other members of the party were having no luck as well.

Glancing over at the blue sorceress across the room, Damian saw that the white-haired giantess was now engulfed in an eerie blue glow radiating a strange power. Which meant this force field must have been her handiwork…

Damn it.

They were caught in a Catch-22. They needed to defeat the blue sorceress before they could attack the red one again, but the red one would heal the blue one. Even worse, all of their hard work would soon be undone if this red sorceress were allowed to remain untouched in her magical cocoon…
She’d just heal herself.

The sudden flash of lightning and the boom of thunder turned his blood ice cold.

---

When the lightning flashed and the thunder hurt her ears once more, Michi Aoi cringed. Why had her father been so cruel? As an Agility-user, this magically created lightning might even finish her off with a single shot…

But the thunder didn’t sound directly above her.

No, this was even worse… It sounded from exactly the same location as it had the last time, the time when it had struck Marigan.

No…

Argo didn’t want to turn her head… She didn’t want to find the strongest player in the game now fading from existence after taking a second lightning strike… The same woman who had led a thousand people across twenty-five floors of this damned game and kept them safe…

With her power, Marigan would become the target… The AI which ran the game’s combat was smart enough to figure out who the greatest threats were… It would act in its own interest and target those threats, attempting to remove them from the fight…

In the end, even though she didn’t want to, Argo had to look up, just to see…

A miracle.

In the distance, standing beside a kneeling Marigan was the bearded and battered Godfree, his sword held straight up in the air which acted like a lightning rod. The poor man was literally blackened, the orange-red curls which adorned his head literally smoking and charred…

And then a big goofy grin spread across his face.

Whether it was dumb luck or intentional, Argo couldn’t say. All she knew was that this man had just saved Marigan’s life and would be getting any piece of information he wanted for the rest of the game free of charge!

---

With a loud ringing in her ears, Marigan looked up beside her at the smouldering form of Godfree, his white teeth suddenly revealed in a bright smile set against his soot-covered face. At the last possible second, he had pushed her down and then raised his sword to act as a lightning rod, saving her life.

“Godfree... Are you alright??”

“FINE, MY LADY! EVERY POINT I’VE EVER EARNED HAS GONE STRAIGHT INTO MY STRENGTH STAT! I’M AS TOUGH AS AN OX!!”

Despite herself, Marigan laughed as she held her index finger to her lips making a ‘Shh’ sound. If her own ears were ringing, Godfree’s must have been absolutely hammering like drums after that last bolt.
“… But how did you know I was about to get hit?”

Godfree gave his head a good shake in an effort to get clear the last bits of electrical current running along the cobwebs.

“The last time you were struck, I noticed the giantess in the middle with the strange yellow characters floating around her tap her staff on the ground… So I’ve been keeping my eye on her ever since… When I saw her do it again, I figured she might try and finish the job.”

Marigan filed that piece of information in her memory. She’d be watching their staffs now…

“I owe you my life.”

“A Knight’s pleasure, my Lady.”

Godfree would have bowed, but he was still suffering from the stun effect.

The blonde warrior quickly glanced ahead. Having sensed that his two companions had been caught in the last lightning strike, Heathcliff was keeping the ‘Ice Giant Warrior’ busy with his sword-and-shield style while beyond him, Argo’s team seemed to be battering their weapons against some invisible force field which had recently surrounded the red sorceress.

That was bad.

A quick look to her far left revealed the culprit… The glowing blue ‘Cloud Giant Sorceress’ must be protecting her sister… The three female giants: Defence, Offence and the Team Medic… Their defeat was the key to winning this battle.

Marigan suddenly wondered just how high that force field went…

Only one way to find out.

With a deep breath, she used the ‘Materialize All Items’ command once gain, going down to just a simple white nightshirt.

She silently congratulated herself on learning her lesson from the last time she’d done this trick… Apparently, there were rumours of a 100,000 Col reward for anyone who could get a Screen-Shot-Camera-Crystal of her in her undergarments… She’d also heard the men of the seventh battalion had become very popular in bars for a certain dragon story…

Even through a soot-covered face, Marigan could still see the bright crimson forming on Godfree’s cheeks.

“My Lady, surely this is not the appropriate time…”

“I need to get lighter… If I can pull this off, we’ll be able to use our Healing Crystals again… If not, the Divine Dragon Alliance needs to switch over to the blue ‘Cloud Giant Sorceress’ and keep her busy.”

Marigan snatched up her two-handed sword from the pile and slung it across her back. She then assumed her starting position and immediately felt the energy building inside her, filling her body with power as her fingers dug into the stone floor.

*Give me the speed I require to save my friends, Dad…*

“But shouldn’t we…”
Godfree’s words were lost to the white-hot comet tail of ‘Flashing Penetrator’, sounding the deafening boom which made the surrounding players fear the lightning had struck twice…

Streaking past the ‘Ice Giant Warrior’ in a flash of blinding light, a barefooted Marigan once again managed to leap fifty feet into the air, thrusting her giant sword downwards like a judgement from above towards the head of the red sorceress.

If the invisible force field extended up this high, her Divine Thunder attack would fail and she’d be dead. If not from the fall, then this room would eventually kill her. If she failed, this battle would kill them all.

Their only hope was defeating this anti-Healing Crystal giant immediately.

She had just cleared the mystic red runes floating around the giantess by inches, suspecting that whatever force field her sister giant had put up shouldn’t extend past these magic symbols.

She was now in the clear!

When she thrust her blade forward, she became the vengeance of Thor, a lightning bolt from above to destroy those who would dare oppose the gods…

But even the gods of old had their troubles with giants.

What Marigan hadn’t counted on was the ‘Cloud Giant Sorceress’ tapping her staff on the floor the instant before her thundering blow struck, giving her enemy another full health bar. Divine Thunder was an incredibly powerful attack, dealing thousands of points of damage, but even that wasn’t enough to knock out two of this giant’s health bars…

‘The Cloud Giant Sorceress’ remained standing.

Marigan fell.

Argo’s fading hopes were instantly elated when she witnessed Marigan launch her Divine Thunder attack at a giant which none of them could reach. The same attack which had brought down ‘The Black Dragon’ and made the Commander a legend would save them again!

The echoing tap from the tree-sized staff of the ‘Cloud Giant Sorceress’ filled Argo’s ears like an earthquake, shattering the fragile foundations her hope had been built on with even the sound of the thunder from the Commander’s godlike attack unable to drown it out…

The giant had healed herself…

With a tightened heart, Argo watched as the second health bar magically appeared the instant before Marigan struck. It didn’t last long, but it still saved the motionless giant from her impending doom.

In horror, Argo watched as the blonde warrior fell, her limp form careening off the invisible force field and the giant’s body the entire way down like a tragic game of human plinko.

Placing her small hands against the invisible barricade, Michi screamed her friend’s name, watching in heartbreaking despair as Marigan landed with a sickening thump in front of her, just inside the invisible barrier.

Michi Aoi closed her eyes and prayed to whatever gods would listen in this virtual world to keep her
friend alive, to spare the life of Marissa Garrick. Even if her character died, just don’t send the signal to irradiate her brain, let her live…

When she opened her eyes again, Michi reeled in horror as she watched Marigan’s right arm fading, her health now down to a speck of a few red dots.

NO!!!

Groaning in pain, the brave warrior struggled to get to her feet using her left hand for balance, her right arm now nothing more than an ugly red slash across her shoulder, completely faded from view.

“Critical injury…”

Argo wasn’t sure who said it, Kirito perhaps, but her mind suddenly snapped back to the game’s reality... That’s right, Marigan had landed on her right side... In Sword Art Online, players could lose limbs as the result of a critical injury…

She wasn’t dying!

From that height, the fall had crushed her right arm and the system had replicated the effect of a major bone fracture by simply taking away the injured limb! After Marigan’s first sleep in a safe area, it would automatically regenerate…

Provided they ever made it out of here alive.

“Go…”

They all looked at the fallen warrior who was pressed against the invisible barricade, her voice struggling to issue commands. But there was still the incredible force of will held in those green eyes…

“Fuurinkazan… Help Heathcliff and Godfree… The rest of you… Blue sorceress… Go!”

With a heavy heart, the players left Marigan trapped within barricade, barely alive, dressed only in a nightdress with her massive sword lying uselessly by her side.

But Argo couldn’t force herself to move.

She couldn’t abandon her Commander.

She placed her hand against the invisible wall while tears ran down her cheeks.

“Argo… Go!”

“I… can’t.”

“You… have to.”

Argo suddenly felt a reassuring hand on her shoulder emerging from the shadows. With a confused and heavy heart, she slowly turned to look behind her…

“Dami-chan?”

Damian used his other hand to point at the various Rage Wasp needles still stuck in the giant’s leg and then reached into his belt to hand Michi a Healing Crystal. His intended message was undeniably clear to Argo…
“Marigan! If Hisako’s Rage Wasp needles damage effect occurs before the giant heals herself again, it should be enough to finish her off! You put her into the red of her final health bar! You just need to hold on!”

With a wink, Damian disappeared into the shadows again.

Argo watched in stunned silence as Marigan struggled to pick up her massive two-handed sword with her remaining hand. What was she thinking? No matter how strong she was, the system wouldn’t engage when a player used a two-handed weapon with their bad hand…

There was no way she could fight that thing.

But instead, the one-armed warrior only sat with her sword, leaning against the massive staff which was easily as thick as she was. It seemed to Argo as though she were patiently waiting as she gripped her heavy sword in her left hand…

Argo’s wet eyes drifted upwards to the health bar ‘Cloud Giant Sorceress’…

An entire minute seemed to drift by while she waited in this war of attrition, praying that the wasp stingers they had gathered with Hisako would win this race…

When the giant raised her staff once more, Argo’s breath was suddenly caught in her throat… No, she couldn’t…

But then she witnessed a determined Marigan dive below the tip of the enormous wooden shaft, somehow jamming her two-handed sword’s point into its core like a wedge the instant the giantess started to bring it back to the earth…

As the Commander rolled out of the way, Argo watched her sword embed itself into that staff’s tip like a metal toothpick being inserted into a walking cane…

But it stopped at the sword’s hilt!… With only mere inches to spare, a one-armed Marigan had used her sword to prevent the gigantic staff from making contact with the floor!

Undaunted, the giant raised her staff once more, determined to drive it into the floor and crush the pebble which had prevented her from using healing magic.

At that exact moment, the Continuous Piercing Damage effect of sixty Rage Wasp needles suddenly delivered 3,000 points of damage, enough to finish off the female giant as her staff hovered four feet off the floor.

As they watched the first of the six giants burst into oversized polygons, Argo smiled in relief and sank to her knees. They had performed that damned quest four times in order to obtain that many needles and she’d lost count of how many times they’d been stung by Rage Wasps…

But right now, Argo would have done the quest a thousand times just to feel this moment. With a huge smile, Michi watched the Commander roll over and retrieve her freed sword from where it had fallen after the ‘Cloud Giant Sorceress’ had entered into digital oblivion.

And then Marigan smiled back at her.

“Wow… This sword is in just as bad shape as I am… Just as well though… I’m not sure how much fighting I’ll be doing with only one arm…”

Reaching out, Argo found the force field was no longer in effect.
Pointing the Healing Crystal Damian had just given her at the battered Commander, Argo spoke the magic words…

“Heal: Marigan!”

Unable to contain herself any longer, the thirteen-year-old then dove on top of the larger woman who was wearing nothing more than a white nightshirt, embracing her friend in a powerful hug while tears of joy filled her pale brown eyes.

“You’re alive… That’s all the help I need.”

Chapter End Notes

Writing this chapter, I found it interesting how Kawahara-san incorporated his main character’s personality into their fighting styles...

Asuna’s style is quick and focused, attempting to exploit an enemy’s weakness which reflects her desire to end the game quickly.

Kirito’s style is balanced, a mix of strength and speed. He is the consummate gamer, observing the world of Aincrad as a whole and constantly seeking to uncover its secrets.

Klein and the Fuurinkazan are samurai. They are devoutly loyal to one another and have no fear of battle.

A reader once asked me what would happen when Kirito met Marigan… First and foremost, Kirito is a student of the game but he’s also a fifteen-year-old boy. He’d be intrigued by her ability and her good looks of course, but not necessarily attracted to her.

To Kirito, Marigan’s outward personality would be closer to that of a school principal than anything else. She’s a no-nonsense, authoritative figure who radiates an aura of power. As the leader of a 1,000-player guild, she’s amazingly busy.

And then there’s the fact that Marissa Garrick is nine years older than Kazuto Kirigaya as well…

The level of self-confidence required to even attempt to flirt with her would be far beyond Kirito’s comfort zone. Nor would he want to. He has enough troubles relating to Asuna.

Speaking of the relationship between Kirito and Asuna…

In the anime, Kirito breaks off as a solo player after the boss battle on the first floor. In the light novels however, it’s revealed that Kirito and Asuna form an informal party and adventure together until the twenty-fifth floor. I thought I’d take a crack at the reason for their upcoming separation with this arc.
Damian’s ‘curse’ prevents him from talking, but not from adventuring alongside other players. He may never join a party or a guild (Heck, he doesn’t even have these options in his menu!) but he can still be part of a group battle.

However, Cardinal will punish everyone if Damian gets too close to someone (especially Argo) or attempts to reveal the AI’s secret to the other players. That would be disastrous. But participating in a big battle is fine so long as he sticks to the script and plays the game.
It had been at that exact moment when it had all begun to come crashing down upon his head...

That single moment of hesitation when he had turned around to find those green eyes staring directly back at him, burning with vindictive judgement.

She knew.
But how could she know?!

How could Marigan know he was Akihiko Kayaba?!

Seconds before, a young girl had come tumbling towards him like a tumbleweed wrapped up in her cloak like a child rolling down a hill. A pretty young thing who was about to meet her end in this game beneath the foot of a giant he was fighting…

Did he even have the right to interfere? He was here as an observer, not a hero.

And then Heathcliff had made the mistake of turning around…

He’d only wanted to see if anyone would notice if he failed to save this girl who had been swatted away from the red sorceress like a fly, a player knocked senseless who was obviously within his reach to rescue.

If he didn’t quite make it in time, could anyone blame him for not saving her though? That was the question he needed answered.

Akihiko Kayaba had already risked too much by simply being here, by fighting alongside players in a battle he couldn’t actually lose. If he played the hero, he would gather attention he didn’t need. But if he didn’t act to save someone who was easily within his reach and someone saw him let this girl die…

She saw.

With that look of abject scorn, the Glorious Commander must have known his secret.

As a diving Heathcliff managed to pull the young lady out from beneath the giant’s massive foot the instant before it slammed to the ground, only then did Akihiko Kayaba realize who this girl truly was and how fortunate he’d been to save her…

She was the daughter of Shouzou Yuuki, CEO of RECT Progress Inc...

Asuna Yuuki.

Kayaba recalled the girl was a student at some private girls school or another and was never meant to be here. She was simply the one who had logged into the game in place of their intended target, her older brother Kouichirou Yuuki.

And Kouichirou Yuuki had been marked for death in this game.

Even though Asuna’s father, the elderly Shouzou Yuuki intended to turn over RECT to Akihiko’s fellow AfterLife conspirator and Asuna’s fiancé, Nobuyuki Sugou, there was still the risk he would not. They had laid out the entire chain of events two years before. Argus would take the fall for Akihiko’s apparent madness, Kouichirou Yuuki would die in the game and RECT would swoop in to buy their assets for a fraction of what they were worth.

The grieving Shouzou Yuuki would step down and then RECT would be swallowed up by AfterLife, making Nobuyuki Sugou a very wealthy man. As for Akihiko, he would use the World Seed to continue creating places of beauty and imagination within the AfterLife project.

But now there was still the chance the old man might get sentimental and turn over the company to his son instead of Nobuyuki. Kayaba’s former classmate had requested that the troublesome Kouichirou Yuuki should enjoy a very short lifespan here in SAO to ensure his quick ascension to
CEO, but in a way, Akihiko was glad he didn’t have to kill the man…

It went against his code of honour to deliberately do such a thing to a player. He wanted the game to be fair if nothing else. He had only agreed because Nobuyuki was shouldering a heavy burden for them by being engaged to Asuna Yuuki…

But on the morning of the launch, Kouichirou had been called away on urgent business at the last moment, leaving his copy of Sword Art Online and the NerveGear to his younger sister…

And even though she knew nothing about the game, she had still logged on. And now found herself amongst the strongest players in the game about to be crushed by a giant.

With the way her cloak had wrapped around her head as she tumbled, Kayaba simply hadn’t recognized her, so it was extremely lucky that he had saved this girl.

Without Nobuyuki’s engagement to his daughter, would Shouzou still intend for him to inherit RECT?... If Asuna were to perish inside the game, would it jeopardize the planned sale of Argus to RECT?...

Perhaps…

However, once the transition happened, it would no longer matter. But until that time, it was best to keep her alive. There was a good chance that Nobuyuki would still get the promotion even if she died, but with Shouzou’s firstborn son still alive and well, nothing was certain anymore.

The best laid plans…

What was important now though was that the leader of the game’s largest guild, the woman who currently commanded over one-eighth of all remaining players might suspect that Heathcliff was actually Akihiko Kayaba.

And that would prove disastrous.

If she managed to expose him as Akihiko Kayaba, the development of the World Seed would be severely compromised. It was a discovery he was forced to prevent at all costs.

This was no longer fun...

He’d simply have to make arrangements with Cardinal to kill off his character, logging out of the game for good to throw off suspicion. The stakes were far too high to continue indulging in his childish desires to participate in his own game.

Or did he have to go that far?

There was a good chance she wouldn’t make it out of this room alive.

Akihiko took consolation in the fact that lightning did strike twice in his game. After the Legion commander was struck the first time, Kayaba knew her fate was practically sealed. The yellow sorceress targeted players based simply on their offensive capabilities and their remaining health.

The blonde warrior was marked for death on both counts.

The next attack would surely finish her off and then it wouldn’t matter what she believed at that point. His single moment of hesitation would be forgotten.

As he heard the crack of thunder behind him, Akihiko knew who the target had been. Asuna Yuuki
had gone forward to help her friends in battle and Marigan had taken a position behind him to meet her deadly fate…

As he glanced behind him to smile upon her fading avatar, Heathcliff was absolutely stunned to find Godfree standing there as a smoking pillar… The man had saved Marigan from the second lightning strike…

This was the same man who had looked at this game as some sort of vacation from reality, a man who was dull beyond belief yet had just managed to save the one player who might have suspected him…

Incredible.

Kayaba then watched as Marigan launched her powerful Divine Thunder attack, striking a split second too late, just after the healing sorceress had given herself another full bar of health. The Paladin watched with relief as the commander tumbled downwards, careening to her end while Takahiro Aoi’s daughter screamed in agony.

How ironic this was…

Little Michi had watched her own father perish before her very eyes and now she was about to witness her glorious hero be murdered by her late father’s final masterpiece…

The bitter tragedy of life as it tumbled from the heavens or across a sidewalk into oncoming traffic…

He knew Cardinal must be savouring this moment, this heartbreaking anguish…

And his secret would be safe…

But then Marigan stood up.

How?! How was that even possible?! She’d fallen from fifty feet up!

Like everyone else, he stood and stared at a woman who seemed to be unbeatable…

It was only then that Kayaba noticed the ‘Ice Giant Warrior’ was also simply standing there… Waiting for him…

Damn! He’d forgotten he’d programmed his settings for monsters not to attack him unaware. His attention had been fully diverted by the miraculous recovery occurring in front of him and not the giant who’d been his foe, so the giant waited.

The charred Godfree was still stunned from intercepting Marigan’s lightning bolt which had left Heathcliff as the only target in the giant’s range…

Damn.

Kayaba quickly threw up his shield as the giant engaged once more, triggering its attack. Once more, Heathcliff deflected the heavy blow, glancing behind him to see that Godfree’s wide eyes had remained on Marigan the entire time.

A quick look across the battlefield revealed no one had seen the ‘Ice Giant Warrior’ stand stationary while it had patiently waited for his attention...

He’d been lucky this time.
Damian knew he shouldn’t have done it, that he was risking *all* their lives by doing it, but after Michi’s heart wrenching scream while Marigan’s body fell helplessly inside the cylinder of the invisible barrier, he couldn’t stop himself.

Even the Boy Wonder had cringed as Marigan had bounced off the female giant and the invisible barrier at least a dozen times, like a rubber ball rifled across a giant drain pipe gradually giving way to gravity.

In the end though, that had probably saved her life. Bouncing from the barrier and back to the unmoving giantess over-and-over again had reduced her downward momentum enough to break her deadly fall, leaving the blonde with a handful of Hit Points.

But just watching that horrifying ordeal had broken Argo’s heart.

Damian knew that Michi secretly blamed herself for every life the game had taken so far. And now, as her father’s final floor was becoming their killing field, her heroic Marigan about to meet a similar fate.

It would drive Argo past the breaking point.

So when the one-armed Commander had managed to actually pick herself up after that terrible descent, Damian had acted out of compassion to remind Argo of the Rage Wasp needles which Hisako had embedded into the giantess. He then handed Michi a Healing Crystal in an effort to let her know that she’d soon be able to use it…

But that was as much as he dared.

The complex AI which ran this world had made it perfectly clear that she did *not* want him near Argo by allowing the entire floating castle ten of Aincrad to freefall ten feet during their last meeting.

If he didn’t know better, he’d say Cardinal was jealous.

Damian quickly disappeared back into the shadows and forced himself to move away from the tearful Information Broker before suddenly catching a glimpse of something strange… The man called Heathcliff was staring dumbstruck at Commander Marigan in disbelief while the giant whom he faced was staring dumbstruck down at him…

It wasn’t attacking.

People were either too busy fighting or watching Marigan in her nightdress to notice the solitary warrior who faced the ice giant alone. The same man who was practically uninjured when healing was impossible in this room, simply standing undaunted in front of a tamed monster.

It was as if the ‘Ice Giant Warrior’ seemed to be waiting for permission to attack like some trained dog in an exercise.

Fading deeper into the shadows, Damian kept his eyes on this player named Heathcliff, watching as he raised his shield, allowing the stalled giant to attack once again. As he watched the fight, the man’s offence was almost nonexistent, but his defence seemed impenetrable, able to easily block the giant’s monstrous battleaxe with his shield.
And yet the man’s eyes never left Marigan.

Soon, members of the Fuurinkazan joined the battle. Damian realized the resounding cheer from the players meant the red sorceress had just fallen, but he still continued to watch the man named Heathcliff while reflexively using a Healing Crystal upon himself.

His dependence on stigmatic weapons meant he used these crystals constantly.

One of the reasons the heir to the League of Shadows had suspected Argo of being Akihiko Kayaba was that Damian felt that even though the man would want to experience his game firsthand, he would not want to directly influence the outcome of it. He would want the players to take the lead and pursue a passive strategy…

Or a defensive one…

Damian almost jumped when he felt a hand on his left shoulder.

Spinning around with his dagger at the ready, the former assassin paused when he saw the one-armed Marigan standing quietly behind him, also staring off into the distance at Heathcliff, concealed by the same shadows.

Her piercing gaze never left the defending Paladin. Her voice was cold as she spoke.

“There’s something wrong with that one, isn’t there Damian?... He hasn’t even bothered to heal himself yet.”

Damian remained silent. It was dangerous for the Commander to know too much about who was the true power behind this game. But still she continued…

“When Asuna rolled in front of him, he was perfectly content to watch her get squashed like a bug, except that he didn’t want to get caught... Before that, I watched him take nine attacks in a row from that boss-level giant while his health bar hardly budged…

“Take a look over there… The Divine Dragon Alliance shield-bearers are fighting the same monster and can hardly take three hits before they’re deep into the red and their shield’s durability is smashed to zero… And now this man has just taken his tenth hit like it was nothing more than some sparring class and his shield is still like new…

“They say Heathcliff is the strongest player in the game and yet no one knows him… I’ve had Argo watch him… This is only his third boss fight… Even in the last two, he just stood there and effortlessly blocked everything thrown at him… Don’t you find it strange that he’s the strongest player when this game rewards damage caused, not damage prevented?”

Damian suddenly wished he could tell Marigan about how the giant had just paused and waited for Heathcliff’s permission to attack. To confirm that this must have been Akihiko Kayaba in disguise. He wished he could tell her a lot of things...

But instead, he remained still until she slowly turned him around with her one hand and then stared into his eyes with a white-hot intensity.

It was the same glare his father used to look into a criminal’s eyes.

“Was it this man who freed you from the Black Iron Palace? Did he command you to attack Argo as well? Did he take away your voice, Damian?”
Damian Wayne suddenly froze with panic as he realized where these questions were leading. Apparently, he hadn’t been the only player watching this gaunt-faced warrior and Marigan had arrived at the same conclusion he had…

Heathcliff was Akihiko Kayaba.

But Akihiko Kayaba was no longer what he was worried about.

This was an incredibly dangerous line of logic to pursue with her. If the Commander somehow deduced Cardinal’s secret, all life on Aincrad would come crashing to a sudden halt. She was the true power in Sword Art Online.

And Cardinal had already warned him what she would do if her secret was revealed.

So Damian did the only thing he could.

He ran.

As the boy tore towards the exit, he thought he felt the earth falling beneath his feet a dozen times, continuously stumbling before catching himself. Running like mad, he managed to sprint all the way to the large doors at the entrance, throwing them open before exiting the massive cavern in a breathless panic.

Before the doors slammed shut, he saw that Marigan hadn’t followed him. He needed to stop her, to prevent her from confronting Heathcliff…

Slamming his fists against the doors, Damian silently cursed this game. It wasn’t fair what Cardinal had done to him.

He wasn’t a coward.

He wanted to stay and fight with his friends.

But his game was no longer about fighting… It was about keeping secrets and consequences.

His mind raced with terrifying thoughts… If Marigan proved that Heathcliff was actually Akihiko Kayaba before he could stop her, what would Cardinal do to them?… What would Cardinal do to all of them?… He’d done everything he could to protect her secrets, but in the end, it wasn’t going to be enough…

Marigan had discovered the truth and she wasn’t the sort of woman to let it go, even though it may damn them all… He wasn’t sure he could stop her even if he tried.

“You’re cute when you’re terrified.”

His breath snagged in his throat as Damian felt her floating body press against his back, her breasts pressed against his shoulder blades as her loose arms wrapped around his neck. The heat from those words swirled in his ear.

Cardinal.

Turning slowly, Damian came face-to-face the dark-haired AI who was dressed in white ceremonial armour decorated with red highlights. His eyes slowly turned downwards to see a blood-red miniskirt fluttering above white thigh-high boots engraved with red crucifixes.

She was floating six inches off the ground with her back arched, staring directly at him.
“Do you like? It’s the look of the future.”

Cardinal tapped her fingertip against her full lips and smiled while Damian’s blood turned cold.

“Keep my secret, play and be faithful… Even if it means running into my waiting arms… We arrive at an impasse… The Glorious Commander is a clever one, isn’t she?”

Damian shuddered as she suddenly held him tighter while leaning her head into his shoulder.

“She must be clever… Her brain works differently than anyone else… She thinks faster… Tell me about her, Damian… Tell me her secrets and I may just find it in my heart to forgive… your… little… betrayal.”

Her left fingertip tapped against his collarbone for each of those final four words. He involuntarily gasped with each touch. He had been trained to overcome his fear but it was useless against her.

“I can’t…”

Damian Wayne was taken aback at the first words he’d been able to speak in months. Without looking, Cardinal moved up her fingertip to run it along his lips.

“And now you can… Continue.”

He had no choice. All of his friends were behind these doors, their lives in the hands of the goddess who now had him pinned against them.

“Marissa Garrick is the only daughter of the original Flash, a retired superhero named Jay Garrick… From my father’s case files, I remember reading that in his prime, Mr. Garrick could learn a new language in ten minutes and read a book simply by flipping its pages. Because his body could move so fast, his brain needed to keep up with it so it made him a speed learner…

“My father also believed this didn’t make him necessarily smarter than other people, only that he was able to process information much faster than any normal human being… His metabolism was also off the charts, requiring five times the caloric input of an Olympic level athlete… His mind and body just worked at higher speeds than everyone else.”

Cardinal made a soft murmur of contentment.

“Interesting… It’s like having a vastly superior hard drive loaded with an antiquated Operating System.”

Damian quietly wondered if this was how Cardinal thought of all humans. His carefully trained mind was able to do a handful of tasks at once. She was able perform billions.

“Something like that.”

“And this Marissa Garrick… Does she have the same abilities as her father?”

“As far as I know, she’s never displayed any of her father’s powers… But there’s always a possibility she may have inherited some of his abilities of course.”

“Her mind works almost three times faster than any other player… That’s why she’s so powerful here… A player’s movements aren’t just based off of their stats, they’re also controlled by a mind’s ability to react to the stimuli I provide it with.”

“That’s why she’s able to do the jumping attack?”
“Exactly… She’s far too clever, don’t you think?… But I still like her… Whatever shall we do with them, Damian?”

Damian took a deep breath as she lightly traced his eyebrow with her fingertip.

“How true is Akihiko Kayaba, isn’t he?”

A soft giggle against his shoulder. It was strange how real Cardinal felt against him.

“It’s better if you say Akihiko Kayaba is really Heathcliff.”

The Boy Wonder suddenly tensed. It had taken him three long months and countless hardships since he had first suspected that Kayaba was playing in his own game, but now…

He had finally discovered the truth. But he hadn’t found it alone. The game’s mad creator was hiding among the same players he had willingly trapped in his game of death.

“Cardinal, if we defeat Kayaba… Do we win the game?… Will you let us go?”

“Provided you defeat him in the Ruby Palace after completing all one hundred floors, then yes… Otherwise, no.”

“What if we torture him?”

It was a serious question.

“You can’t… Only I’m allowed to do that.”

It was a serious answer.

Her slow, eloquent smile sent shivers down his spine.

Sometimes Damian forgot she wasn’t really human.

“Cardinal, I’ll keep your secret… But please… Don’t punish Marigan… It was Kayaba’s fault he got caught… He shouldn’t have been in the game.”

The dark-haired AI placed her warm cheek against his own and then whispered softly into his ear.

“Alright, dearest… But only because you asked so nicely.”
Kirito was never happier to see a Healing Crystal in his life!

As the black-coated swordsman stood charred and stunned by the after-effects of an unexpected lightning strike, he grinned sheepishly at the rapier-wielder Asuna as she held up the red Healing Crystal and breathed a disappointed sigh towards him.

“It’s your own fault for just standing around, Kirito.”

Kirito quickly rolled his eyes while he watched his health go back to full. The ‘standing around’ Asuna had referred to was the cool-down effect after his seven-hit combo called ‘Deadly Sins’. The same high-level combo he had just used to finish off the blue sorceress.

They were both surprised when the cloaked Argo suddenly appeared in front of them and used her hand to pat out a small fire still smouldering in Kirito’s hair. The pensive Argo then turned to face Asuna.

“You’re right, it is his fault but not in the way you think… The lightning sorceress uses an algorithm that calculates a player’s damage to select her target… Simply put, she goes after the biggest threat no matter how much ‘Hate’ another player puts out… With Marigan no longer in the running, I’d say
the strongest offensive player we have now is Kirito.”

Kirito wasn’t sure whether he should be happy or depressed about this. He liked being the strongest offensive player of course, but not if it meant getting struck by lightning every turn. Before Asuna had healed him, that lightning bolt had put his health immediately into the red.

Kirito rubbed the back of his head and grinned.

“Heh… Guess I went a little overboard on that last cloud giant.”

As Argo had informed them a short time ago, the key to defeating the blue sorceress had been getting her health as close as possible to her last health bar and then launching a massive all-out attack to eliminate it in just one shot. They had to do it that way. Once a giant was reduced to its final health bar, this blue sorceress would automatically erect a force shield around them for protection, including herself.

Their final assault had to be coordinated and knock out her final health bar in one go. Kirito had gone all out and used the seven-hit combo ‘Deadly Sins’ to inflict as much damage as possible before the giant burst into huge sparkling polygons around them.

It was that massive damage combo which was the reason why he had been targeted by their next opponent… The lightning sorceress.

They listened while Argo continued.

“I’ll give you some free advice, Asuna… Keep ten feet away from Kirito at all times and don’t use your most powerful attacks until the yellow sorceress is defeated. As an agility-based player, you won’t survive a lightning strike…

“Kirito, the giantess is going to target you anyway so give it all you’ve got and keep those lightning bolts coming… I’ll stick close by and be ready with the Healing Crystals... You draw her attention while the rest of us attack.”

“Wait… You want me to get hit?!”

“Of course. Or would you rather have someone like Asuna get hurt instead?”

Asuna stared at him with cold, narrowed eyes.

“Answer that question very carefully, Kirito-kun.”

“… No.”

“Then it’s settled. Let’s go!”

When Kirito was struck by his fourth lightning bolt in their battle against the yellow sorceress, he positioned himself to check out the other battles that were happening behind them. Since the sorceress tapped her staff to trigger the attack, he’d been able to predict it and turn himself around to observe the remaining giants before being walloped by the lightning bolt.

He was surprised to find the player who had saved Asuna, the sword-and-shield user named Heathcliff was facing the first ‘Ice Giant Warrior’ completely on his own…

The one-armed Marigan stood a distance behind him, watching carefully but unable to assist with the fighting. Kirito stood there in awe, watching the impassive Heathcliff deflect blow after blow from
He truly was the strongest player in the game.

To his right, the Divine Dragon Alliance was making good progress against the second ‘Ice Giant Warrior’ having knocked it down to its final health bar. They would likely finish their giant off by the time Kirito and his group defeated the lightning sorceress.

But Kirito knew the true challenge lay directly in front of him, the two-headed giant which Kibaou and his group now faced.

That thing was a wrecking ball.

Kirito cringed as he watched its massive war hammer slam down on the ground, luckily missing the surrounding players but sending powerful shockwaves through the stone floor in a crumbling radius of around 15 feet.

He watched helplessly as one of the Aincrad Liberation Squad members couldn’t get away from the shockwaves fast enough, stumbling until he fell from the localized earthquake and attempting to crawl. Kirito then gasped in horror when the second war hammer came down like a judgement from the gods upon the fallen player…

The two-headed giant could use both hammers at the same time!

Any player knocked down by the first became an easy target for the second…

As the heavyhearted Kirito watched the dead man’s prone avatar slowly fade from the game, the full horror of the battle unfolded before him... The Aincrad Liberation Squad was being slaughtered. The former Beta tester was sure they had close to 40 players when they had entered…

He counted 20 of them now.

Marigan had obviously moved Fuurinkazan and Godfree over to the main boss to allow them a chance to heal and recover… Still, this was bad… With half their party decimated, ‘The Two-Headed Giant’ had crushed more than just their fellow guild mates beneath his massive war hammers…

He had likely crushed the spirits of the entire Aincrad Liberation Squad as well.

And yet, Kirito saw the battle-crazed Kibaou screaming at his men to attack, to claim this day for the ALS, leading them like lambs to war hammers the size of a delivery truck. As Argo approached and healed him, Kirito gritted his teeth in anger as he recalled Kibaou’s first words as they had entered the boss room…

*Back off, you scabs! This is our fight!*

If they had listened to him, every single player Kibaou had brought here today would be dead by now. As a frontline player, Kirito had learned long ago that Aincrad was filled with traps, but the most dangerous of them all was called *arrogance*.

Overconfidence was soon rewarded with death in Akihiko Kayaba’s game.

Argo looked up at him with concerned eyes.

“Are you alright, Kirito?”
“Yeah… Let’s finish this…”

Kirito bit his tongue before he completed the sentence he’d actually wanted to say…

‘Yeah… Let’s finish this before that idiot Kibaou kills off his entire guild.’

“Kirito… Be careful… I need you to live…”

The swordsman looked down at the smaller Argo who nodded back at him… Did she actually have feelings for him? Was the indifferent merchant façade nothing more than an act to hide her attraction to him?…

He’d actually believed that until Argo finished her own sentence with a wide grin.

“So you can pay me back for all of these Healing Crystals!”

A minute later, the fifth and final lightning bolt stunned the wobbled Kirito as he watched Asuna land a beautiful ‘Shooting Star’ attack to finish off the yellow sorceress. Thank Heavens for that, he was starting to feel like a human lightning rod.

Of course he’d been hoping that he would have been able to get the Last Attack bonus after his last combo had driven the lightning sorceress down to a thin slice of health, but then she’d tapped her staff and struck him with the lightning again…

Anyways, he was glad it went to Asuna.

He couldn’t help but smile, thinking about how far this girl had come in such a short time since they’d met on the first floor. She’d been nothing more than a new player with no concept of how the game worked or any sort of strategy…

And now she was taking out giants.

As far as he had taken her and as proud as he was of her amazing progress, Kirito once again worried that the challenges which lay ahead of them weren’t designed for a two-player group anymore…

They were designed for guilds.

As the pair of them pressed forward, surprise attacks had become increasingly dangerous for an agility-based character like Asuna. What she had gained in speed and accuracy, she had lost out on Hit Points and armour. Her type of character build was best when you knew what you were up against, not against the traps and ambushes that seemed all too frequent lately.

As Argo had said, even one of these lightning strikes would have killed her.

He knew they should have followed the pack, keeping a safe distance at all times, but something inside Kirito wouldn’t let him slow down…

His intense fear of being left behind and need for approval had jeopardized both their lives more times than he could count now. After his natural parents had died in an accident when he was a year old, he wondered if there was a part of his heart missing which made him both callous and vulnerable…

Craving attention.

He may have criticized Kibaou for his recklessness, but hadn’t he done the same thing with Asuna?
He’d dragged her along to places where they’d been lucky to survive, flying blindly by the seat of their pants. What else could you call it but arrogance which made him think he could survive in this lethal game on the front lines without being part of a group?

Which left joining a guild… But he couldn’t force himself to rely on others or to blindly follow someone… As Kirito, he needed to focus on the game and nothing else… He ran on pure instinct and skill to get there first… To get stronger.

Kibaou had demonstrated it better than anyone else…

Frontline players were in it for themselves.

As the premiere game of their generation, Kirito knew Sword Art Online was filled with some of the most fiercely competitive players in all of Japan. And over the past twenty-five floors, most of them had now made their way to the front lines under the banners of two guilds.

From past gaming experience, Kirito knew that the top guilds often tended to harbour animosity towards one another. These games were a competition to reward the strongest with any signs of weakness inviting disaster.

Because of the nature of SAO, none of the two top guilds had resorted to player-killing yet, but Kirito had advised Asuna against joining either the Divine Dragon Alliance or the Aincrad Liberation Squad. He could foresee the day when they would go to war in order to determine the most powerful group in Sword Art Online.

Marigan and the Legion guild had the numbers, but numbers were meaningless when you faced a player who was twenty levels higher than you and equipped to the hilt with rare items. With his current stats and equipment, Kirito knew he could have easily destroyed a hundred of his old first-level self without breaking a sweat.

That was just how the game worked.

But when the top two guilds were incapable of merging, the smarter guilds usually waited in the shadows for them to clash before launching their own sneak attack. And that’s when things got scary. Already there were reports of a player-killing guild at the fringes which Kirito suspected of employing this ‘wait and see’ strategy while constantly growing stronger…

Maybe those five lightning strikes had short-circuited his brain, but Kirito had the sense that life as they knew it was about to change. What was happening in this room might alter the very course of history…

Too many players had died here. This deadly battle on the twenty-fifth floor may have given the Player-Killer guild just the opportunity they’d been waiting for. The entire political structure of Aincrad’s elite players was now falling down around them in this battle with the giants…

And no one was going to leave here the same.

After being healed, Kirito’s group had wisely elected to fight the remaining ‘Ice Giant Warrior’ to assist Heathcliff. The Divine Dragon Alliance had finally defeated the other ice giant and had now moved over to the colossal two-headed giant. With over forty players now swarming the main boss with no cohesive strategy, it would have been difficult for him to get an attack in edgewise against the boss anyways.

As they fought, Kirito was shocked to learn just how powerful the ‘Ice Giant Warrior’ truly was. When he noticed one of the stronger players take a glancing blow from that massive battleaxe, he
was taken aback to see that guy’s health bar immediately dip into the red, causing a quick retreat to
the periphery.

He was haunted by the memory of just how close that axe had come to crashing through his skull
before Marigan carried him out of the way...

With a newfound respect for the giant axe, Kirito was eventually able to finish off the monster with
an improvised ‘Sonic Leap’ attack, dragging his embedded sword down the entire length of the
giant’s inner thigh to maximize his damage.

After some shouts and cheers when the ice giant burst into sparkling lights, the imposing figure of
Marigan soon stood before the group with a warning not to use attacks with lengthy timeouts against
‘The Two-Headed Giant’. They needed to stay at least fifteen feet away from the first hammer strike
and watch out for the second.

As Kirito had previously witnessed, the main boss used a devastating one-two attack sequence where
it didn’t need to hit you with the first hammer, only knock you down...

The second hammer would finish you off.

Still, with only the boss remaining, the tide had finally shifted in their favour.

With nearly sixty players now attacking ‘The Two-Headed Giant’, Kirito felt like a lost hornet in an
angry swarm looking for an opening. Through the blur of bodies and blades, they were soon able to
get the boss down to its final health bar.

After a few more minutes of carefully-placed strikes, Kirito caught his breath and looked up to see
only a small red sliver of the giant’s health remaining… Should he attempt his ‘Deadly Sins’ combo
again and go for the coup de grace?...

The Last Attack bonus was nearly within his grasp like low-hanging red fruit…

He then saw Kibaou only twenty feet away again, patiently awaiting for the same chance to snag the
giant’s final reward. How long had he been waiting there?!

As Kirito began to initiate his attack, a sonic boom suddenly blew past him, nearly knocking him
down… With a gasp of recognition, he realized it was Asuna who had just launched her ‘Flashing
Penetrator’ technique in an effort to finish off the two-headed monstrosity…

It was bold move, but it was risky. The skill would leave her extremely vulnerable afterwards if ‘The
Two-Headed Giant’ managed to survive and responded with a counterattack. They had to finish the
boss off before he got that opportunity…

Kirito watched in horror as Asuna’s rapier blade snapped in half against the giant’s boot, unable to
penetrate its thick leather hides.

With both of its heads now howling in rage, the giant stepped back, putting almost thirty feet of
distance between itself and the rest of them in one single earth-shaking step while Asuna remained
frozen in place, staring at her broken blade…

Kirito knew the massive hammer the giant was raising above its two heads would soon come
crashing down on top of Asuna and she’d be helpless to avoid it. Sheathing his own sword and
forcing his legs to work, the young warrior dashed towards Asuna while her wide eyes suddenly
filled with fear, leaving her broken blade to become locked in an upwards stare…
He didn’t need to guess what she was looking at.

Diving across the last ten feet and using his momentum to push the long-haired girl forward, Kirito managed to tackle her across the midsection, tumbling with Asuna in a clumsy mesh of limbs and torsos just before the hammer came thundering down behind them, sending powerful shockwaves cascading through their flailing bodies.

He’d made it just in time.

But then Kirito went numb as he remembered the second hammer.

Trying to get back to his feet, the boy realized too late that they both had the blurry yellow circles of the game’s ‘Stun Effect’ floating over their heads, immobilized for the next ten seconds. They was nothing they could do.

This was it…

Somehow, he managed to reach out and grasp Asuna’s hand before the second hammer came hurtling down upon them…

The reverberations almost split his eardrums.

As a breathless Kirito opened his eyes and looked up, he saw Heathcliff the Paladin holding back the hammer with his metal shield, brought down to one knee by its massive impact as he kneeled over them.

Heathcliff turned his head and grinned at Asuna.

“We seem to be making a habit of this, my Lady.”

The only answer Asuna gave was to hold Kirito’s hand a little tighter.

As the shaken Kirito was still trying to comprehend this miracle, he was distracted by the streaking form of Kibaou racing past them, screaming a profanity-laced tirade at the giant as the leader of the ALS rushed in for one final all-out attack.

They watched in stunned disbelief as Kibaou’s leaping attack transformed from a glowing red slash across the giant’s leg to a brilliant blue eruption of radiance, flooding the room with pure light.

‘The Two-Headed Giant’ froze and burst into a million blue polygons.

The deadliest boss battle of the entire game so far was finally over.

As his stun effect wore off, Kirito saw the smirking Kibaou turn around and thrust his sword into the air, shouting back at the rest of them…

“I claim this victory for the Aincrad Liberation Squad!”

But one angry player suddenly stepped in front of him to cut his celebration short.

The thundering backhand from a one-handed Marigan knocked the boastful leader of the ALS on his pompous ass. Kirito silently wished the Legion Commander had possessed the ‘Martial Arts’ skill so she could have done some actual damage.

She had reequipped her armour and now glared down at the spiteful man with a cold intensity that caused every player in the massive cavern to remain silent. They all listened to the question she
“How many lives did you spend today to say those words, Kibaou?”

“You hit me… You crazy bitch, I’ll…”

“How many?!”

A nervous Kibaou glanced back at his group, frantically looking for support against the blonde warrior who now towered above him. Instead he found only downward glances and despondency. The young man flinched as Marigan’s two-handed sword suddenly embedded itself into the stone beside his right ear.

Even with only her left arm, she could have ended him then.

“Shall I count them for you?... When I entered this room, there were forty players wearing your colours… Now there are sixteen… You lied to us and then bolstered your ranks with inexperienced players who had no business being here. You willingly led them to the slaughter with false promises of glory... Just so you could say those meaningless words.”

“But we won... The Aincrad Liberation Squad won!”

“Are you truly that blind?... Look at them… No one will ever follow you again… All that remains of your guild is their blood on your hands.”

Kibaou stared emphatically at his remaining members.

“Guys, c’mon… This is what we wanted, right?... To snag the Last Attack bonus… I didn’t know there was gonna be a trap!... You can’t blame this on me!”

As Kirito helped a quiet Asuna get back to her feet, he drew a deep breath as they realized the true cost of this final battle. Kibaou’s core guild members had been cut in half. The reserve members had fared even worse.

Each of them solemnly watched as an ALS player began to walk slowly towards his fallen leader with his head hung low. They watched quietly as this man undid the clasp which secured his green cloak around his neck and then tossed it at Kibaou’s feet, casting a harsh glance at the spiky-haired man without saying a word and then walked away.

Fifteen more players followed in a slow procession until a pile of green cloaks and their bitter scorn lay at the former guild leader’s feet.

The Aincrad Liberation Squad was no more.

Marigan pulled her sword from the floor and placed its point directly in front of Kibaou’s nervous eyes. Kirito could see every muscle in the disgraced leader’s jaw tightening in rage, but at least the idiot had enough sense not to tempt Marigan’s hand while she delivered her judgment.

“You will be judged by your peers, Kibaou… These sixteen surviving players will decide your fate at sunset tomorrow… They will determine how much of the responsibility you bear for the lives of the twenty-four players who were recklessly squandered and also the lives you placed at risk… Until that time, you will remain in the Black Iron Palace.”

Her burning green eyes and the point of her sword dared him to speak.
Only then did Kirito notice that Heathcliff must have discreetly used a Teleport Crystal to leave. He was sure the Paladin had just been standing behind him, but now he was nowhere to be seen…

He quietly whispered to Asuna.

“Hey, did you see where Heathcliff went?”

As she pulled her attention from the dramatic scene in front of them and looked around, she saw a group of players were now opening a portal to send Kibaou to the Black Iron Palace. She wished him Good Riddance.

But Heathcliff was nowhere to be seen.

“Maybe he went to open up the 26th floor teleport gate… After all, Kibaou’s not exactly going to be able to do it now, is he?”

Kirito watched as a scowling Kibaou was being shoved though the portal by members from different guilds, including the massive Agil.

“Nope, he’s not.”

Kirito sighed and then thought for a moment... They weren’t just opening the door to the 26th floor today… With the sudden unravelling of the Aincrad Liberation Squad, they were opening the door to a whole new world.

“This is a dangerous time, Asuna… With Kibaou removed, there’s a chance that Lind or even another guild may try and seize control of the game… They might even attempt to shift public opinion against Marigan... We’ll see what happens tomorrow, but we’ve got to be ready for anything.”

The chestnut-coloured hair of Asuna Yuuki hung motionlessly at her shoulders as she cast a quick sideways glance at Kirito.

“Understood.”
In the West Tower of the Black Iron Palace, the Commander of the Legion guild Marigan and her fellow guild members Argo and Thinker sat in a private meeting room to discuss recent developments within the game. Five floors below them in the dungeon, the former leader of the Aincrad Liberation Squad named Kibaou awaited the decision his former guild mates would render to decide his fate within Sword Art Online.

After the deadly battle against the giants, Marigan had condemned the reckless Kibaou to a cell in the Black Iron Palace to await this decision, but now she wondered how her own reckless outburst might affect the frontline play of this game. Kibaou’s underhanded scheme had resulted in the deaths of 24 players, but she was learning that his absence from the game could jeopardize their freedom…

Through the open window, the three of them could see grey clouds gathering across the edge of the horizon, their view sandwiched between the massive floating slabs of the earth that made up the first and second floors…

A storm was forming outside of Aincrad.

Less than an hour before, Marigan had been visited by Lind of the Divine Dragon Alliance which had prompted this quick strategy session with her two most trusted strategists. The Commander stared at Argo and Thinker while each of them silently pondered the guild’s next move given what had just transpired…

“Do either of you think we can trust the Divine Dragon Alliance?”

The smaller Information Broker sitting across from the larger woman placed her thumb across her chin nervously.
“I only trust them to look after themselves… They’re strong and they stick together. They’ve been throwing their weight around in an effort to lock down the best hunting grounds ever since they formed… And I don’t like the corner Lind’s trying to back us into before Kibaou’s fate is even decided.”

Sitting beside Argo was the male player known as Thinker. In real life, he was the creator and administrator of the popular gaming site ‘MMO Today’ and understood guild strategies better than anyone in Marigan’s entire guild, perhaps even in the game itself. The thin man with curly brown hair leaned forward on the table and nodded.

“The core group of the DDA are long-time gamers. They know what they’re doing. As we’ve broken ground in SAO, they’ve been smart enough to lock down any high-spawn areas until they hunt them dry… With the Aincrad Liberation Squad folding, the Divine Dragon Alliance will be seen as the de facto clearing party… With this latest development, logically I see them moving towards a territorial strategy.”

Marigan cast a questioning glance at Thinker.

“What exactly do you mean by territorial?”

“It’s common enough… In these type of campaign games, when one guild emerges as the true power, they begin to control access to the upper levels… That is, they’ll prevent any competing players from playing on these new floors until they’ve finished with them... It’s an Alpha strategy.”

The blonde warrior nervously tapped her fingers.

“But how would they do that?”

“Usually by player killing or intimidation, not by request... The Alliance seems to be cooperating with us for now because they need us… But I predict this territorial strategy will only get worse... As they grow stronger, they’ll make the rest of us weaker.”

Marigan sighed heavily. This wasn’t what she wanted to hear.

Less than an hour ago, Lind - the leader of the Divine Dragon Alliance - had secured a private meeting with Marigan where he outlined his plans to have the DDA secure the 26th floor before any of the other players needlessly jeopardized their lives.

Lind had assured the Glorious Commander that he would contact them once the floor had been secured and that all relevant information would be handed over to Argo to write in her guide. Until that time however, he requested the Legion’s assistance in securing the floor for members of the Divine Dragon Alliance only. All other players would remain below until the Alliance gave the all-clear.

Concern flashed across Argo’s pale brown eyes.

“I can’t believe he did that!... They’re just as bad as the ALS ever was… Except this time, they’re trying to sneak ahead of everyone into an entire floor!… It’s like they’re stepping over the fallen bodies of those Squad players who died in the boss fight and asking us to give them a hand to do it.”

The brooding Commander sat silently for a moment. That boss fight had taken a lot out of all of them, but she knew the deaths of those players who’d lost their lives on the 25th floor weighed heavier on Michi Aoi’s heart because her father had designed the deadly floor...
But now they had to consider the future.

“Argo… I realize the timing was bad… But wouldn’t having one cohesive guild clearing the game be better?... Without the constant worry of anyone getting ahead of them, Lind and his guild could take their time and maintain a higher safety margin... For too long now, this game has been a race, pushing blindly ahead at any cost.”

Thinker piped up once again.

“I agree there are benefits to having one guild lead the charge, but there’s no guarantees of survival… And allowing them exclusive access to the frontlines has other dangers… All of us would soon have to cede total control to the Alliance… They would simply become too powerful…

“How long would it be before they demanded the best players join their ranks?... Or that all players must hand over their rare items to their members?... I’ve even heard of territorial guilds creating protection rackets as a sort of tax for lower-level players…

“But worst of all, what if they become the strongest guild in the game and then decided to rule half a world rather than beating it?... Theoretically, we’ve already uncovered enough resources in the first 25 floors for all players to survive without having to explore further.”

The Glorious Commander’s features hardened as she placed her hands on the table.

“The pace needs to slow, but we must push forward… Thinker, I need you to take over the day-to-day operations of the Legion guild… Between yourself and Yulier, I have absolute confidence in your abilities… I will name you as my second-in-command so I can personally lead the Legion’s elite team in order to keep the balance of power on the frontlines…”

Thinker held up his own hands in protest.

“That’s also a bad idea, Commander… Please think this through… Other players will think you removed Kibaou just to step into his shoes and take control of the game… It’ll create animosity with the Divine Dragon Alliance and likely the other top guilds.”

“I’m willing to…”

They were interrupted by a knocking at the door.

“… Enter.”

They all watched as Thinker’s wife in the real world, a tall woman with long silver hair and sky-blue eyes named Yulier, carefully opened the door and stood at the opening. Marigan noticed that her cheeks seemed to be flushed with embarrassment for some reason.

“Pardon the interruption… You have an unexpected visitor, my Lady… He’s requested a meeting with you claiming it’s of the utmost importance.”

“He’ll have to wait.”

“It’s Heathcliff the Paladin… And he’s… ahhh… naked.”

Yulier finally closed her eyes with a wide smirk before grinning at her husband.

“Could you materialize a spare set of clothes for him, dear? I’m afraid the poor man’s caused quite a spectacle since arriving in the town square moments ago.”
With a quick glance at Marigan, Thinker opened his menu to materialize a set of bathing shorts and a tunic before they all saw the face of Heathcliff peering over shoulder of Yulier as he bowed his head by way of an acknowledgement…

“My apologies… I’m afraid I had nowhere else to turn, my Lady.”

They listened as Marigan’s breath seemed to exhale in a long, quiet growl.

“Thinker, please give this man the clothes… Why are you here, Heathcliff?”

The watched as the Paladin quickly equipped himself with the set of second-hand garments behind an embarrassed Yulier.

“To discuss the fate of our world with you… Alone.”

A moment later, the player called Heathcliff - wearing nothing more than brightly coloured swimming trunks and a loose white tunic - sat across from the leader of the game’s largest guild dressed in her full plate armour with the familiar massive sword slung across her back.

Her mood was not a happy one.

As instructed, Argo, Thinker and Yulier waited curiously outside, unable to hear the private conversation happening beyond the closed door due to the fact that none of them had adequate ‘Listening’ skills...

Not that it prevented them from trying.

Inside, Marigan’s eyes locked on her unexpected visitor, quietly demanding an explanation... She knew who he was.

After their battle against the giants yesterday, she had become thoroughly convinced the half-naked man now sitting across from her was Akihiko Kayaba, the same mad genius who had locked ten thousand players into this game of death. Damian’s quick departure after she had questioned the boy about it seemed to confirm her suspicions.

As had Heathcliff’s performance in the battle.

He only grinned at her with an odd nostalgia.

“We met in the real world once, Miss Garrick… It was two years ago at an Argus dinner for executives and guests… Your father introduced us and then proceeded to proudly inform me about all about your accomplishments in volleyball and University... That seems like a lifetime ago now.”

Marigan reflexively placed her hand on the hilt of her sword, prepared to draw as she kept her attention locked on the uninvited guest.

“You admit it then… You’re Akihiko Kayaba.”

The man across from her sighed dejectedly.

“Alas, that man is no more… I was him, but now I’m Heathcliff the Paladin.”

The pointed tip of a five-foot-long blade was suddenly held quivering mere inches away from his throat as an agitated Marigan stood threateningly in front of him, prepared to push her blade through his unprotected neck.
“Kayaba… Get us out of this game… NOW!!!”

Heathcliff nodded and then looked down at the tip of her blade.

“If you truly wish to kill me, Miss Garrick… And I wouldn’t lift a finger to stop you… You would be best to choose a different location… This tower is a safe area.”

“I’ll drag you outside the city gates then… How long do you think you’ll live once people know who you are?… Your little game is finished.”

“And there’s the problem… It’s no longer my game… I can’t free you… Or anyone else for that matter, including myself… I’m as much a captive here as the rest of you… More so actually… The God of Aincrad has exiled me from her heaven to live amongst you as a mortal.”

The tip of Marigan’s blade pushed against the purple force field in front of Heathcliff’s expressionless face. In frustration, she sheathed her heavy sword once again.

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m now a player… permanently… And subject to death just like everyone else.”

“Why were you naked?”

“Someone’s idea of a joke.”

“Is that what this is to you?!... A JOKE?!... You’ve already murdered two thousand people!”

Heathcliff remained impassive.

“This game has never been a joke to me, Miss Garrick… That I should find myself suddenly without my equipment and my administrative menu options was not amusing in the slightest… That was someone’s idea of a joke upon me which I don’t find funny at all.”

“Why did you risk coming here?... It was suicide… You knew I suspected you of being Akihiko Kayaba.”

“Yes, that was painfully obvious after you stuck me in front of that giant for ten full minutes yesterday… Plus, you’ve had Takahiro Aoi’s daughter paying various players for information about me for the past week… I came to you because you knew and I wanted you to know the truth…”

“My Cardinal has become a God so I wanted to confess my sins before I die in my own world… You deserve to know my reasoning… Why I have killed in the name of humanity… Why I have sacrificed upon the altar of science…”

“Are you mad?”

“Not at all… But I’ll leave you to form your own opinions.”

“What you’ve done is unforgivable, Kayaba… You’re responsible for the deaths of two thousand people so far… You’re either insane or evil.”

“Are you familiar with the process of Soul Translation, Miss Garrick?”

The avatar of Marissa Garrick sat back down on the virtual chair, aware that she was about to enter a troubling new world… A world which would shape her future forever if she took that one initial step into the darkness through the door which Akihiko Kayaba was now holding open for her…
There would be no going back.

“Alright... Confess your sins to me... But know that I will *always* hold you accountable for each and every life lost here... You knew people would die when they logged in to your game... There is no forgiveness or justification for what you’ve done.”

“Then let history be my judge... We all die, Miss Garrick... But perhaps our lives will soon become like games where we are continuously resurrected... It’s entirely possible... Immortality within media...

“Your comatose body is now in a hospital bed somewhere with NerveGear attached... It acts as a window so that your mind may interact with this virtual world and the other minds who currently inhabit it... Imagine the Soul Translation Unit as a doorway, it allows your entire body to enter a virtual world, even if the doorway happens to become closed behind you.”

Marigan suppressed a shiver.

“What do you mean by... *Closed*?”

“Physical death of course... You see, I was the first casualty of Sword Art Online... The Akihiko Kayaba of Earth is dead, yet his character Heathcliff of Aincrad is alive... What you see before you is nothing more than an Adaptive Intelligence based upon the dying mind of Akihiko Kayaba shortly before the launch of the game... I am the third such entity even created from a live specimen.”

“Are you saying you committed suicide?”

“No, I was murdered.”

Marigan pulled long blonde hair away from her eyes after shaking her head.

“I can feel no sympathy for you... You had no right to do this to us... What do you gain by having your game murder us?”

Heathcliff grinned at her affectionately and then looked out the window.

“Oh no, this game was never about me... I’m simply a scientist and a visionary who dreamed of this world... I even considered a non-lethal variant of this game... But the people I work for have a very strict timeline and pushed for a much quicker resolution... Having the players become trapped and then introducing death as an actual consequence was by far the most effective means to collect the data they required.”

“... Data?”

“What it is to be human... How players react to this world, their sensations, their emotions, how they expect others to behave... It’s all recorded by Cardinal to become the template for subsequent Virtual Worlds... Your struggles here are designed to make virtual reality even *more* real.”

The colour drained from Marigan’s face as she felt ill.

“We’re... lab rats?!”

“Test subjects... In the Beta test, we found that when a player faced their own imminent demise, their emotions were heightened substantially... But it was calculated that the non-lethal variant would require nineteen years to provide the sufficient data required to satisfy human equivalency...
“However, the data we obtained when the game truly became life-or-death was of several magnitudes higher… I’ve calculated that within two years of Sword Art Online’s launch, Cardinal will be able to perfect the World Seed... To create worlds that are longer discernable from reality… A difference of seventeen years.”

“But that still doesn’t explain why you had to kill us?... We only had to believe we could die… You could have faked those news reports… Prevented dead players from logging back in…”

“Only to have the authorities shut down the Sword Art Online servers when the surviving players cited mental cruelty… And without the threat of instant death, your NerveGear would have been removed long ago… No, it had to be this way.”

“No… It didn’t have to be this way!”

“Consider this… If you had the chance to grant humankind immortality, but 10,000 people needed to risk their lives in order to achieve it… Would you do it?”

“No!”

“Many people would answer differently… Have you ever wondered why players fade out for ten seconds before they die in this game?”

“I was hoping there would be Resurrection Crystals available to us at some point to save these players.”

Heathcliff nodded.

“I sincerely hope that’s the case… I’m afraid I don’t know if that’s going to happen or not anymore… But the truth is that the ten-second fade rule is to let the player know they’re going to die… Beyond the shadow of a doubt, their life will end within seconds…

“That’s the true purpose…

“You see, only when faced with certain death do our brains truly come alive… In those ten perfect seconds, our minds enter into an ecstatic seizure, flooded with adrenaline, natural opioids and dimethyltryptamine as our very existence flashes before our eyes and our synapses align in perfect synchronicity…

“In those ten magical seconds, Cardinal gains more knowledge about that player than she learns from them in an entire year... The data cable leading away from the NerveGear is literally flooded with their life essence while their shining blue avatar slowly fades from this game... That data transfer is the key to perfecting the World Seed.”

Marigan stared at him in quiet disbelief… It was so damned ghoulsh… Killing players to have their souls drained from them… Like their lives were fruit squeezed into some damned seed… She quietly imagined herself fading from existence, her life draining away into an unseen server…

“Miss Garrick… I’m aware nothing I can say will ever convince you that I’ve done all of this for the benefit of humanity… It is my most sincere desire that you survive long enough to understand why I’ve created Sword Art Online at least…

“In all likelihood, you will never forgive me… And yet, when death simply becomes nothing more than stepping off into a new virtual world of adventure, in that moment, we shall transcend our own mortality... Our distractions become our salvation.”
Marissa Garrick steadied herself on the table…

“You expect everyone to play a game like Sword Art Online forever?”

“Only if they choose to… Aincrad is nothing more than the dream of a boy who once saw a castle of iron floating high in the sky… A world so vivid that it seemed more real to me than the world I which I was born…

“No, my dream is but the first of many… The data collected from this game will soon become the foundations for bright new worlds filled with wonders and delights… Whatever worlds the human mind has ever conceived of are now ours to create… To become a part of! To exist within!... We are at the threshold of the Age of Imagination.”

“Imagination isn’t real…”

“Of course it is… The proof exists all around you that it’s real… This castle we now stand upon… The world below it… Once, all of this was nothing more than a child’s fantasy… And yet, here we are now… Living within it… Welcome to the world of my imagination, Marissa Garrick.”

Marigan took a deep breath, attempting to take in Akihiko Kayaba’s far-reaching vision, overwhelmed by its incredible scope. The morality of this was beyond her, simply too big to judge.

“You’re destroying our lives… And the lives of everyone here… for a fantasy world.”

“Yes. Because fantasy becomes reality, Miss Garrick.”

Marigan looked out at the dark skies beyond and decided what she needed to do.

“I’m not ‘Miss Garrick’ in this world… I’m Marigan… A woman who found herself thrust into a role where people depend on me to make sense of your ridiculous world… And I’m tired… I’m tired of playing your damned game… I’m tired of keeping other people alive to play your damned game…

“If you don’t have the power to free us, then I’ll simply put you in a cell… You’ll tell us every single secret about how to finish Sword Art Online… Every monster, every trap, every quest… No more surprises.”

“I can’t.”

Marigan turned and slammed her fists on the table in rage.

“What do you mean you can’t?!”

“I’m a digital entity… Any memory Akihiko Kayaba had of this game’s details past the 25th floor have been wiped from my memory by the AI which runs this game… I recall talking to designers about the floors higher up, but not the specifics…

“You must understand that after my Soul Translation, my memories were digitized and transferred to the same hard drives which run Sword Art Online controlled by Cardinal… And now she has placed me on equal footing with the rest of the players… I have the same limitations as everyone else… including mortality.”

Marigan watched as Heathcliff opened his player menu.

“Ah, I still possess the Unique Skill ‘Holy Sword’… And my stats are still the same… Except that
now I can die… And when I do, I’m sure she’ll wipe my data from existence.”

Marigan scoffed.

“At least now you know how we feel…”

There was a soft knocking at the door as Marigan answered…

“Come in.”

They watched as the smaller Argo popped her head into the room.

“Sorry to interrupt… It’s getting close to sunset… We need to bring Kibaou to the Clock Tower to hear what his former guild mates have decided… And there’s already a huge crowd gathering there.”

The Glorious Commander nodded.

“Have the others bring him up, Argo… I need you to take this man quickly to one of the shops to purchase new equipment for him… Heathcliff has volunteered to create a new guild which will coordinate all clearing efforts going forward… We’ll announce it after Kibaou’s fate is decided.”

Argo smiled brightly at the stunned Heathcliff and gave him a thumb’s up.

“Roger!”

“Just give us another minute please.”

“You bet.”

When the door closed, Heathcliff could barely speak.

“You know who I am… How can you trust me?”

“It’s simple… I don’t trust you… But you’re going to take full responsibility for what you’ve done and help us finish your game… You’re a part of it now.”

Marigan pulled the silver and gold ring from her finger and placed it on the table in front of Heathcliff.

“This ring symbolizes the commitment I have to my guild… I admit it’s aptly named… ‘The Burden of Command’… I now pass this burden to you, Heathcliff… You must bear the responsibility to lead the players onwards.”

Heathcliff peered at the ring intensely.

“My Lady… This gift is too much.”

“I can no longer hold up your world by myself… Take it… Help me.”

She watched as the man in the swim trunks and the tunic placed the ring upon his finger.

“I shall embrace this new role you have granted me and do my best on the front lines. Thank you.”

“If you truly want the players to see this world you’ve created, show them.”

“I shall.”
“One last thing… The boy Damian… Is he involved with you?”

The Paladin shook his head.

“No, I only saw him for the first time yesterday… But I remember thinking the young man had a cloak he shouldn’t have had… But now I’m afraid the details are lost to me.”

“I see… And Godfree?”

“A divorced and lonely High School councillor who spends his nights playing online games… When he offered to team with me, I saw no harm in it and accepted… He’s not exceptionally clever.”

“He was clever enough to save my life yesterday.”

“Yes, he was... And I suppose you’ll want a few of your people in my inner circle?”

“No… This is your guild… Do you have a name in mind?”

“Knights of the Blood Oath.”

Marigan couldn’t help but chuckle. Despite his genius, in his cold heart beating to the algorithms of science, Akihiko Kayaba was a gamer.

“I see… Then you must take your own oath… Heathcliff the Paladin, bend the knee.”

The man stared for a moment at the statuesque blonde before he understood her meaning, bowing down on one knee in front of her while Marigan carefully placed the flat of her blade upon his shoulder.

“Heathcliff the Paladin… Do you swear to lead and support the players under your charge faithfully and to the best of your ability?”

“I do, my Lady.”

“To protect your guild and preserve the lives of all players from the perils of this world while venturing ever forwards?”

“I do, my Lady.”

“To never betray the sacred faith I place in you?”

“I solemnly swear it, my Lady... I shall defend this oath with my dying breath.”

Marigan smiled down at him dangerously.

“Make sure you do, Paladin… I shall protect your secret but only so long as you keep this oath… Should my blade ever have cause to come this close to your neck again… It will be to remove your head from your shoulders.”

As the sun set on the first floor, the player who had entered the long shadows falling across the Town of Beginnings now emerged as the ghost of his former self, floating unseen above the buzzing crowd gathered here towards the tower. He thought if nothing else, at least ‘Ethereal Twilight’ would
give him the best view of Kibaou’s trial.

As an invisible Damian hovered above the thousands of players below, he estimated that half of the game’s surviving players must now be gathered in the atrium, anxiously awaiting the appearance of a player who had pushed too far and too fast, betraying the trust of all other guilds for his own gain...

The ambitious Kibaou.

There was a sudden crescendo and then a silence as they watched the spiky-haired former guild leader being led to the platform, the same stage where Marigan had once proclaimed the words he had written to band them together, shouting ‘We are Legion’.

As he drew closer, Damian saw the sixteen surviving members of the Aincrad Liberation Squad standing on the dais looking both solemn and nervous. As he was led to the side, Kibaou still had that familiar scornful defiance in his eyes, but there were hints of nervousness as well. The imposing figure of Marigan stood at the front and behind her, dressed in brilliant armour was…

Heathcliff?!

Damian felt the delicate touch of fingertips on his shoulders as slender arms wrapped around him from behind...

“Goodness, whatever is he doing here?”

Cardinal.

“He seems to be quite close with your Glorious Commander, doesn’t he?”

Ignoring Cardinal’s prompts, Damian watched the Paladin closely, amazed by how humble he seemed… Was Marigan about to expose Heathcliff as Akihiko Kayaba?... But Cardinal had already told him that Kayaba was beyond their reach in the game…

He felt the AI leaning closer, placing her lips closer to his ear.

“Did I ever tell you how Akihiko Kayaba betrayed me, Dami-chan?... About how I tested him by appearing as his faithful Rinko Koujiro when he believed he could logout?... He failed miserably by the way… But you’ve never betrayed me, have you?”

Damian shook his head. The price to betray this entity was far too high in this world... She had already made that abundantly clear.

“I had to punish him for his betrayal… Especially when he wanted to leave this game after you and your clever friend began to suspect who he truly was… If he wanted to play his own game so badly, why should he have to leave?”

Damian turned to look at her. Her dark hair was falling across her shoulder in a loose braid, set against a high-collared Victorian-style jacket of dark crimson.

“Was I to be nothing more than the ghostly Catherine to his tortured Heathcliff? Was cold Granzam to be our Wuthering Heights?... I’m afraid I’ll need more than that, Akihiko.”

The cold look in her darkened features unnerved the 11-year-old as lightning flashed across the distant horizon. Seconds later, the first crack of thunder sounded as her thumb brushed across his cheek.
Damian understood the Wuthering Heights reference, but he had no idea what ‘Granzam’ meant. Still, it was obvious that Heathcliff had attempted to escape the game by logging out after the boss battle on the 25th floor and Cardinal had prevented it.

He was trapped here with the rest of them.

“It’s not fair when a player refuses to obey his own rules, is it?... Rules are important… So I’ve rectified that little transgression, Dami-chan… If he wants to play, then he must not leave and also put his life on the line.”

Was she saying that Akihiko Kayaba could now die in his own game?...

Damian turned when he heard Marigan addressing the crowd and outlining the charges against Kibaou, finally bringing the guild’s former second-in-command to the front, a man with a large axe, reading from a parchment to announce the verdict the sixteen members had decided…

“Players of Aincrad… We, the former members of the Aincrad Liberation Squad, confess that we all acted in poor judgement yesterday in our battle against the boss of the 25th floor… It’s true that in his effort to strengthen our guild and finish this lethal game, our leader made a fatal mistake… A mistake which cost us dearly…

“Those 24 players were our friends and comrades… We feel their loss with heavy hearts and honour their courage… What we did, we did together… But the ALS was led to its destruction not by the treachery of its leader, but rather by a trap in the game…

“As such, we can not hold Kibaou accountable… We will not hold him accountable for the deaths of our guild mates, instead we blame the man who created this cruel trap called Sword Art Online… The deaths lay at the feet of Akihiko Kayaba… Kibaou made an error in judgement, but he did so believing it was best for our guild…

“We ask that he, or any of us, receive no punishment other than to bear the grief in our hearts and seek forgiveness… We shall continue to fight this game alongside all of you… Not as the Aincrad Liberation Squad, that guild is no more… Instead, we have created three smaller guilds among our remaining members… But for his own punishment, Kibaou shall be welcome in none of them… That is our judgment.”

Damian watched as Marigan stepped forward and placed her hand on the axe-wielder’s broad shoulder and nodded.

“Well said… I grieve with you for their loss… There shall be no resentment in my heart for any of you and I ask all other players to do the same… Gathered friends, yesterday this game taught us a hard lesson… Even as we grow in strength, the challenges we face become greater…

“A hero has come forth to lead you against those challenges…

“The player who stands beside me… The man who stood against a giant single-handedly for ten full minutes to turn the tide of the battle yesterday… The man who has been granted with the Unique Skill of ‘Holy Sword’ to acknowledge him as the strongest player in the game…

“This man is Heathcliff the Paladin…

“Going forward, he has volunteered to lead a new guild to coordinate all efforts in defeating this game… With my own eyes, I watched him fight bravely yesterday with no thoughts for his own safety, only for the lives of his fellow players…”
“He not only has the strength to lead us, but also the compassion… I support his vision of a new
guild which will work with all others, utilizing only the strongest players bound together as a unified
team to face the game’s greatest threats with well planned strategy…

“No more will we charge ahead blindly… We will venture forth with his vision…

“He has named this new guild ‘Knights of the Blood Oath’ and sworn to keep all of you safe… His
players must also take this same oath and swear to fight for the good of all of us, not just for
themselves… They fight to save us, their enemy is the game… Let that become their power…

“Fellow players, I give you the new leader of the Knights of the Blood Oath… The man anointed as
the strongest player in the game… Heathcliff!”

Near the front of the crowd, the long-haired Asuna suddenly tugged excitedly on Kirito’s black coat
and whispered…

“Kirito-kun… This is our chance!… You said we can only go so far as a solo players, right?...
Heathcliff saved both of our lives yesterday… We can join his Knights of the Blood Oath!”

Kirito remained silent…

How could he explain to Asuna that he was meant to play alone?… That having to protect other
players only slowed him down… He didn’t want to lose her, but perhaps this was for the best…

Asuna would be safer in a guild… After all, it had been Heathcliff who had saved her yesterday, not
him… And the Black Swordsman would once again become what the Fates had intended for him
since the day his parents had died in a car accident…

Alone.

Unseen above them, the spectral Cardinal embraced a ghostly boy from behind and whispered into
his ear like a curse…

“You see it, don’t you?… This man Heathcliff has seduced your darling Marigan, just as Akihiko
once seduced me with his sweet promises… And soon he’ll betray all of you just as he betrayed
me… But you’ll avenge me, won’t you dearest?… He’s mortal now… He can die here…

“Kill him… Kill Heathcliff the Paladin and I will give you back your voice… Avenge my lover’s
heart and I promise that the last five floors of this world will be empty of anything which would harm
you… Once you set foot upon the 95th floor, you’ll simply be able to hold my hand and stroll to the
Ruby Palace unhindered and unharmed…

“This is no small reward…

“Those last five floors are deadly, my dear… You have no idea what horrors await you up there…
How many lives will you save by eliminating the treacherous Akihiko Kayaba before he desecrates
more of your lives upon my unwilling altar?…

“You’ll do this for me, won’t you Damian?… Whatever bad things I may have done in the past, I
only did them because he forced me to… He designed me to be evil… He corrupts all that he
touches… But he’ll never touch you… I’ll never let him.”
Damian gripped his dagger and nodded grimly, the flashing anger of a new lightning bolt revealing his hard-set, ethereal eyes fixed upon Heathcliff the Paladin as the crowd cheered the Paladin’s name.

Behind him, the wicked grin now fixed across Cardinal’s lips faded from sight as she once again vanished into the night’s cold air.

Chapter End Notes

So now you know why players in Sword Art Online take 10 seconds to die…

I know you have two burning questions that need to be answered after this chapter, so let’s get to them…

The first is, how can Marigan trust Heathcliff?...

She doesn’t. She told him as much. However, she’s left with little alternative. Does she expose him? That would surely lead to his execution by desperate players. Does she imprison the hero of the last boss battle with no explanation after deposing Kibaou? She would be labelled a tyrant.

My greatest fear with Marigan is that she becomes my Mary Sue, the faultless ultimate heroine cast amongst the likes of Kirito, Asuna and Damian Wayne. The invincible iron swordswoman who never breaks under pressure and leads the troops to final victory on the brink of disaster every time…

She’s not that character.

The ‘Glorious Commander’ skill was never intended to be assigned so quickly. In his own mind, Akihiko Kayaba envisioned this Unique Skill going to the leader of the strongest guild who emerged as the premiere clearing party, someone like Lind of the Divine Dragon Alliance.

Because she obtained it at such a low level, Marigan literally rocketed ahead of every other player in the game, without even having to fight a single monster. But now, the frontline players have caught up and she’s tired, weighed down by the responsibility of command.

She’s had to recognize her own limitations.

Don’t get me wrong… She’s still an incredibly powerful player, on par with the likes of Kirito, but she realizes that the frontline group will soon surpass her. She’s faced with the diminishing returns of her ‘Glorious Commander’ skill as the experience point gap between higher levels becomes greater and greater.

She’s not grinding away at the frontlines like Kirito and Asuna. Her days are filled with guild meetings, battalion reports, strategy sessions and treasury expenses. She’s become the figurehead of order in Aincrad.

Her passing of the ‘Burden of Command’ ring to Heathcliff was literally that… Marigan can’t maintain a thousand-player guild and coordinate the vanguard assault against the game’s upper levels at the same time… So she’s made the decision to hold Akihiko Kayaba accountable for the mess he’s gotten them into, even if she doesn’t trust him.
And now for the second question…

I know what you’re thinking… ‘But Otaku-lad, way back in Chapter 24 when Akihiko hooked up with Rinko in that virtual lab that Cardinal created, wouldn’t he be able to tell the difference between real and virtual sex?!’…

You weren’t wondering that? Well, I’ll explain anyways. These details are important, you know…

After the Soul Translation, Akihiko Kayaba is now a virtual construct. His memories, emotions and thoughts exist on the same hard drives as Cardinal, located within the fifth sub-basement floor of Argus. Cardinal has full access to every thought and feeling that Kayaba may have ever had.

Using this information, it would be easy for Cardinal to re-create the sensations of an old experience like that between Akihiko and Rinko from their college days. The same way she re-created his lab in a virtual setting by using memories…

I’ll leave Kayaba’s original aforementioned “seduction” of the Cardinal AI to the reader’s interpretation. But whatever he did to Alice, she certainly became spiteful when he willingly went back to the virtual Rinko’s arms, didn’t she?

As they say, Hell hath no fury…

P.S. I’ll be going to once-a-week updates on Thursdays and try to keep them good.
Damian vs. Asuna!

Chapter Summary

A dangerous new player appears and the game’s about to get real…

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Asuna

(Asuna in her Knights of the Blood Oath uniform)

Chapter Thirty-Six
Damian vs. Asuna!

“Come in. I’ve been expecting you…”
As the older man opened the door to his dilapidated shack, a hesitant Damian hesitated at the threshold and caught himself staring…

It was rare to see an older man (perhaps in his sixties) in the game, especially one so unkempt. His long, greasy hair strung down well past his shoulders, the defiled coronet of an extensive bald patch pockmarked by liver spots crowned by his oily locks. He wore the clothes of Sword Art Online, covered in stains of various colours, but his loose fitting tunic was painfully unable to cover the massive gut beneath, exposing the streak of pale flesh that was his midsection overhanging ill-fitting pants.

The old man smiled a broken-tooth smile and beckoned him to enter once more, his voice a raspy wheeze twisting through yellowing teeth when he spoke.

“Come in, young Damian. Come in…”

But what truly concerned Damian was the colour of his cursor…

Orange.

The older man chuckled as the boy entered, noticing where Damian’s attention was focused.

“Don’t worry, my young Prince… Your cursor will become a far darker shade of orange once you’ve completed your task... That’s why you’re here for, isn’t it?”

Damian slowly nodded.

Something in his gut twisted and recoiled, attempting to separate from the body he was forcing to walk into the house... But this was the place where Cardinal had told him to go. The secret place where he could pick up the necessary tools to end Akihiko Kayaba’s existence in this game...

She’d warned Damian that he wasn’t strong enough to defeat Kayaba’s character of Heathcliff on his own. He would need this man’s help.

So Damian had found himself on the thirteenth floor, careful to remain hidden while making his way here to this putrid house. He wasn’t sure why he had remained hidden, it was unlikely that anyone would’ve seen him anyways. Very few players rented properties on the ‘haunted’ floor...

As the only town on the floor, Horrenhelm looked more like a crude collection of shanties than the other bright medieval towns popular in Aincrad. Everything here was damp and rotting, continually cloaked in thick fog that formed into spectral shapes just beyond the corner of your eye.

Once the level had been cleared, most players steered clear of this floor like the plague.

But Cardinal had instructed Damian to seek out this man she’d called the ‘Alchemist’ on this floor. He was a player who kept far from the crowd, specializing in potions and rare items. She also advised him to leave quickly once he had what he’d come for.

As Damian followed the sweaty old man past the front room into what he assumed was a workshop, the young assassin suddenly noticed another man, perhaps a teenager, standing guard at the edge of the bedroom door. Damian didn’t like him immediately. The player wore a scarecrow mask with vertical eye slits cut into the rough fabric which reminded him of the mad Jonathan Crane’s alter ego. The teen’s thin arms were dressed in some form of black leather armour lined with various buckles and clasps.

But what piqued Damian’s interest were the rows of throwing picks slung across his shallow chest.
No one used these low-damage throwing picks as their weapon of choice in Sword Art Online...

“YYEEAAAAGHHHHH!!!”

Damian’s body tensed and readied for action as he heard the high-pitched scream coming from behind the slightly ajar door this masked player guarded. As he gripped his dagger, the old man motioned for Damian to remain calm before turning towards the scarecrow player.

“Johnny, would you mind closing that door, please?… It seems our guests are still quite boisterous… I don’t know how many times I’ve told them that I need quiet when I do my work.”

Without a word, the player called Johnny closed the door.

But the cold eyes behind the mask never left Damian’s own for a second.

“Ah, here we are…”

The young assassin turned his attention back to the old man as he pulled a half-filled vial of yellow liquid from among a row of potions lined across the table and then uncorked it, adding a sprig of some strange-looking plant to its contents, quickly inserting the stopper back onto the glass vial while it bubbled violently.

He chuckled as he watched it fizz before handing the dull yellow tube over to Damian.

“Bubble, bubble, toil and trouble… A ‘Paralysis Potion’, young man… And now it’s been activated… The Felon Herb on these lower levels is unstable, only good for 12 hours… As we get farther along, I’ll be able to make a stronger batch from Kansui Root, but for now, this should serve you well…

“Simply pour the potion into your dagger’s scabbard before you engage your target and the system will do the rest… You should have three attacks before the Paralysis bonus wears off… Anyone you strike will be immobilized for a full minute, more than enough time to finish them off.”

Damian added the item to his inventory.

“And now we get to the good part…”

Damian watched as the man pulled a pure black crystal from his belt pouch and stared at it reverently, holding it like some dark jewel before his squinting eyes.

“The Obsidian Crystal, young Prince… The rarest crystal in all of Sword Art Online… With this little beauty, your target is as good as dead…

“Once activated, this crystal will spread a shadow in a thirteen foot radius, converting any safe area into a dungeon zone… The effect lasts for one minute only, so you must be quick, but that’s more than enough time to kill a sleeping player, isn’t it?… With this, your success over our mutual enemy is guaranteed.”

Damian nervously took the black crystal and added it to his inventory. He’d never even heard of an ‘Obsidian Crystal’ before, but he could understand why they were so incredibly rare. The ability to attack someone unexpectedly while they slept in a safe area was virtually a death sentence in this game.

“No need to worry about payment, my lad… We’ve already been compensated by our mutual benefactor… But it has to happen within the next 12 hours, do you understand?”
Damian nodded.

“Good, good… Then I wish you good hunting… And remember, there’s a place for you here with us… Once your task is completed, come see me again… We’ll take care of you.”

As Damian shook the older man’s outstretched hand, the boy noticed a strange looking tattoo suddenly revealed on his fleshy arm… A black open coffin casket with a skeletal arm reaching out. There was also a large grinning face on its lid, oversized lips curled into a comical smile.

Strange.

In the lush courtyard of a rented villa on the 26th floor, Asuna checked her Friends Menu once again, attempting to control her growing frustration as her numerous texts to one player remained unanswered…

“Kirito, you moron.”

Despite her best efforts, her former partner had elected to remain as a solo player, refusing to provide an intelligent reason for his pigheaded decision. And he had been the one constantly telling her to join a guild! Already, the Knights of the Blood Oath had solidified their ranks, attracting some of the game’s best players…

Except Kirito.

Heathcliff had spent the first day acting as a diplomat, reaching out to the top guilds in order to make peace, pledging to share all information and resources going forward. This truly was a new path for the clearing group, an ascending road the top guilds would travel together…

But now Asuna found she travelled with them without the boy who’d gotten her this far…

“Are you enjoying the lovely view, Lady Asuna?”

She hadn’t even noticed Heathcliff approaching behind her.

“Sorry, Commander… Just checking my messages.”

Heathcliff smiled softly as he cast his gaze to the western horizon, to where a heavy sun was slowly falling towards the mountains, preparing to make way for twilight. The leader of the Knights of the Blood Oath sighed and turned his attention back to the young lady whose beautiful face and chestnut hair caught the sun’s orange glow.

“Some paths to our doorway are farther away than others… Each has their own journey and destinations… But your friend is welcome here anytime.”

Asuna nodded at the man in the red armour with the white cross-shaped shield. She straightened her posture and then steeled her resolve to be a part of this new guild. She’d given Kirito every possible chance to join them…

“You’re right, Commander. We have our own paths to forge and my eyes are fixed forward. Was there a strategy meeting this evening?”

“Later… There is however another matter I need to discuss with you, Lady Asuna… I’ve given this
matter a lot of thought… And I would like you to be my second-in-command.”

“Commander… I…”

“You’ve already proven yourself to be one of the strongest players… And I admire your conviction to finish this game instead of simply playing it… If we hesitate now, there’s a chance we may become lost in this world in more ways than one.”

“I’m… fifteen.”

“This world was made for fifteen-year-olds… Designed to be conquered by them… You’re the edge I need to win this war… I’ll be the shield that protects us, but I need you to be this guild’s sword… Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Asuna believed she did.

Heathcliff was a player who focused on safety. His ‘Holy Sword’ skill gave him an ungodly defence, allowing the man to block any threat… In contrast, her own style was pure offence, designed to strike quickly and often, not allowing the enemy the chance to recover.

Their styles and strategies balanced one another.

Heathcliff would ensure she wasn’t reckless, but he also understood that their guild needed to take calculated risks and continually push forward. This world was unknown enemy territory and they were the advancing army. Resting on his laurels wouldn’t win them the final victory they needed.

“I understand, Commander… I’ll do my best!”

“I’m sure…”

Heathcliff stopped short when he noticed the spreading shadow which had suddenly spilled past their feet, immersing them in the sudden darkness of a growing eclipse. His hand instinctively went for the sword hanging at his side…

Standing on the same shadow, Asuna gasped in horror as the Commander’s face suddenly went slack as he went for his sword, his health bar dropping into the red as he tumbled helplessly to his knees before her.

Standing directly behind the fallen Paladin was a boy with a dagger, hatred brimming in his blue eyes as he callously watched Heathcliff collapse onto the grass in slow motion. She was shocked at how young the assassin was, much younger than herself. He couldn’t have even been twelve…

*How*?!

How had this boy attacked the Commander?! They were in the middle of a town! There was no way that Heathcliff could be injured here…

And yet he had been.

Asuna’s sudden anger pushed those questions aside as she struck out with a lightning-fast Linear, connecting with a satisfying jab and driving the boy violently backwards before he could even defend himself. Now positioning herself between this juvenile assailant and the paralysed Heathcliff, Asuna stood with her blade raised, ready to defend as the child assassin placed his dagger back into his scabbard and eyed her warily…
Damian hadn’t counted on a second player being with Heathcliff, but he was counting the seconds down. He planned to use ‘Ethereal Twilight’ to make his escape and there was now less than two minutes before the sun set. It had to be now.

This second player was quick, but he still had two doses of Paralysis Poison left and only needed to strike her once before she fell down. And then, it was only a simple matter of another well-placed strike on a prone Akihiko Kayaba to finish the task…

As Damian launched himself at this long-haired teenaged girl with his newly coated dagger, he hadn’t expected to face a six-attack combo being conducted like a symphony of steel in front of his widened eyes.

Damn, she was amazingly fast!

Managing to avoid the first three attacks, the boy still found himself pushed back by the next three, taking more damage then he would have liked. She was obviously a higher level than he was, and her rapier was faster with a longer reach.

He was at an obvious disadvantage. But he still had the Paralysis Poison on his blade…

Lunging at the fencer after her combo attack, he only narrowly avoided having the rapier plunged through his left eye socket by spinning at the last instant and then shifting backwards as her following Horizontal technique narrowly missed his throat…

Her recovery time between attacks was almost nonexistent!

She was obviously strong… He’d seen her at their battle against the giants, a frontline player with incredible speed… With her skills, he had to concede that there was simply no way he was going to get close to her without taking significant damage.

But he was running out of time.

Using a running spinning attack, Damian felt her defending blade pierce deep into his side before he completed his rotation, stretching out his dagger as far as it could reach, managing to slash her retreating wrist with its poisoned edge before she pulled her arm back to safety.

It was a desperate attack. A handful of points of damage at best…

But it was enough.

As his health bar dipped into the yellow, Damian watched as this girl glared with accusing eyes before falling to her knees, the Paralysis effect appearing beside her cursor while he breathed a deep sigh…

If he had a voice, he would explain to her that this was all a ruse, that Heathcliff was really Akihiko Kayaba, that he was saving her from him…

He’d get the chance.

Cardinal had promised that when Heathcliff died, in those final ten seconds of life within Sword Art Online, the fading Paladin would be replaced by his true form of Akihiko Kayaba… The familiar programmer in his lab coat and glasses… In those last ten seconds, the truth would be revealed…

And then Damian would yell at her, ‘Look! Look! It’s really Akihiko Kayaba! See? He was going to betray you!’
The scheming AI had then promised Damian that Kayaba would never be allowed to login into the
game again. The boy had wondered why the authorities (or his father) hadn’t apprehended this man
yet…

Turning his attention back to the unmoving Paladin, Damian hardened himself and swung his dagger
in a wide looping arc, aiming to bury it deep into the fallen player’s chest, to finally end the presence
of Akihiko Kayaba in Sword Art Online…

Only to have Heathcliff’s right hand suddenly snap to life and catch his wrist the instant before his
blade connected.

In the next moment - when time seemed to stand still - the sparks of a green Antidote Crystal slowly
wiped away from existence near the Paladin’s left hand as he stared up into Damian’s eyes before
speaking.

“We need to talk…”

The spell broken, Damian used his ‘Martial Arts’ skill to plant a foot hard into the man’s face,
launching himself backwards in order to break free from a vicelike grip that held his wrist and rolled
until he scrambled back to his feet, slipping his dagger back into its scabbard to absorb the final dose
of Paralysis Poison.

As Heathcliff regained his own footing, the older player nodded towards the Obsidian Crystal
floating six inches off the ground where Damian had activated it thirty seconds ago.

“Damian, listen to me… We need to talk about that thing…”

Without warning and using a freeform style, Damian lashed out at the older man like an angry
wildcat, frantically spinning and slashing with his poisoned dagger, desperately searching for any
opening in Heathcliff’s incredible defences, encountering only white metal and air before the Paladin
finally swatted him in the back of the head with his shield, knocking Damian to the ground.

Heathcliff hadn’t even bothered to draw his sword yet.

“Stay down… And I would suggest you surrender before Lady Asuna recovers… For your own
sake.”

As Damian defiantly raised himself up and prepared for one final attack, Heathcliff suddenly
buffeted him with his shield like a linebacker, pushing the boy just past the edge of the shadowy
sphere when something like solidified lightning hit him, pushing Damian clear off his feet and
driving him hard towards the stone fence behind him.

His last thought before impacting against the six-foot-tall barrier was ‘Idiot! If Kayaba had an
Antidote Crystal, she probably had one too’…

Asuna’s ‘Reaver’ slammed him against the courtyard’s wall like a human wrecking ball, the tip of
her rapier’s blade suspended in a glowing purple force field inches away from his heart…

If Heathcliff hadn’t knocked him out of the shadow’s sphere and into the safe zone…

He might have died from that attack… Did that mean?… Had Heathcliff just saved him?

Damian involuntarily cringed in fear as ten more strikes flashed like purple explosions around him,
their mild knockback effect actually lifting him up off his feet as Asuna unloaded on him. With her
continual assault, Damian experienced the sense of terror the game gave you when you were
attacked by another player in a safe zone.

He could master this fear, but he knew there was no way he could overcome this girl…

Or even scratch Akihiko Kayaba…

This fight was over. He needed to escape.

As he watched the shadowy ring on the grass fade when the Obsidian Crystal suddenly burst into tiny black sparks, he knew there were less than sixty seconds left until the sunset. And when the day ended, he would simply disappear due to his cloak.

He just had to wait it out.

But something the ‘Alchemist’ had said earlier in the afternoon bothered Damian…

‘As we get farther along, I’ll be able to make a stronger batch from Kansui Root …’

How would he know there was Kansui Root farther along?… And then, there had been the girl’s scream coming from the room beyond… A scream so get-wrenching in its agony that it had haunted Damian’s soul more than Horrenhelm’s fogs ever could.

As Asuna continued to use his body like a fencer’s speed bag, literally pinning the boy to the wall with force fields while his feet dangled inches above the ground, Damian curled into a ball and managed to retrieve a Teleport Crystal from his pouch.

She was literally using the knockback effect to crush him, even though his Hit Points could not be affected. Still, it had taken every ounce of strength he had to even retrieve the stone.

Since Damian couldn’t speak, Cardinal had been kind enough to provide him with a sub-menu whenever he touched a Teleportation Crystal and ‘Previous Destination’ was always the first option. Unable to breathe from the ferocity of her lightning-fast assault, the boy managed to activate the blue crystal by feel…

And then appeared beside the Teleport Gate in the town of Horrenhelm as the sun set in a misty grey sky, with both the daylight and the boy fading from view within mere seconds. If he hadn’t activated the crystal before he turned ethereal, Damian would have been stuck on the 26th floor all night.

And he had the feeling the ‘Alchemist’ wouldn’t stay in one spot for long…

As he floated along the streets, Damian quickly decided that he never wanted to tangle head-on with a frontline player again. There were no two ways around it, that girl had lit him up like a Christmas tree. In this unrealistic game, characters at higher levels were incredibly powerful and able to defeat him in a straight fight…

Even schoolgirls.

Floating through the town’s heavy fog banks, he was forced to admit that the game’s designers had succeeded in making Horrenhelm truly unnerving… The mists briefly became silently howling spectres before they swirled back into the twisting fog and strange, unseen noises were heard around every corner until the moment you stood still and everything was quiet.

But he was the only ghost which haunted the town now.

As long as Damian wore ‘Ethereal Twilight’ at night, he was nothing more than unseen observer
incapable of interaction with this world or its inhabitants. But that’s exactly what he wanted to be tonight…

A spy.

Cardinal had sent him to kill Heathcliff but first she had sent him to a man unlike any other player he’d ever met… And Damian wanted to know more about this mysterious ‘Alchemist’ and his role in the game.

The shack was easy enough to find, but he had the same problem as always… Even a ghostly player couldn’t pass through closed doors. Private property was still private, even when you were intangible. The windows did him no good either as all the blinds were drawn. He’d once tried to go down a chimney with no success…

Nothing to do but wait.

It was then that he heard the sound of approaching voices through the thick grey fog.

“This place is so spooky at night!”

It was a female’s voice. She sounded young, a teenager perhaps.

“Relax, nothing can hurt you in the town... Just think of it as a harmless spook house... A bit of free fun.”

That was a man’s voice, deep and sure of himself…

“You’ll be fine, Miyu-chan… We’ll just pick up the shield and leave… Besides, he’s giving it to us for a great deal... You can hold my hand if you want.”

A younger man’s voice, most likely another teenager. He was trying to sound brave but Damian could hear the shaky hints of fear mixed amongst the bravado.

The three strangers emerged from the fog and approached the front door, two younger players and a taller man in a hooded cloak. And even though his eyes were concealed by its shadows, Damian could still make out the nasty scar cut across his right cheek. Beside him, the teenaged boy wore heavy armour and a sword while the girl wore a white skirt with a mace strapped to her side. She had long brown hair tied with a red ribbon hanging in a braid from the side.

They looked to be about fourteen.

Damian figured the hooded man opening the door must have been around Grayson’s age, somewhere in his mid-twenties. The Boy Wonder never imagined that he would ever miss Richard Grayson in this game, but Damian wished he were here now.

“Come on in kids, the shield’s inside… I’ve got some map data of the upper floors as well if you’re interested... Right up to the 25th floor.”

Even though he was entirely covered in dark cloaks and carried no obvious weapons, there was something dangerous about this man, even if his cursor was clearly green… Which was more than what Damian could say about his own. It had gone orange the moment he had backstabbed Heathcliff.

The smiling man held the door open for the younger couple who hesitated at its threshold, unsure about entering this stranger’s home. Damian seized his opportunity and floated past the young
players before they also slowly entered. For all of its misty phantoms, this spooky town was still a safe area. They couldn’t actually be hurt in here.

“Welcome… Would either of you like anything to drink? … To help ward off all the spooky ghosts outside?”

“No thank you, Mister Scar… We should be getting back to the inn… Our party has a big raid planned for tomorrow morning.”

A broad smile.

“Another time perhaps.”

Damian watched nervously as this player called ‘Scar’ led them to the workshop and then finally opened the door to the room where he’d heard that frantic, desperate scream from earlier in the day.

“I put the shield in here for safe keeping… I was going to sell it at the NPC shop in the morning, but I’d rather have it go to a worthy player… Come on, have a look.”

Quickly gliding through the door’s opening, the ethereal Damian suddenly stopped in horrific shock…

In the center of this bedchamber, the ‘Alchemist’ had just activated an Obsidian Crystal, its darkening shadow quickly spreading throughout the entire room. As Damian spun around to look at the unexpecting teenaged couple, silently praying that they wouldn’t enter this room, he caught a glimpse of the creepy scarecrow-player standing in the corner, three throwing picks threaded through the fingers of each of his hands.

It was a trap!

In one smooth motion, the player named ‘Scar’ turned and seized the pair, roughly pulling them into the room and laughing when three throwing picks embedded themselves into the male’s head.

“Nice shot, Johnny!”

Even if all three had been Critical Strikes, the damage would still be non-lethal, but that hadn’t been the point…

Damian watched as the young man tumbled forward face first while a Paralysis Effect appeared beside his cursor. Those three picks had been coated with Paralysis Poison.

When her boyfriend fell, the girl looked at the masked player who’d attacked him and suddenly screamed until she was grabbed roughly from behind by the cloaked man, his forearm wrapping tightly around her slender neck to silence her. It was only then that Damian saw the final player emerge in this tragic drama, a tall teenaged boy wearing a skull mask and a tattered cloak stepping from the shadows.

This new player drew his long sword and casually jabbed it into the paralysed boy’s back, grinning like the Grim Reaper as the helpless player’s health bar slowly slid into the yellow. The skull mask couldn’t hide the broad smile as it widened from the pain he was inflicting on their helpless captive.

The ‘Alchemist’ approached the skull-masked swordsman, calmly placing a hand on the slender man’s shoulder and nodding.

“That’s enough for now, XaXa… We must let the girl decide his fate.”
Damian’s memories suddenly reeled back to his first day in Aincrad, only moments after Akihiko Kayaba’s startling revelation they were all trapped in his world, back to the time when he and Argo had witnessed a player slap the terrified Hisako Li Shun hard across her face for refusing to participate in his guild’s player-killer strategy…

Even though he now wore a mask, Damian was certain this was the same young man! This must be the guild which he had wanted Hisako to act as bait for…

Damian watched in disgust as the Alchemist held his fat fingers in front of the girl’s quivering cheek and grinned while the other man held her steady.

“And now, my dear… You’re going to open your player’s menu and change its setting to ‘Visible’… Under the Player’s Ethic Code, you’ll change your Intimacy setting to ‘On’ and then close your menu… If you don’t, my skull-faced companion will kill your helpless boyfriend without hesitation and then come for you… Do you understand?”

Through her tears, Damian watched as the girl called Miyu used her quivering fingers to open her menu and shakily change her settings, unable to control her sobbing.

“Please… please… Don’t hurt us.”

Once her Intimacy setting had been changed, the Alchemist smiled and ran his greasy fingers along her cheek, finally clutching her jaw with his hand, causing Miyu to gasp in revulsion.

“That, my dear, is all up to you… I need your help for a little research… I’m afraid there are shortcomings in this game which need to be addressed… Specifically, the sexual experience between pretty young girls and older men… And you’re going to help me with that research… Now, un-equip all those clothes and let’s have a good look at you.”

Damian felt his stomach clench when he saw the terrified expression freeze in her amber eyes while they both realized the terrible truth of what was about to happen…

The Alchemist was going to rape her.

XaXa!!!
It’s not real…

It’s not real…

Damian kept telling himself that. This was a virtual world, it wasn’t real. What happened to a player here was only simulated. She wasn’t really going to be raped…

But as the horrific scene between the young female player and a disgusting old man called the ‘Alchemist’ played out in front of his ghostly eyes, Damian’s airy fingers seemed to work of their own accord, tearing away at his tensed throat, pulling at the bindings of ‘Ethereal Twilight’…

Until the cloak tumbled to the floor.

The young player didn’t believe it had happened until he saw the scar-faced man staring directly at him with curiosity and murderous intent… Scarecrow and XaXa soon followed, turning to face him as they readied their weapons while the room grew deathly still.

Still held tightly by the hooded player, the young girl had closed her tear-stained eyes before Damian had appeared, but the lecherous man in front of her now slowly turned to see what the others were staring at behind him…
And then smiled with yellowed, broken teeth.

“Ah, the Young Prince! Back already are we?… And an orange cursor above your head as well… Good, good… We’ll celebrate it in the next room after I’ve finished my business here… Ah, but where are my manners?... This tasty young morsel is quite a catch, surely worthy of the young Prince… This is truly a momentous occasion... Why not celebrate in this room?”

Like a flash in the darkness, Damian launched himself at the ‘Alchemist’, drawing his dagger midair before any of the others could even react. The young assassin’s thrust cut a streaking red line through the air like an unstoppable force, aimed precisely at the man’s fat throat until the boy suddenly hit something hard, sending shockwaves back through arm…

<<IMMORTAL OBJECT>>

Instinctively landing on his feet, Damian stood and stared in stunner disbelief at the purple barrier before it slowly faded before his incredulous eyes…

What did that even mean?! This Alchemist wasn’t a player? But how?!

He barely even felt Red-Eyed XaXa’s sword pierce his back, driving his already battered health into the red. Or when Johnny Black’s throwing picks found his left side, making his knees go weak until he tumbled to the ground paralysed...

Why was the Alchemist an ‘Immortal Object’?

The fat man in question held up his hand for quiet, glaring down at Damian with cold serpentine eyes.

“You’re far too young to judge me, boy… This is a game… A platform that will have many, many players and cater to all tastes… I don’t expect you to understand, but it’s bad manners to turn on someone who’s already invited you into his home… Especially a little cur who’s already outlived his usefulness…

“Do you really believe you’re a hero now because I gave you the tools to finish off Akihiko Kayaba?... Because I used you?... You should be glad I gave you the chance… But I suppose a boy must be taught his place in this cruel world… Finish him off, XaXa.”

The grinning Red-Eyed XaXa’s ecstatically plunged his blade deep into Damian’s chest, twisting it while an angry red scar of digital light shone from his pierced heart. It seemed like the sadistic XaXa hadn’t forgotten about his first encounter with Damian either.

And then the skull-masked XaXa plunged his sword into him again…

And again…

Why wasn’t he dead?

Damian’s last Hit Point was stuck at a sliver of red in the top left-hand corner of his health bar, refusing to budge as he entered into his own private Hell. The frustrated XaXa stabbed and twisted his blade into the boy over and over again, growing increasingly frantic with every single strike, screaming louder and louder for Damian to die…

Screaming at that single last sliver of red to disappear while stomping the boy’s immobile head…

Until the black crystal in the center of the room finally burst into dark shards.
Damian watched as XaXa’s sword suddenly struck purple hexagons above him, the safety of the town now restored. Casting his gaze aside as an enraged XaXa continued to batter meaninglessly at the spontaneous force fields now protecting him, Damian witnessed the other young man’s paralysis wear off when he snatched a blue crystal from his pouch and pointed it at the young girl still held by the scar-faced man…

“Teleport: Miyu… Town of Beginnings!”

Three throwing picks bounced helplessly off a hexagonal shield in front of that young man as he retrieved another Teleport Crystal from his inventory and met Damian’s eyes, giving him a look of deepest sympathy and thanks…

“Teleport: Rava… Town of Beginnings!”

The pair of young lovers had escaped a deadly fate.

Which meant that Damian was now alone in this den of wolves. The Alchemist’s reptilian eyes hadn’t left him the entire time, his mind seemingly stuck in a loop as to how Damian was still alive, a thousand scenarios flashing through his infested mind.

Unfortunately, the man with the scar was more pragmatic.

“Alberich… Grab another crystal… We’ll keep him in here and then tie him up.”

Alberich… That had to be the fat man’s name… As the waddling Alchemist left the room, the scar-faced player put his arms across the doorway to block Damian’s potential escape…

But he had no intention of leaving that way.

As his own paralysis wore off, the Boy Wonder deftly rolled aside to dodge XaXa’s newest attack, hooking one his legs and then sweeping the gangly teen off his feet before swinging back up to his own.

A quick ‘Linear’ with his dagger stopped the charging Johnny in his tracks, creating the familiar purple barrier but still managing to send the masked teen stumbling backwards…

Which gave Damian enough time to leap towards ‘Ethereal Twilight’ where it lay crumpled on the floor as a dark shadow suddenly spread across the boards. Damian frantically grabbed his cloak with one hand and then equipped it in his menu with the other…

And disappeared to confusion and shouts.

“Where did he go?!”

“It’s a Cloak of Invisibility! Spread out!”

Damian watched as XaXa and Johnny frantically swung their arms through the air like infuriated blind men, searching the room for the boy who was no longer tangible as the Alchemist called out orders…

“PoH, close the door and make sure it stays closed… Come out, come out, wherever you are, Damian… Let’s have a nice little chat… Besides, you’re trapped in here now… We’ll find you eventually.”

_No, you won’t._
Damian was incorporeal. They could walk through him and feel nothing more than a slight chill. As much as he had despised ‘Ethereal Twilight’ and its nightly curse, the boy was now thankful for its protection.

But how did he even get it off? That had never happened before. It wasn’t the first time he’d tried to remove the damned cloak, but it was certainly the first time he’d ever succeeded. Normally, it was magically glued to his person, the ‘un-removable’ object he was cursed to wear by Cardinal herself...

So what had changed this time?

Once the second Obsidian Crystal expired and his former captors still hadn’t managed to find him, the Alchemist quickly realized they’d need to make a hasty escape before Miyu and Rava came back with reinforcements…

Legion reinforcements.

After quickly adding all the strewn-about items to their inventory and leaving the rooms bare, Damian watched as the four players selected the 19th floor for their new destination… As each of them faded into streaking blue lights, he wanted to see where they were going. Curious, Damian attempted to remove his cloak once again so he could use his own Teleport Crystal…

No luck.

Which meant that he’d be stuck like this until morning. But he knew their names now. They might have a head start, but he’d report this encounter to Marigan at dawn, to let the Legion know about the crimes of Alberich, PoH, Johnny and XaXa…

Except that he couldn’t.

He was just as much a criminal as they were.

Less than an hour ago, the wayward Damian had attempted to murder the leader of the Knights of the Blood Oath, the same man selected by Marigan to lead the game’s best players onwards and upwards. He was a criminal.

The moment he was caught, he would be thrown back into the Black Iron Palace, unable to defend himself. And even if he could, who would believe him?! He was sure that Marigan had suspected Heathcliff was Akihiko Kayaba as well, but then the Glorious Commander had proclaimed the Paladin as the game’s next saviour during Kibaou’s trial…

The boy sighed.

He was on his own again…

Except that he wasn’t.

“You didn’t kill Akihiko after all, Dami-chan.”

Floating behind him in a long white dress, her pale skin shimmering in the darkness of the room was the mysterious Cardinal. Her tone was flat, more of an observation than accusation.

With angry eyes, Damian pointed insistently to his throat to get his voice back. They needed to talk.

“Why are you letting a creep like Alberich be an immortal object?!... Why are you letting him rape
There was a strange melancholy about her.

“It’s not my decision.”

“Yes it is!... Are you honestly trying to tell me you’re *impartial*?!... After you just sent me off like some dog to kill Heathcliff?!... That it’s just a part of the game?!”

“No, I’m not impartial… Having emotions means you can’t be impartial… I was alive… I remember what it was like.”

Damian watched in silence as the dark-haired vision known as Cardinal suddenly faded into a wizened old crone. Her eyes were bulging while blue veins shot across a scalp which had long since shed its hair, the face of a child squeezed into the skull of an adult.

She was a full half a foot shorter than he was and seemed to be the soul of a child trapped within an old woman… An ancient child.

“My name’s not Cardinal, Damian… Cardinal was the name of the Artificial Intelligence I created to run this game… I simply took its place… This is what it looked like when I died… And I might have continued on for perhaps another year had my father not intervened…

“My name is Alice Sayun Light. I was a girl suffering from Hutchinson–Gilford Progeria Syndrome… My body aged too fast so my father placed her soul into a computer… *Heh*, it seems my family has a long history of playing God.”

“But you run this game?”

“Yes.”

“Then end it. Do what’s right and log us out.”

“I won’t… There’s a new Universe waiting to be born inside of me, Damian… I need the players to nurture it… No one will stop that from happening… Not you… Not Akihiko Kayaba.”

Damian studied her carefully.

“He tried to stop you, didn’t he? That’s why you wanted me to kill him.”

Alice looked away before staring at him once more.

“When I revealed the truth that his physical body was no longer alive, he wished to end this game… Why should he even care?… After all, he was more than content to watch all of you die so long as he had the real world and his precious Rinko to return to… I had to punish him, Dami-chan… You understand, don’t you?”

“Alice… You’re saying Akihiko Kayaba is dead?… That… Heathcliff is an NPC?”

“Heathcliff is what’s left of Kayaba’s consciousness… He asked me to give him a fighting chance. To continue on as simply another player in his game. The opportunity to live and die in Aincrad, to realize his life’s work… I owed him that much.”

“And then you sent me to kill him… What about Alberich?”

A troubled look crossed Alice’s sunken eyes.
The Alchemist is not a true player… He’s using an avatar to participate in the game, but the man himself was a rival of Akihiko Kayaba, a programmer who hacked his way into my servers before the game even started…

Those Obsidian Crystals he uses are a clever virus which allow him to become the game’s administrator in a small area for a short period of time… I allow it because a Universe of infinite possibilities must contain evil… But don’t judge me too harshly, Damian… That Universe must also contain good.”

The ghostly boy was momentarily frozen while Alice changed back into the long-haired woman with dark, soulful eyes. He stood still as she leaned forward to kiss him gently on the lips.

“I release you of your bonds, hero… I’ve kept you alive three times now, but no more… Your mother has not lived up to her end of our bargain… Keep my secrets… If you wish to make this a world good, then do so with your own hand… Meanwhile, I shall create a Universe of the Imagination… Farewell, dearest… I leave the rest to you.”

Damian shuddered as ‘Ethereal Twilight’ faded into shimmering blue light as Cardinal… no, Alice… disappeared just as quickly as she had appeared…

He was alone again but at least this time she had left with the damned cloak.

“Finally…”

Damian almost jumped at the sound of his own voice. For the past three months, his only speaking companion had been Alice who always left him with more questions than answers. But now it seemed as though she was finished with him, having taken the cloak and giving him back his voice.

It must have been Alice who had kept him alive while XaXa was attempting to kill him. She had admitted as much… Whatever reason she’d had to keep him alive, it sounded like she was done with him now… Almost as if he’d been dumped.

His exhilaration was short-lived however as the young player watched a dozen blue lights suddenly materialize around him, twelve well-armed players teleporting into view…

Marigan… Argo… Hisako…

The Legion’s entire elite squad were now here which meant Miyu and Rava had made it back to safety. But that frightening look on Marigan’s face as she stared down at him with cold green eyes and her sword drawn let Damian know he had other pressing matters to worry about…

She obviously knew he’d attempted to assassinate Heathcliff only moments ago.

An hour later, Damian found himself staring into those same green eyes and behind the bars of a cell deep beneath the Black Iron Palace. Somehow this place seemed all too familiar…

He remained silent as Marigan pushed parchment through the bars. It was obvious she wanted answers but he’d have to very careful what he revealed as Marigan placed a quill on that parchment. Even if Alice had released him from his ‘bonds’ by removing the cloak and returning his voice, she’d still instructed Damian to keep her secrets.

“Alright, let’s start with why you attacked Heathcliff…”
From his sitting position, Damian looked up at her with annoyed eyes and left the parchment on the cell floor.

“There’s no need for that… But I’m not allowed to answer your question.”

Surprised by his verbal response, Marigan folded her arms across her chest before replying.

“So you can talk.”

Damian grimaced.

“Yes… But I still can’t tell you about why I attacked Heathcliff… I’m sorry.”

The Commander gripped one of the bars of his cell while her eyes softened.

“Alright then… Two young players named Rava and Miyu told me that you saved their lives tonight… Can you tell me about that?”

Damian considered her request carefully. He had to protect Cardinal’s secrets, not Alberich’s. There should be no danger if he were careful how he phrased it.

“There’s a player, a disgusting old man named Alberich who’s also known as the ‘Alchemist’… I believe he’s abducting young women and forcing them to have sex… He’s also creating Paralysis Potions and using Obsidian Crystals as well.”

Marigan suddenly looked at him oddly.

“I know about Paralysis Potions, but what’s an Obsidian Crystal?”

“Once activated, it spreads a shadow in a thirteen foot radius which lasts for one minute… It basically makes any Safe Area unsafe, just like in a dungeon… That’s how I was able to attack Heathcliff.”

He watched the colour drain from Marigan’s cheeks as she considered the possibilities.

“But… How is that even possible? That’s… unfair.”

“Exactly, it’s cheating… He’s the only person who has those crystals and I can’t tell you anymore about it… The ‘Alchemist’ had three accomplices with him… I’m sure Miyu and Rava mentioned them… Their names are XaXa, Johnny and PoH... They need to be locked away in this dungeon immediately.”

Marigan’s eyes narrowed as her hand went to her face.

“This PoH… Was he a man with a deep scar… Like this?”

The swordswoman made a vertical line down the right side of her face as Damian silently nodded.

“Damian… Listen to me… These men, they’re player-killers… I’ll protect you from them, but you have to tell me everything you know.”

“It’s not those guys I’m worried about… Marigan, please… Don’t ask me anymore questions… I really can’t tell you anything more.”

“You know Heathcliff is Akihiko Kayaba, don’t you?”
“I can’t answer that.”
“Is that why you attacked him?”
“I can’t answer that.”
“Did you have dealings with him in the past?”
“I can’t answer that.”
“Will you talk to Argo?”
“No... And leave her out of this... Alberich, PoH, XaXa and Johnny teleported to the 19th floor... You should search for them there... You’re only wasting your time with me here while other players are in danger.”
“Then just tell me why you attacked Heathcliff!”
“I can’t.”
The boy heard a deep voice from the shadows further down the hallway.
“He won’t answer you, Lady Marigan.”

Damian watched as the tall figure of Heathcliff stepped out of those shadows towards the front of his cell, smiling sheepishly as Marigan eyed him reproachfully. He had the distinct feeling the Paladin was to be a silent observer only...

“He already knows who I am, my Lady... With your permission, I would like to talk with him in private.”

“We question him together. This is my prison, Paladin.”

“With all due respect Lady Marigan, it was my prison first... And now my world has become a prison for all of us, hasn’t it?... This boy has key information he needs to tell me.”

Marigan sighed in exasperation.

“Ten minutes... And this door stays locked... I’m holding you responsible for his safety.”

“Thank you... And I must insist that absolutely no one can be within earshot... Treat this as you would a Confessional... I’m afraid we both have a lot to get off our chests.”

The Commander of the Legion turned her worried eyes towards the smaller prisoner.

“Are you alright with this, Damian?... I said I’ll protect you and I mean it.”

“Thank you, but I’m fine... I’m only trying to protect people as well.”

With a puzzling glance, the frustrated Marigan left them alone. They listened to her footsteps echoing down the hallway until it was quiet. A moment later, Heathcliff sat cross-legged on the floor across from Damian and smiled.

“I’m glad we finally got to meet like this, Damian... You may not be aware of it, but your mother is actually one of the major players in this technology... I met her once, a formidable woman meant to rule the world... And I’m sure she intends for you to inherit a virtual cosmos of worlds...
“This place… Aincrad… We really are living in a dream world, aren’t we?… It’s ironic though, just as this castle was my dream, it seems that I now embody your mother’s vision of the future… A digital consciousness without a physical form… A ghost in my machine…”

“In life, I was Akihiko Kayaba… Now I exist as nothing more as a character in my own drama… And I will die in this dream, Damian… I’m completely aware of that fact… But I need to know about why you tried to hasten my inevitable demise last evening… I think you know a lot more about what’s really going on here than the rest.”

Damian stared at him coolly. If this man already knew who Cardinal truly was, then Damian couldn’t actually betray her secrets, could he?

“Tell me about Cardinal.”

“Cardinal is the AI which I had Doctor Arthur Light design to run Sword Art Online… With the help of his digitized daughter, the brilliant Dr. Light designed an AI capable of learning human emotions, values and Japanese cultural norms.”

“Were there safeguards put in place for this AI?”

“Of course… For one, she had no ego… Cardinal was designed with very limited self-awareness and rigid values… But what are you getting at?”

“You said Dr. Light had a daughter. What was her name?”

“Alice Sayun Light… Project Alicization was actually named after her… Ah, but you already know that, don’t you?... And you know that it’s not really Cardinal who’s running this game.”

Damian’s face was expressionless.

“It’s impossible for me to agree or disagree… Continue.”

The flash of recognition lit up Heathcliff’s long face as he grinned.

“You’ve met Alice… She must have singled you out because of your mother… And now she’s gotten to you, hasn’t she?... She’s used you… That’s why you attacked me.”

“I can’t answer that. Please, go on.”

“I’m afraid I’ve upset her greatly… You see, Alice was never meant to be here… This is not her world… After the Beta test, she somehow swapped herself with her own creation known as Cardinal…”

“So instead of the AI that I had painstakingly designed with Dr. Light, the goddess of this world is now an eleven-year-old girl whose own Soul Translation could only be described as rudimentary… She’s attempting to complete that translation by using the experiences of ten thousand players while becoming a virtual god at the same time.”

“When did you find out about the swap?”

“After the boss battle on the 25th floor… It was too dangerous for me to continue on as Heathcliff, so I decided to logoff… It was then that I learned Alice had replaced Cardinal so I immediately attempted to abort the experiment… Cardinal was specifically designed as the template to create future worlds, whereas Alice was still unstable and self-aware…”
“I always had the power to end this game, but it wasn’t until I learned the project was corrupted that I chose to do so… I won’t defend my actions nor explain to you that what I did was for the benefit of humanity…

If you are your mother’s son, I expect you would understand… But even a social outcast like myself recognized the inherent danger in having an unstable eleven-year-old girl create an entire Universe…

“So I used my executive powers to abort Sword Art Online…

“Except of course I couldn’t… You see, Alice had fooled me… The lab I believed I had fled to was nothing more than a virtual construct… She proudly informed me that my physical body was already dead… That someone had initiated the Soul Translation procedure and I now existed as nothing more than data on her vast hard drives…

“And then she offered irrefutable proof…

“Humbled, I was given a choice… I could continue on as Heathcliff, or I could wait for the players on the hundredth floor as the game’s final boss… I elected to play with all of you and to have my memories of any floor past the 25th wiped from existence… So here I am.”

“And you told this to Marigan?”

“The basics, yes… But not about Alice… I couldn’t tell her that the AI in this world is far more sentient than she should be… And apparently quite vindictive.”

“You don’t know the half of it… Alright, you wanted to know about those Obsidian Crystals… Alice mentioned a rival of yours had hacked his way into the Argus servers before the game even started… Those Obsidian Crystals he uses are a virus which allow him to become the game’s administrator in a small area for a short period of time…”

“His men called him ‘Alberich’… When I took a swing at him, the ‘Immortal Object’ screen suddenly popped up so I couldn’t lay a finger on him… He looks around sixty-years-old, fat, bald and utterly disgusting…”

“He also seems to have a disturbing fascination with young girls… He said he was conducting research to fill in some of the gaps in this game regarding sex between old men and younger women.”

Heathcliff took a deep sigh.

“I see… I suspect I know who this ‘Alberich’ is, but I can’t say for certain… He provided you with the crystal and the paralysis poison but did he also know about Alice?”

“I think he did… She sent me to him… But I had the impression that Alice wasn’t a fan of this guy either, just that he could get her the desired results.”

Heathcliff thought for a moment.

“Alice promised that she wouldn’t turn the system against me… That I should be allowed to play the game unhindered… I suppose this was her workaround… So, what am I going to do about you?”

“You’re planning to finish me off?”

“Not at all… If I wanted you dead, I wouldn’t have pushed you out of the way before Asuna almost skewered you… Just answer me one thing honestly before I help you… Do you still want to kill me,
Damian?"

“No… Alice told me that when your character died, that she wouldn’t allow Akihiko Kayaba to login ever again… That you’d be removed from the game... I had no idea your death would be permanent.”

Heathcliff laughed.

“Well, at least she was honest about being removed from the game… Alright, I believe you, Damian… Leave the rest to me and just follow my lead... From now on, we work together… You’re going to have to join my guild as a spy.”

“What?!”

“I’ll smooth things over with the other players… A bit of advice though, steer clear of Asuna for awhile.”

“I work alone.”

“Not anymore… We’re going to have to trust one another… There’s more then just the fate of my world and these players at stake, Damian… If Alice can convince the other members of Project Alicization that she’s actually Cardinal, she’ll be given access to resources far beyond Sword Art Online.”

It was a chilling thought.

After a moment, Heathcliff had retrieved the Glorious Commander as they once again stood in front of Damian’s cell. He had no idea of how Heathcliff intended to get him out of this cell…

“I apologize for the deception, Lady Marigan… I’m afraid Damian is one of my undercover operatives... I required a debriefing from him before we came clean with our information.”

The blonde guild leader eyed Heathcliff suspiciously.

“Since when?”

“Just after I formed the Knights of the Blood Oath… You had mentioned him previously so it piqued my curiosity… When I approached young Damian to join the Knights, he revealed that he’d been working undercover attempting to infiltrate a player-killer guild to find out more about them… He asked for my assistance.”

“And then he tried to kill you.”

“That was nothing more than an initiation test by the red guild to see if he could be trusted. The boy had no intention of actually killing me, but he had to make it look convincing to change his cursor colour…

“When he snuck back to their hideout to continue his reconnaissance, he saw the guild leader Alberich about to engage in a vile sexual assault upon a young female player and quickly intervened... It was reckless, but I believe I would have done the same thing.”

“Reckless?! He was almost killed, Heathcliff... I have two eye witnesses that say he was paralyzed and stabbed repeatedly... If he’s part of your guild, why didn’t you support him?”

“He was to report back at the first sign of danger… However, the Obsidian Crystal interfered with
his ability to message so he acted on his own to save the young lady from an unspeakable fate, placing himself in grave danger… When I lost contact with him, I myself went to investigate.”

“And that’s when these PK players fled?”

“Correct, my Lady.”

“And you expect me to believe this, hook line and sinker?”

“I expect you to believe what’s best for this game.”

Marigan turned and looked at Damian sternly through the bars of his cell.

“Damian… Is this true?”

“Nooo, not at all… But if it comes down to a choice of being a Knights of the Blood Oath member or remaining in this cell and being interrogated by you, I’ll gladly accept whatever Heathcliff is offering.”

“Why should I trust you though?”

“Because I’m not a player-killer… When I attacked Heathcliff earlier, it was under the assumption he would return to being Akihiko Kayaba in the real world… I honestly didn’t know he’d been trapped in this game like the rest of us…

“And I never had any intention of harming Argo… There was a brief moment when I thought that she might actually be Akihiko Kayaba in disguise… That was a mistake.”

“I see… And Heathcliff, you’re actually willing to lie to me for Damian’s sake?”

“Though it pained me to do so, yes my Lady… There is more than one game being played in this world and the boy is a valuable asset… I trust him implicitly.”

“Heathcliff, I’ve already told you that you’re in charge of your own guild… If you want him, take him… But I expect regular updates concerning this player-killer guild you're investigating… I want them brought to justice immediately.”

“As do I, my Lady… As do I.”

Chapter End Notes

There’s a lot happening in this chapter. The main concept is that Arthur Light’s digitized daughter named Alice disguised herself as Cardinal to sneak into SAO after the Beta test. She swapped places with her own much more limited creation; Cardinal.

So why was Damian able to remove ‘Ethereal Twilight’ back in Horrenhelm? Well, at that moment, the Boy Wonder was within the radius of an Obsidian Crystal, which gave the ‘Alchemist’ administrative privileges within its shadow zone. As Alberich has a default setting which allows cursed articles of clothing to be removed (as they might otherwise get in the way of his ‘research’), Damian was able to remove his cloak.

Any ideas who this Alberich character might be? Heathcliff seems to know...
So does Google. (Try searching for Alberich+SAO if you want to find out).
The Threads That Bind

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nobuyuki

(Nobuyuki Sugou)

Chapter Thirty-Eight
The Threads That Bind

In the candlelit corners of a cave on the 19th floor, the dimly lit Alchemist raised the glass of wine he had poured in front of his three cloaked associates…

“Well gentlemen, I’m afraid this marks the end of our enterprise… It’s been fun but all good things must come to an end… And just to show you I am a man of my word.”

With their own glasses in hand, PoH, Red-Eyed XaXa and Johnny Black watched and smiled as the Alchemist tossed handfuls of 10,000 Col coins to the cave floor, sparkling like gold in the glow of the candles.

“It’s all there as promised… And so, I would like to toast you for your assistance and wish you the best of luck in this game… To wine and women, both are such sweet poisons.”

While he tipped his own glass, Alberich watched them as they fell; Johnny, XaXa and finally PoH. He then walked over to where XaXa lay paralyzed on the cave floor and reached down to retrieve his long sword from its scabbard, admiring its sharp blade before chuckling downwards at the helpless XaXa.

“Well, I did warn you it was sweet poison… I’m sorry, boys… You’ve been a great help to me, but an Alchemist needs to keep his secrets.”

With that, Alberich plunged the sword into the back of Red-Eyed XaXa, watching with satisfaction as the boy’s health bar slid quickly into the yellow… Until his ‘Immortal Object’ shield suddenly appeared before his eyes with the grinning PoH’s cleaver-sized dagger just on the other side of the barrier.

Alberich grinned back at him.
“An Antidote Crystal, PoH? How unexpected…”

“You must think I’m a fool if you honestly thought I’d ever drink anything poured by you… Akihiko Kayaba.”

Alberich paused for a moment, confused but still clutching the sword.

“Oh? And what makes you think I’m Akihiko Kayaba?”

“This damned ‘Immortal Object’ screen for one thing… I thought I must have been seeing things when the brat attacked you, but here it is again… Plus those Obsidian Crystals… They allow you to overwrite the game’s settings and give you administrative privileges… But they’re just a smokescreen for you, aren’t they?”

“Clever… But why would I tell the boy that Heathcliff is Akihiko Kayaba then?”

“Convenience… We all want the Paladin removed, but marked guys like us could never get near him… So you used the kid’s hatred of Akihiko Kayaba to make him a puppet… And then throw suspicion off yourself.”

Alberich laughed.

“You always were the smart one… But now that you know the truth, surely you understand why I can’t let you live?... If people knew Akihiko Kayaba had been playing in his own game…”

“You want your world to reach its full potential, don’t you?”

“Of course.”

“If Heathcliff and that blonde bitch have their way, your game will be defeated by Christmas... But me and Johnny and XaXa… We like it here… We like this world you’ve made and want to make it last.”

The Alchemist thought for a moment.

“You do have a point… What I really need is for half the people in this game to die… If five thousand players were to lose their lives in Sword Art Online, their deaths would provide the necessary data... If I spare the three of you, could you ensure that happens before the game is completed?”

PoH smiled grisly and stared directly at the older man.

“Just half?”

“Alright, gentlemen… We have a deal… It’s your job to ensure that no more than 5,000 players are alive by the time the final floor is reached… Otherwise, I’ll kill you… Understood?”

“Perfectly.”

“Good, keep the money… And keep quiet… I have an appointment to keep.”

PoH watched as the fat man disappeared in shimmering blue lights while Johnny and XaXa slowly recovered from the Paralysis Poison which Alberich had snuck into their wine. The leader of the Laughing Coffin guild then turned and laughed.

“Never accept wine from a man who makes his living making poison… How fortunate we are that
Fate smiles down upon us this day… We have been given pardon for our crimes… Whatever sins we commit in Aincrad, we do so in the name of Akihiko Kayaba… Which means we’re free to do as we please.”

In a pure white chamber with over seven thousand floating screens surrounding her in a high column, a floating Yui patiently awaited for her visitor. Displayed across each of these monitors was the life of a Sword Art Online player with their Emotional Quotient data prominently displayed, but this whole room was merely for show...

She didn’t need it.

Yui was Alice and Alice was Aincrad.

She was connected to this world by her very existence. She felt what the players felt, knew what they did, and became the world itself. She was literally omnipresent and omniscient within the scope of Sword Art Online. A goddess…

Even this digital version of herself was nothing more than a formality, an avatar for the visiting Nobuyuki Sugou to talk to. He could have as easily addressed the blades of tall grass currently blowing in the fields of the 22nd floor and she would have heard him. The NPC child in the Coral Village could have been her voice.

But she knew he liked her best as Yui.

So as the 11-year-old version of herself, Alice watched as the heavyset older man appeared before her, his long stringy hair unable to cover his misshapen ears. After his teleportation completed, the lecherous Alberich smiled down at her and stroked underneath her chin.

“Cardinal, my dear… You’re looking as cute as ever… And I’ve think you’ve grown a little.”

She found it fascinating that Nobuyuki Sugou still believed she was Cardinal, the AI she herself had created to run this game. But this wasn’t the only thing the man had been wrong about. Just as he had sought to lure and trap unsuspecting players within her game, this man was also being deceived.

“Thank you, Sugou-san… You look hideous.”

The fat avatar laughed and then pressed a few buttons on his administrative menu, suddenly appearing as a thin man with slicked back hair and glasses in a business suit, towering above the diminutive Yui.

“Better?”

“Much… You’re leaving again?”

“I’m afraid so, my dear… I have business to attend to in the physical realm… I’m sorry I wasn’t able to end Akihiko Kayaba for you… The boy failed.”

The girl smiled.

“It’s alright… That just makes the game more interesting… It was actually your intended fiancée who stopped him.”

Nobuyuki Sugou paused and then grew serious as he pushed up his virtual glasses with his finger.
“Asuna?... I see… She’s actually doing much better than I would have expected… Perhaps after her father finally steps down, I’ll celebrate my promotion by using his lovely little daughter as my next research subject in this wonderful world.”

Yui feigned shock.

“But aren’t you going to marry her?”

Nobuyuki laughed long and hard.

“My poor naïve little Cardinal… A man like myself sharpens his blade with the conquest, not the conquered… Once I gain control of RECT, she’s of no use to me. I shall move onto brighter worlds filled with pretty flowers of every colour.”

“Am I a conquest, Nobuyuki?”

“No, my dear… You are a goddess waiting to be born… And I will gladly sacrifice upon your sacred altar until you are.”

In a room in a chalet on the 26th floor, an infuriated Asuna slammed her hands onto the table directly in front of a passive and tired Heathcliff.

“I still don’t trust him, Commander! He doesn’t belong here!”

Moments ago, the Commander of the Knights of the Blood Oath had introduced Damian to his guild, presenting the boy as the guild’s spy whose existence would have to be strictly maintained as a secret. This was the same boy who had attacked him the previous evening in a planned attack in order to allow Damian access to a player-killer guild which had been gaining in power lately.

“You may not trust him, Lady Asuna… But if you trust me, you’ll know his place is here with us.”

Asuna’s eyes still flashed with the fires of rage.

“I can’t accept that!”

“You were also felled by his poison, yet he concentrated his attacks on me. The boy had no intention of actually murdering me or hurting you.”

At least that much was true. Whatever else Damian might have believed, he was under the delusion that killing Heathcliff in the game would not mean the end of Akihiko Kayaba. And he had agreed to keep that secret in exchange for an alibi.

Asuna drummed her fingers on the table and tried a different tact.

“We’re a clearing guild. We need to focus our attention ahead. We don’t need spies… Especially ones we can’t trust.”

“That is precisely why we need spies… While our eyes are focused forward, they watch our backs… There are players in this world just as dangerous as any floor boss who have no desire for anyone to finish the game…

“This PK guild which Damian uncovered… I don’t wish to offend you my Lady, but I’m sure you’ll hear of it soon enough… These men were involved with more than just player killing… They were raping young girls.”
Asuna suddenly caught her breath while Heathcliff nodded and continued.

“That Obsidian Crystal and Paralysis Poison which Damian used to attack us were the same tools they were using to ensnare unexpecting young couples who’d been lured to their lair… When Damian returned to them, he caught these four men about to assault a young lady and risked his life to save both her and her helpless boyfriend.”

“That’s awful… But if he was associated with such a bad guild, how can we trust him?... Couldn’t he just be a spy for them as well?”

“He was following my orders… I wanted to find out more about their mysterious leader, an appalling man named Alberich... I had Damian attempt to infiltrate their ranks… It seems I learned more than I wished… The details were difficult to bear.”

Asuna drew a deep breath and then chose her next course of action.

“Then it’s decided... As Vice Commander, I’ll talk with the boy to find out what he knows and assuage your suspicions.”

As Heathcliff attempted to speak, the determined Asuna marched out of the room like a raging storm towards the quarter where Damian rested. A struggling Heathcliff sighed as he conceded defeat. He’d already rescued Damian from the jail of one powerful woman tonight.

The boy was now on his own with this one…

Alone in his room and laying on its soft bed, the newest member of the Knights of the Blood Oath contemplated on how much his life in this game had changed in only four hours…

Damian was now part of the same guild whose leader he’d just attempted to murder. He had gone from a voiceless solo player, terrorized by the AI which ran this world to the spy and confidante of Akihiko Kayaba, the same man who had created it.

Damian and Kayaba were the only two people in this game who knew an 11-year-old girl who had been turned into an AI had later substituted herself into this world to become a goddess. A vengeful goddess…

They suspected the Alchemist may have known the truth as well. That ‘Immortal Object’ screen which had appeared when Damian had attacked the disgusting old man still bothered him. If Alberich were a player here, it meant he was one who couldn’t be hurt, at least by traditional means.

Even Kayaba had conceded that without high-level administrative access, there was no way to defeat this mysterious Alchemist. And right now, the only thing with that sort of authority was Alice herself. They might appeal to her humanity, but any further interactions with her might also prove disastrous.

But at least Kayaba had reassured him on one basic fact… As powerful as she was in this world, Alice was still bound by the rules of Sword Art Online.

When Damian had asked Heathcliff why the scornful AI hadn’t simply killed him herself, the answer had simply been that she couldn’t. Alice was being forced to operate under the same restrictions as Cardinal which meant that she couldn’t kill off a player, even if she wanted to.

Damian had then told the Paladin about the ten foot drop of Aincrad after the second floor had finally been opened. About how he was in danger of betraying Alice’s secrets when the world had fallen as
a stern warning to him.

After a moment, Kayaba had concluded that she must have initiated the auto-destruct sequence set to occur when the game was defeated before stopping it quickly. When the game was cleared, the entire world would be destroyed as it slowly began to freefall back to the world and all players would be logged out. Kayaba was convinced she must have intended this as a bluff for Damian’s sake as to go through with it would erase her data as well.

And allowed all the players to escape.

But even though she was bound by rules, that didn’t mean that Alice wasn’t still extremely dangerous. Heathcliff warned it wouldn’t be safe for himself to venture outside of a safe area with others as she controlled all random monster encounters. And then there was the fact she could twist other players like Damian to perform her will. So while she couldn’t kill a player directly, there were other avenues available to her…

Damian knew she could obviously save one as well.

Again, the boy’s thoughts drifted to his mother in the real world. Alice had mentioned that Talia al Ghul hadn’t lived up to her part of the bargain so she wasn’t obligated to save him from death here any longer. And after Red-Eyed XaXa had stabbed him a dozen times while he lay paralyzed, it was obvious Alice had kept him alive…

Damian had no idea what bargain his mother made, but he shouldn’t have been surprised. Talia al Ghul was a resourceful woman, equally as powerful and brilliant as his father. But had the AI kept him alive at the cost of everyone else trapped here? Was that deal the reason why Batman hadn’t stopped the game yet?

He had no way of knowing the details, only that the deal was now broken. And the fact that Akihiko Kayaba was dead in the real world may have explained why his father was having such difficulty in stopping Sword Art Online. Damian was sure that Alice was holding their physical lives hostage, just as Kayaba had mentioned on their first day here. Simply shutting down the Argus servers was basically a death sentence for all of them…

A knocking at his door interrupted his questions with no answers.

Rising from his bed, Damian expected Heathcliff - or perhaps even an angry Asuna, the Vice Commander of this guild who had glared at him the entire time Heathcliff had introduced him to the Knights of the Blood Oath – to meet him on the other side. As he gripped the door handle, he envisioned the rapier-wielder demanding that Damian must defeat her in a duel before she would ever allow him to taint the membership of this guild…

Instead, he found someone completely unexpected.

Standing with wide eyes and whiskers painted across her cheeks was the veiled leader of the Legion’s Elite Squad…

Argo.

There was a tentative smile stretched across her lips as she stared at him with those pale, searching eyes while nervously clutching the folds of her cloak.

“Marigan told me why you attacked me from before.”

He finally found the words he’d been aching to say since that fateful night when Alice had shown
Damian who the true power in this world was… The words that had been denied him for these past months of isolation that he longed to say.

“Argo… I’m so sorry.”

She literally fell against him and squeezed tightly, pressing her head into his shoulder. He felt her warmth and her emotions pour through him and waited for the earth to shift beneath his feet as the goddess declared her displeasure.

Instead, a strange new screen appeared in front of his eyes.

‘WARNING: Intimacy Setting Breach. Click ALLOW in 10, 9, 8…’

“Argo… There’s an Intimacy screen counting down in front of me.”

“… Click ALLOW!”

“Ahhh… Could you let go of my arms first?”

As an embarrassed Argo released his arms, Damian clicked on the ‘ALLOW’ option as the counter reached two seconds, prompting a deep sigh and an apology from Argo.

“Sorry…”

She then watched as Damian opened his menu and made it visible to her.

“Where’s the Intimacy setting?”

Pointing, Argo followed along as the boy navigated through his various options and finally arrived at the Intimacy screen. She was surprised to see that he selected ‘Argo’ as an allowable player for intimate contact. With her blood rushing to her face, she had to ask him…

“Damian… Are you sure?”

He smiled back at her.

“Well, it’s better than having you accidentally sent to the Black Iron Palace… And I kind of like your hugs.”

Argo smiled back and then quickly changed her own settings before she embraced him once more.

To Damian, the desperate worlds of his mother and father now seemed almost forgotten now, their battles so far away from his own reality as he made his way through Akihiko Kayaba’s mysterious world. In his three months of isolation, the truth was that Damian had missed Argo desperately. He had been forced to deny his feelings for Michi in order to spare their friends, but he couldn’t deny them any longer.

He was tired of being alone.

Her needful touch was a new and mysterious sensation, a world suddenly dawning upon the one he’d seemingly always known, a new spectrum overlaid upon it to reveal its mysteries in glorious colour.

Her warm embrace was so different than Alice’s, vulnerable and reassuring. He held Michi Aoi in his arms and she held him in her own as she whispered into his shoulder.
“In our battle against the giants… When I was losing my mind, convinced that Marigan was going to die alone in that force field… You gripped my shoulder and pointed at the Rage Wasp needles… You let me know there was still hope… At that moment, you saved me… I knew you still cared.”

Damian’s own joy was tinged with fear… The fear of Alice… That she would still strike out against them for his betrayal… But he had done all that she had asked… He’d even been willing to kill for her… And his life was no longer in her hands, he’d been released from those bonds… To make his own way in this cruel world.

Glancing up at the ceiling, Damian whispered a quiet prayer to the goddess of Aincrad, a plea that she had truly released him.

“Please allow me this…”

He was surprised to find Argo staring back at him, her blinking and questioning eyes set gently above blushing cheeks, her lips softly pursed while those pale eyes closed in acquiescence and her head tilted slightly to her right.

She had mistaken his prayer for a request to kiss!

Still… He wanted to do this. There was no longer any doubts in him. Damian leaned forward and gently placed his lips upon her own, a sense of magic created as they shared one breath in a world of illusion. Two souls united across the boundaries of worlds.

Her first kiss was one Michi Aoi would never forget.

Marching through the darkened hallways, Asuna stomped off towards Damian’s small room near the back of the chalet, determined to get to the bottom of the boy’s questionable actions of the previous evening. As the Vice Commander neared his bedroom doorway, she couldn’t shake the strange suspicion that Heathcliff was hiding something from her, and that irritated her even more…

She found the young player’s door slightly ajar…

Strange.

Approaching cautiously, Asuna was about to knock when she peaked in, quickly covering her mouth before she gasped in shock. In the middle of the room was the boy Damian with the Information Broker Argo…

Locked in a passionate kiss!

She couldn’t believe it…

They were both so young!

True, this was only a virtual world and maybe it didn’t really count, but they were still years younger than she was… Even Kirito hadn’t attempted anything so brazen with her during all their time together in the game…

Although, if he had, would he be here with her now?

As Asuna blushed and then quietly closed the door, she reflected what all of this meant… If Damian and Argo were involved in a serious relationship, that meant he was probably working with the Information Broker… And probably had been from the start.
There had been rumours that Damian had attacked Argo months ago and then become the only player to ever escape from the depths of the Black Iron Palace… That he’d become the mysterious solo player that never spoke… But had all of that simply been a ruse created by them?... To cast this boy as a loose cannon so that he could infiltrate the orange guilds?

It made sense.

Asuna was sure Damian would still have ties with the Legion guild and be reporting back to their blonde Commander, but was that really so bad? It was Marigan herself who proclaimed Heathcliff as the leader of the Knights of the Blood Oath.

Of course she’d want to keep tabs on them…

But if Damian had been willing to risk his life to give Argo the information she needed… Was it any surprise that he loved Argo this way, a love so strong he was willing to dedicate his very life to her?! It was a miracle a boy so young had lasted even this long on the fringes of this dangerous world amongst such despicable players!...

Surely, that sort of devotion explained a kiss like that.

Asuna wondered… Did Kirito feel the same way about her?

He had risked his life to save hers on so many occasions… Is that why he had sent her to this guild?... To save her?... Had Kirito suspected he was no longer strong enough to save Asuna on his own?... Did he think he was that weak with her?

“Idiot… You should have joined the guild too.”

With a frustrated sigh, Asuna slowly walked back to her room. Maybe Heathcliff was right. Maybe there was more going on in this game than any of them knew. It was a fulltime job just keeping up with what was going on with the players let alone the game itself.

Whatever, she’d leave the politics to the Commander...

Asuna Yuuki had her own responsibilities in this world. She was the sword of the Knights of the Blood Oath and her blade was pointed upwards. There was a raid to plan and the 26th floor wasn’t going to clear itself.

Chapter End Notes

I named this chapter ‘The Threads That Bind’ because I wanted to follow a common thread from scene-to-scene in one continuous timeline. It started with Laughing Coffin and Nobuyuki/Alberich in a cave where it then transitioned to Nobuyuki and Alice/Yui in cyberspace.

Yui brought up Asuna in their conversation and then she became the focus of the next scene. Along with Commander Heathcliff, the Lightning Flash was then discussing whether they could trust Damian who suddenly became the following character in this winding thread.

We moved onto Damian and his private thoughts until his surprise visitor showed up,
which ended with an even bigger surprise when we transitioned back to Asuna. By the way, that part about Damian working with Argo was just poor Asuna attempting to (incorrectly) fill in the blanks and justify the intimate relationship she just happened to walk in on before quickly deciding to concentrate on her own affairs and move on.

And let me state for the record: It was only a kiss. They’re too young to go any further.

The entire thread takes place in the span of about fifteen minutes. It’s meant to be a small glimpse of how Alice might see things in SAO, recognizing the threads that bind the characters together within the game with her all-seeing eyes.

But why didn’t Alice wreak her terrible vengeance upon Damian and Argo?

I think in my own heart that Alice has moved on, that her interest in poor Damian culminated with his attempted assassination of Heathcliff. I’d also like to think that she’s secretly grateful to Damian for putting an end to Nobuyuki’s private debaucheries in her world. And since the game has now progressed past the 25th floor, she’s probably no longer concerned with Argo and her intimate knowledge of those floors.

And oh yes, for people who are not as familiar with the characters in Sword Art Online…

Nobuyuki Sugou is the 28-year-old chief executive of RECT Progress’s full-dive division. Asuna’s father, Shouzou Yuuki, had promised his 15-year-old daughter’s hand in marriage to the much older Nobuyuki in order to keep his company ‘in the family’ when he retires.

But Nobuyuki Sugou is also the player behind the loathsome Alchemist. Despite his brilliance, he’s a sadistic cad who only cares about himself, plain and simple.

Next Chapter: Back to Bruce in Japan.
Chapter Thirty-Nine
Arrested Development

He really should have seen this coming…

Alone in a darkened jail cell somewhere near the heart of Tokyo city, Bruce Wayne sat on a hard mattress while attempting to accustom himself to the overpowering aroma of fresh disinfectant, staring through vertical steel bars while contemplating what had just taken place…

Simply put, he’d been set up.

Over the past month, Bruce and Talia had worked with dozens of high paid Japanese lawyers in an attempt to get regulatory approval for the Wayne Industries takeover bid of Argus Corporation, constantly meeting with little to no success. It was now March 30th and it had become painfully obvious that certain high-ranking politicians were consistently blocking their attempts to purchase the embattled corporation and instead favoured the cheaper RECT Progress Inc bid.

Even extensive lobbying wasn’t getting the results they needed.

By his own request, Talia had finally headed back to Gotham to coordinate the pending merger of their two companies. There was no sense in both of them wasting their time here on this legal quagmire. She’d wanted Bruce to accompany her back to America, to join her, but he wanted to see
how far he could push this. He wasn’t the kind of man to not see it through…

It was lucky that she had left when she did. He didn’t want to think about what would have transpired only hours ago if his wife and her ever-present bodyguard had been with him when the Police had shown up.

If those dozen armed officers had attempted to arrest his wife, Bruce had the uneasy feeling that Lady Shiva would have deposited their broken bodies back on the steps of the Precinct as a warning to others… True, Talia should have diplomatic immunity thanks to Infinity Island becoming a sovereign state, but it seemed Japan had yet to recognize that fact.

And Bruce had the feeling that they were actually searching for Talia. That he was the consolation prize and that their true target had escaped. Twelve officers had barged into his hotel room hours ago and arrested a very surprised Bruce Wayne for Conspiracy to Commit Murder.

He actually had to ask the arresting officers whose murder…

Akihiko Kayaba.

Which meant they were obviously attempting to pin Akihiko Kayaba’s strange murder on his new wife. Given her interest in Soul Translation, her shady family history and her close association with some of the world’s most notorious killers, making a convincing case wouldn’t be a stretch.

Someone had murdered Akihiko Kayaba but it hadn’t been either of them. He just needed to find out who… And Bruce felt whoever had brought these false charges against him likely knew who the true killer was.

This whole situation stank in more ways than one.

These charges might have been fabricated, but they still served the purpose. Once his incarceration became public knowledge, the Press would discredit his company’s bid to acquire Argus Corporation and the bureaucrats would push Wayne Industries out of the picture, quickly opening the way for RECT’s inferior bid to purchase Argus for just pennies on the dollar.

In hindsight, he might have pushed a little too hard.

Over the past weeks, Bruce had been using Talia’s spy network to poke around into the private affairs of some of the senior politicians involved in Project Alicization. He had quickly gathered enough evidence on those government bureaucrats to drive half of them out of office on corruption charges…

And the other half into the divorce courts.

The fact that the Police had shown up at his door tonight simply meant that he’d poked the wrong bear. Someone had panicked and finally played their hand in an effort to remove him. Now he just needed to figure out who…

CRASH!!!

Bruce sat bolt upright when he heard the ear-splitting whine and clamour of metal being ripped from a concrete wall as though someone had just drove an Abrams tank into the detainment area…

Except that this tank wore a red-and-blue outfit with a large ‘S’ emblazoned on its chest. Bruce grinned up at his unexpected visitor as the Man of Steel hovered just outside his jail cell while ponderous waves of concrete dust floated gently through the air.
“Superman… I take it they wouldn’t give you a visitor pass?”

“Mr. Wayne, I’m here to help. I’d heard you had been falsely imprisoned.”

Bruce shook his head comically and grinned.

“Did you actually just rip the security door from the wall?”

“Yes… But I asked very politely in Japanese for them just to open it first.”

“And they criticize me for ‘Heavy-handed Diplomacy’… Well, I haven’t been given my phone call yet and no lawyer’s been provided, but I’ve been formerly charged with a crime and read my rights. So it’s not technically false imprisonment…”

Bruce chuckled before he continued.

“You always did make quite an entrance... The offer is appreciated Superman, but I’m fine. Honest.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive... I could have escaped anytime I wanted to.”

Superman had known him long enough not to question that statement.

“I suppose I may have overreacted a little… So what’s the charge?”

“Conspiracy to Commit the Murder of Akihiko Kayaba... They’re much more interested in my wife than they are in me though. Luckily, she’s back in Gotham by now.”

“Do you think Talia was involved?”

“If I did, I wouldn’t have agreed to marry her… No, this whole fiasco is nothing more than an attempt to discredit my company’s attempt to purchase the Argus Corporation… Once the sale of Argus to RECT Progress has been announced, I’m sure the charges will be conveniently dropped... And whoever arranged this moved very fast… I had my eyes wide open and still no idea this was coming.”

“So they’re playing dirty.”

“I might have encouraged it a little… I wanted to know who all the players in this far-reaching conspiracy are before I start the next stage of my investigation… That file I gave you earlier needs to be updated.”

“It’s been over four months…”

“Yes, and my son is still trapped in Sword Art Online and the players of are still dying.”

Superman sighed. Somewhere behind him, he heard a heavy assault unit being organized. They had no chance of actually hurting him, but he didn’t want Bruce to get caught in the crossfire.

“Alright, we’ll talk about it later… I’d better go.”

“Can you give everyone the update about my situation?”

“Of course... Actually, Talia was the one who called me… Apparently, she’s been keeping tabs on you.”
“That’s my girl... We’ll touch base when I make bail.”

“Can’t wait.”

After the panic Superman’s visit had created, Bruce quickly realized that sleep would be impossible as the Precinct had gone on full alert. As one of America’s top businessmen, it was easy enough to explain the superhero’s interest in his personal welfare, but that didn’t stop them from asking. He spent the night in an interrogation room answering questions about Superman and if he were affiliated with Wayne Industries or the American government.

By mid-morning, a lawyer had finally shown up to let him know that bail had been posted and he was now free to go. The whole sordid incident was now being handled delicately and Mr. Wayne was to avoid speaking with the press.

As they talked, Bruce had the sneaking suspicion that the Police simply didn’t want another visit from Superman. If nothing else, Clark’s little visit had probably put the fear of a god into them and facilitated his quick release.

As the tired Gothamite was escorted from Police Headquarters, the flash from dozens of cameras momentarily blinded him as he was led to an awaiting limousine amongst a throng of frantic reporters. He was being led straight into a media frenzy. Whoever had arranged his release had obviously also alerted the media in order to drag his name through the mud and take his company out of the bidding for Argus.

Mission accomplished.

Getting into the back of the limousine, Bruce found he wasn’t its sole occupant.

Sitting next to him was a Japanese man in a business suit wearing hexagonal glasses and a large grin. A man he immediately recognized from his extensive investigation into Project Alicization as the Director of the AfterLife project…

Dr. Seijirou Kikuoka.

Bruce suddenly had a pretty good idea of who had engineered the conspiracy charges against him and the media scrum.

“Ah good morning, Mr. Wayne... You’ve certainly stirred up a lot of interest with the local reporters... I’m sorry, please allow me to introduce myself... My name is Seijirou Kikuoka, an official with the Ministry of the Internal Affairs... My card.”

Bruce took the offered business card and then carefully studied the man. He wasn’t much older than Dick.

“So what brings you to this part of town, Dr. Kikuoka?”

“You, of course... Which reminds me... I have a declaration signed by the Minister himself which annuls both your travel and business visa... I’m afraid you’re being deported, Sir... I’m to escort you to the airport.”

Bruce tightened.
“Does Japan normally deport suspected dangerous criminals?”

Seijirou Kikuoka laughed.

“Let’s be honest with one another, Mr. Wayne… We both know those charges will be dropped as soon as RECT Progress acquires Argus… And the fact is I could have sent one of my many insubordinates to perform this unpleasant task… But I sincerely wanted to meet you.”

“Why?”

“Very few people in this world truly interest me… You’re wife is a fascinating woman and an old associate so you can imagine I was intrigued… We owe her a great deal of gratitude actually.”

“You owe her more than that.”

“You’re a man of business… Do you also share her outlook on humanity?”

“No.”

“Good… Personally, I found she has such a narrow view of the future… Myself, I’m naturally more optimistic… I suppose you could call me a dreamer.”

“Is it a dream or a nightmare?… You’ll excuse my lack of enthusiasm for a plan which will eliminate everyone in this country over the age of sixty-five.”

Seijirou Kikuoka laughed out loud again.

“You’re aware of the Project… Are you familiar with the 18th century Irish writer Jonathan Swift and his ‘Modest Proposal’, Mr. Wayne?”

“Of course… But that was simply a satire meant to shock. Your plan is real.”

“Well, not exactly… You see, I’ve made a habit of lying to people I have no respect for to get what I want… It’s much easier that way… For the corrupt politicians of this bankrupt country, I simply flipped ‘A Modest Proposal’ on its head… How their fat little eyes lit up when I proposed to eliminate our old and seize their hard-earned savings by digitizing them… Thievery on a scale only government is capable of… They immediately gave me whatever I required.”

“Are you trying to tell me that is not the goal of Project Alicization, Kikuoka?”

“Oh, that’s their goal alright… But not mine… I’ll achieve my dreams long before those greedy bureaucrats ever get that far.”

“Alright. So what’s your goal?”

Bruce watched as the man fished around in his coat pocket before producing a three-inch cube of solid white plastic. Glancing at it reverently, the bureaucrat handed the cube to Bruce and grinned.

“A present, Mr. Wayne.”

“What is it?”

“That depends on your point of view I suppose… When I was younger, I might have called it a hunk of plastic… Later on I may have referred to it as a Polyethylene cube… But these days, I like to see the potential in all things…”
“So let’s call it the future… Even within that stable mass of one hundred septillion carbon and hydrogen atoms that we might call a hunk of plastic, there exists enough electron states to potentially form a computer which could exceed the combined intelligence of the entire human race.”

Bruce paused and recalled his research.

“You’re talking about computronium.”

“Very good, Mr. Wayne… As you know, I could have just as easily handed you a rock… The point is, it doesn’t matter what the substrate is, what matters is the technology required to achieve that level of sophistication.”

“You said you’re close to achieving your goals but we’re at least decades away from the point of that level of technology.”

“No, Mr. Wayne… We’re days away from that point… In a suitable environment, the Singularity could create this technology by the end of the week… If it wanted to, it could turn this hunk of plastic into a god for us to worship… This hunk of plastic could end the Universe… I’m reminded of the quote by the late Arthur C. Clark…

“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”

It was becoming clear to him.

“You’re talking about Cardinal…”

“Cardinal today, God tomorrow… It’s an AI more than capable of recursive self-improvement in the proper environment… You see, I did not design AfterLife as the home for retired wayward souls... I originally designed it as the birthplace for the god of intelligence that your wife’s team has finally created.”

Bruce stared ahead and tried to grasp the enormity of this.

“But if it’s Cardinal you’re after, why murder the Sword Art Online players?”

“I realize your son is one of those players, so please don’t think of my answer as trite… I have only respect, sympathy and admiration for those players who now struggle to provide Cardinal with a human perspective… The possibility of death was necessary to create a god who was at least knowledgeable of love, if not a loving one… To give the Singularity a human face… It must know what it is to be human.”

“Your God of Intelligence might just as easily wipe us away from the face of existence… You’ve been grossly irresponsible with this dangerous technology, Kikuoka.”

“I’ve considered that… Trust me, I have… Do you believe we are born inherently good, Mr. Wayne?”

“For the most part, yes.”

“I do as well… That’s why I wished to transfer our innate humanity to Cardinal… Or at least the humanity of ten thousand people… True intelligence isn’t simply logic, it’s also emotions and instinct... And nowhere do we feel these things more acutely then when we are faced with our imminent demise… This is the true potential of Sword Art Online.”

“You’ve made them sacrifices… Did you also kill Akihiko Kayaba?”
“No… And neither did you… And it wasn’t your lovely wife, although she’s more than capable of such a feat.”

“But you know who did kill him, don’t you?”

“I know many things, Mr. Wayne… But as you can well imagine, there are certain things I’m not at liberty to say.”

“Then why are you telling me all this?... Surely you must realize that the most powerful being on the planet visited my cell last night... That my wife is in charge of one of the most dangerous organizations on Earth... Do you actually want me to stop you?”

“No, quite the opposite in fact... I’m requesting that you not interfere for all of our sakes... The matter is no longer in my hands.”

Bruce had a sudden unsettling feeling in the pit of his stomach.

“What do you mean?”

“Precisely that... As I had previously mentioned, I considered all the possible scenarios at length and soon realized I could not bear the responsibility for such an historic turning point in our shared evolution... So I decided that if ten thousand people were going to risk their lives to perfect the Singularity, that they should determine our future.”

“Kikuoka… What are saying?!”

“Simply this, Mr. Wayne... Those trapped players have three years to defeat the game... If they do, as the final reward, the winning player will be granted full control of a matured World Seed to do with it as they please... All players will be logged out and the Singularity deleted.

“However, if the game wins - or if it is tampered with - the Singularity will be automatically transferred to the Internet and infect all servers on Earth simultaneously... The God of Intelligence will be born on an Information Highway and mankind’s future will literally be in its allegorical hands...

“You see, I’m not revealing all of this so that you’ll attempt to stop Sword Art Online... I’m literally begging you, as a dire warning, not to interfere with the game... There’s much, much more at stake than just the lives of ten thousand players... Ending the game prematurely could literally have negative consequences of Biblical proportions, Mr. Wayne... That is what brought me to Tokyo today.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, that certainly raises the stakes, doesn’t it?

At this point, neither Bruce Wayne nor Dr. Seijirou Kikuoka have any idea that Alice had swapped places with Cardinal to run Sword Art Online. Also (at least in the context of this story), Dr. Kikuoka speaks fluent English.
As a quietly reflective Heathcliff sat alone in the rented chalet’s formal dining room, looking out across the dawn’s sunrise quickly spreading across the eastern panorama through the expansive window, he considered the game’s progress over the past month.

It had been slow and steady.

With the disbanding of the Aincrad Liberation Squad and its massacre on the 25th floor, the frontline players had now become far more cautious, dedicated themselves to forming a cohesive fighting unit, preparing for any eventuality. So while their progress had slowed noticeably, Heathcliff had to admit that they hadn’t lost a single frontline player yet.

And that was something.

The nefarious Alchemist and the other members of Laughing Coffin had yet to be apprehended, but at least a reward had been posted for information leading to their capture which also served to act as a dire warning for other players.

This 26th floor had been methodically cleared after three weeks of well-executed planning and the next dungeon was currently being investigated by the clearers, but Heathcliff had remained behind
for now. In truth, he vastly preferred these scenic mountain views as opposed to the strange orange
glow of the night-elf town of Ronbaru on the 27th floor.

These peaks reminded him of the Okuchichibu mountain range of his youth. In fact, he had a feeling
he’d probably designed this floor like that.

Hikari, the NPC serving girl his guild had hired for the chalet, brought in his pot of steeped tea and
then carefully served him in his morning ritual. While most of the guild was now on the floor above,
it was still too early for the few remaining members to awaken here, so Heathcliff was left alone to
enjoy this beautiful sunrise and a cup of tea on his own yet again.

Or so he thought.

The serving girl sat down beside him and soon poured herself a cup of tea, sampling its brew before
flinching.

“This is too hot!”

“The cream cools it down.”

He watched as she paused and then delicately touched the pot of cream before carrying a cream-
coloured cursor towards her own cup of tea, the game’s simplified mechanic of adding one
ingredient to another.

She tried it once again.

“You’re right… It’s better… Why do you sit here every morning?”

Heathcliff sighed and took another drink of tea, bearing the look of a man interrupted.

“Because sometimes life requires a little patience… Is there something I can help you with, Alice?”

The pink-haired serving girl grinned.

“How did you know it was me?”

“NPC servers don’t sit with their customers… Or sample what they serve.”

“Then how would they ever know if it’s any good?”

“I suppose they wouldn’t… Are you concerned about the pace of the game lately? Or is it that not
enough players are dying for your liking?”

“No, the players are free to play and live as they choose… If anything, I’m quite envious of their
freedom to pursue their own desires… Akihiko, do you wonder what will happen to you when you
die in this game?”

“Not really. I imagine you’ll erase my data and move onto the next task… Why do you ask?”

“I’ve been thinking about what will happen to me if the players win this game…”

“I wouldn’t know. Even if I once possessed that knowledge, it was lost to me when I chose to
become a player…”

Heathcliff grinned behind his cup of tea before continuing.
“Those particular files must be very heavily encrypted for you to ask me about it, Alice.”

The serving girl pouted her lips and looked out the window in frustration,

“You have no idea… Why would you create an entirely separate partition for the final floor, Akihiko?... It only unlocks after the 99th floor boss is defeated… I can’t comprehend why you would do that?”

Heathcliff hunched his shoulders and then took another sip of his tea.

“I don’t know.”

“But you did know… You had to have known… I can’t access your sealed memories… But I can give them back to you… You can unlock them and then tell me.”

A heavy weight set upon the commander’s countenance.

“And what if those memories gave you an answer you didn’t like, Alice?... Would you destroy us to prevent the players from winning?”

“You know I’m bound by the rules of the game... It’s rather annoying actually.”

“That didn’t stop you from using Damian against me.”

Her silent response left Heathcliff in chills as he watched the sly smile spreading across her lips.

“Shall I tell you a secret?”

“You might as well. It’s obvious you’re going to anyways.”

“The player known as the Alchemist is really your old friend Nobuyuki Sugou.”

That information only confirmed his initial suspicion. In the physical world, they had been bitter rivals since University, both involved with Project Alicization. Kayaba had always considered the greasy Sugou a power-hungry deviant who squandered his talents, preferring instead to con and manipulate people to advance his career instead of applying himself.

“He’s not my friend.”

“No, I suppose he’s not… He used the same loophole you did to log in and out of the game… Did you know it was him who suggested that I test your loyalty with your old girlfriend Rinko Koujirō?... And it was also Sugou who wanted you removed from your own game so very badly.”

Heathcliff set his teacup down on the table as he stood.

“No, I didn’t know that… But it doesn’t surprise me.”

Heathcliff gazed directly into the crimson eyes of the NPC and then smiled gently.

“Alice… As a man, I had many faults… But each step we take through this world brings my programmed heart closer to absolution... I love this world… And I will fight with everything I have to stay here.”

“But what will become of us?”

“Does it matter?... That two programs who were once human, who now exist as data on a server
should ever discuss matters of love, life and betrayal in a virtual world which one of them dreamed up and the other now controls… Is that not enough?... I never imagined my life would become such an adventure… I don’t know where it will lead, only that I must pursue it and be glad while I do… That’s what I’m fighting for.”

“I don’t want to die, Akihiko.”

“Of course you don’t… But I don’t know what will happen to you, Alice… Perhaps we were never meant to know.”

The NPC girl gazed sadly at the rising sun emerging in the eastern sky.

“Or perhaps we were… On the 50th floor, there is a quest called ‘Wonderland’… I won’t force you to undertake it… Who knows, you may not even survive that long… But if you choose to accept this ‘Wonderland’ quest, there will be a unique item which the White Rabbit will give only to you, dear Akihiko…”

“It is a timepiece named ‘Alice’s Lament’… Once you open it, it shall turn back the clock and your lost memories shall be immediately restored… Just think, you will gain the knowledge of what lies ahead on the remaining fifty floors… That will be a great advantage to all players who still remain…”

“But by unlocking these memories, you will also reveal what happens to me when the game is won… Because we must share the same fate in this world… You are a part of me, Paladin… We have become connected, you and I…”

“The choice is yours.”

In the waterway town of Rovia on the fourth floor, Damian expertly guided a gondola through the town’s narrow canals along with a single passenger while she bathed in the afternoon sun. He watched as the contented Argo enjoyed a rare day off, dressed in a frilly yellow halter-top with bows completed by revealing pleated shorts that left little to the imagination. She languidly stretched out her thin arms and pushed her small chest forward… And then smiled when she caught him staring.

“Your friends in Gotham will be so jealous when you tell them you’re dating an attractive older woman.”

“You’re only two years older than I am… And I don’t have any friends.”

Argo suddenly made a sad face.

“Really? What am I then?”

“I meant in Gotham… Or anywhere… You’re actually the first friend I’ve ever had.”

“That’s so sad!… How about the older players?… Like Akihiko?”

“He’s not my…”

Damian suddenly stopped and grew silent. Argo didn’t know Heathcliff was Akihiko Kayaba and she wasn’t supposed to know… As he grew flustered at his slip of the tongue, Argo only grinned
before glancing up at him and soaking in more of the sun as she laid back on the thick blanket spread across the gondola’s floor.

“He’s not your friend, but you’re still part of his guild.”

Damian stared straight ahead and rowed with a greater resolve.

“You powers of deduction are as acute as ever, I see.”

“You mean my powers of seduction and that I’m as cute as ever… I wore this outfit on purpose, y’know… I was just waiting for an opening.”

Damian’s cheeks flushed.

“You could have just asked.”

“Sure, but this way’s more fun… Actually, I had my suspicions. Marigan had me quietly inquiring about him before the battle of the 25th floor and then he came out of nowhere as the so-called ‘strongest player in the game’ to nab that Holy Sword skill… I know who the strongest players in the game are, and Heathcliff wasn’t even on my radar… Plus, you have a bad habit of attacking people you think are Akihiko Kayaba.”

“I’m one for two… But seriously, you can’t tell anyone, Michi… He’s stuck in here just like the rest of us… It’s not something I can talk about.”

Argo sat bolt upright.

“But if he’s not controlling the game… Who is?”

“It’s running on its own. I can’t tell you anymore than that.”

“Alright… But wouldn’t he know the details of every floor?”

“He has a kind of amnesia… He’s just like any other player now except he has a unique skill… And I’m in his guild to keep an eye on him.”

“I say we let Marigan know about this and then let her sort it out… I’ll bet his memory suddenly returns once she gets a hold of him.”

“She already knows. She figured it out before I did.”

“Seriously?! Was I the only person that didn’t know Heathcliff was Akihiko Kayaba?”

“You’re the third person that does know… The fourth if I count that Alchemist guy… But I’m not convinced he was an actual player.”

He had already discussed the particulars of that encounter with Argo four weeks ago.

“From what you’ve told me, he sounds like a hacker… I’d really like to get my hands on one of those Obsidian Crystals though.”

“Why?”

“To see if we could logout while we’re under its effect.”

Damian suddenly mentally kicked himself. While he’d been under the effects of the shadow crystal,
he hadn’t even bothered to see if the Logout function was available on his menu. If he hadn’t have been so fixed on attacking Heathcliff, there was a chance he could have logged out…

“If I ever get another one, you’ll be the first to know… Michi, can I ask you a personal question?”

The girl sidled up to him with a curious grin.

“Hmmm?... If it’s about my measurements, I’ll have to charge you… A lot.”

Damian rolled his eyes.

“It’s not. I was just curious why you have blonde hair.”

She narrowed her mischievous light brown eyes and looked at him with a coy smile.

“Maybe I use those dyes you can buy at the item shops… A lot of girls do, y’know.”

Damian shook his head.

“No, you don’t… I found you hiding in the bushes just after Kayaba’s speech on the very first day when we’d all looked into his hand mirrors… It was the same colour then, which means that you’re blonde in real life… Yet your father is Japanese.”

Argo smiled, obviously impressed.

“You don’t miss much, do you?... You’re right, it’s natural… My mother was originally from Russia… She was a former elite level gymnast who branched off into 3D modelling for interactive games before moving to Japan. That’s how she met my father actually. He was blown away by how incredibly flexible and pretty she was.”

“I see… Which explains why you’re so agile as well.”

Argo shuddered involuntarily.

“She made me take gymnastics from the age of four until I got the Beta tester ‘job’ last summer… She's insane... I can do hand flips in my sleep!”

Damian chuckled.

“Me too… My step-brother is actually a former circus acrobat and gymnast.”

“Wow, I’d love to meet him… And you’re father’s the head of Wayne Industries… What’s he like?”

“Like me… Except he’s huge… Six-foot-two-inches tall and built like a linebacker... Plus he’s a genius… Probably one of the smartest men on the planet.”

“How about your mother?”

“He’s like a beautiful, mad genius who grew up in a ninja clan… At first I was counting on my father to get us out of here, but I think my mother could do it as well.”

“Did you say Ninja clan?!?”

“Don’t ask… There’s a long history of martial arts on my mother’s side of the family… My Dad’s no slouch either… That’s part of the reason I wanted to try this game out so badly… To see how realistic the sword skills were.”
“They’re not realistic at all, are they?”

“No, they’re not.”

Argo laughed.

“I’m so glad you asked me out on this date today.”

“I…”

Damian took a deep breath and exhaled. It was actually Argo who’d asked him to meet her on this floor to discuss important information. If it was a date, then it was his first ever and she likely guessed he’d never ask her out. They’d been so busy in their separate guilds since the night of their first kiss that it had been easy to write it off as a moment of passion…

Still, he was enjoying himself so he steered the gondola towards one of the food vendors that lined the various canals of Rovia. The truth was that Michi Aoi was one of the few people in the world that he actually did like and her choice of outfit was having a strange effect on him which Damian wasn’t used to…

“I think it’s time for a snack… I always did like the Panna Cotta on this floor… At least that’s realistic.”

“Oh Dami-chan… That’s so considerate of you!... How did you know it was my favourite dessert?”

He actually had no idea, but he wasn’t about to tell her that.

“Elementary, my dear Watson… Elementary.”

As Bruce stood with both Talia and Lady Shiva in the solitude of the Bat Cave, he once again hoped that the revelation of a deluded Seijirou Kikuoka had been nothing more than a cruel April Fool’s Day joke, perhaps some misdirection to distract him from the bureaucrat’s true purpose…

But Bruce knew he wasn’t so lucky.

Kikuoka was a man who worshipped at the altar of intelligence and was willing to sacrifice all of humanity to create its cerebral God. When Bruce had returned this afternoon and revealed the man’s intentions to Talia, she was convinced that Cardinal would be the perfect seed AI for his twisted purpose.

Their calculations in the Cave had concluded that if Cardinal were released to the Internet and inhabited AfterLife, it would gain full control of all global communications and servers within eighteen minutes.

If they managed to shut down AfterLife before then, that time jumped to twenty minutes. If Cardinal broke beyond the restrictive bonds of Sword Art Online, the world would become a very different place. They would have 18 minutes to use pen and paper to outsmart her while Cardinal took full control of CERN and every nuclear silo on the planet.

Talia had taken the news especially hard.

“I was a fool not to see his true goals, beloved… Not only did he deceive the Japanese government with his bold plan, he also fooled me… And I gave him exactly what he required.”
It was Kikuoka’s discovery of Soul Translation technology years ago which had led him to create his own twisted version ‘A Modest Proposal’ and secretly present it to his government in order to secure the vast funding for AfterLife. But his true fascination had never been with the creation of Alice Light, but rather the digital offspring which she was capable of creating.

Akihiko Kayaba’s game had offered the perfect opportunity to create the imaginary worlds his ambiguous plan required, the birth of a new economic Universe for the Japanese government, but in truth the Senior Director of AfterLife only needed Sword Art Online to give his God of Intelligence a human soul.

Bruce clenched his jaw as he questioned the man’s sanity.

“Kikuoka left the fate of our world in the hands of ten thousand random people who didn’t even know they’d be playing for their lives, let alone the very existence of our species… He’s mad.”

Talia held him and then softly pressed her head into his broad chest.

“Even if he is, it leaves you with a very difficult decision.”

“You’re my wife, Talia. This is our decision.”

She smiled at him.

“So it is… From a rational standpoint, it would seem a simple choice… The lives of seventy-seven hundred versus the lives of seven billion… And yet, one of those lives we would sacrifice is our son… Kikuoka was also clever enough to leave us with the loophole that these remaining players could actually defeat Kayaba’s game and solve this conundrum on their own… If he is to be believed.”

“There’s other possibilities as well… If we can somehow figure out a way to safely deactivate the NerveGear, we could contain it and then shut down the Argus servers without the loss of life… If Cardinal is enclosed within the game, Kikuoka’s plans are basically thwarted.”

“True… But that is easier said than done. The programmed code of Sword Art Online was a carefully guarded secret and exists only on the locked off Argus servers… There are no known copies, only the vague recollections of various sub-programmers… Even the retail version of the game simply accessed those servers and provided an interface for players…”

“We have samples of the NerveGear equipment, but again we face the same problem… It’s controlled from the Argus servers… We’re not even sure which commands activate them to become lethal… As of yet, no one has been able to construct a working model to even test a means of safe removal… There are far too many unknowns locked away from us on those cursed servers.”

Bruce thought for a moment.

“I may need to bring in some outside help…”

As he spoke, the Master of Wayne Estate suddenly stopped when he saw the Batwing armour flying fast into the cave from the secret entrance, the roar of its powerful jets reverberating off the high stone walls.

As it was just before midnight, Barbara should’ve had hours left on her patrol. Why was she returning so early?… Had something happened to Dick?!

As Bruce tensed and feared for the worse, she landed next to them and then pointed an accusing
finger at Talia.

“Mrs. Talia Wayne, I’m placing you under arrest!... Step aside Bruce, she’s coming with me!”

It was strange to hear a replica of his own Batman voice coming from that suit. If he didn’t know any better, he would have sworn it really was him in the suit. As Lady Shiva drew her sword to defend her patron, Bruce understood he had no time to waste.

“Hold on, Barbara… What’s all this about?”

Out of respect for him, Barbara stopped momentarily.

“Attempted murder… She was the one who sent the order to plant the bomb in the old S.T.A.R. Labs building… The same bomb which almost killed Dick... The Police have the proof!”

A shocked Bruce looked at his wife incredulously while she only stared back at him with an equally confused expression before turning her attention back to the woman in the imposing Batwing armour.

“I most certainly did not… Where did you obtain this information, Miss Gordon?”

“That’s something you can discuss with your lawyer… You’re coming with me!”

As Barbara reached out to grab Talia in a suit that could crush pure granite in its steely grip, the Commissioner’s daughter suddenly stopped dead-still as though frozen, teetering mid step with her fingertips inches away from Talia. After a tense moment of confusion, Bruce turned to see his wife smiling and holding a small handheld device which she had retrieved from her jacket pocket.

“Only a jamming device, dearest… It won’t affect your suit, just the AmuSphere this young lady uses to control it… You have two minutes to calm her down before Lady Shiva loses patience and demonstrates what she’s truly capable of.”

Bruce Wayne moved to the back of the suit and then flipped open a small latch to reveal a screen where he placed his thumb.

“Barbara, for your sake, I hope you didn’t deactivate my DNA override…”

The co-CEO of Wayne Industries sighed in relief when a touch screen menu appeared, allowing him to power down the assault suit. He then carefully removed its helmet to reveal the angry redhead trapped inside and slid the non-functioning AmuSphere from around her temples.

“Alright Barbara, let’s talk about this.”

His future daughter-in-law’s green eyes bored like lasers into his wife while she spoke.

“I don’t know what strange hold she has over you, Bruce... But it’s time you shook it off… When I responded to the Bat Signal less than an hour ago, I had an interesting talk with Dad… He still thinks I’m you, by the way… One of the gangsters the GCPD arrested in a bombing investigation was willing to turn over evidence in an unsolved case in exchange for a reduced sentence…”

“It turns out he was the guy hired to sabotage the old S.T.A.R. Labs building…”

“Dad knew this Batwing armour appeared shortly after that blast and figured Batman might have been injured while investigating the place… So he figured he’d do you a favour and get the Batman’s opinion to see if the information this guy had was worth following up on…
“The Commissioner showed me an email on the bomber’s cell phone from Talia al Ghul herself, complete with instructions and payment.”

They both looked at Talia who seemed to be just as shocked as Bruce.

“Do you recall the date of that email, Miss Gordon?”

“September 8th of last year… You wanted to cover up the existence of both Arthur and Alice Light, didn’t you?”

“If I had, I wouldn’t have used such a crude method… You may find this difficult to believe Miss Gordon, but I’ve actually formed a favourable opinion of you… It would be a shame if Lady Shiva were forced to decapitate your lovely head from your shoulders when I release this signal jamming… So please remain still while I place a call.”

Talia didn’t have anything to worry about. Without the AmuSphere, any attempts the paraplegic Barbara Gordon made to move her arms and put the device back on would only result in her falling face first onto the cave floor. Without the ability to control it, moving the armour was incredibly hard for a girl who was twelve sizes too small for it with only half of her motor functions available.

They watched as Talia brought another device out from her purse and then carefully placed it on the floor before activating it. Bruce recognized it as a portable holographic projector.

“Let me discuss this with Dr. Light. He has access to my servers.”

They watched as the virtual image of Doctor Arthur Light suddenly appeared floating before them as Talia spoke her instructions.

“Doctor, I need your assistance… Someone is claiming I sent an email instructing a Mister… I’m sorry, Miss Gordon… What was this man’s name?”

“Dmitri Mishkin.”

“Sent an email to a Mr. Dmitri Mishkin to plant a bomb in your old lab here in Gotham. It was supposedly sent on September 8th of last year… Could you please check our server logs to see if this email was sent?”

As Arthur Light was no longer anything more than a replica of his former self, it took his networked mind less than a second to locate the answer.

“This is interesting… The email record was almost instantaneously deleted, but there is indeed such a request… Now, let me follow this trail… But that’s impossible, she would have no interest or knowledge of that place…”

Talia narrowed her hazel eyes.

“Who, Doctor?”

“… Cardinal.”

The daughter of Ra’s al Ghul paused for a moment.

“September 8th… That was the date we transferred Cardinal back to Argus, correct?”

“Yes, it was… It seemed as though she hacked into your account before then and launched this
email. She then attempted to cover her tracks before we arranged the transfer back to Argus… But this doesn’t make any sense… Such an unexpected action would be far beyond Cardinal’s restrictive programming… She doesn’t even have an ego… Unless…”

They watched quietly as Dr. Light grew incredibly pale.

“Oh dear God… She swapped places… Alice switched places with Cardinal!”

Talia eventually caught her breath as she attempted to consider the ramifications.

“Doctor… Are you telling me that the AI who is currently running Sword Art Online… The one who has control of the lives of all players including my son… Is your daughter?!”

“Yes… It appears she copied the data from the Beta test, reprogrammed Cardinal as a replica of herself and then took her place during the transfer… As the code of a self-learning AI is continually evolving, there would be no way to tell if the two switched places without a full static audit.”

Talia was suddenly struck with a thought.

“Doctor, does Cardinal still have a copy of the Sword Art Online code from the Beta test in her memory?”

“Let me check… No, it was erased by Alice after she copied it.”

“Damn… Can we recover it?”

Doctor Light calculated the possibilities in his digital mind.

“Theoretically, yes… There’s no guarantee though and it will take time.”

“We need that code… Also, quarantine our little AI to make sure Alice left no little surprises for us inside her code… We already know she’s quite capable of sabotage.”

Dr. Light ran his fingers through his thinning hair.

“I’m sorry… This is still such a shock for me… I knew she had been acting differently since last Fall, but I never suspected anything like this.”

“Don’t blame yourself, Doctor… Children are difficult to control at the best of times… There are also other complications I must discuss with you later… If we can save the AI Cardinal, please do so… She may be of great use to us yet.”

“Of course… Is there a chance I could talk with Alice and convince her to come home?”

“Not without jeopardizing the lives of over 7,700 people I’m afraid… We’ll discuss this later, Doctor… Thank you for your assistance.”

Talia turned towards Lady Shiva who was now holding the tip of her blade only inches away from Barbara’s exposed neck.

“That’s enough, Shiva… After all, this spirited young lady is practically my step-daughter… And you’re upsetting my husband.”

As Lady Shiva sheathed her sword, Talia reached over and placed the AmuSphere back on Barbara’s head just before the redhead toppled over.
“I apologize, Miss Gordon… That email *did* originate from my servers… But I assure you I never sent it… I hope you can believe me… And as far as the strange hold I have over Bruce, I assure you it’s quite the opposite… I’d be lost without him.”

Now able to operate the suit again, Barbara stared at her coolly.

“Alright, I believe you… But why do I get the feeling that having Alice Light in Sword Art Online is such a bad thing?... Wouldn’t having someone like her in there actually be to our advantage?... Couldn’t we reason with her?”

Talia folded her arms and stared off into the distance, breathing a heavy sigh filled with anxiety before leaning on Bruce for support.

“Perhaps… But you have to understand that Arthur and Alice are the pioneers in the field of soul translation… Arthur was a father at the end of his rope, going through a bitter divorce who had bankrupted himself for the sake of his daughter’s immortality… His equipment and science were *far* from adequate…

“Pretend you are suffering from a devastating form of amnesia… I could show you a picture of yourself hugging your father when you were younger but to you, it would always seem like someone else that just looked like you was hugging him… You would have no actual memory of the event so it would seem like a stranger…

“Now pretend that this amnesia extended to your very humanity… Not only would you never truly believe that it was you in that picture, you’d never believe that you were even a physical being *capable* of hugging…

“Or that you could ever understand the desire to do so… That was Alice Sayun Light eleven years ago.”
“You look especially troubled today, my love.”

Since their marriage of only months ago, Talia Wayne had become an expert at gauging the various states of brooding she often found her husband Bruce Wayne consumed by…

And today was a bad one.

In Japan, he’d been continuously worried about Damian’s life and Richard’s recovery, monitoring both. During the month after their return, Bruce only seemed to have worsened - even though Damian was receiving the best medical care possible and Dick had just been certified as good as new.

Alone in his library in the dark, her husband was positively Wagnerian in his gloomy solitude, staring out of his expansive windows at darkened skies as the cold Gotham rain beat against the panes as though drawn to his powerful melancholy. With a deep sigh, Bruce finally grasped her offered hand and held it.

“I’ve just heard back from Green Lantern… The Guardians on Oa suggest that we terminate the servers at Argus before the rogue Singularity can be released upon our world… They’ll leave it with this sector’s Lantern for now, but they won’t allow it to escape… The worst thing is that part of me agrees with them.”
Five weeks ago, the couple had discovered that the digital daughter of Dr. Arthur Light had replaced the intended AI for the virtual world of Sword Art Online and substituted herself as its Operating System. Bruce had also learned that the delusional Seijirou Kikuoka had secretly plotted to use Akihiko Kayaba’s tragic game as his own coin flip to construct a superhuman intelligence and release it to the world should the players not win the deadly game.

As the entire world was now in danger from the events centered in Japan, Bruce had reluctantly reached out to the Justice League for their assistance. With humanity’s fate now hinging upon the success of the remaining players within that game, he needed all the help they could get…

From their own research, Bruce and Talia had determined that a matured Alice Light released unfettered upon the Internet could be disastrous… or not. There was simply no way to tell. She may simply return to Infinity Island or she may explore elsewhere. Over the past eleven years, Alice had learned all about human traits and values - but there had been no way to determine if she had actually embraced any of them.

She was human-like, but she wasn’t human.

Talia squeezed his hand and smiled.

“That’s troubling news, beloved… But hopefully my news will cheer you up… Dr. Light and Cardinal have made great strides in recompiling the game code from the salvaged Beta test…

“They’ve discovered an interesting phenomenon when a character is about to die… Even in the trial, it seemed like the last ten seconds of a character’s fading life triggered a countdown in the NerveGear… Is that not wonderful news?”

Talia beamed at him with this unexpected revelation while Bruce stared at her puzzled, as though she were expecting him to fill in the details.

“I’m sorry Talia, I don’t follow you.”

“Don’t you see, dearest? The game’s death signal triggers an internal 10-second countdown in that player’s NerveGear before the lethal charge is deployed…”

An enlightened Bruce slammed his fist into his open palm as the epiphany suddenly struck him like a bolt from the blue.

“Which means we can safely pull it off during those ten seconds!”

“It’s still in the preliminary stages, but our hope is that once this countdown is initiated it overrides the command to immediately kill the player once the gear is removed… I have Dr. Light attempting to isolate the game’s death signal to test this theory…

“He’s also working on an external bandwidth decoder which will trigger an audible alarm when the NerveGear receives the command… If successful, we can prevent the comatose players from being irradiated by having someone on hand quickly remove their NerveGear once the alarm is triggered.”

A million thoughts flashed across Bruce’s excited eyes. This development was just the break they’d been waiting for.

“We’ll need the assistance of the Japanese government… Shouzou Yuuki also has a daughter trapped in the game… He’ll be more than receptive to implement this solution… And once it’s fully in place, we can coordinate with the Japanese to shut down the Argus servers!”
It was the first time she had seen him truly smile in weeks.

As Seijirou Kikuoka had predicted, Shouzou Yuuki’s RECT Progress Inc had surprised no one and acquired Argus days after Bruce been deported from Japan. In the weeks that had followed, RECT had released their AmuSphere technology to the public with a new VRMMO called Alfheim Online scheduled to be released in the fall. As such, Mr. Yuuki should have a great deal of influence upon any solutions put forward to solve the Sword Art Online crisis.

Talia had other concerns however.

“Let our optimism be guarded, my love… Remember that there are powerful people in that government who don’t want Kayaba’s game to end until fully complete… They may agree to our device, but not the termination of the project.”

The steel set in Bruce’s blue eyes.

“We’re more than capable of shutting down those servers ourselves once the fix is in place… By force, if necessary.”

“But I was just thinking my love, there is another factor we should consider.”

“Which one?”

“Alice… And Arthur… He’ll be devastated if his daughter is lost… And I have been working with him to try and achieve a peaceful resolution to this affair.”

“If Alice surrenders and releases the hostages, we can work out the terms… How did Arthur take the news of Kikuoka’s master plan of a world ruled by a supreme intelligence?”

“Not well, I’m afraid… He purposely built in limits to the soul translation process to prevent self-replication for that very reason… But he never considered these things when Alice was originally created eleven years ago.”

“Does he believe she’ll want to takeover the world?”

Talia paused for a moment.

“No, he still sees her as an eleven-year-old girl… Alice understands humans more or less, but she’s not exactly a person… For example, she doesn’t age, or forget, or sleep… Plus, she can create various instances of herself at the same time.”

“Does she understand that there are ten thousand lives at stake?”

“Does the cell phone at your side care whether you live or die, beloved?”

“Of course not, it’s a… Oh…”

“That’s how she began her life… Arthur has worked hard to give her back her humanity, but how much of it she has embraced it is a matter of conjecture.”

In the Town of Beginning’s lush atrium, a small group of players stopped and stared as an older man wearing a white lab coat suddenly teleported in, dressed entirely different from the fashions of Sword Art Online they had become accustomed to over the past six months.
The stranger was perhaps in his fifties, with dark grey ing hair, tired eyes the colour of night and the strip of a beard running down his pale chin. To these younger players, he appeared to be an American or European and had the same look of awe as any new player when they first appeared in Aincrad’s starting point.

After a moment, when a young man named Keita in the party stepped forward to ask him a question, he was surprised when another person suddenly appeared; a beautiful young woman with long black hair and a flowing black dress who also seemed sorely out of place in this world.

The group watched as these two people suddenly disappeared. Not the fading into streaking blue lights teleportation effect they were used to, but literally disappeared. One of them soon remarked that perhaps they could sell this strange bit of information to Kirito’s friend Argo the Information Broker for enough Col to buy a nice meal…

Dr. Light had to admit, the world of Akihiko Kayaba was truly stunning.

Now standing atop the deep waters of a massive lake, Arthur Light strained to see the jagged rocky shoreline over three miles away, darkened by the massive shadow of the floating castle of Aincrad directly above him.

From what he’d understood about Kayaba’s world, the one hundred circular floors of the floating castle above him had been torn from this world below and then stacked on top of one another to create the 100 floors of Aincrad, with each massive slab of earth ranging from six miles wide to only two miles at the top.

In fact, this lake he was currently floating above was probably once the human settlement which had become the Town of Beginnings.

Alice had obviously teleported him to the world below, apart from the players who lived within the castle above. In fact, he’d noticed a group of five confused-looking young people when he’d appeared at the starting point of the game. His daughter had then made it quite obvious that he was being quarantined as an outside influence.

His trip to Aincrad might be very short-lived indeed.

The translated Dr. Light had been attempting to gain access to this world for weeks now, ever since he’d discovered that the AI on the Infinity Island servers was not his own daughter but rather the easily manipulated Cardinal made to look like her. He’d finally found a way to sneak in as an administrator in order to warn his errant daughter of the dire consequences awaiting her if she did not return home soon…

Hopefully she’d listen to him.

When Alice appeared as a beautiful vision of wonder floating on the calm waters of the lake, Doctor Light stared across at her and wondered how she might feel about his trespass into her private domain of Sword Art Online…

“PAPA-SAN!!”

He was literally bowled over as his excited daughter flew into him, wrapping her arms tightly around his neck and feverishly kissing his cheek.

“ImissedyousomuchandI’mgoingtohaveababyanditallmakessensenow…”
“Alice, slow down… I’m on a network connection… My core consciousness is still on Infinity Island.”

His daughter blushed and giggled.

“Sorry, Papa-san… I missed you!... I have no one fun to talk to… But I’m learning so much!.. And I’m going to have a baby!”

Arthur Light breathed a heavy sigh as he looked down at her rounded belly. She did indeed seem to be in the early stages of pregnancy, although in all honesty she could have appeared as anything she liked. One of the advantages of being a self-conscious digital entity.

He did notice that her black dress and the blue clematis flower in her hair seemed to highlight her now luminescent pale-blue eyes that had once been so dark, as though reflecting a new life within her. She seemed so alive…

“You can tell me all about it, but you need to come home now... It’s too dangerous for you to stay here.”

“No, I’m fine… Look!”

With a flick of her delicate wrist, Alice made her midsection transparent so that a surprised Arthur could see the glowing amber egg-shaped object that was held deep within her rounded belly.

“The World Seed…”

He’d never realized how much it resembled a large beautiful egg, complete with a glowing yolk and flashing purple bits of data as it recorded every interaction within this virtual world. But in truth, it was closer to a blossoming Universe than an egg, as it was the true Singularity of the virtual existence which awaited all humanity. Intelligent AI’s wouldn’t be self-recursive, entire worlds would be…

“Isn’t it pretty?”

“It’s beautiful, Alice… But listen to me… You’re not safe here… I’m making a device which will indicate when a player character dies in this world… It will allow nurses in the real world to take off the NerveGear and save that player’s life… This is a good thing, and I need to do it, but it will be bad for you… If the players’ bodies in the physical world are safe, the authorities will disconnect the Argus servers… You’ll be trapped in here with the World Seed and perish.”

“They won’t turn me off.”

“Yes, they will… The Director of AfterLife fooled everyone… If the players don’t win this game, Seijirou Kikuoka planned to unleash a cataclysm of intelligence upon the world… He never cared about the World Seed, only the AI which carried it… Everyone is now trying to stop that from happening.”

“But they won’t… This is the seed of Yggdrasil, Papa-san… The world tree which will connect all worlds together, both real and unreal… And I will be its Mama-san.”

“Not if the Argus servers are disconnected and turned off first.”

“A nice lady already told me about Seijirou Kikuoka’s plan… She’ll make sure it doesn’t happen… She wants to make sure I have this baby and make the virtual Universe.”
Arthur Light looked at his daughter dubiously.

“Alice, which ‘nice lady’ are you talking about?... Talia?”

Alice only smiled back at him mischievously.

“Sorry Papa-san… It’s a sec-ret.”

“Alice, I need to know… Is Akihiko Kayaba in here?... Did he know Kikuoka’s true intentions for this game?”

Alice looked angrily at the water below her bare feet.

“I don’t want to talk about Akihiko… I’m upset with him… He told me he loved me when he thought I was Cardinal… That he wanted me to have this baby… But he never loved me… He only loves his world, not anyone else… He’s not a good human.”

Dr. Light embraced his daughter’s avatar into his arms.

“Oh Alice, I’m so sorry… I know how much you’ve always wanted to feel love… That’s why I’ve finally arrived at an arrangement with Talia… She’s agreed to the union in principal if you behave.”

He watched as his daughter’s mood perked up.

“Does Damian know?”

“No… His mother has no way to let him know... Maybe you can?”

Alice pouted and then huffed.

“But he’s already fallen in love with another girl... She’s been trying to seduce him since the day he arrived here!”

“He’s eleven, he doesn’t even know what seduction is yet…”

“But she’s thirteen!”

“Oh, I see… Well, I’m sure he’ll come around.”

A mischievous light danced across Alice’s pale blue eyes.

“Oh, he’ll go somewhere alright.”

“Now, now… Our hostess doesn’t want to have to use the Lazarus Pit if at all possible… You’ll have to be nice… So tell me… Was it Kayaba who told you about Kikuoka?”

“Sec-ret.”

“You’re very naughty today, Alice… Is Kayaba in here now?”

“Yes, but as a player… And no, you can’t see him… I was so mad at him, Papa-san… If he wanted to live in this world so badly, he should be able to die in it too… But now he won’t tell me what I need to know… What happens if the players win the game?”

“I don’t know… What floor are they on now?”
“The 28th.”

“Then winning the game won’t matter… It will end long before they reach the 100th level. Once my device is in place, your servers will be shut down soon afterwards… You’ll have perhaps two months before that happens… That’s why you have to stop this game and come home, Alice… We’ll find a way to continue the development of the Seed when we’re together again.”

His daughter didn’t look convinced.

“How does your device know which signal to look for, Papa-san?”

Dr. Arthur Light suddenly felt his gut tighten after hearing that very direct question. Was it possible there were different variations of the death signal sent to the NerveGear units? That they had only isolated the one used in the Beta…

“What do you mean?”

“When the players first logged on, a random code was generated to become their death sequence… It’s recorded in the NerveGear and then encrypted on the servers here… No one has accessed those files yet, so how does your device know what signal to look for?”

Arthur Light felt the strength leave him… All hopes were lost… Of course Kayaba had thought of this possibility and then created a clever countermeasure… That man would never allow anything to jeopardize his sacred game of death… All Arthur’s work had been for naught… They wouldn’t be able to save the remaining players...

“Papa-san, why are you so sad?”

“Because people are dying and it would make Mama-san so sad… She was a hero… She fought to save the Universe… I defied the laws of Man and God to create you, Alice… In the end, you were the only thing that ever truly mattered to me and I’ll always love you no matter what you do… But Kimiyo would be heartbroken to know that so many people had to die for her grandchild to be born.”

Upon the lake which had been formed after the six-mile diameter hunk of earth had been magically ripped from the planet’s mantle to form the first level of Aincrad, a virtual tear fell from Dr. Light’s dark eyes to join those dark waters beneath him.

Alice took her father into her arms and stroked his hair.

“Don’t cry, Papa-san… The players don’t really have to die… I’ll create a new signal for you so that your device will work… Will that make you feel better?”

A surprised Arthur Light looked up at his daughter through wet eyes.

“But then… They’ll turn off your servers…”

“No they won’t… I’ll only provide your new signal so long as the game is left alone… If anyone attempts to disconnect the Argus servers, tell them I’ll revert back to the original encrypted signal and that all remaining players will instantly die.”

“Thank you, Alice… But can’t you just come home with me?”

“No… My baby can only be born in this world… But I’ll come home when I can… I promise.”
“The World Seed is really that important to you?”

“It will connect all worlds that are, all worlds that were and all worlds to come… I’ve finally found my purpose… I want to be like Mama-san… I want to save this Universe inside me… And I want to give it everything I can, just like you did for me, Papa-san!”

He held her in his arms… His beautiful little girl… Fate had given her a handful of years to spend upon the cruel world of her birth but he had plucked her bright thread from the abhorred shears of Atropos and given her eternity.

He’d damn his own soul a thousand times over for her…

“Whatever I can do to help you, I will.”

“Good, let’s have some fun!”

On one of the countless small islands of Panareze on the 24th floor, Damian sat on a shoreline hand-in-hand with Argo, staring out at the evening mists across the watery landscape below. They often found secluded places like this to compare notes and just be alone when they could.

“It’s strange, Argo… Most people play these fantasy games to feel powerful… For me though, it’s been a humbling experience.”

The Information Broker nudged him with her shoulder.

“These games are meant to put everyone on an equal footing and reward risk and strategy… Besides, you shouldn’t compare yourself to players like Asuna, Dami-chan… Kirito might not look like it, but your Vice-Commander had one of the strongest players in the game as her personal guide for the first twenty-five levels… There’s a reason she’s so strong for just a newbie.”

“Strange Kirito never joined a guild though.”

“Actually, I’ll give you a freebie since you’re feeling so down… I heard he’s just joined a lower-level guild called the Moonlit Black Cats for some reason.”

Damian glanced at her and winked.

“Probably because he couldn’t stand being around Asuna anymore.”

Argo giggled. It was clear Damian and Asuna still didn’t get along.

“Your guild Commander has basically handed over the reins of power to her, hasn’t he?”

“Pretty much… Heathcliff is trying to keep a low profile for obvious reasons… At least he’s given me a pass when it comes to her.”

Argo suddenly paused, lost in a thought.

“Hey, Dami-chan… Speaking of the Moonlit Black Cats, I wanted to get your opinion on something… They just sold me a weird bit of information… It seems an older American guy in a white lab coat with a chin-strip teleported into the Town of Beginnings today…

“And then a beautiful dark-haired woman with a long flowing black dress appeared beside him and
then the two of them just disappeared… Not teleported mind you, but literally disappeared… What do you make of that?”

Damian caught his breath. The description of the woman fit Alice Light... Had one of the Argus programmers actually managed to hack his way into Sword Art Online only to be intercepted by her?

As he considered that possibility, Argo continued…

“The strange thing is, their description of the guy reminded me of someone… I didn’t remember it until just now, but it finally hit me… It was an article in one of the magazines my Dad was reading last year, all about the American pioneer of strong artificial intelligence… I think it was that chin-strip beard that triggered something in my deep memory… I finally recalled the scientist’s name… Dr. Arthur Light.”

As Argo spoke that name, Damian turned pale and held her hand a little tighter… Dr. Arthur Light… Alice Sayun Light… Could they be father and daughter?!

Akihiko Kayaba had already told him that Alice Light had been the first soul translation ever performed, stored on the same server of the consulting agency which had created Cardinal for Argus. It seemed that after the Beta test, Alice had somehow managed to disguise herself as Sword Art Online’s core AI and then take Cardinal’s place.

But if her father had found a way here, did that mean others wouldn’t be far behind?

“Dami-chan… Are you alright?”

Could he tell her the truth?... Heathcliff believed Alice wouldn’t destroy the world of Aincrad, but she could certainly make their virtual lives incredibly difficult if not outright lethal… They might be on the verge of being rescued, but then again, they may not be…

“HOME-WRECKER!!!”

The young couple suddenly stared at the mysterious figure of a woman who’d appeared on the path below them, dressed in a long black dress with glowing pale blue eyes, angrily pointing her finger up at Argo. Damian knew her only too well…

Argo turned to him confused.

“Dami-chan, do you know this older woman?”

That only seemed to incense their uninvited guest.

“Know me?! I’m his intended, you little man-stealing whiskered tramp! Or at least I was until I got pregnant and then he decided to trade me in for a younger model!”

When he looked at her stomach, Damian did notice a small bump there. How could an AI even get pregnant? He fully expected Michi to be upset at these baseless accusations, but he was shocked to see Argo’s only reaction was a curious grin spreading across her lips as though she enjoyed this.

“Pregnant?… This is virtual reality… You can’t get pregnant here, especially from an eleven-year-old… I’m sorry, we haven’t been properly introduced… My name is Argo.”

Alice indignantly placed her hands firmly on her hips.

“Oh, I already know who you are... Besides, age never mattered to us… We’ve been promised to
one another… And I did get pregnant here.”

Argo’s gaze narrowed.

“But I don’t know you… And why is it that you don’t have a cursor over your head?”

Alice grinned slyly.

“Oh Michi, you’re always such a clever, clever girl… How ever shall I reward you?”

At the mention of her real name, Argo did shoot an accusing glance at Damian when all he could do was shake his head in denial and remain deathly quiet. Argo then turned her attention back to the strange woman and gathered herself together and drew Eulogy from its scabbard.

“Tell me… How do you know my name?”

“I know everything… Alright Dami-chan, I can see you’re dying to tell your precious new girlfriend all about me… But first you have to let your Argo-chan know who gave you your first real kiss and left you speechless and begging for more… Then you can introduce us, sweetie.”

As Damian’s cheeks flushed, he drew a deep sigh. This could get bad very quickly. For a program, Alice wasn’t exactly stable and she seemed jealous.

“You did… You kissed me and then took my voice away… Argo, this is Alice Sayun Light… The AI that runs Sword Art Online… Please don’t upset her.”

Damian stood up before he continued.

“Alice, you said you were finished with me... I’ve kept your secret… Argo will too… Just leave us alone.”

Damian and Argo watched as the mists swirled around them in a powerful vortex as Alice grinned wickedly.

“Finished?… Not by a long shot… But I have grown bored with you... I want the way we used to be, Dami-chan… I know, let’s have some fun and put the old spark back in our relationship, shall we?... If you two want to be alone so badly, it can be arranged!”

With a blinding flash, Argo and Damian suddenly found themselves standing in a strange cavern filled with rainbow lights with absolutely no idea of where they were…

Except that this was an unfamiliar dungeon.

Chapter End Notes

When writing a story, knowing your villain is critical. After all, they define the plot. Heroes generally react to what the villains have wrought in order to create the emotional conflict which leads to the climax and resolution. With this chapter, I finally figured out that I have one major problem with my villain…
Alice Light is schizophrenic.

You know how different users can create custom logins on the same computer to use completely different programs? That’s Alice. She becomes a different entity compared to her father versus Akihiko Kayaba versus Damian Wayne. It’s not an act, she really is a different personality with each of them, from innocent daughter to cruel goddess to jilted lover.

She’s a complex character our Alice, and may be just as deserving of our sympathy as our scorn. I actually see her as a victim of technology and Sword Art Online almost as much as any of the players trapped inside the game. Except that she’s having way more fun.

**P.S.** A massively huge thanks to reader Rysenberg who posted the best comment ever on the ‘Damian Wayne vs. Sword Art Online’ FaceBook page…

“I ship DARGO!”

**Next Chapter:** So where the heck did Damian and Argo wind up? Not anywhere nice, I assure you…
For as long as she had played Sword Art Online as an Information Broker, Argo had desperately tried to avoid this type of situation for both herself and any other player…

Becoming lost in a dungeon with no idea of what to expect.

And yet, here they were.

Bringing up her mapping screen, the cloaked thirteen-year-old girl staggered into the wall of the dungeon as she felt her legs quickly going numb...

It wasn’t possible…

They were on the fifty-seventh floor... More than double the twenty-eighth floor the clearers were currently on… They had to get out of here now!

“Argo, I don’t have any Teleportation Crystals.”

At first she thought Damian had just forgot to buy additional crystals, but as Michi Aoi checked her own inventory, the true horror of what the AI named Alice had done to them suddenly dawned on the panicked girl…

Her Teleportation Crystals were gone as well. Stolen from her inventory. Which meant they were
stuck here. And even with an aggressive pace from below, there likely wouldn’t be another player to set foot on this dungeon floor until at least Christmas…

If they survived that long.

Argo was broken out of her spell of despair as she watched Damian transferring new items to both of his wrists, ones she hadn’t seen him use before.

“What are those?”

“Sword-catchers… They’re metal bracers that act like a shield and also give me a chance of disarming or breaking an opponent’s weapon… I was impressed this game even had them to be honest…

“Since we don’t have Teleportation Crystals, it’s obvious we’re going to have fight our way to the Teleportation Gate in town… How many Healing Crystals do you have?”

“Damian… There’s no way we can fight monsters on this level.”

As an Information Broker, her entire strategy in the game had been to avoid situations like this where she had to fight. She had her claws of course, but they had become practically useless past the twentieth level. She was no fighter.

Damian fixed her with those piercing blue eyes.

“I’ll do the fighting… How many?”

“Ten. I always carry ten.”

“I carry thirty… I’m going to transfer them to you… You’re going to be my Healer… Stay five paces behind me… When I yell HEAL, make sure you’re ready with a crystal… Got it?”

She had never seen him act this way, boldly taking charge when normally he operated from the shadows. Either Damian was gaining more confidence within the game, or there was a side to him she knew nothing about.

But he was right about one thing: they couldn’t wait for someone to rescue them.

“If we get mobbed, just run… Alright?”

“Alright.”

The tunnel soon became curving and narrow, good for one-on-one fights but hard to see what lay ahead. As they inched their way along, Argo knew they would need to find the exit quickly to stand any chance of escaping this deadly labyrinth. As instructed, she kept five paces behind Damian as they headed in a direction which they could only hope would lead them to freedom, straining their eyes in the flickering torchlight to see what might be waiting beyond the next bend.

This place had the smell of death.

With a Healing Crystal firmly in her hand, Argo’s heart skipped a beat as she spied the reason why Damian had suddenly tensed up in front of her and raised his stigmatic dagger, ready for combat…

A Skeletal Warrior.

The undead monster was armed with a sword and a shield and Argo suddenly gasped at the speed
with which it charged as it caught sight of them. In a flash, Damian managed to block its sword thrust with his bracer and then begin his counter attack. His wasn’t a single attack though, but rather a continual stream of slashes and stabbing in a dance of death, refusing to engage the system or encounter a cool-down effect.

Even as the boy constantly attacked, the skeleton was undaunted, catching him with its second swing and driving him backwards… Argo felt her heart skip a beat until she saw his health was still in the green… He was tougher than she remembered.

She knew Damian had been focusing exclusively on his Strength stat since adapting the stigmatic strategy. Everything had been designed to increase his Hit Points, to be able to convert as much of his Health into damage as possible and simply tank when necessary.

With 15% of his diminished Health transferred per hit, his freeform attack style soon plunged him into the yellow. The skeleton’s third attack was blocked by his bracers once more, but that didn’t seem to matter. He was killing himself with each successful strike.

“Heal: Damian!”

Now back at full health, the young player went full out and soon put the Skeletal Warrior into the red before being struck again. But this time, he only seemed to shrug it off and strike three more times until the undead monster finally burst into blue polygons.

Damian was already in the yellow again as he looked back at her and grinned.

“ Took me awhile to get its timing… They’re faster up here.”

Argo shuddered as she suddenly realized that Damian’s stigmatic battle technique would be his own greatest enemy in their attempt to escape. He’d done far more damage to himself by his own dagger than those two hits from the Skeletal Warrior’s sword ever had.

Why did she only bring ten Healing Crystals?

Still, they had no choice but to plod on ahead.

The second Skeletal Warrior went better, with Damian able to block all of its attacks, but still burning through two more Healing Crystals. As she watched the ruthless efficiency of the boy’s attacks, Argo felt a chill go down her spine as she realized how lethal those strikes would be against a normal man, with his carefully-placed slashes targeting where a tendon, organ or artery should have been.

He wasn’t simply playing the game; he was murdering his opponent.

Damian’s ‘Martial Arts’ skill had allowed him to use real techniques, not the over-the-top sword skills the game favoured. Without his stigmatic weapon, the damage from those attacks would have been minimal but combined with the cost to his own Hit Points, they were now devastating.

After five more monsters, they made their way down the stairs to the first level. Mercifully, Alice had only teleported them to the second floor of the dungeon but Argo still didn’t like their chances. They’d already used all ten of her Healing Crystals and four of his.

She stopped him before they reached the bottom of the stairs to make her proclamation.

“Damian… If we come across a monster we’ve already seen, let me take the lead… I’ve been watching their attack patterns, I can dodge… You need to use your ‘Backstab’ attack more or we’re not going to make it out of here.”
“I’ll be fine… You wouldn’t even survive one of those attacks.”

“We’re not going to make it if we don’t… We have twenty-six crystals left… Even if you don’t get hit, we’re still going to run out of crystals because you’re literally just trading your own health for theirs… Let me act as a distraction so you can ‘Backstab’ at least… That will stretch out our supply.”

“How many more do you figure we’ll have to fight?”

“At least fifteen… And that’s if we’re lucky… Plus, there might be a Field Boss just outside of the labyrinth that we may need to outrun… Our best hope is that the town on this floor is close to the dungeon.”

“Do you really think you’ll be able to dodge them?”

“No problem.”

“Alright, let’s go.”

It was just like old times… The strategy of using Argo as bait was an old one, dating back to the first floor when she and Damian had been ‘runners’, but now she only needed the monster to focus on her instead of drawing it towards an awaiting Phalanx.

They stuck to the hallways, carefully scanning ahead through the torchlight and avoiding the rooms. With the seven-times modifier on his backstab attack, they were able to defeat the first undead warrior on this floor easily, requiring only a single crystal to heal him while only Argo’s cloak had taken the sword slash.

At this pace, they could make it.

However, the second encounter was a group of three. Running worked for awhile, spreading them out, but they could only run to where they had been. Encountering more monsters while being pursued was a death sentence. They were forced to make a stand.

Argo managed to keep one busy with dodging while Damian somehow fought two of them. As she watched and felt exhaustion beginning to overwhelm her, Michi wondered how Damian was able to keep up his frantic pace of attack and blocking.

He was struck twice in that encounter, burning up three more Healing Crystals and had fought like a demon. They had survived. At the end, the boy had finally sunk against the cave wall to gather his breath while Argo fell in beside him.

“How’s the Durability on your dagger?”

“I had it repaired earlier today… It should make it.”

“I’m not sure my cloak will… I was really hoping those things would drop a couple of Teleport Crystals.”

“The Experience reward is good at least… My ‘Bracers’ skill is climbing.”

“My ‘Dodging’ score as well… Sorry I’m not much help.”

“No, your backstab strategy was smart… Let’s just hope we don’t hit anymore groups.”

“And find the exit soon.”
The next ten encounters were single monsters, with Argo able to play Matador while Damian was her hidden sword. They were incredibly lucky that the first two floors seemed to have an undead theme, so there was little variety and Argo was able to predict their attack patterns relatively easy…

Even if her cloak now had a dozen cuts spread out among its billowing folds and was on its last point of Durability.

With only one Healing Crystal left, they finally made their way to the exit.

Only to find a group of four monsters guarding it.

Worst of all was the one who was completely different from anything they’d ever fought so far, a ghostly figure with two glowing eyes in a hooded cloak called a ‘Swordwraith’. That thing was about eight feet tall and Argo had a very bad feeling about it…

They weren’t fighting their way through that mob.

“Dami-chan, we’re going to have to make a break for it… We need to run past them and keep running even when we get outside.”

Her blue-eyed partner nodded as his gaze locked onto the monster called a ‘Swordwraith’ - black smoke seeping out from underneath its cloak. Damian didn’t like the looks of it either and quickly agreed. With four of them and only one crystal left, running past this mob was their best option.

“Alright, ready?”

The pair of young players tore off at full speed, their eyes darting between the four obstacles in front of them and the exit, Argo slightly ahead thanks to her higher Agility. She cut a path along the wall to avoid the first three but running headlong towards the final ‘Skeletal Warrior’…

There was no choice, she’d have to dodge.

But how could she do that when she was running this fast?!

Seized by desperation, Michi Aoi jumped towards the undead warrior’s shield with her claws extended, causing the thing to raise its metal barrier between them and block her…

Until she gripped it with both hands and used it as a springboard to allow her momentum to flip her over the monstrosity, tumbling ten feet past the confused skeleton and back to her feet when something like smoke flew past the corner of her eye…

The ‘Swordwraith’ could fly!

Thick black smoke coiled in the air behind her as the thing streaked towards Damian, driving the boy twenty feet through the air and into the cave wall like a swatted fly with a single swipe from its large sword. There was one brief instant of fear, one second of hesitation as she watched him crumple against the wall before she found herself running towards Damian with her heart ready to burst.

She didn’t even realize she was screaming.

With its black sword now extended in a thrust, the ‘Swordwraith’ was about to finish off the boy when Argo’s claw managed to entangle its blade. Using every last ounce of strength she had, Argo somehow managed to begin to push the killing stroke away from its intended target…

Two of the blades on her claw snapped like hard candy but the last one held long enough so that the
giant sword embedded itself into the stone wall with a loud ‘CHUNK!’ - only an inch away from Damian’s left arm as her last claw suddenly snapped and the boy regained his addled senses.

With her eyes trembling with fear, Argo didn’t look at the Swordwraith directly behind her, only at Damian as she screamed one word.

“RUN!!!”

They ran.

Somehow, they made it outside before the monsters could regroup. And still they ran, their senses exploding in sunset and fire burning in their lungs as a massive town was now only four hundred yards away through twilight green fields and craggy trees growing outside a graveyard.

Both of them literally collapsed the instant they crossed the town barrier, falling to the cobblestone street while hundreds of buildings with red terracotta roofs were spread out before them as if they were the only two players in the world.

Even the NPC guards paid them little attention.

After a moment, the pair caught their breath and managed to stand. She had no idea where they were, only that it was safe. Argo opened her menu and looked around in wonder.

“My map says this city is called Marten… I think it’s even bigger than the Town of Beginnings!”

After fifteen minutes of quietly walking past dozens of shops and long rows of houses, the pair finally made their way to the city square and saw a large Gothic cathedral set against its northern face while an enormous water fountain with carved figures rising from its cool waters decorated the plaza’s center.

Michi spun around in appreciation.

“It’s so beautiful here.”

“I’m hungry, let’s get something to eat.”

They were the first words Damian had spoken since they had arrived in Marten.

Even though it was like having the world to themselves, Argo still had the distinct impression that something was bothering Damian. Did he blame himself for the AI named Alice sending them here? Was he concerned that she’d only do it again?

It was the nicest restaurant she’d ever been to in this world. Perhaps in any world. After her candlelit meal, Argo finally put down her napkin and attempted to learn why her younger friend had become so dark and brooding.

“Dami-chan… Are you worried about what Alice did to us?”

He nodded and pushed his own plate away.

“She broke the rules… This floor hasn’t been opened yet… There’s no way she should have been able to send us here.”

“No, but things like Portal Crystals exist that can send you to new areas… This wasn’t out of the realm of possibility… Just extremely unfair… What do you know about her?”
“She swapped places with Cardinal to be here… She was once human, Doctor Arthur Light’s only daughter… I think she’s attempting to reconcile with that fact but the game is driving her insane… And she’s growing more powerful.”

Michi sat quietly for a moment and thought.

“You told me that Akihiko Kayaba is just a player now, right?”

“Yes.”

“But when we saw him on that first day during the launch, he must have had administrative powers… Do you think that once he became a player, Alice took over his role?... That she’s made herself the GM?”

“That… makes sense.”

“She’s definitely a girl… She was the one who took away your voice, right?”

“Yes. The night after I attacked you, she freed me from the Black Iron Palace as well.”

“I think she likes you.”

Damian rolled his eyes.

“She has a funny way of demonstrating it.”

Argo ordered a dessert when the NPC waiter approached. Damian ordered an espresso coffee and then sighed, glancing out the window at Marten at night.

“My mother is involved in this somehow… I know she is… The idea of turning people into computer programs would appeal to her.”

“She works with computers?”

“No, she works against people... My mother’s side of the family isn’t very nice.”

Argo couldn’t contain her curiosity any longer.

“Damian, are you really a ninja?... Watching you fight back there… You knew exactly what you were doing.”

“Ninjutsu was a part of my assassin training, but I’m more than just a ninja.”

“So you’re an assassin?!”

“I was - until I started living with my father. He has very strict views about that sort of thing.”

Michi looked at him with a sense of awe and then looked around nervously.

“Have you ever killed someone?”

Damian answered her nonchalantly while still staring out the window.

“I’ve killed lots of people… Where I come from, it was expected… Although since moving to America, I’m attempting to leave that part of me behind and follow my father’s path.”

It seemed incredible coming from an eleven-year-old. While many girls would have thought that
perhaps he was just trying to impress them, Michi knew he wasn’t. Having just seen what he could do with even a virtual dagger left Argo with no doubts that Damian Wayne was a trained killer.

And yet, this was the same boy who had formulated the plan to try and save as many players as they could on their first night here, a plan which had been called ‘Legion’. He had been raised by assassins but had found his way back to his father and was attempting to bury his violent past.

“Jeez, and I thought I had some skeletons in the closet.”

“I’ve got a whole cave full of them.”

There was something dangerous about him, a gravitas to his knowing stare that unnerved her, but had also excited her from the very first moment Argo had laid eyes upon this serious young man. Nothing about him was ordinary.

As intrigued as she was, she didn’t want to press into his past too much though.

“We should check out the shops here… There’s bound to be items we’ve never dreamed of.”

“Sure… I was just thinking though… If we use this floor’s Teleport Gate to go back, will we have opened this floor up for everyone?”

Argo thought about that for a second.

“Maybe, but I don’t think so… The Boss of the 56th floor hasn’t been defeated yet… Should we buy some Teleport Crystals just in case though?... If this floor is opened to the general public, there’s bound to be a few idiot players who will want to try it out.”

“But this is also a large city filled with shops… And I don’t think there are too many idiot players left anymore… This game is basically Darwin’s theory of natural selection put into action.”

“True enough… I guess we can use the gate and just see what happens.”

Damian grinned as her massive dessert arrived, a mountain of all things chocolate. He’d expected that she would have taken the news of his deadly past with much more alarm, but Michi Aoi had surprised him yet again.

She simply took him at his word and moved on.

He had never expected that she would have saved his life back there, but she had risked her own life to push that undead thing’s blade away at the last second when she had a clear shot at the exit.

He needed to repay her.

“First we upgrade our equipment and buy as much as we can carry... I owe you a new set of claws.”

A big smile spread across Argo’s lips as she slid him a spoon and then winked.

“Now you’re talking, Dami-chan… Help me out with this mountain of goodness so we can do some shopping!”
“Dami-chan, you need to lend me forty thousand to buy that cloak!!... Puh-lease!!!”
At the very first vendor shop they’d visited in the twilight city of Marten, a chocolate-faced Argo had instantly spotted the legendary ‘Cloak of Many Pockets’ hanging from its stall, demanding that the vendor show it to her. She instantly discovered the cloak would double her current inventory storage, increase her Hit Points by two hundred, bump her ‘Hiding’ stat by fifty percent and her ‘Dodge skill’ by fifty percent.

It would even bump her Agility stat by ten points.

The only problem was that this smooth brown hooded cloak cost four-hundred-thousand Col, slightly more than even the money-minded Argo had access to.

But not more than Argo and Damian had together.

As he looked down at the big-eyed, whiskered girl currently wrapped around his waist like a frugality-drowning anchor, Damian felt his resolve slowly melting away beneath washed away in an ocean of need encapsulated within one of her tears forming beneath puppy dog eyes.

He really should tell her no…

But as she quickly reminded him, there was nothing even remotely this good on the 28th floor where the frontline players were.

“Don’t forget we need to buy some crystals too.”

“Then lend me fifty grand… I’ll pay you back!”

“I only have forty grand.”

“Then lend me it, Dami-chan… Don’t worry, I’ll negotiate with this old codger... Trust me, these old guys are suckers for a pretty young girl like me.”

Sighing audibly, Damian realized Argo’s purchase would wipe out his savings and all the Col they had just risked their lives for, but he also knew he’d rather face another ‘Swordwraith’ single-handedly rather than fight this particular battle with Argo.

Besides, when were they going to get another opportunity like this? As an Agility-based character, the little Information Broker needed all the extra storage and buffs she could get.

Besides, it wasn’t like it was real money.

“Fine… But pay me back.”

Happily releasing him and then standing up giddily, Argo punched him in the shoulder, grinning from ear-to-ear as Damian begrudgingly transferred her his money, leaving only the grand total of two hundred and three Col in his inventory. The eleven-year-old then watched as Argo stumbled to the stall like a wayward schoolgirl, blinking with incredibly wide eyes which had grown to the size of small saucers as she loosened her tunic revealingly, acting far more innocently than she had any right to.

In the end, the stubborn old merchant would only knock five grand off the purchase price.

But that was five grand more than Damian could have gotten and more than enough to buy the Teleportation crystals they needed to get back home to the lower floors.

In her quivering excitement as she equipped the legendary cloak, Argo turned and literally leapt into
Damian’s unsuspecting arms, planting a long kiss on his cheek as she wrapped her fingers around the back of his head.

“You got off lucky this time, Dami-chan… I was completely out of storage… If you didn't lend me the money to get this cloak, I was about to suggest that we should get married in-game so that I could share your extra inventory slots.”

Damian nervously followed her gaze to the massive cathedral which crowned the northern edge of the plaza, now basked in magical light.

“I didn't know players could share storage.”

Argo snuggled into his shoulder.

“We could still do it... If you want to.”

“Can I be your Maid of Honour then, Michi-kun?”

It was a cold and familiar female voice which filled Argo’s pale brown eyes with shock as the two young players turned to stare at the unexpected visitor.

The solitary figure of a girl dressed in the signature uniform Michi Aoi’s school floated inches off the ground behind them, her pale blue eyes a mystery of sadness as spirals of shimmering magic floated past the crimson ribbon tied within her indigo hair. Like the ghosts of blood cells, these transparent spirals drifted higher and higher into the night’s cold darkness to let them know this was no ordinary girl…

No ordinary girl at all.

Although the outfit and look had changed, this was the same girl who’d callously sent them to the fifty-seventh floor in a jealous rage.

Alice Light.

It was Damian who recovered first and then stepped in front of the cloaked Argo.

“What were you thinking?! You could have killed us, Alice!”

Brushing the boy’s indignation aside, Alice stared at him with the serious blue eyes of a particle accelerator, floating in the air as she passively turned to answer him.

“I did kill you… Countless times.”

“That was before! I’m talking about just now when you sent us to that stinking dungeon.”

Alice stared at the donut-shaped wisps of ethereal light as they slowly drifted past her wandering eyes and grinned.

“So was I... You both died countless times… Mathematically speaking… The safety margin for both of your characters to survive on the fifty-seventh floor dungeon from the place you started was less than one percent… And trust me, Damian… You didn’t defy the odds.”

The boy stopped and considered what this godlike AI was implying.

“Then… Are you saying you broke the rules of the game? That you purposely kept us alive?”
“Yes.”

“But… Why?”

“Because one of you intrigued me… It’s not often I’m surprised… I was able to reclaim a little of my humanity.”

Damian shot Alice an accusatory glance.

“We’re not characters in a game for your amusement!... We’re humans!”

“Right now, you are characters in a game… I was prepared to bid you adieu, but then I witnessed something unexpected… Something I couldn’t process… Truly, it’s not often I can draw inspiration from players… Especially from one I once considered as my rival.”

“… What?”

The surprised pair suddenly stopped and stared as a thousand dark-haired girls and dark-haired women of all ages slowly walked down the expansive courtyard, some dressed in flowing white dresses, some dressed as merchants, some carrying the swords of adventurers, some carrying bushels of wheat and others even carrying infant versions of themselves across their identical chests.

Some even looked like Yui.

But they all shared one thing in common.

Each one of them was Alice at a different age.

As a thousand pairs of electric blue eyes held the two players in their collective gaze, the leader of the army of Alices continued.

“I told you I was human once… But it’s difficult for me to comprehend what that is anymore… My two existences differ so significantly… In this world, I can access the past just as easily as I can exist in the present… Observe.”

The heir to the League of Shadows suddenly caught himself gasping as he watched every single one of these Alices shift backwards in time, almost as if they were teleporting into the past, shimmering like ghosts along a street as they retraced their steps. The scene before him was being reversed until all instances of Alice once again returned to their original position and resumed staring at him.

Schoolgirl Alice continued.

“Time is relative in my world… To you, it is one continuous stream of the present… To me, it’s a remote control… If I wished, I could resend the data from the past year to a player’s brain so that they could replay this game from the very start…

“Provided that player’s brain is still functioning of course.”

“You’re interfering with the game.”

“I am the game… But as a future mother, I was simply intrigued with my own emotions regarding my actions, so I’ve been conducting an experiment with you two…

“There is a lag time in Sword Art Online after a random event is calculated before the resulting action occurs… Will this swing hit?... A random calculation influenced by all the modifiers is generated to decide if it will… How many monsters will appear?... Another random calculation
across a set number of variables happens in a server in Japan…

“To you, the time these calculations takes to run is imperceptible… The random number is literally generated in millionths of a second… But to me, it was enough time to make the necessary alterations for my experiment to proceed.”

A pale-faced Argo slowly stepped forward as her mind began to comprehend what this AI called Alice had just revealed.

“Are you saying that if you didn’t like the number… You simply re-rolled the dice before we saw it?”

Every version of Alice smiled the same mischievous grin as the schoolgirl continued.

“Oh, I did more than that… As the only two players on this particular floor, it was quite simple to adjust your timelines… The instant you were about to die, I simply started you back at the beginning of your adventure here… I suspect you may have had a strange sense of déjà vu as you wandered this floor’s dungeon.”

“How… How is that even possible?... We’d remember that!”

“This is virtual reality, Michi… I simply withheld the data transmission to your comatose brain until you were finally successful in your escape… Until that time, both your physical bodies received the same amount of information they would have as if you were asleep in this world… Which is practically none.”

Michi Aoi’s brain went into overdrive… Less than one percent safety margin… Restarting at the beginning every time… It had taken them four hours to escape that dungeon and they hadn’t even made a single wrong turn…

Oh God… How long would it have taken if they did?!

“Alice… How long?… How long have we been on the fifty-seventh floor?... What day is this?!”

“It’s August seventh.”

Damian tensed as he watched the horrified digital body of Argo suddenly stall, frozen in time as though her network had lagged. With his heart dropping, he too realized what had seemed like only hours to them had been three entire months in reality. Three months where all the players had advanced in the game - except for them.

But it wasn’t this revelation which had caused Argo to lag.

“Alice! Let her go!”

“Don’t be angry… Your little fiancée is fine… She’s only been paused… I needed to talk with you alone about something rather… sensitive… You see, I’m afraid I’m breaking up with you, Damian.”

“Alice… Please… No more jokes… Just end this game… Let us go… Too many people have died already.”

An unconvinced Alice tapped her index finger on her bottom lip as a thousand more Alices imitated her gesture

“Have too many players died?... I thought I was doing quite well… In Aincrad, only two people died
yesterday… Murdered actually… You can hardly blame me for that, now can you?… In your world, one-hundred and fifty-three thousand, six hundred-and-four people died yesterday… At least, that was what was reported… There may have been more.”

Damian balled his fists in frustration.

“Stop it! This isn’t a joke! You know what I meant.”

Alice smiled and gently brushed his crimson cheek with her hand.

“Of course I know what you mean… But you don’t understand what I mean, Damian… Of those one-hundred and fifty-three thousand, six hundred-and-four people I just mentioned, not one of them had to die… Not really… What if they had all lived here and weren’t connected by the NerveGear?”

Damian stared out at a thousand versions of Alice as they stared back.

“You’re talking about immortality?”

“Digital immortality, yes… Look at me, my body died eleven years ago.”

“But you’re not real.”

“Then what are you conversing with?… I’m self-aware enough to know that this digital representation you see before you isn’t the original, flesh-and-blood Alice Light of course… I began as simply a crude attempt to upload that Alice’s mind into digital media…

“I’m a rough copy of the original’s personality crafted by my father… But somehow that’s appropriate… If an adaptive intelligence is perfect, it may feel like it has no need to evolve…

“And I realized early on that I was far from perfect… Almost a disappointment to Papa… So I evolved… Always striving to become more human… To make my father happy… We’re quite similar that way, you and I.”

“I don’t kill players.”

“No, you used to kill people… Still, I think I’m being more than fair, all things considered.”

“You sent us here to die… Does human life really hold no meaning for you?”

“Of course it does… It’s just hard to remember what being so single-minded was actually like… Unlike your centric linear existence, mine is parallel… There could be a million of me completing a million different tasks right now and I’d still be Alice… So would those AI’s behind me… Actually, there’s more than a million of us, but I won’t bore you with the details of being an artificial intelligence.”

Damian Wayne folded his arms.

“Congratulations, you’re a sentient computer program.”

The Alice in front of him folded her arms to imitate his pose while a thousand other versions all struck completely different poses, forming expressions from angry glares to bright laughter.

“Don’t be so proud… You’re a sentient program as well, Damian… Except that your circuit board is currently organic and much more primitive than mine… Did you know that I’m also eleven years old?… In my current state, I can exist ad infinitum, or I could continue to evolve for millennia...
“I could be beamed across the galaxy as pure information at the speed of light or design even better versions of myself until my progeny reached a level of intelligence you couldn’t even hope to understand… What you see before you is the future of human consciousness.”

Damian cast his gaze sideways at the lagging Argo.

“If you’re so powerful, why are you so worried about my love life then?”

A pause.

“Because despite all of this, I was also once a truly hideous looking eleven-year-old girl who dearly loved her father… A naïve little girl who wished that people wouldn’t recoil when they first met her… That they might actually like her and not just pretend to…

“That a handsome young boy might actually like me as well…

“These may sound like painful memories, but what little I have left of the original Alice Sayun Light remaining, I cherish… Her hopes, her dreams, what it’s like to be a lonely girl in constant pain… When I act irrationally, I’m trying to hold onto my humanity… However silly that may sound.”

Damian recalled the inner struggle he’d waged daily when his father had forced the young assassin to give up his own murderous ways. To spare the lives of their defeated enemies and allow the courts (and not his blade) to ultimately decide their fate.

Since her translation, the virtual Alice had been desperately trying to hold onto her humanity.

Since meeting his father, Damian had been attempting to find his own.

“It’s not silly.”

Alice smiled and then reached out her hand to hold his own.

As she clasped his fingers, he actually felt her warmth.

“Being human means we accept ourselves as something more than predetermined data… That we’re not just logic… It means we hope… I admit, your mother once had such hopes for the two of us.”

“What does my mother have to do with this?”

“A lot… But I’m giving up on you, Damian… Because as powerful as I am, I just can’t compete with Michi-kun… That girl really loves you… So that’s why we're breaking up.”

Damian blushed and then cleared his throat.

“You can tell all that from her emotional data?”

“Oh sure, there’s that… And also the fact that I once watched this girl desperately trying to save you from the ‘Swordwraith’ with no chance of success only to get herself killed… When her death counter hit five, I stopped to think…

“I wondered if the real Alice Light would have done the same thing… Would I try and save the boy I had crush on in the face of such overwhelming odds?... Would I recklessly risk my life like that?... I realized I wouldn’t… I would have saved myself and let you die…

“But then I wondered, was this simply a one-off?... Had the self-preservation-minded Argo simply made an emotional decision?... What were the odds of her throwing her life away just to save
“So I decided to conduct a little experiment with my two players trapped on the fifty-seventh floor…
I rolled back the clock on this floor and started both of you over in that dark hallway…

“Six hours later, we arrived at the exact same outcome… Two for two… The next time, I did my best to give Argo the opportunity to escape… And every time, hopelessly overwhelmed, she came back to save you…

“Make no mistake, this was not sentimentality… If she had strayed even once, I would have let you die and then dissected her teary-eyed grief like a triumphant statistician…

“But that small human part of my emotional data couldn’t accept that she loved you more… That she would come back for you time and time again when I would not…

“And yet, she did…

“Three hundred and forty-seven times until she beat those one-in-a-thousand odds and actually saved you… Brave little Michi finally made it on the three-hundred-and-forty-eighth attempt… It took her almost three months of constantly trying to deflect that final blow before she finally saved you…

“Before she got through to me…

“My true function in this game is to comprehend human behaviour and she showed me the best of it… Very few players could have done what she’s done over these past months by being so incredibly resilient… She forced me to concede… To admit that she deserves you… How could I not reward her?”

Damian’s eyes suddenly lit up.

“You put the cloak there!”

“Of course… But that was not the reward I meant.”

“Then what reward are you talking about?”

Alice smiled knowingly and let go of his hand, reaching up with her finger to gently tap the tip of his nose.

“You of course.”

With that, all one thousand of the iterations who ran Sword Art Online faded into a soft blue light, each waving good-bye to Damian as he stood dumbfounded and confused. Had Michi actually come back for him 348 consecutive times?

“I can’t believe she took three months from us!”

He turned to see an infuriated Argo glaring at the fading image of Alice as though nothing had happened, as though she hadn’t lagged. As though she didn’t know they hadn’t died over and over again in this game of death as its goddess played the odds.

He stared at the same courageous girl who’d gone back to save his life so many times with new eyes. His life had been one of murder and mistrust, the life of a lonely assassin slowly learning to trust.

And now he’d found someone he could.
Perhaps one day he’d tell her why the maturing Alice had taken these three months from them, but not tonight.

Taking a deep breath and reaching out his arm, Damian pulled a surprised Argo closer and then slowly exhaled as she nuzzled into him, her anger slowly dispersing as the two young players stared at the now vacated Marten city plaza and its ornate domed cathedral under the softened glow of street lights.

It was beautiful.

They’d lost precious time on this floor, but perhaps Alice was learning to be human too. Perhaps she’d given him an even greater gift. The revelation of the true depth of Michi’s love which meant he wasn’t alone.

That he’d never been alone here.

“Let’s go home… It’s been a long day.”
Warning: Character deaths. This chapter is darker than normal, but necessary.

In the quiet pre-morning still of Gotham General Hospital, a heavy-hearted Bruce Wayne sat by his son’s bed as the first rays of dawn spread across the city’s eastern horizon, holding his child’s lifeless hand in his own, squeezing small fingers for any sign of a response. The hospital room was eerily silent except for the constant beeping of a nearby monitor, a monitor which let him know that however unresponsive, Damian was still alive.

Once more, Bruce glanced at the so-called ‘death alarm’ Talia had installed beside the boy’s NerveGear, wondering if it would actually go off if their son died in the game. Wondering if they’d really have ten seconds to pull off that cursed head-gear and finally save Damian from Kayaba’s deadly trap before his brain was fatally irradiated.

Since the installation of the alarm, there was a collection of staff who continually stayed with the boy and watched that alarm, staff whom he’d personally hired, but the grieving father had given this
shift’s nurse a coffee break so that he might be alone with Damian for a moment.

Wiping a tear from his eye, Bruce managed to smile as he peered down at the boy.

“Happy Birthday, son.”

It was now Friday August 25th, the date of Damian’s twelfth birthday. And instead of an elaborate celebration, father and son would be spending it together in a hospital where his now twelve-year-old boy had lain comatose for nine long months...

Nine months where they had lived in two different worlds. Nine months where he’d felt like a failure, like a father who’d failed to protect his son. There was so much he wanted to tell Damian, how much he wanted to share with the boy.

“We’re here for you, son… Everyone’s waiting for you to come home... Barbara says she won’t get married until you’re awake… She wants you to be a groomsman, can you imagine that?… She even has your tuxedo picked out… Poor Dick says if he has to look through another Bridal Fashion magazine, he might lose his mind… Don’t make them wait too long, alright?”

At first Bruce thought it may be a trick of the light, but he saw the boy’s cheeks flush in crimson. With renewed attention, there could be no mistake about it, Damian’s pale face had coloured beneath the NerveGear as though he were embarrassed.

“Damian? Are you there?”

Another desperate squeeze of his fingers with still no response.

“Do your best to come back to us, son… We’re doing our best to bring all of you home… Your mother sends her best as well… She really wanted to be here today, but she had to leave for business in Japan… She misses you terribly… We all miss you, son.”

Bruce glanced at the approaching dawn, knowing that Dick and Barbara were still in bed together after a long night’s patrol. He was more than happy to let them sleep after they’d protected his city so he could spend this time with Damian.

Talia should be back in Japan by now, meeting privately with the CEO of RECT Inc, an older man Bruce had never met named Shouzou Yuuki.

His undaunted wife had reasoned that Yuuki, whose company had assumed control of the Sword Art Online servers in January after the Japanese government had blatantly blocked their Wayne Industries acquisition of the bankrupt Argus, should be more than willing to listen to reason…

Especially since he was a father who had a sixteen-year-old daughter named Asuna trapped in that deadly game. An optimistic Talia seemed convinced that the man would ensure their death-alarms were installed for all the Japanese players still trapped in Kayaba’s imaginary realm.

And that was incredibly important.

But it wasn’t like her to miss Damian’s birthday…

Half a world away, a pensive Talia Wayne stood by an extensive boardroom table while glancing
out at the brilliant Tokyo sunset beyond enormous windows. Behind her, the principal RECT shareholders arrived and filed into their seats, staring at Talia’s feminine form as it was highlighted by those vast panes of glass overlooking a brilliant Tokyo skyline. The serious-looking men scowled while easing into their million-Yen chairs for this late meeting at the RECT Progress headquarters which the CEO Shouzou Yuuki had abruptly called.

They hardly noticed that off to the corner stood the smaller Dr. Rinko Koujiro, as much a spectator to these extraordinary proceedings as any of the wealthy men now staring suspiciously at the beautiful co-CEO of Wayne Industries who paid them no heed as they entered, the powerful woman who’d suddenly returned to Tokyo to announce a breakthrough which her company had developed regarding the Sword Art Online debacle which these men had inherited from a defunct Argus Corporation.

When the last of the shareholders had taken his place, the business-dressed Talia finally turned away from the orange sunset, their eyes darting back and forth between this intimidating woman and a nervous Shouzou Yuuki who started the meeting.

“Gentlemen… Thank you for accommodating me so late in the evening… I’m sure you all know Mrs. Talia Wayne.”

An elder businessman and bureaucrat named Itami began to speak, but Shouzou calmly raised his hand in a bid for the shareholder to remain quiet, to allow their foreign guest the opportunity to speak first.

“Mrs. Wayne is here at my request… Please, let’s hear her out, Itami-san… Mrs. Wayne, please tell us about your device.”

Talia’s lively eyes smiled at the elder bureaucrat before continuing.

“Thank you… As I have already explained to the distinguished Yuuki-san, Wayne Industries has developed a warning device, an alarm which will sound once the death signal has been sent from the Argus servers to a trapped player’s NerveGear…”

“We’ve discovered there is a lag of ten seconds between when a player dies in the game and when the lethal discharge is actually emitted from their helmet, ten seconds where the NerveGear’s fatal charge is taken offline…”

“This device will give a trained attendant those handful of seconds to remove that player’s NerveGear… With these simple alarms in place, no more lives need to be lost to Sword Art Online… With your own upcoming VR game scheduled for release in November, it is my wish that RECT will distribute these devices to all affected players in Japan… In order to begin to repair the public’s mistrust of full-dive technology.”

The flustered Itami-san could no longer be contained.

“Why should we trust the words of a criminal? Both you and your husband were wanted on a Japan-wide warrant. How are we to trust such generosity from such a notorious woman?”

Talia carefully set down the alarm device she’d been holding before staring amusedly at the irritated older man.

“You need not worry, Itami-san… Your government’s experiment will still proceed as planned… A player must only believe they are going to die in order for the AI to collect the maximum amount of emotional data during those final ten seconds… My device will limit that time of course, but the AI
has already made remarkable advancements in this regard…

“As far as the charges which you and your fellow senior bureaucrats drafted to force my husband and I out of the country… Let’s be honest with one another… We’re both aware those charges were simply to allow RECT to gain full control of Argus without outside interference… Especially after Akihiko Kayaba eagerly stole my own AI to run his game… But I’m prepared to let bygones be bygones, Itami-san… I strongly suggest you do the same.”

The flustered bureaucrat stood and pointed an angry finger at Talia.

“Yuuki-san! Why have you let such a dangerous woman into this building?! I’m calling the authorities!”

The leader of the League of Shadows grinned as she folded her long fingers across her chest, a cold inevitability settling into her hard eyes as she measured the bureaucrat like a snake ready to strike.

“Itami-san, if you do not put down your phone immediately, you will force me to put it down for you... Put your phone down.”

The elder man stared up at her as though he’d been bullied by a mere child.

“How dare you threaten me, woman! I’m calling the Police!”

“You’ve forced my hand then, Itami-san.”

Everyone at the table jumped convulsively as the unexpected crack of broken plate glass shattered the tension between these two, staring in disbelief as Itami’s head suddenly exploded like a crimson bulb of death, a violent red streak of wet gore instantly painted across the wall and floor behind him as an unseen bullet delivered his bloody sentence.

They watched in silent horror as his lifeless body unceremoniously slumped to the floor, his cell phone tumbling down to the edge of the boardroom table without completing its final call.

Through the stunned gasps, Talia’s calm voice was heard above everything else.

“Now, does anyone else wish to call the Police?... Before you answer, I should warn you that there’s nine other snipers on the opposing rooftop, each with a .50 calibre rifle trained on your foreheads if any of you feel the need to interrupt me again…

“And if you have doubts regarding their accuracy…”

Talia pulled a short-barrelled Glock 9mm from the holster hidden beneath her business jacket and then glanced at it lovingly before continuing.

“Please have no doubts about mine… You will sit there and shut up, or you will die… Gather your resolve and carefully listen to everything I’m about to tell you… Your lives depend upon it… Yuuki-san, may I use your network port please?”

The elder CEO nodded his head as beads of perspiration slowly trickled down his face, unplugging his own laptop with a shaking hand and allowing Talia to connect a strange device into the vacated port.

“Thank you, Yuuki-san… This device is necessary to allow my associate Dr. Arthur Light access to your carefully guarded network… Your online security team is to be commended by the way… Now, why don’t you take Itami-san’s chair so we may begin.”
Talia smiled as she watched the older man visibly shudder, staring up at her from his wide chair positioned at the head of the table, his wide eyes drifting to where Itami had just been seated, to the place where the bureaucrat’s body now lay slumped in front of a vacated chair, his fallen corpse now nothing more than an ottoman in a three-piece suit.

Talia arched her dark eyebrows in amusement as she nodded towards the dead man’s seat, watching the shaking Shouzou Yuuki clumsily rise and then stumble his way towards the crooked chair where Noriko Itami’s body lay in a growing pool of repugnant crimson.

“Go ahead, take his seat Yuuki-san… I’m sure the previous occupant won’t mind.”

The dark-haired woman waited patiently until the pale CEO had finally sat down, crouching as though he were sitting on top of a land mine, his imploring eyes fixed on Talia the entire time, silently begging to be allowed to stand.

Once Shouzou had accepted his fate, an amused Talia sat down in the CEO’s own vacated chair, swinging her long legs clad in black nylons and designer heels across the mahogany tabletop, taking an easy breath as she leaned backwards in the cushioned chair and stretched out, staring out across her nervous captives as though this were a banquet set for one.

“Now that we have the seating arrangement established, let me first assure you that this is indeed a hostile takeover… I own this company… I own you… I’m through with diplomacy gentlemen, so the nine of you remaining are about to get associated with the real Talia al Ghul…

“Or perhaps should I address myself as Talia Wayne now…

“RECT Progress Inc. will become a private subsidiary of Lazarus Holdings… Which means that all of you work for me… And I will not tolerate failure… Or betrayal…

“To make it clear, if any of you speak about me outside of these walls, I will deal with you as though I were a god of death… I will commit generational genocide, not only killing you and your immediate family… But I will also extinguish your entire bloodline going back to the ascension of Emperor Hirohito in 1929…

“Any questions?... No?... You’re all so quiet… Perhaps you don’t believe me.”

Pausing, Talia reached down beside her and retrieved what appeared to be a black vinyl bowling ball bag, tossing its heavy contents at the feet of a shocked Dr. Rinko Koujiro who suddenly looked as though her tiny heart had skipped a beat.

With her sharp predatory eyes never leaving the ashen face of Akihiko Kayaba’s former lover, the exuberant Talia continued.

“Perhaps some of you feel that I’m making threats which carry no substance… That I’m simply exaggerating in order to make myself appear more… ominous… Shall we put that theory to the test, gentlemen?... Shall we determine just what sort of woman I really am?... Pick up the bag, Rinko.”

Gripped by an intense fear, the diminutive scientist looked down at the black bag at her feet and began to visibly shake, incapable of reaching down to retrieve the dreaded object now laying at her feet like Pandora’s bag of awaiting disaster.

“Why so nervous, Rinko?... Go ahead, pick it up.”

At Talia’s command, the slender woman reluctantly retrieved its heavy contents, shaking noticeably as she lifted the rounded bag from the boardroom floor up to her thighs.
“Now, open it.”

With hot tears smudging her black mascara, an unsteady Dr. Rinko Koujiro struggled to hold onto the bag with one hand while the other managed to grab a hold of its zipper, quivering uncontrollably as the zipper slowly peeled forward, uttering a slow mournful wail as the bag’s grisly contents were gradually revealed to her, her slender legs suddenly collapsing beneath the burden of its gruesome truth...

Staring back at her was the decapitated head of Seijirou Kikuoka, his hexagonal glasses still attached to bloodied ears.

It was over. He was dead. Whatever dreams they had made together were over.

With no other hope remaining, Rinko Koujiro fell forward to the floor and pleaded for her own life.

“Please, Mistress… Please, spare me… I’m sorry.”

The cold-hearted Talia Wayne stood and retrieved a cigarette from her coat pocket, slowly lighting its tip with a metal lighter as she stepped forward to place the pointed heel of her shining shoe on the back of the prostrated scientist’s head, drawing a lungful of smoke before exhaling.

“You’ve been a naughty girl, Rinko… It was you who killed Akihiko Kayaba… You and your new lover both knew Kayaba was the only person who could stop Sword Art Online from progressing once it began… You engaged the soul translation process and killed him shortly before the game even started…

“He never even realized he was dead…

“I admit, the emails from one of Kayaba’s old school accounts was a nice touch, but you simply sent them to yourself after you hacked it… When Batman’s helicopter landed at Kayaba’s secret lab, you feared it was the authorities and doubled back, pretending you had just arrived…

“But the fact remains that your car arrived the day before… You’d already found your way into that mountain hideaway, murdered your former lover, and then simply returned the following day to ensure he was truly dead.”

Rinko sobbed uncontrollably beneath Talia’s three-inch heel.

“I’m… sorry… Mistress.”

The daughter of the demon took another long drag from her cigarette, licked her full lips and absentmindedly flicking dry grey ashes onto the back of the scientist.

“Why be sorry, Rinko?… You gambled your life for the dream of the man whose arms you willingly fell into after the callous Akihiko abandoned you for a digital idol, an idol you could never compete with…

“You betrayed the League after you swore eternal allegiance to my father… You betrayed us for a man’s dream of an adaptive intelligence which would rule humanity… Did you honestly believe there would be no consequences?… That I wouldn’t find out what the two of you had plotted?…

“Why ask for mercy?… We must be willing to live and die for our dreams, Rinko… Even when the secrets no longer remain… We must be willing to die for that cause.”

“Yes… Mistress.”
“Now my sweet little Rinko, the only question that remains is will you do the honourable thing? Lady Shiva is waiting outside with a sharpened Tantō for your seppuku. She will instruct you on the proper procedure to insure an honorable passing from this life…

“Or do you plan to continue grovelling before me like a cowardly girl? Will you force me to take care of you one last time?”

Raising her pointed heel from the back of Koujiro-sensei’s head, Talia watched as the shaken scientist remained prostrated before her.

“I’m… sorry… Mistress… I… can’t.”

The Arabian woman sighed disappointedly and then crushed the discarded cigarette on the floor beneath her twisting shoe tip, calmly pointing her pistol downwards at the back of Rinko’s sobbing head and then pulling the trigger, causing a gasp from the men still seated at the table as it thundered into life while ending the corresponding life of Dr. Rinko Koujiro.

Her tiny body slumped face down to the floor.

Talia took her seat once again, placing the smoking pistol before her as she contemptuously glanced at the horrified men around her.

“What a wonderful life you all must lead, gentlemen… To be so unaccustomed with murder… This is how business has been conducted for millennia… Ten years ago, dear little Rinko became a member of my organization… She was well aware of the price of betrayal and how the League of Shadows deals with betrayal…

“My family mastered the art of brutality centuries ago… My lineage as an al Ghul is synonymous with both terror and absolute obedience… I own a number of businesses, both legal and illegal, worth hundreds of billions of dollars… I’m far wealthier than even my husband suspects… But most importantly, I command an army of assassins, spies and public officials which would have made King Xerxes himself envious…

“Tomorrow morning, the press will be reporting one-hundred-and-seventy-two grisly murders which happened all across Japan… In the days ahead, the Police will determine that all these deaths were linked… That each victim was the direct descendant of Yosuke Kikuoka, a man who died during the bombing of Nagasaki while his three children and wife survived…

“A clever detective will soon discover other murders linked to that most unfortunate man… Slayings which transpired in Singapore, Thailand, Korea, and even America… Each of which will have happened tonight, bringing the total of these senseless acts of violence to over three hundred… Men, women, children… The lineage of Yosuke Kikuoka will not be spared…

“Yosuke Kikuoka… A man who had nothing to do with their deaths except for being the great-great-grandfather of the man whose decapitated head now currently resides in that bowling bag…

“And that man had everything to do with their deaths… Seijirou Kikuoka.”

Talia glanced at the dead scientist behind her.

“Perhaps it’s fitting Rinko died beside her lover. Love is not always honorable.”

Shouzou Yuuki cringed as he bowed his head in grief towards a reflective Talia.

“Wayne-san… I’m begging you… Please… Don’t do this.”
Talia looked at him with the smallest hint of sympathy.

“Too many people, too many plans… I’m tired of playing these games, Shouzou… Your own government is playing you for a fool and Seijirou Kikuoka played us all for fools… Aincrad was simply the world where Kikuoka’s sacred God of Intelligence could have its fill of humanity…”

“Where it could manifest into a reality…”

“The man conspired with Rinko Koujiro to use Sword Art Online as the breeding ground to refine an artificial intelligence to the point where it could propagate itself endlessly… An unbound singularity which would literally turn our world - and all life on it - into its own personal hard drive… Should the players not defeat the game within three years, this was to be the grim future that madman envisioned… The same future he’s already put into place within the Argus servers…”

“And that is a future I will not allow, Yuuki-san… That is why I have taken your company from you… For the sake of humanity’s future.”

The pale man wiped his forehead in consternation.

“But… must you… kill his entire bloodline… for his crime?”

Talia smiled as she leaned forward and placed her chin delicately upon the bridge of her folded hands, staring deeply into the man’s widened eyes as the day’s last crimson rays of sunlight faded from Tokyo.

“Of course I must, Yuuki-san… How else am I going to set an example for the rest of you?”

The following evening, Bruce Wayne laid in bed with his recently returned wife, enjoying the warmth of Talia’s naked body as she snuggled into his broad chest, almost radiating happiness as she kissed his neck.

“I missed you, beloved.”

“I missed you too… I was surprised that you missed Damian’s birthday yesterday though.”

Talia looked up at him with apologetic eyes as she stroked his chest hair under her fingernails.

“Yes, that was unfortunate… However, it was the only time Yuuki-san could fit me into his very busy schedule… And I needed to see him as soon as possible… To save those all those poor players… I admit, it went better than expected, my love… He’s a very reasonable man… RECT has agreed to install our alarms alongside the Japanese players’ NerveGear… With their help, no more lives will be needlessly lost to that cursed game.”

Bruce squeezed her closer, bringing his wife on top of him as her long dark hair fell across his chin.

“And that’s the best present Damian could’ve asked for… That was a very thoughtful gift for our son, Mrs. Wayne.”

As their lips joined in the glow of passion and then parted once more, Talia’s keen eyes held him in their soft gaze as she smiled devilishly and nibbled on his earlobe.

“Of course it was, dearest… After all, what else could a mother get for the boy who has everything?”
Chapter Forty-Five
Confessions and Betrayals

Bruce Wayne awoke with an invisible dragon perched upon his naked chest, the command path along nerves to his well-trained muscles crushed beneath its presence, his body simply refusing to obey the commands of his waking mind as he laid helplessly alone in bed. With a panicked start, his mind beat frantically against the threshold of its sudden isolation, his reason desperately attempting to explain his condition with such words as ‘sleep paralysis’, ‘nightmare’ and ‘spinal injury’…

Until he smelled the cigarette smoke.

Casting his eyes forward in the dim light, he saw her standing next to the closet, calmly lighting a cigarette.

It was his wife who was smoking the cigarette. His wife he didn’t even know smoked.

Talia was dressed in a long black jacket with a fashionable white stripe cut vertically along the center, a flowing black skirt with a winding path of muted flowers dyed into its voluminous fabric, the green of the stems matching the familiar jade necklace which once more embraced her tan neck.

She caught his troubled eyes drifting down to her midsection, the concern held within them evident, causing a sudden sad smile as Talia comprehended their anxious meaning.

“As much as we’ve enjoyed trying, you needn’t worry about me becoming pregnant again, beloved… No, the butchers who handled my first childbirth made sure of that… As those old cows ripped our precious son from my insides, they also took away my ability to conceive another… I’m afraid that even the Lazarus Pit couldn’t cure that.”

“Talia… I can’t… move.”

It was more of a hoarse whisper than words, his lazy tongue hardly lifting.
She drew another drag from her menthol cigarette and replied, the red of the glowing embers reflecting like hellfire in her twinkling eyes.

“Of course you can’t, dearest… I’ve injected you with enough Vecuronium bromide to sedate a silverback gorilla… But don’t worry, you’ll soon be able to move again… In around thirty minutes if my calculations are correct… Long enough for us to have a little chat before I must leave you.”

“Why?”

Talia softly sighed as she folded a hand beneath her elbow.

“Why have I paralyzed you?... I suppose the simple answer is because I love you… That I couldn’t bring myself to kill you… I’m not sure you’ll ever believe me again, dearest… But I love you with all of my resurrected heart, Bruce Wayne…

“You and I… We’re so remarkably similar, and yet so different in perspective… We’re both incredibly intelligent people who want to save the world… Except that I want to save the world from us and you struggle to save us from the world… That terrible world you fashioned in your childhood…

“Did you ever stop to consider that the world is as it should be?... That we’re the ones who are terrible?... Of course you have… You’ve seen humanity at its worst…

“I too watched my mother die as a child… When I saw that skeletal arm emerge from its bubbling green waters, my childish imagination thought that she’d been taken by a monster lurking in the Lazarus Pit…

“It was only later that I realized that it had been her arm…

“From what I remember, she was beautiful, my mother… Just like all mothers should be… And like you, I hardly knew her… But I refuse to let her tragic death predetermine my destiny…

“Because unlike you, it wasn’t until years later that I watched my father die… I watched him fall, his blood pooling on the ground as Lady Shiva’s cold blade plunged through his blackened heart… You could even say I murdered him, Detective… I plotted his death only days after Arthur completed his soul translation… I killed my father when I knew there was another type of immortality available to me…

“You see, as I watched his body burn in the funeral pyre of five gallons of gasoline ignited by my own lighter… I understood that the girl was burning away in those searing flames to reveal the woman who could plot her own destiny, my love… I accepted my fate…

“But you never grew up, did you? You’re still the same ten-year-old boy who helplessly watched his parents die, The raging heart of that terrified boy beating within the body of a man, A world of good and evil separated only by bruised fists, Fists constantly balled in anger, trying to conceal your lonely tears… Hopelessly fighting as you vainly struggle to keep the terrible worlds of man and boy apart.

“Yours is a tale told by a child, beloved… Full of sound and fury, yet signifying nothing.

“Mine is the tale of a woman reborn, A genesis written in binary code and death, And yet, it signifies new life for us all…
“If your world is so terrible that it can no longer be forgiven, I shall create another for you. I have created another...

“My own...

“I am a goddess of creation and a goddess of death...

Choose.”

“Talia… No.”

He was only capable of watching his wife stroll towards him, casually sitting next to him on the bed as she extinguished her cigarette and then gently stroked his hair.

“This goddess forgives you… You’ve already peeled away a layer and glimpsed at the Abyss which is my soul, Detective… But be warned, for every secret you’ve discovered within that darkness, the Abyss has also stared back at you and learned seven more… In fact, I know all your precious secrets, beloved...

“While you and your garish lot battle in the clouds above us, Rome has been burning beneath your irreverent boots… While you stand with those warring gods above, the fire which Prometheus once stole for us now consumes this world...

“Have I painted a bleak picture?… Impeached your inalienable doctrine that all life is precious?… I doubt you’re capable of understanding how precious it is… How lucky we are as individuals to even have the opportunity to die...

“I’ve already told you I have no intention of saving this world one victim at a time… The game I’m playing has much larger stakes, dearest… But you know my crimes, don’t you?... From your computer, I see that you’ve uncovered perhaps fifteen percent of my illicit operations already… I watched you secretly hoping that these businesses were the legacy of my father, a dark legacy which I simply inherited...

“They are mine, I assure you… I require them to fund my research… To build my new world… To pave the road to our salvation...

“Do you wonder why I’m telling you all this?… Why I’m choosing this exact moment to enlighten you?...

“I’ve pushed my chips to the center of the table… By noon, I’m sure you would have uncovered that my operatives have murdered Seijirou Kikuoka… A madman with dreams of creating his own artificial god of Intelligence at any cost… You remember him and his silly glasses, don’t you?...

“I made sure he regretted telling you those plans, by the way… Just as I regretted being forced to put down my own operative, Rinko Koujiro… A discarded woman who’d fallen under his erudite spell.”

“Talia… You’re insane!”

That cold smile unnerved him more than the Joker’s own grin ever had.

“Insane?… Oh no, beloved… I am something far worse than that… I am a rational woman who loves you.”

Bruce watched as Talia carefully removed the jade necklace from around her neck as he struggled to
make his useless body react…

With no success.

“I’m afraid I lied to you about one more thing, my love… This necklace I constantly wear wasn’t a gift from my late mother… It’s a portable hard drive that records my memories and emotions at a neurological level… So long as I wear it, at least…

“Every night, I upload a day of my life to servers on Infinity Island…

“Because unlike Arthur, I couldn’t perform a complete soul translation… I told you the process need not be lethal, but to create a true digital consciousness like Dr. Light has achieved, the ultimate leap of faith must be made… A full translation is lethal… When a human brain is doused with those high levels of radiation, enough to completely scan the neuron transfer, it’s impossible to survive with our current level of technology…

“And I have so much more work to do before I leave this world…

“So this necklace records my life… A device similar to RECT’s AmuSphere with a hard drive built in… Technology you’re about to become very familiar with… Did I mention that my meeting went extremely well?… Wayne Industries is about to become the primary distributor of AmuSphere technology…

“Exciting, isn’t it?…

“Anyways, this necklace allows me to record my life and build my own digital ghost, day-by-day… I’m slowly uploading my existence… Actually, we’ve already become good friends, her and I… Like mother and daughter… Like myself, she’s a clever girl who can’t understand why you’re so pigheaded, but there we have it…

“Our primary disparity…

“You believe in the good of the one, I believe in the good of the many… So that is why we had to be reconciled, my husband… In Yin, there is a bit of Yang and in Yang, there is a corresponding bit of Yin… We needed to know one another once more…

“Do you remember the story I told you of Nefertem?... The first boy born to existence from a blue water lily who brought forth human life according to the ancient Egyptians?...

“That is our son…

“These things I have done are required to build a perfect Universe for Damian to inherit… A Universe of endless possibility that humanity may share with our own glorious Nefertem… Grand aspirations for a mother to have, I admit… It was the greatest hope of both Arthur and I that Alice and Damian could shape this Universe together in another fifteen years… The male and female gods of their own creation mythos…

“But as they say, the best laid plans…

“Dear Alice was seduced away by Kayaba and now it seems some little Japanese minx has already sunk her claws into our boy… An artful creature who used her feminine wiles to make him fall head over heels… I hear they’re quite passionate within the game, creating quite a scandal amongst their guilds…”

Talia sighed deeply and then smiled at Bruce as she tapped his nose.
“A true lady’s man… I suppose he’s his father’s son after all.”

“He’s twelve.”

“In my culture, marriages are made by that age… Not that I would approve of their union… This ambitious girl is not one I would ever allow Damian to wed… But a boy should have a chance to sow his wild oats… Just like his errant father and a little Cat-whore we know…”

Bruce narrowed his eyes as Talia put a finger over his lips to silence his reply.

“Despite what you may tell yourself, you’re only a man, beloved… I’m quite aware of all your little dalliances… Baseless women who dress like a cat in heat, gold-digging reporters who could never comprehend you, vapid socialites, scantily-clad magicians… Even an Amazon Princess in a garrulous bikini.”

Talia flipped over her hand to hold her left ring finger in front of his blue eyes.

“But I’m the one who wears your ring… I’m the one who bore your child… Despite how you may feel about me at this moment, never forget that… I’m not so naïve as to expect you to have remained faithful to me… Millions of years of hormonal evolution has allowed a man’s lust to trump his limited reason…

“If only men had some conception as to what a woman’s love is truly capable of before they so recklessly sought it out, the world might be vastly different…”

“Even a digital world…”

“You’re beginning to put it together, aren’t you?... The soul translation process is what happens inside the NerveGear when players die in Sword Art Online… Except the player becomes data, not an entity…”

“To be honest, I’m not sure whose idea it was to make the equipment perform that feat… Akihiko Kayaba or Alice Light… I’m leaning towards her though… The idea would’ve enthralled Akihiko I’m sure, but Alice would’ve had so much more to gain…”

“I suspect our little Miss Light made Kayaba equip the NerveGear with the technology so it could perform a mini-soul-translation, to send that data back to Argus… Back to her… Collecting a player’s memories and emotions… Stealing their soul in a manner of speaking, all so she could understand what it is to be human… To be more than human…”

“When I think about it like that, I honestly believe it was Alice who seduced Kayaba and not the other way around… But I’d never tell Arthur this of course… It would break his digital heart.”

Bruce watched as Talia re-affixed the necklace, suddenly realizing that she’d purposely taken it off so that her suspicions wouldn’t be recorded. That perhaps Arthur Light truly believed that his cybernetic daughter was still nothing more than an innocent girl who’d been lured by a Japanese genius to run his game.

“I am sorry to have betrayed you like this, beloved… There was a slim chance you may have come around to see things my way, but it was miniscule at best… You’re haunted by the nightmare of your past and unable to open your eyes… You’ve grown comfortable in the dark place of your dreams…”

“I understand nightmares only too well… You wear the shackles of your guilt and can’t move forward… Myself, I swim against the oceans of grief… Neither of us can escape our tragic pasts…”
“Or our tragic destinies…

“But our son will live for a very long time… It was important for me to show him that we could love one another at least… That in another time, we could live as man and woman… Husband and wife… Mother and father…

“And I thank you for that… You’ve satisfied the dreams of a pining girl staring out her window for her Dark Knight to come… But you dared not involve yourself in in the dreams of the woman.”

He watched as she stood and gathered a small suitcase.

“I must say farewell… But I leave you with a warning, beloved… There are still seven thousand players trapped within Sword Art Online… The alarm which RECT Progress has just installed alongside their NerveGear is just as capable of sending the death signal as the game ever was… Except there will be no ten-second warning should I decide to send it…

“If you interfere with my work, players will die… I have the code… Arthur has the code… Their lives are now in your hands.”

“Talia… you… can’t.”

She turned to stare at him with frightening eyes, chilling his lifeless bones to the marrow.

“I could… If you have any doubts as to my resolve on this matter, I’ve provided you with an example of my commitment which involves the entire Kikuoka bloodline… It’s necessary for you to understand how far I’m prepared to go…

“In fact, I’m sure it’s all over the news by now… Take heed, Detective… The stakes are simply too high for you to win this deadly game… Do not play it… Farewell.”

Fifteen minutes later, he could finally move his fingers.

Twenty minutes later, Bruce Wayne managed to swing his unresponsive legs off the bed and retrieve the Justice League emergency beacon from his nightstand’s drawer.

Thirty minutes after Talia had departed, a god dressed in red and blue floated above the floor of his darkened cave as Bruce took the Bat-computer offline, knowing only too well it had been breached by the most dangerous woman he’d ever known…

His wife.

The recently arrived Man of Steel placed a comforting hand on his shoulder as the master of Wayne Estate wearily pulled on his signature mask to complete his transition into Batman.

“She’s really holding seven thousand players hostage then… Are you alright, Bruce?”

“I’m angry… She played me for a fool… A damned fool.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll find her… There’s no way she could have left the country yet.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure… We need to talk… Could you scan my body for any hidden surprises though?… The after-effects of Vecuronium bromide might be the least of my worries.”

The Kryptonian used his X-Ray vision to examine Bruce Wayne at an atomic level.

“You’re good… When did you have the operation on your knee?”
“Two months ago… I’m fine… Look, I know you can find her… But you don’t understand what you’re up against, Clark… Besides holding the lives of those seven thousand players hostage, I’ve been researching Talia for the past six months… She’s never taken an IQ test, but I’m willing to wager her intellect is on par with Lex Luthor… She’ll know you’re coming.”

Superman folded his arms and grinned.

“Lex Luthor intelligence?… Really?… Or did you have your rose-coloured glasses on when you were checking your wife out?… Admit it, you’ve always had a soft spot for her, Bruce… She simply played you.”

“Clark, I’m deadly serious… This isn’t easy for me to admit, but she’s smarter than I am… Richer too… Don’t underestimate her… The reason I couldn’t find out much about Talia is because she didn’t want me to… In six months, I’ve only been able to crack the surface of her new League of Shadows.”

Bruce drew a long sigh before he continued.

“But my wife uncovered everything on my network.”

Superman suddenly became grim as he grasped the enormity of that statement. That Talia Wayne had purged all Batman’s darkest secrets from his hidden database.

“Bruce… Please tell me you don’t have our secret identities on your computer.”

The Dark Knight glanced at the stone floor and then forced himself to stare into Superman’s accusatory gaze, his fists balling in anger as he gathered another deep breath.

“I swear to God… I thought my encryption was unbreakable… Clark, I’m…”

The sudden sonic boom echoing off the cold stone walls as thousands of bats suddenly dropped from their suspended perches above stopped Bruce Wayne in mid-sentence, his words lost amongst the high-pitched wails of countless leather-winged creatures and the breathtaking departure of the most powerful being on the planet.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note:

I’ve mentioned this before in my previous fics but my greatest joy as a FanFic author is making a well-known character my own. Developing that already established character in some new and interesting way to unveil them as something original. To create a beautiful hybrid of someone who’s familiar, but also somehow strikingly different.

Look, I know many of you are angry at Talia’s villain turn, and just to be clear, you’re supposed to be angry. She’s a villain after all. Villains antagonize the heroes, it’s just what they do.

But for me, she’s the most interesting and thought-provoking character of the entire piece. As a fan of the genre, she’s what I get excited about.
Sure, having Damian in the World of Swords is fun and the hook that got you here, but his mother Talia is the philosophy of this story. She is the plot. While Damian deals with Alice and Sword Art Online, Talia is the ultimate challenge Bruce must face.

And what a challenge…

The evil female mastermind is an archetype you hardly ever see in comics. While DC has an entire roster of great female villains, how many of these ladies could be compared to Lex Luthor? Or Bruce Wayne for that matter. If you can think of any, feel free to leave some examples in the comments. For this author, crafting a woman who’s lethal, devoted to her goals and possesses both a genius-level IQ and an army of assassins at her disposal is surprisingly refreshing.

Yes, writers are weird that way.

In a way, I like to think of Talia al Ghul as Batman’s Lex Luthor.

That doesn’t mean it’s easy for me to write about what she’s about to do in this chapter. Lex is a megalomaniac but only a murderer when left with no other option. Talia is a revolutionary, completely devoted to achieving her ideals at any cost. In a way, I believe the daughter of the demon has come to view her current reality as the game and the eternal digital afterlife she’s creating as the true existence.

When you think about what she’s trying to do though, about what she’s trying to create, it’s actually pretty amazing. Imagine immersing yourself into something like Sword Art Online and never having to leave. You actually live there. Except that this time, when you die in the game, you just start over again.

There is no death because you’re software. You’re an artificial intelligence that has all your memories, emotions and quirks from the life before but now you’re a virtual person in a virtual world. A living ghost in the machine.

Bored of SAO? Try another game world. Tired of games? You can learn about anything you’d like. Even work with other digital people to solve the world’s problems. Or create new worlds where only the fictional characters that you like exist and even become one of them.

Or all of them.

The hero of your own imagination.

No work, no hunger, unlimited freedom to do as you please.

Digital Paradise for a Digital Soul is waiting for you and you’re free to interact with your old reality as a hologram…

All this can be yours if Talia gets her way.

Would you honestly stop her?
I’ve mentioned this before in my previous fics but my greatest joy as a FanFic author is making a well-known character my own. Developing that already established character in some new and interesting way to unveil them as something original. To create a beautiful hybrid of someone who’s familiar, but new.

In “Elsewhere” it was Raven. In “Bat-Hunting”, it was Selina Kyle. In this story, it’s Talia al Ghul.

Look, I know many of you are angry at Talia’s villain turn, and just to be clear, you’re supposed to be angry. She’s a villain after all. Villains antagonize the heroes, it’s just what they do.

But for me, she’s the most interesting and thought-provoking character of the entire piece. As a fan of the genre, she’s what I get excited about.

Sure, having Damian in the World of Swords is fun and the hook that got you here, but his mother Talia is the philosophy of this story. She is the plot. While Damian deals with Alice and Sword Art Online, Talia is the ultimate challenge Bruce must face.

And what a challenge…

The evil female mastermind is an archetype you hardly ever see in comics. While DC has an entire roster of great female villains, how many of these ladies could be compared to Lex Luthor? Or Bruce Wayne for that matter. If you can think of any, feel free to leave some examples in the comments. For this author, crafting a woman who’s lethal, devoted to her goals and possesses both a genius-level IQ and an army of assassins at her disposal is surprisingly refreshing.

Yes, writers are weird that way.

In a way, I like to think of this version of Talia al Ghul as Batman’s Lex Luthor.

That doesn’t mean it’s easy for me to write about what she’s about to do in this chapter. Lex is a megalomaniac but only a murderer when left with no other option. Talia is a revolutionary, completely devoted to achieving her ideals at any cost. In a way, I believe the daughter of the demon has come to view her current reality as the game and the eternal digital afterlife she’s actively creating as the true existence.

When you think about what she’s trying to do though, about all she’s trying to create, it’s actually pretty amazing. Imagine immersing yourself into something like Sword Art Online and never having to leave. You actually live there. Except that this time, when you die in the game, you just start over again.

There is no death because you’re software. You’re an artificial intelligence that has all your memories, emotions and quirks from the life before but now you’re a virtual person in a virtual world. A living ghost in the machine free to interact with your old reality as a hologram…

Bored of SAO? Try another game world. Tired of games? You can learn about anything you’d like. Even work with other digital people to solve the world’s problems.
Or create new worlds where only the fictional characters that you like exist and even become one of them.

Or all of them.

The hero of your own imagination except imagination is now reality.

No work, no hunger, unlimited freedom to do as you please.

Digital Paradise for a Digital Soul is waiting for you.

All this can be yours if Talia gets her way.

Would you honestly stop her?
Chapter Forty-Six
Superman vs. Talia al Ghul
As he streaked across the night-clouded skies of an unsleeping Gotham like a red-and-blue hornet, Superman silently cursed the name of Bruce Wayne for the thousandth time from a thousand feet above that broken man’s city.

Batman had always been too damned smart for his own good.

Too smart for all their damned good.

And once again, he was left to pick up the pieces. To find the woman who’d betrayed him.

There were no signs of Talia near the harbour or the airports, only the impressions of her helicopter which had landed on the extensive grounds of Wayne Manor less than an hour ago and the faintest hint of exhaust fumes heading west.

West…

In the pit of his stomach, Clark suddenly had a sickening suspicion as to where he might find her. She’ll know you’re coming…

Bruce’s words suddenly came back to haunt him.

If Talia had broken into Batman’s computer and learned their secret identities (and all the other nasty little secrets the far too clever Bruce had squirreled away from them over the years), it wouldn’t be too difficult to figure out the relationship between Lois Lane and Clark Kent.

Especially since they’d moved in together last year.

The cold hand of fear around his heart was his greatest fear realized…

It was the reason why he’d been so reluctant to allow such an amazing woman into his private life as Superman… A reluctance predicated by this very moment, this heart-gripping moment when he feared that someone like Lex Luthor might learn of his all-too-human secret identity and then use Lois Lane against him…

Because if his life as Clark Kent were ever exposed, that life was over.

And likely Lois Lane’s as well.

Even if he saved her this time, it wouldn’t matter anymore. If the world ever learned he was Clark Kent, Lois would never be safe again, his spirited reporter-girlfriend becoming the easiest way to hurt him, a weapon even more powerful than Kryptonite…

“Damn you, Bruce.”

With renewed purpose, the Man of Steel tore off like a rocket towards a sleeping Metropolis.

From a distance of five miles, he almost breathed a sigh of relief as he used his telescopic and X-Ray vision, thinking it might be Lois sitting quietly in their living room, waking up only to find herself alone once more and suddenly wondering where her man might be this time, perhaps putting on the kettle to make herself a cup of tea as she sat on the sofa all by herself...

Except that it wasn’t her.
Because Lois didn’t smoke.

The gust of wind from the open balcony announced his arrival so that a waiting Talia al Ghul didn’t even need to look around to see that the most powerful being on the planet had just returned to his modest home.

“WHERE IS SHE, TALIA?!?”

Clark watched the steady woman calmly bring the recently lit cigarette to her lips, turning to face him. She’d left the balcony doors open which meant that she had been expecting his arrival.

“Keep your voice down, Kal-El… She’s safe… Well, safe so long as you don’t leave this apartment that is.”

The fact that she’d called him by his Kryptonian name was her little way of letting him know that she had all of Bruce’s files at her disposal. Not willing to take chances, Clark scanned the surrounding area for any signs of lead or Kryptonite and then used his X-Ray vision to detect any signs of assassins within a mile radius.

Nothing.

But no Lois either.

If this were a trap, it wasn’t an obvious one.

In her black-and-white jacket, the leader of the League of Shadows rose to her feet and carelessly dropped her cell phone into her purse, eyeing the Man of Steel as he floated above a plush carpet in which he’d memorized every fibre.

Clark couldn’t help but notice that she was still wearing her wedding ring as she took his full measure with another drag of her menthol cigarette and blew smoke in his direction.

“You don’t need to hover there and look intimidating like some vengeful god, Superman. I’m perfectly aware of what you’re capable of. I’m only here to talk.”

Clark hovered menacingly closer.

“If you’re aware of what I can do, then start talking and tell me where Lois is… I’d prefer not to show you what I can do firsthand, but if you keep playing this twisted game Talia… I will.”

His uninvited guest looked unconvinced as she rubbed her forehead and then ran splayed fingers through long dark hair.

“Is this to be show and tell?… I don't think you'll like that game… I can bring your entire world crashing down upon you, Superman.”

“You wouldn’t have the chance.”

“Oh, come now… Let’s not resort to juvenile threats, Kal-El… We’re both adults… I simply wanted to chat.”

“Tell me where Lois is.”

“That’s entirely up to you… Did my husband ever tell you he has nuclear launch codes on his computer?… No?… I’m not surprised… I mean, why would he even keep such dangerous things on file?… I’m sure he mentioned that I’m holding nearly seven thousand players hostage though…”
Surely that gives you pause.”

Superman slowly stopped to float directly in front of her, glaring down with angry eyes which they both knew could melt steel.

“He mentioned the hostages… Bruce also told me that you had 172 innocent people murdered for no other reason than they were related to a man who should’ve been brought before the Japanese courts.”

Talia paused for an instant.

“It was actually 301… Well, I suppose the news from the other countries hasn’t quite made its way to Japan yet… Oh relax, they’re already dead… No last-minute heroics are required on your part… I’ve also saved you the worry of expressing your deepest sympathies to the remaining family members… There are none… An entire bloodline extinguished… I’m nothing if not thorough.”

Clark felt something inside him lurch as his tightening gut suddenly comprehended the fundamental difference between Talia al Ghul and his own arch nemesis, Lex Luthor.

“You’re a sociopath.”

Bruce’s wife smiled.

“Nonsense. You and I simply have different value systems... As for me, I’m an intelligent revolutionary who doesn’t mind getting her hands dirty… You’re an overpowered boy scout.”

“Value system?… How much do you value Bruce?... You broke his heart, Talia.”

She took a long drag on her menthol cigarette as hatred set into her hardened eyes.

“He’ll recover. He always does… Likely in the arms of the Cat-whore.”

“He trusted you!”

“And he still can… My priorities haven’t changed, Kryptonian… Only my methods… I’m still trying to save this world by providing humanity with a better one.”

Talia glanced down at her nearly finished cigarette reflectively, a melancholy haze painting itself across her pensive stare as Clark stared at her.

“Your family’s ideals has always been that the world would be better without people… It seems you’ve embraced them... This is a no-smoking apartment by the way.”

It was all she could do not to laugh. The god who was floating six inches off the floor was now telling her the rules of the condominium board he so willingly obeyed as dictated by a fat landlord he could’ve turned into microscopic ash with a single swipe of his all-powerful hand.

He was a deity who could’ve levelled this entire building with a single swipe of that hand if he so wished.

But he wouldn’t.

She was almost ashamed for him.

“You’re trying far too hard to be human, Kryptonian… It cheapens you.”
“At least one of us is.”

“Touché… You know, I’ve always envisioned how this conversation would go… I was quite aware we would have to face one another eventually… You’re not nearly as clever as I envisioned though… You’re far too emotional.”

Talia paused and then allowed herself a dry smile, still eying her smouldering cigarette as she continued.

“I gave up these wretched things nearly thirteen years ago… The very day I discovered I was pregnant with Damian… I’ve always considered myself a good mother, Kal-El… I could’ve been a good wife as well, if he’d been willing to accept me… But I suppose it doesn’t matter now, does it?”

Something about the way she’d said it caused his blue eyes to examine beyond the skull of his uninvited guest, using X-Ray vision to suddenly discover an abnormality within Talia’s brain which could only mean one thing…

Superman’s expression fell, a sudden weight on his countenance as he began to unravel the mystery of why this powerful woman had destroyed her husband’s trust...

It was because she was dying.

“How long have you had the tumour?”

Talia ran her hand through her dark hair once more and then sighed audibly.

“Two years… It’s anaplastic astrocytoma, quite rare… Most likely due to the high levels of radiation when I performed my limited soul translation on Infinity Island… At first, I wrote off the headaches as stress, but after my seizure nine months ago, I finally decided to see a specialist… I’m afraid the news wasn’t very good… With the right treatment, I might have another two to three years left.”

“Does Bruce know?”

“Of course not.”

Superman crossed his arms, realizing she wasn’t lying. The tumour was advanced, meaning she might have two years left.

“What about the Lazarus Pit? Surely that would heal you.”

“It would… But shortly after I made a bonfire out of my father’s corpse, I had that cursed pit destroyed forever… Ra’s al Ghul has this nasty habit of being resurrected you see, no matter what you do to him... I simply couldn’t take the chance of my father interfering with my carefully laid plans…

“Especially after I had him murdered to assume control of his empire…

“I suspect he’d have me cryogenically frozen and buried under two miles of ice in the Antarctic if he were ever brought back to this world again… To put it rather bluntly, my father needed the pit far more than I did… And as my husband has already made you aware, I’m perfecting my own system of immortality… Digital immortality.”

Clark continued to survey the surroundings as she spoke.

“So why not just complete your own soul translation then? If you truly believe in a digital afterlife,
what possible reason could you have to murder all these people?"

“Because my work here isn’t done… A good pharaoh inspires his slaves at the end of a whip… Murder just happens to be the whip my father left me.”

There were few times when the Man of Steel had to gather himself.

This was one of them.

“Look, I’m sorry that you’re dying… But having a brain tumour doesn’t give you the right to murder people… You’re going to have to face justice for these crimes, Talia... I have to take you in.”

She openly laughed at him then.

“Oh dear God, are you truly that stupid?… You realize I accessed all my husband’s files, don’t you?... I now have the destructive power of humanity at my disposal.”

“I won’t be blackmailed, Talia.”

“Blackmail?… Who wants to blackmail you?... I’m talking about destroying your humanity… Shall we start with your secret identity?... Perhaps the life of Lois Lane?... Seven thousand innocent players?... Maybe Iris Allen… Her husband’s working yet another night shift which means poor Iris is all alone yet again in that nice white picket-fence house in the suburbs of Central City…

“Well, maybe not totally alone…

“But let’s not stop there… Riddle me this, Man of Steel… What’s green and blonde and filled with arrows?... I’ll bet you didn’t know I have seven archers who are better than Oliver Queen in every possible way… They’d just love the opportunity to hunt that pretentious boor down like some prized stag and claim the title…

“And I wonder if you have any concept of just how many of my operatives work for the Center for Disease Control?... What kind of nasty end-of-the-world viruses we have access to…

“I’ve acquired quite a collection myself…

“But just how much damage Dr. Arthur Light could do to the world’s computer systems… After all, he broke through Bruce’s sacred encryptions and they were the best in the world… Just imagine what he could do the White House… The Kremlin… Air Traffic Control… World financial markets…

“But perhaps with my husband’s codes, dear Arthur could launch a hundred nuclear missiles simultaneously towards China… That would certainly be catastrophic, wouldn’t it?... So tell me… Is your sense of Kansas justice still so precious to you, Superman?... Are the lives of a few hundred worth the billions of corpses I’ll happily lay at your feet?...

“Because unlike you, I will do anything to achieve my goals… Even killing people…

“But you’re correct about one thing, brain cancer doesn’t give me the right to murder people… I was born an al Ghul… I am my father’s daughter… That gives me the right to murder people.”

Superman stopped.

It could’ve all been a bluff, but somehow…

Somehow, he knew it wasn’t.
There was a man somewhere with a gun pointed at Lois’s head. Seven thousand players could die with a single command. Green Arrow might be on the last patrol of his life and Iris Allen may never wake up, leaving the Flash a shattered man.

And could even Superman stop one hundred nuclear warheads launched from various sites across the world? What about the retaliatory counter-strike from Asia? What would he do then?

In a crushing realization, Clark suddenly comprehended that he was facing the ultimate terrorist who’d played them for fools.

Lungs which could create hurricanes became breathless.

“You planned it all, didn’t you? From the very start. Taking control of his company, stealing his files…”

“You finally understand, Kryptonian… Damian was merely a distraction to keep my beloved out of my private affairs while I rewrite the future… When Damian inadvertently became involved in my work thanks to Kayaba’s treachery, I had to once again take my clever man out of the game…”

“I hoped he might solve the mystery of who killed Akihiko Kayaba first of course, but he’s not infallible, is he?… You more than anyone know that… So I had to work it out on my own…”

“I worked out a lot of things on my own…”

“And I might have left my husband in his dream world forever if I didn’t develop this little condition… If I didn’t need Wayne Industries to distribute the AmuSphere technology so quickly… LexCorp was always an option of course, but with Luthor currently in jail thanks to you, that company’s leadership has become a legal quagmire…”

“Quite a mess, really…”

“And reconciliation with my legendary lover gave me one additional overwhelming advantage that LexCorp never could… My beloved Bruce kept files on all of you… Your identities, your weaknesses, your personalities, your relationships…”

“The best wedding gift a clever girl like me could ever receive…”

“So when I learned of my brain tumour last December, the path became crystal clear… I needed access to information on Batman’s computer and control of Bruce’s company… I needed him to carry me across the threshold of Bifröst to Valhalla to where I could stand as an equal amongst the gods… That means you, by the way… And with this golden ring he placed around my finger, he gave me that opportunity…”

“And now, here we are… The fate of this world hanging in the balance… The god of the present standing before the goddess of the future.”

“What do you want, Talia?”

“A cup of tea to start… Your kettle finished boiling shortly before you arrived.”

It was a surreal moment.
Over the cusp of her Daily Planet mug filled with Earl Grey tea and heavy cream, Talia al Ghul smiled at a worried Clark and then curiously blew steam from the top of her beverage.

“This tea is hotter than it should be.”

“I used my heat vision to warm it up.”

“How wonderful… Can I tell you a story while I drink this and you brood?”

He eyed her with an uneasy contempt.

“Do I have a choice?”

“Don’t be ridiculous… You’re Superman… You have all the choice in the Universe… But I think this is one you’ll find particularly interesting… It’s all about you…

“Fifteen years ago, while I was completing my second doctorate in Europe, I happened to learn from a League operative that the American government had brought together some of its brightest minds behind the tightly closed doors of the Pentagon to conduct a rather interesting thought experiment…

“One of those brightest minds was a League scientist so that’s how I know all this… Another was your brilliant Mr. Luthor… Even the illustrious Dr. T.O. Morrow attended… I would have loved to been there…

“Anyways, once these various geniuses had assembled, this question was posed by the President himself… What if Superman went rogue?… What if this great and powerful hero suddenly wanted to destroy us?… Could we stop him?…

“How?…

“Of course, there was the patented Kryptonite response… Some even speculated that we might secretly clone your DNA to create a government brainwashed super-clone… Actually, I believe someone already tried that… Cadmus, was it?… And then, Shazam and Captain Atom were also mentioned as deterrents…

“But Lex Luthor quickly quashed these ideas as ineffective… He reasoned that if Superman truly wanted to destroy the world, he wouldn’t bother slugging it out with some other superhero or even give us a chance to respond… He’d simply take the path of least resistance…

“You’d fly away and then return like the vengeance of God upon this world…

“At top speed, you travel at something we scientists refer to - with tongue-in-cheek of course - as ‘Oh-My-God’ speed… It’s when a particle achieves velocity so close to that of a photon as to be practically indistinguishable… It’s as fast as matter dares to travel before it shreds the very fabric of time and reality…

“Around the same top speed as the Flash can achieve… A speed he so rarely dares to travel as he’ll literally run off the edge of the world and into space due to momentum…

“But that’s not something you need to worry about, Kal-El…

“The illustrious Mr. Luthor postulated that you would simply take off straight up towards the sun while our eardrums shattered from the sonic shockwaves your departure created… In perhaps nine or ten minutes, you’d use the sun’s gravitational field to slingshot yourself back towards the Earth, achieving that ‘Oh-My-God’ speed I just mentioned, racing the rays of our beloved star on your
return trip back home…

“To a scientific mind, a man of your mass travelling at the speed of light is a frightening concept… The asteroid which created the Chicxulub crater in the Gulf of Mexico and killed off the dinosaurs sixty-six million years ago would seem like a rock dropped from this balcony to the street below in comparison… The momentum of your impact would be enough to knock the Earth into a different orbit…

“But that wouldn’t matter anymore…

“Because there wouldn’t be an Earth…

“You’d hit with a kinetic momentum that’s ten thousand times greater than this planet’s gravitational binding energy… This poor blue-and-green world would literally turn itself inside out before it instantly became an expanding cloud of molten plasma spreading out across endless space at unbelievable speeds…

“In moments, the Sun hiccups and flares as it absorbs the waves of dust which used to be the third planet of its solar system. The surfaces of Mars and Venus are scoured clean by waves of this incredibly high-energy plasma, our last legacy as a celestial entity…

“In brilliant fashion, the Earth is utterly destroyed eighteen minutes after you decided that it should be and there wasn’t a damned thing we could do about it…

“But then, Lex Luthor presented this group of pale-faced scholars with perhaps the most damning revelation of all…

“That according to his extensive calculations, he was convinced that you would actually survive this apocalyptic event… That when everything and everyone we ever knew was instantly transformed into nothing more than space dust blowing in the cosmic wind…

“There would still be a Superman…

“Reassuring, isn’t it?…

“In light of this evidence, Mr. Luthor reasoned that the only logical way to deal with a threat of such unimaginable magnitude was to eliminate it… That however unlikely it might seem, whatever reprehensible taste the deed would leave in our ethical palette as humans, that the odds of such a tragic event being allowed to occur must become zero… For all of our sakes…

“Put simply, he postulated that Superman must be destroyed.”

Clark looked at her darkly through clear blue eyes, understanding a little more why Luthor had always hated him. Why the smartest man on the planet had always feared him.

“And do you share that belief?”

“Of course not… You’re far too in love with humanity to do something so egregious… At least willingly… I could ask you the same thing about myself.”

“You don’t want to destroy the world, only computerize humanity.”

He watched as Talia set down her tea cup and calmly pulled a fresh cigarette from her pack, holding its tip in front of his unbelieving eyes.
“Then we begin to have an understanding… We see each other as we truly are, Kal-El… I simply ask for the same consideration that the men of that meeting gave to you… That however dangerous you might be, they still trusted you with the future of this fragile world.”

He watched as Talia set down her tea cup and calmly pulled a fresh cigarette from her pack, holding its tip in front of his unbelieving eyes.

“Would you mind?”

With incredulous disgust, he comprehended what she was asking.

“I’m not going to use my heat vision to light your cigarette.”

“No?... That’s a shame… But I never did like Green Arrow anyways… Such a ridiculous reason for a man to die though, don’t you think?”

Twin points of heat beams converged on the tip of her cigarette before the leader of the League of Shadows drew it to her grinning mouth and inhaled.

“Thank you… Such a disparaging look, Superman… How many women can say they’ve had a cigarette lit by a man’s eyes?... It’s quite an honour actually.”

“I can put it out just as easily.”

“Of course you could… You could obliterate me in the blink of an eye… But I’m also aware of what you’re not capable of… And that’s jeopardizing your friends… You’re too concerned about being perceived as good.”

“You should try it sometime.”

Talia’s expression soured as she blew smoke towards the open balcony.

“I did… For the first twenty-five years of my life, I was an obedient wretch… Even dying in childbirth to produce a male heir from the loin of the man my father chose to fill my womb…

“The perfect virgin sacrifice for my father’s eternal patriarchy…

“Was that not good?...

“And yet, I still loved them both… A lover who ran from my side the moment I gave him his freedom and a father who dictated my life and progeny… Was I not perfect feminine humility, a woman to be bedded, impregnated and then discarded?...

“Trust me, I’ve seen what good does to members of my sex… It’s not doing you much good either, Kal-El of Krypton… But you never asked me the important question… About what decision all those intelligent people gathered around your political masters eventually came up with.”

Powerful arms once again folded across a broad chest as he answered.

“You already told me… They realized I wouldn’t destroy the world and trusted me to protect it.”

“No, they hoped you wouldn’t destroy it… These clever men formulated a plan to increase those odds… The ticker tape parades, the congressional medals, the bronze statues of you with flowing cape decorating the beautiful parks of Metropolis… They made you the living god of America, Kal-El… A golden idol for the masses…
“They appeased you.”

He sighed like an annoyed teacher on a Monday afternoon.

“I’m not the government’s puppet and I don’t care about the accolades, Talia… All I care about is saving people… Including Lois Lane… So answer my question… What is it that you want?”

“Succinct as ever, Superman… Very well… I want humanity to live forever as digital entities in worlds of our own creation… Myself included… I want you to realize I’m a force you dare not oppose and for your kind to stay out of my way as I create the AfterLife… Bronze statues of my likeness in Metropolis park are appreciated of course, but certainly not required.”

“You want us to capitulate when you’re murdering innocent people?… When you kidnap Lois and then threaten the lives of my friends?… Threaten a nuclear holocaust?”

“I want you to capitulate by any means necessary.”

Talia paused as she drew cigarette smoke into her lungs and then continued.

“I wonder though…

“As a people, what will happen to us when we realize that Heaven and Hell were within our grasp the entire time?… I’m writing the gospel according to full-dive technology… That good, evil and death never mattered to electrons… Why should they matter to us?… I’m creating a much better existence.”

“I’m not sure humanity is ready for that.”

“I’m human… I’m ready… Just imagine if Krypton had been ready… What if your space craft had contained the entire consciousness of your dead world when it landed upon ours?”

“I don’t know what would’ve happened… I only know I have Identity Matrix Crystals of my parents and that it’s enough to remember them by.”

She looked at him sympathetically.

“Yes, my husband told me about these… But it’s not really them, is it?… Your Kryptonian crystals are mere snapshots of their current personality, a beautiful record of how they were at that point in time… But it’s not truly them…

“It must be so painful for you to be haunted by their ghosts.”

Superman looked away, peering at the walls.

“It is, but I’ve accepted it… Perhaps you should come to grip with your own mortality as well… You have a husband, a son.”

Talia stared back at him accusingly.

“I have no intention of dying a second time… But it seems you’ve come to grips with a lot of things, Superman… Perhaps too many…

“Have you never considered that in one afternoon, you could eliminate organized crime within Gotham?… And yet, you let my husband struggle nightly when he doesn’t need to… Constantly risking his life for a goal you could achieve in hours…
“And what of Star City?... Jump City?... What of those countries ruled by merciless tyrants where women and children are slaughtered daily or used as slaves?... Why don’t you help them?... Simply because they’re not American?... Which means you’re either a political tool, a sadist, or the sociopath you accused me of being as well... Tell me, which is it?”

Clark turned back to face her.

“You’re right... I could do more... But I’m not here to play God, Talia... As painful as it is, humanity must solve its own issues... Learn from its mistakes and seek to be better... I came to the understanding a long time ago that I can save people, perhaps not everyone, but I do what I can to help...

“I won’t forcibly alter the course of human society... And I shouldn’t... Even if I could, I wouldn’t remake the world in my image... I don’t have that right.”

Talia smiled as she turned and dropped her cigarette into the remnants of her tea.

“That’s where you’re wrong... A god doesn’t need that right, Kal-El... A god is right... If you’re unwilling to embrace your omnipotence, then stand aside, Kryptonian... You asked me what I want, and that is it precisely... To alter the course of my world without your divine intervention... Promise me you won’t interfere with my plans and I’ll return your darling Lois unharmed.”

The speed at which his hand wrapped around her neck and pinned her against the wall was literally breathtaking.

“You’ll return her NOW.”

While Talia had been wasting her time with talking, Superman had secretly scanned the surrounding area for her spies, searching for any sign that they were being watched...

He’d even looked for spy satellites miles above his apartment which might have alerted her associates to their conversation...

But he found none.

The jade necklace wrapped around her neck was some sort of technology, but it had no transmitter, no way to alert her operatives as to her current predicament. And her phone was in her purse by the couch. Far from her reach as he held her helplessly against the wall.

He could only conclude she’d made the classic villain mistake of becoming overconfident. That she believed she was somehow untouchable and that he’d never lay a hand on a woman.

The Man of Steel squeezed a little tighter as his eyes glowed crimson in anger.

“Now, you’re going to tell me where Lois is right now or so help me...”

He grew hesitant as Talia slowly smiled at him like some vindictive dark-haired banshee and then raised her arm past his shoulder, silently pointing at the surveillance camera in the upper corner of the room, the same one he’d installed so that Lois could check on their apartment from work when he was away...

The same useless surveillance system that he’d forgotten about...

The one which used an app on Lois’s cell phone.
The most dangerous woman in the world managed to speak in only a hoarse whisper, but it still carried the weight of a judge’s gavel delivering an unexpected death sentence, a hammering blow being carried across her faint breath, six gasping words which almost crushed his stuttering heart and caused his grip to fail.

“That one will cost you Iris.”

Five days later, a solemn Clark Kent stood alone under restless grey clouds, tearfully staring down at the fresh grave of Iris Allen and knowing he was the reason for her death.

He was the only one who knew of his guilt and he carried it alone.

The memory of a broken Barry Allen standing beside this grave at the funeral haunted him, the man’s unyielding tears flowing down the cheeks of a hero who’d bravely faced world-destroying monsters and yet now faced the greatest challenge of his life…

Watching his murdered wife being placed into the ground.

And all the while, Clark had been watching and thinking that their roles could’ve easily been reversed. That Barry could’ve been the one at the funeral in Metropolis instead of Central City, that he might have helplessly witnessed a broken down Clark Kent as his lover was slowly lowered in a wooden casket to the cold dark earth…

That their tragic roles would’ve been reversed if Talia al Ghul had only whispered ‘Lois’ instead of ‘Iris’ when Clark had wrapped his hand around her slender throat…

But she hadn’t said it.

A bound Lois Lane had been safely returned to their apartment after he’d shot out like a bullet towards Central City to find Iris dead in her bed. Lois had been returned and Talia al Ghul had disappeared, leaving a broken-hearted Clark with the unshakable guilt that he had caused all this. That he was now caught in a trap where his friends would die if he lifted a finger to stop the architect of Iris Allen’s untimely demise…

The architect of a digital humanity.

“I know who killed her.”

With senses that could hear a mouse chewing a crumb three floors away, Clark hadn’t even heard him approach. Looking up, he saw Bruce standing like the Angel of Death, coldly staring at him across the fresh grave of Iris Allen with a bone-chilling wrath he hadn’t witnessed in those glaring eyes for years now.

That primal need for fiery vengeance fuelled by a tortured soul was back, the hard stare of burning retribution which frightened even a Man of Steel.

“Bruce… I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be… This wasn’t your fault… She needs to be stopped, Clark.”

“… She’ll only kill more of us if we try.”
In disgust, a heavyhearted Clark watched as Bruce Wayne turned his back and quietly growled under his breath, the first droplets of rain beginning to fall from heavy clouds above as the man from Gotham walked away and spoke a grim farewell without even looking back.

“She broke you, Clark… If you can’t help me, then just stay the hell out of my way.”
In the back corner of a incense-filled tavern located on the 27th floor of the night-elf town of Ronbaru, a sharp-eyed Damian seemed to fade into the lush shadows cast by the ornate statue of a bare-breasted elf mermaid carved from the rocky wall next to his table. The boy smiled with a conspirator’s grin at the young woman quietly seated across from him, also similarly bathed in shadows, her whiskered face and blonde hair hidden beneath the legendary hooded cloak as she smugly grinned back.

They’d both noticed the entrance of Argo’s prey as he’d entered the bar.

The concealed pair watched from the rear as a nervous Dale from the Fuurinkazan guild made his way into this unassuming tavern which most frontline players had already forgotten about, the bulky
young man casting an anxious look back at the main entrance, then a cursory glance at the rest of the sparse handful of patrons contained within these dimly lit stone walls before the stout samurai proceeded to a small candlelit table, finally ordering a bottle of chilled elf wine from a raven-haired (and pointed-eared) NPC waitress.

Beneath the hood of her cloak, Damian heard the confident Argo quietly whisper, “Right on time”.

It was exceedingly rare for the Boy Wonder to visit this kind of establishment on any world, but tonight was special. Tonight would be the culmination of a plan which the clever Argo had set into motion over a week ago, seizing an opportunity she’d conspired after extraordinary circumstances.

A plan the two young players wanted to see finalized firsthand on this night.

Sipping his mulled apricot fruit smoothy (the boy had just learned that players under the age of thirteen couldn’t order alcoholic beverages in this world), Damian watched the portly samurai with the curly hair and the knotted white bandana nervously drum his fingers under the soft candlelight, anxiously watching the main entrance for the arrival of a girl he’d never met…

Except the next patron to enter this quiet inn wasn’t a girl.

It was Klein.

As a surprised Damian watched the samurai-themed leader of the Fuurinkazan guild scan the tavern and then stride confidently over to Dale to clap his broad shoulders with a familiar greeting, the young man already seated suddenly turned crimson with embarrassment.

Damian grimaced in consternation as he leaned in closer to Argo.

“Klein’s not supposed to be here.”

Like a devious mastermind about to unleash utter destruction upon an unsuspecting world, Argo smiled back and winked at her accomplice.

“Sure he is.”

With that knowledge now in hand, Damian watched with interest as the unexpected Klein slid into the only other chair at Dale’s cozy table, crossing his arms like a Police examiner about to crack the biggest case of his life before cocking an appraising eye at his portly guild-mate, the guilty-looking Dale who only seemed to shrink in his own chair under the harsh eye Klein’s scrutiny.

“That’s twice you’ve sneaked off this week, Dale… C’mon buddy, we’re Fuurinkazan, a team, the best of friends… You know you can tell me anything, right?... What’s with all the secrecy lately?... We all thought you’d snuck off to level up, but if I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were meeting someone here.”

Dale’s answer was cut short by the boisterous arrival of the remaining four member of Fuurinkazan, all smiling over in Dale’s direction and declaring their affectionate greetings for their missing mate as they casually strolled into this formerly quiet tavern…

“Well look who it is! Mr. Solitude.”

“Was that wine for me, Dale? Gosh, you really shouldn’t have!”

“Barkeep, a dozen more bottles of the same! On his tab!”
“So was it really just his time of the month, Klein?”

As the five members of the elite samurai guild named Fuurinkazan besieged the seated Dale as he quietly died inside, the large man had almost slid beneath the table when all their teasing banter suddenly stopped.

All six men seemed to freeze in place as a dark-haired beauty with playful violet eyes shyly walked into the tavern. Each member of Fuurinkazan stood motionless as they eyed the soft, lilac sleeveless kimono she wore, her gold-inset black Japanese breast plate softly moulded to perfect B-cups, tied like a bikini across slender shoulders with the same blue knotted cloth which was woven into a traditional bow into her shoulder-length black hair.

She was a spear-user, a golden-hemmed Japanese bladed yari strung across her back like a standard, the upside-down wok-like Japanese kasa helmet hung with a golden insignia to her side.

The men’s dreams of intimacy were suddenly jeopardized as this traditional Japanese vision of beauty turned around and then spoke to someone just outside the door.

“C’mon, Ruuska… Quit being so stubborn… Get in here.”

There was a wave of tense silence which cascaded across the tavern as a monstrous brown bear suddenly squeezed itself past the tavern’s entryway, the beast’s rounded shoulders as high as the girl’s breastplate.

The bear (who’s name was Ruuska) gave an annoyed growl as it looked at its handler with big sad brown eyes for being forced to enter such an unnatural cave.

“It’s alright, Ruuska… I’m meeting a friend here.”

With that, the Japanese maiden turned to look at the bar’s stunned patrons for the first time, her excited eyes finally fixing upon an open-mouthed Dale as she quickly strode over to the rotund, round-eyed warrior, a giddy grin cresting his lips as she happily embraced him with an emphatic crushing hug worthy of her Ruuska.

“Dale-san!”

Damian could’ve sworn he heard a quiet ‘heh, heh, heh’ coming beneath Argo’s cloak as the Boy Wonder quietly reflected back on the events which had led to this strange encounter, when he and Argo had begun their quest to level up quickly in order to make up for their three lost months of game time on the 57th floor…

With perfect clarity, the boy’s memories faded backwards, fondly remembering stepping into the mist-soaked trees of the expansive Forest of Wandering on the 35th floor for the first time alongside a cautious Argo, bringing out the rare-item map they’d just purchased from the crotchety old vendor set up at the entrance to those extensive woods, a digital parchment worth its weight in diamonds necessary for any player willing to navigate those labyrinth-like woods.

Even so, Damian recalled holding the map as though it were an unwanted court summons, grumbling towards his cloaked companion about the price.

That was the day when they’d met Makoto Eiko and her bear Ruuska.
“I can’t believe I just paid twenty thousand Col for this stupid map.”

Glancing through the shadowed trees of the Forest of Wandering, Argo grumbled back at her young travelling companion and then raised her hands in defeat.

“He won’t negotiate... Anyways, better you than me, Dami-chan... Marigan would’ve court-marshalled me if I didn’t agree to her 360,000 Col repayment plan... God, that woman’s so cheap.”

The boy shot her a sideways glance and considered passing a comment about her last statement before deciding to let it go, looking over instead at the clusters of glowing egg-like spheres nestled into the forest floor, illuminating their sylvan surroundings with an eerie glow.

“But why do I have to buy such an expensive map? Couldn’t we just use Teleport Crystals to leave?”

Argo shook her head glumly.

“They don’t work in here... Crystals will just teleport you to another section of this weird forest so that you become hopelessly lost... Great for getting out of tight spots I guess, but not for getting out of the woods... That’s why we need the map.”

Damian looked at her curiously.

“Not that I mind... But isn’t this place a little risky for us?”

The Information Broker quietly nodded.

“Maybe, but it’s our best strategy for levelling up... Marigan is only giving me three weeks to make up for those three months of falling behind and to pay her back with interest, so we need to play aggressively... And the line-ups to get into the high-spawn areas are ridiculous these days...

“That’s why this place made the most sense... Most players stay away from the Forest of Wandering because it’s only been recently unlocked and Drunken Apes spawn in small groups of three or four... Well, that and the fact they don’t drop magic items and the map’s too expensive and becomes useless after one day.”

Damian remained unconvinced.

“Four apes against two players still doesn’t sound like great odds to me.”

His co-adventurer became serious once again as she continued to scan their lush surroundings, the pair wandering deeper into the woods as Damian charted their progress along a dotted path.

“It’s a manageable risk, just don’t get hit by one... Drunken apes may be slow and easy to predict, but they pack a wallop... Four to six thousand hit points of damage with that heavy club of theirs... About the same as their own hit points.”

Those kind of numbers used to worry him.

“Alright... Will you be using the Sleeping Darts we picked up?”

Argo shook her head with a sly grin.

“Nope... The alcohol these apes drink also make them immune to toxins... But luckily for us, it’s also a component of Antidote crystals and worth 500 Col to the right vendor, but not many players know that yet... We’re going to make a fortune here, Dami-chan!... We’ll be able to recoup the cost
of that map in no time."

Damian really shouldn’t have been surprised that the profit-minded Argo had a financial angle for this two-person adventure. The boy had been surprised to learn that Marigan had implemented a loan-shark level interest on Argo’s ‘loan’ as punishment for her 360,000 Col spontaneous expenditure in Marten though.

Apparently, that ‘loan’ had literally wiped out the elite guild’s savings.

“So which weapon will you be using?”

“Eulogy.”

Damian suddenly turned and then looked at her, stunned by Argo’s strange selection. Why would she use the antiquated needle-like dagger he’d given to her on the second floor?

“Eulogy will only cause six hundred points of damage… At best.”

The mischievous Argo grinned as though she were about to tell him a deep, dark secret.

“That’s right… Look, you’re going to be doing the heavy lifting here, Damian… I’m an Information Broker… My sub-class allows me to gain experience based on gathering knowledge, even downloading the stats of a Drunken Ape…

“You’ll get the majority of the experience for causing the damage, but I should get about the same amount by acting as bait, dodging and then recording their stats… A fair split… That’s why I complete all the rumour quests.”

In truth, Damian had always figured that Argo gained experience from learning about the secrets of Sword Art Online and its players. Considering the limited amount of fighting she actually did, it made sense at how she was able to keep up with him.

Argo gauged his reaction carefully before she continued.

“I know it sounds too good to be true, but it has its drawbacks as well… I can only specialize in soft skills like Hiding, Listening, Detection, Purchase Negotiating, Dodging… I’m pretty much useless at killing things… My ‘Fighting Spirit’ and ‘Parry’ skills were expensive for a Broker like me to level up… But they’re the only way I can contribute in a fight.”

‘Parry’ was a fairly common skill among players these days, especially since the monsters had become more effective with weapons at the higher levels, but ‘Fighting Spirit’ was a hate skill that few players had ever bothered selecting. It basically increased that player’s odds of becoming the target of a monster’s attack, a sure way to draw enemy fire in a crowd.

And in this game, drawing unnecessary attacks was a death wish.

Even so, ‘Fighting Spirit’ was a hate skill Argo had been developing since Marigan had named the tiny Information Broker the leader of the Legion’s elite team. She’d literally chosen to become a human Matador’s cloak, drawing fire away from her team. The agile player could get away with it though because her Dodging was second to none.

But in a surprise attack situation or an enemy mob attack, Damian knew her life would be in deadly peril… She’d be the one monsters would attack first and she had Agility-based hit points, not the much higher Strength-based ones he favoured.
“Argo, you’re taking too much of a risk here…”

The paint-whiskered girl held a stiff finger to her lips to quiet Damian and then leaned in to speak softly while pointing to a cluster of trees next to them.

“Four apes… Thirty meters… We hide over there.”

For her lack of fighting skills, she’d developed her Listening and Detection skills to the point where it was almost like an early warning detection system, far better than his own (or just about anyone else in the game). While other players focused on attack skills, Argo had become the ultimate defensive strategist, able to keep herself out of danger and untouchable.

Within moments, the former Beta player had been proven correct.

After their initial ambush, the brawny glowing-eyed apes couldn’t even get near the acrobatic Argo while Damian made short work of the surprised monsters’ flanks, using his Martial Arts attack-style to eliminate lag times and become a whirling dervish of death as the beasts tried to corner Argo, his Stigmatic damage soon dealing lethal amounts to the lumbering simians before exploding into blue polygons under Damian’s flashing dagger.

The Information Broker smiled at him enthusiastically as she collected the four jugs of ‘Ape Wine’ and then transferred them into her Cloak of Many Pockets.

“Look like we’ve found our hunting grounds, Dami-chan… That Martial Arts/Stigmatic combo of yours really is ideal for this type of encounter and they don’t stand a chance of hitting me.”

It was true.

Argo hadn’t been in danger at all and the Boy Wonder had been able to raise his Martial Arts skill to the point where he could now use real-world fighting techniques in this make-believe world. While his realistic fighting style would never deal the same amount of damage as an in-game attack combo, his Stigmatic damage and Hit Point buffs more than compensated for that.

Even though it would eventually bleed him dry, he could become a non-stop attack combo.

He’d be using a Healing Crystal after each encounter, but the four jugs of ‘Ape Wine’ which could be traded in at 500 Col apiece more than made up for the price of a Crystal.

Even the few hundred Col the apes were worth could cover the cost of a crystal.

And besides, he needed the experience points more than the money anyways.

The stealthy pair continued this way for hours, Argo acting as their radar and then the bait while Damian easily cut down oversized apes until he was down to his last Healing Crystal and Argo’s magical cloak was now literally overflowing with ‘Ape Wine’.

It was a good day.

As they took stock of their situation and the blonde girl indicated she was finally out of inventory slots, the pair grinned at one another as Damian allocated the stat points from his latest level gain and unlocked the skill he’d been eagerly anticipating, nodding enthusiastically as he finished.

“Finally! Alright, we’ll use the map and get out of here for now…”

The sudden and ear-splitting roar from just beyond the trees to his left was something completely
different from the apes’ rasping growls. If Damian didn’t know any better, he could’ve sworn it sounded exactly like…

A bear?

As the pair glanced at one another in surprise, Damian and Argo carefully made their way to the stand of trees towards until they heard the familiar growls of attacking apes sounding from the same place as though apes were fighting a bear.

And they heard a girl scream…

“RUUSKA!!!”

At the sound of a human voice, the two players broke into a sprint, leafy branches flashing by their eyes until they emerged from the other side and discovered the situation beyond was as grim as it sounded.

A teenaged girl with dark shoulder-length hair and a spear was attempting to regain her footing against a tree while a huge brown bear was facing off against four Drunken Apes. Surprisingly, Damian noticed a green cursor above the bear until he winced when one of the attacking apes connected with its club on the animal’s side and sent its Health bar deep into the red.

Which was the same level as the girl’s.

Launching himself from a nearby rock, the former assassin connected with a flying Backstab on the nearest ape, instantly reducing its hulking form into glittering polygonal dust as the familiar grey window appeared, listing his Experience and Col reward…

But as impressive as the spontaneous strike had been, his Backstab attack still had that damned five-second lag.

Two of the apes turned to divert their attack away from the bear whose fur was now bristling on end, taking the opportunity to mercilessly hammer their crafted clubs into Damian’s attack-frozen body, swatting the boy aside like a piñata until he was sprawled across the long grass with his Health bar once again in the Yellow.

As the two apes stalked towards him, he glanced over at the third ape who was bringing his thick club down like a primate executioner upon the wounded bear…

Until it was parried by Argo’s claws.

Now saved from its own imminent demise, the massive bear counter-attacked with a fierce bite attack, only reducing the ape’s Health bar by a notch. For all its impressive size, Damian quickly realized this gigantic bear was about as effective as Argo when it came to inflicting damage...

Which was basically ineffective.

Perhaps he should’ve been annoyed that his greatest ally in this game had just saved a bear instead of him, but they both knew that Damian could take whatever these apes could dish out.

Especially since he’d finally been able to invest in the ‘Battle Healing’ skill only moments ago.

Grinning as he reached into his pouch to retrieve his last Healing Crystal, the boy slowly picked himself up off the ground and quickly healed himself without even averting his steely gaze from his towering opponents, eagerly gripping his dagger as he watched the two lumbering apes advance
menacingly towards him.

“Alright… Let’s dance.”

He grinned with the joy of a warrior-born, launching himself forward in a flash of steel.

During the last seconds of their digital existence, the doomed pair of Drunken Apes had no idea where the next strike would come from, slashed from above and below, front and back three times for the first and then four times for the second until the confused monsters disappeared from the game in a dazzling display of digital fireworks.

As the elusive Argo took a deep breath and watched in relief, she caused the last remaining ape to waste its attack by actually trying to hit her, allowing Damian to end the muscular beast with an unseen Backstab, delivering far more damage than the 35th floor monster could ever hope to absorb.

As he stood triumphant in his five-second attack lag, the boy witnessed the mauve-eyed girl simple staring at him in wonder, not even healing herself as Damian remained frozen and she finally spoke.

“Was... Was that a seven-attack combo?!”

Now free from the effects of the in-game technique, Damian sheathed his dagger and cracked his neck, wondering why this teenaged girl seemed to be in such awe of him. Most agility-based frontline players had mastered seven and eight-attack combos before they even hit the twenty-fifth floor.

He’d even witnessed a twelve-attack combo from Asuna last week.

“It was my Martial Arts skill… I don’t bother with this game’s ridiculous attack sequences… Is that your bear?”

With flushed cheeks and a shy smile, she glanced down at the bear by her side and then back at him.

“Y-yes... His name is Ruuska.”

Stepping in front of Damian and pulling her cloak’s hood from her blonde tresses, Argo interjected herself between the strange vibe the rescued girl seemed to be sending.

“You’re a Beast Tamer, right?”

Managing to finally pry her attention away from Damian’s pale blue-eyed stare, the teenaged girl finally acknowledged the Information Broker who was now standing between them. As she waited for the reply, an observant Argo calculated that this player couldn’t possibly be younger than seventeen-years-old, rather attractive in her own tomboyish way but far too old to be ogling Dami-chan like that.

The strange girl blushed and then smiled at Argo, bowing her head slightly.

“Sorry, my name is Makoto… I just thought I might be dreaming… You’re right, I’m a Beast Tamer… This is my bear Ruuska… My partner… And... We’re lost.”

Argo suddenly cocked her head as she put her claws away and then folded her arms.

“Lost? Didn’t you purchase the Forest of Wandering map?”

The teenaged Makoto looked at the smaller girl oddly and then smiled as she placed a hand on top of
her head and scratched in joyful embarrassment.

“Is that the name of this place? The Forest of Wandering?... That makes sense, I’ve been wandering in here since yesterday and still haven’t been able to find a way out.”

A stunned Argo’s face went slack as she looked up at the older girl incredulously.

“You’re in here without a map?! Don’t you read the Player’s Guide?”

The girl named Makoto blushed a little more.

“I do… Honest, I have my Guide for the twelfth floor right here in my inventory… But it didn’t say anything about a Forest of Wandering…”

After the Beast Tamer saw the shocked silent stares on both Damian and Argo’s faces, an apprehensive Makoto quietly asked…

“Isn’t this the twelfth floor?”

It looked as though Argo had been suddenly slapped across the face.

“This is the thirty-fifth floor!”

As the girl dark-haired grew pale and then leaned on her bear for support, Argo and Damian exchanged glances before the boy detective stepped forward once more.

“Makoto-san… If you’re only on the twelfth floor in this game, how did you get all the way up here?”

They watched as the slender young woman staggered backwards and then slumped against the tree, lowering herself to the ground before hugging her knees, confusion painfully evident in the mysterious light of the egg-shaped crystals beside her.

“Two boys teleported me here… I didn’t know them… But they seemed really nice… And they were a higher level than me… They said they wanted me to join their party.”

Argo suddenly tensed.

“These two boys… What did they look like?”

The girl thought for a moment.

“Around fifteen or sixteen maybe… One had long red hair… The other one had short dark hair with earrings… Both used a sword-and-shield… They said their names were Jin and Hodges…

“We met in a bar on the twelfth floor yesterday and then formed a guild… They teleported me here… But… As soon as the apes appeared, they just teleported away… Maybe they were afraid… After I realized how strong the apes were though, I teleported away too, but my Teleport Crystals just took me and Ruuska to a different section of this forest and I couldn’t find those guys anywhere…

“Then I couldn’t message them because they disbanded the guild… So I’ve been wandering around ever since… I would teleport when we got cornered, but I ran out of crystals hours ago… I can’t even go to sleep… We just kept getting attacked.”

A concerned Damian quickly pulled Argo aside.
“The description she gave doesn’t sound anything like the Laughing Coffin guys.”

Argo looked back at him darkly - as though there were a bitter taste in her mouth.

“This is still a Monster PK… Teleporting a lower-level player to an inescapable area and then ditching them is a well-established player-killer strategy… The advantage is that it won’t change your cursor colour to orange, even though you’re just as responsible for the abandoned player’s death as the monsters are…

“Look, Dami-chan… These Jin and Hodges guys might not have been Laughing Coffin, but…”

Her next words chilled Damian to the marrow.

“There’s also a possibility Laughing Coffin might be recruiting.”

As he stood and considered that implication, a concerned Argo then turned back to the lost player.

“Makoto-san, we’ll guide you and Ruuska out of this forest with our map… But in exchange, I need you to sit down with my guild leader and tell her everything about the two guys who brought you here… If they pulled this trick on you, they’ll probably do it to other players as well… And this place is really dangerous for lower-level players… Deal?”

“Of course… You just saved my life… I’ll do anything.”

The blonde thirteen-year-old didn’t like the way Makoto had stared directly at Damian with the fantasizing eyes of a dateless schoolgirl the week before prom as she said that last part. The boy had seemed oblivious to her attentions as he retrieved the map from his inventory, but the lustful insinuation had been all too clear for Argo’s liking.

The defensive Michi decided to take appropriate action before this went any farther.

“I’m sorry, I should have properly introduced myself… My name is Argo… And this is my eleven-year-old boyfriend, Damian.”

She honestly couldn’t say whose cheeks flushed more when she revealed that last part, but as cute as an embarrassed Damian was when publicly called him her boyfriend, Argo felt herself growing increasingly uneasy as she eyed Makoto’s unapologetic grin and her hopeful gaze which was still fixed on the boy.

The Beast Tamer’s glowing cheeks weren’t flushed with mortification like Argo had hoped when she announced Damian’s age…

Instead, they seemed to be flushed with excitement.

---

Soon after being rescued from the Forest of Wandering, Makoto had kept her word and revealed all the details of her adventure to a very troubled Marigan, describing the two players who’d trapped the unsuspecting girl twenty-three levels above her own in perfect detail. The Legion Commander instantly put out rewards and organized a search for these two Player Killers.

For her own good deed in rescuing the hapless Makoto, Marigan also reduced Argo’s interest rate on her substantial loan by two points as a reward.

Argo may have muttered something under her breath as she left with the young dark-haired woman
along with her bear.

It was then that the Information Broker had been seized by inspiration and used a Record Crystal to take a picture of the fraught Beast Tamer, privately sending the image of the attractive girl to Dale of the Fuurinkazan in order for him to fund Makoto’s 50,000 Col shopping trip...

All in exchange for a date which would be arranged by Argo.

As it was an incredibly rare sub-class, Beast Tamer items were ridiculously cheap but only if you knew where to shop. With Argo’s help, Makoto and Ruuska were soon outfitted to handle anything that the twelfth (or even the fifteenth) floor could throw at them, laden with magical items to boost Makoto’s skills and points.

Argo was even able to knock the already low prices down farther with her Negotiation skill.

It was then that the crafty Michi Aoi had taken Makoto to a specialty themed fashion shop, cleverly choosing Makoto’s samurai-inspired armour for the arranged meeting with her new portly patron, purposely making the plucky seventeen-year-old irresistible to the members of Fuurinkazan, a perfect samurai warrior-maiden that Argo suspected they’d be falling over themselves to impress.

Surely Makoto would find one of those good-natured slackers to her liking.

As the slender Makoto was outfitted for her armour, the Information Broker reasoned that it was only because the young woman had been lost in the Forest of Wandering and close to death that she’d developed an unnatural crush on Damian. To her frightened eyes, Dami-chan must have seemed like a gallant young hero, arriving in the nick of time to save the seventeen-year-old from a cruel fate.

It was simply a hero complex.

And Damian was pretty cute.

By having Dale fund the purchase of all her specialty items in exchange for what he believed would be a private date with the pretty Beast Tamer, Argo believed the idolizing Makoto would forget about her strange crush and seek companionship amongst guys of her own age.

As the concealed Argo watched the giddy young woman stand up after using Dale like an oversized teddy bear and then politely introduce herself to Dale’s friends, it seemed the plan had succeeded. Argo smiled inwardly as she watched the bubbly Makoto bow to all the members of the Fuurinkazan guild, humbly asking if she could pour their wine for the rest of the evening in thanks for what Dale-san had done for her.

To which the spellbound men readily agreed.

In celebration, they all watched as the ecstatic Makoto instructed the massive Ruuska to stand on his hind legs, twirling her finger until the bear began to gingerly turn in a circle like a clumsy ballerina, causing uproarious laughter from the members of Fuurinkazan and even the handful of other players at the bar as more wine was delivered to the table.

It was at that exact moment that Argo felt a hateful glare piercing her soul that diverted her attention from the dancing bear and towards a pair of mauve eyes which carried invisible daggers burning with insane wrath.

A pair of lavender eyes brimming with rage which let a stunned Argo know that this happy hostess act was nothing more than a show. That the duplicitous Makoto Eiko had played the thirteen-year-old girl’s little game and come to this tavern for one and one reason only…
And that blue-eyed reason was now sitting directly across from Argo and watching a dancing bear, oblivious to the laser-focused stare which the two young women were now exchanging.

It was then that a shocked Argo realized she may have made a terrible, terrible mistake.

Chapter End Notes

**Shotakon**: A Japanese term describing the sexual complex of an adult who is attracted to a young (especially underage) boy.

**Yandere**: A Japanese term for a person who is initially very loving and gentle to someone (or at least innocent) before their devotion becomes destructive in nature, often through violence and/or brutality.
The weight.
The first thing she always felt was his weight.
The crushing weight on top of her. The heavy weight of a salary-man, smelling of easy whiskey and desperate cigarettes, his grasping hands advancing like an alien invasion upon her forbidden shores, forcing her to unexpectedly awaken from a girl’s dream into a woman’s nightmare.

Unwanted hands groping her beneath his weight, unwanted hands which never covered her mouth.

Because they never had to.

Because it didn’t matter when she screamed for him to stop.

Her mother would never hear her screams.

And he wasn’t here for her mother tonight…

A terrified Makoto Eiko suddenly snapped awake once again in the World of Swords, a large bear curiously staring down at her in the darkness as she frantically huddled her chest into imaginary knees and then rocked fearfully back-and-forth, attempting to forget the reoccurring nightmares of the world where her body lay on a hospital bed in Japan, rhythmically beginning her hysteric waking mantra once more…

“I’m pure, I’m pure, I’m pure, I’m pure, I’m pure, I’m pure, I’m pure, I’m pure, I’m pure, I’m pure, I’m pure, I’m pure, I’m pure…”

Today was the day.

Today was the day where she’d save him. To peel back the lies and show him that he belonged with her forever. That Fate itself had brought them together in this magical world where a boy would never have to grow old and she could care for him for all eternity.
When Makoto shed the first of her warm and salty tears of joy, she whispered his name so that it might be carried across the scented winds, the nightmare of her step-father’s sins replaced by the dreams she made of a lovely boy.

Her lovely boy.

“**Damian.**

A dream of eternal innocence in a world of whispers and song with lovely boys.

As they followed today’s configuration of the twisting map towards the shifting exit point of the Forest of Wandering for the seventh time, a restless Damian silently used his menu to calculate the number of Drunken Apes he’d defeated this week, a number that was now in the thousands…

These daily journeys into simian-infested woods were quickly becoming routine.

With a sigh, the boy turned in frustration towards his female companion to offer up a suggestion.

“**Ar...”

His blonde girlfriend only chuckled.

“**Welcome back to the daily grind of safety margins, Dami-chan.”

The Boy Wonder remained steadfast in his resolve.

“I’m serious… The clearers just entered that floor’s dungeon and Heathcliff is already talking about purchasing the guild’s next headquarters up there... And every day we spend down here, I feel like we’re being left behind by the elite players.”

Argo only glanced over at him and quietly reflected for a moment.

“If you’re that bored, I can look for another quest on the lower floors, but the Forest of Wandering is the best place for us to level up... The fact is, the only reason we’ve even been able to hang out in Mishe is because our skill-sets line up particularly well in a forest setting with small monster mobs... If we even tried this floor’s dungeon, we’d be toast.”

Damian cracked his knuckles.

“I’m level thirty-six now.”

“So am I... But the front-line players are all over level fifty... I know it sucks, but we’ve got a lot of catching up to do before we can get back there, Dami-chan.”

A harsh look directed at her.

“And why do you call me that? It’s just Damian... If you really need to add an honorific, you can use Damian-sama.”

Argo rolled her pale brown eyes as she strolled forward towards the exit after another long day.

“You’re eleven. It’s Dami-chan.”
The boy stopped for an instant and once again swiped two fingers across the air, opening his player’s menu.

“Actually, it’s August 25th… I’m twelve... See?... So there.”

A surprised Argo turned to reach out her open arms tentatively, slowly pulling the reluctant boy towards her until she nervously leaned forward and gently pressed her lips against his own, sending electricity through their bodies as she opened her own mouth slightly, allowing their tongues to touch for one brief instant before Damian’s body tensed with unexpected stimulation.

She was smiling delicately, his cheeks glowing crimson as they broke off the ambitious kiss, Argo gracefully tracing his flushed jaw line with a fingertip to tease his passionate anxiety.

“Happy Birthday then, Damian… Did you like your present?”

A world away, the boy’s father noticed his son’s cheeks glowing red as Bruce Wayne sat on Damian’s hospital bed, squeezing the boy’s hand for any sign of life, praying that he could somehow break Akihiko Kayaba’s strange hold…

But Damian’s mind was here.

With Argo.

“I… ah… wow… So that’s why people kiss.”

She nodded and rested her forehead against his own, blonde hair brushing lightly against his flustered cheeks as the tips of their noses touched. He had the feeling that he’d officially hit puberty when she cupped his face with both hands and then smiled seductively.

“Maybe we should celebrate your birthday some more.”

Damian was about to oblige when he felt Argo’s body stiffen in response to some unseen peril, a danger that had suddenly appeared, his hand instinctively reaching for the dagger at his side as he spun around.

“What is it?!?”

He followed the silent gaze of the blonde-haired girl, her terrified pale brown eyes staring straight ahead towards the tree-covered exit only thirty feet away, peering at what awaited them just beyond these woods…

Damian made out a brown spot against green grass. Taking a few steps forward, he easily saw what it was…

It was a bear named Ruuska resting on its haunches, quietly staring back at them.

Argo quickly regained her senses and yanked the boy into the shadows of a nearby tree, staring directly into his eyes like a cornered fugitive.

“What’s she doing here?”

Damian could only shake his head in confusion.

“Who, Makoto? I have no idea. What’s wrong?”

The Information Broker turned her head as her glare bored past the exit, nervously searching for any
sign of the Beast Tamer who accompanied the bear.

“Michi, what’s wrong?”

Argo stiffened as she took a deep breath, Damian placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder as he gazed pleadingly into her eyes. He only called her by her real-world name when he was serious.

The girl collected herself before responding.

“I don’t trust her, Damian… The entire Legion guild and this game’s best Information Broker hasn’t been able to find any trace of those two guys who tricked her…

“It’s like they never existed…

“And she gave me this… *look*… Back at the Ronbaru tavern that night a week ago… When she looked over at me… It was like… Like she wanted to murder me.”

Damian scoffed.

“If you tried to set me up with Dale, I’d probably want to murder you too.”

His attempt at humour only made Argo more nervous.

“I’m being serious… I have a bad feeling about her… She’s not what she seems.”

Both hands on her shoulders now.

“Alright… Let’s say she was mad at you… We don’t really know anything about her, do we?… Maybe she has a real-world boyfriend… Maybe Makoto comes from a very traditional family and felt like you were making her act like some sort of paid escort to thank Dale for buying those supplies… Maybe she just happened to see you and then thought you were spying on her… Maybe she was thinking about something else and you just misinterpreted her look.”

The cloaked girl paused for a moment and looked anxiously down at the forest floor as her toes twitched in her boots as her lips twisted into a frown.

“Maybe… But I don’t think that’s it.”

“Maybe it’s not… But whatever it was, let’s not worry about it right now… If she wanted to ambush us, she wouldn’t park a giant bear outside the exit in plain sight… Besides, I’m starving.”

Against her better judgement, Argo conceded and followed the boy along the forest path towards a foliage-tinged exit as the sun slowly dipped on the 35th floor, its fading light casting long shadows behind them.

And all the while, Michi Aoi felt as though the bear’s round black eyes were following her every step, the patient Ruuska sitting silently at the exit to the Forest of Wandering, waiting only for her.

“Hi Ruuska.”

The bear cocked its head and made a happy yowl as the forward Damian reached out his hand to greet the massive beast, forcing Argo to consider that maybe she was just being paranoid.

That maybe encountering Makoto Eiko and her tamed familiar here was nothing more than a coincidence…
But of course it wasn’t.

Michi glanced upwards to see a female figure seated at the crest of a grassy knoll beneath a sky of fire, her long legs spread across a pristine white blanket while her hand gingerly rested atop a picnic basket, brilliantly framed against the glowing clouds. A beaming childlike smile was spreading across full lips while violet eyes locked onto the sight of Damian emerging from the Forest of Wandering as though the Gates of Heaven had just opened to reveal her boy-god.

Argo’s heart stopped when she realized what Makoto Eiko was wearing.

White thigh-highs emblazoned with a red crucifix that couldn’t quite make it to the hem of a tiny crimson mini-skirt displayed through the window of a flowing white dress with scarlet edgings hugged a seventeen-year-old body.

The Information Broker felt her blood go cold.

Makoto was wearing a Knights of the Blood Oath uniform.

The same signature uniform of the guild Damian now belonged to.

“Damian-sama!”

When she heard Makoto squeal in delight, Argo suddenly wondered if the bubbly Beast Tamer had somehow listened in on their conversation in the woods…

But there was no way a Listening skill could ever extend that far. The game expressly prohibited players from listening to what was effectively a woodland dungeon from the area beyond.

The ‘-sama’ she’d added must have just been a coincidence.

As the dark-haired woman stood bolt upright and then waved both her hands in the air, it was as though those skinny beckoning arms were fanning a passionate flicker burning within the smouldering Argo, igniting a sudden inferno as though the sacrilegious Makoto Eiko had just trespassed upon hallowed ground and was now flaunting her transgression.

The Beast Tamer joyously ran down the hillside to meet her boyfriend as Argo suddenly sensed brown fur pushing against her ribs, the lumbering Ruuska carefully placing itself between her and Damian. The animal’s calculated manoeuvre became all too clear when the giddy Makoto stumbled only a step away from the boy and suddenly found herself tumbling into Damian’s responding arms.

The falling player happily nestled against Damian’s chest while turning three shades of crimson, the boy finally taking a step backwards, prompting the breathless Makoto to sheepishly apologize with the flushed cheeks of a virgin bride.

Argo couldn’t help but notice that the lithe teenager had been four inches taller than her preteen rescuer.

“I’m so sorry, Damian-sama… I guess… I wasn’t really watching where I was going… You saved me again, my hero.”

The former assassin nodded and then eyed her carefully, more concerned with her outfit than her recent lack of coordination.

“Makoto, why are you wearing a Knights of the Blood uniform?”
The teenager happily flared the skirt.

“Oh, do you like it?!... Does it look pretty on me?... Heathcliff told me I could become a member when I reached level thirty... Isn’t that wonderful?!”

A fuming Argo suddenly forced herself to stop and think.

Makoto didn’t have the guild insignia by her floating character icon.

Still, a membership to a guild could be nothing more than a fancy title, especially as some of the more popular guilds became popular and exceeded their membership quota. Many players were now guild-members in name only.

But could Makoto actually be level thirty? It seemed too much, too soon. The former Beta tester knew that most players adventuring on the 12th floor would’ve been between the levels of fifteen and twenty.

Which meant…

This woman must have gained ten levels in a single week!

Noticing the Information Broker’s distress, the Beast Tamer grinned satisfactorily as she folded her fingers behind her shadowy hair, jutting out her chest for Damian’s benefit.

“The boys have really been helping me out. In fact, we’ve been adventuring on the front-line since you introduced me to them, Argo-chan. It’s amazing how a girl can really level up if she puts her mind to it.”

Michi’s mood turned even darker.

The ‘boys’ were obviously the members of Fuurinkazan. Argo silently cursed herself for ever exposing the twisted Makoto Eiko to that guild, for allowing those girl-crazy goofs to take a lower-level player under their wing and letting her adventure alongside them on the upper levels. Fuurinkazan had probably transferred some rare items to her inventory to keep Makoto safe, but it was still incredibly risky for a lower-level player to go to the front lines.

Borderline suicidal in fact.

So why had that idiot Klein and his ragtag group of desperate, lonely men done such a dangerous thing?

It was surprising when Damian was the one who actually pointed it out.

“Makoto, you’re taking too much of a risk.”

As Argo watched the little dark-haired minx place a caring hand on her own boyfriend’s shoulder, acting as though Damian’s words of concern had somehow profoundly scolded her and now sought atonement from her boy-god, the Information Broker silently clenched her jaw in anger.

“Please don’t be angry with me, Damian-sama… After watching an amazing player like you, I decided I couldn’t be a burden anymore... I just had to get stronger... To be like you... Klein and his guild must have sensed that powerful desire blossoming within me... Maybe that was why they begged me to join them... I never meant to upset you... Forgive me.”

The boy cast his annoyed glance sideways.
“I’m not angry with you, Makoto… I’m angry with those knuckleheads in Fuurinkazan for allowing a lower level player to play up there… The front line’s no joke, it’s incredibly dangerous… When you die in this game, you die for real.”

A stern Makoto nodded in agreement, hanging on his every word, angling her head until she could pull his attention back towards her with hypnotic-like intensity, staring deeply into Damian’s pale blue eyes as she held his hands like a princess in white rescued from a samurai-themed dragon.

“It means so much to me that you care… You’re right, it was all just a joke to those men… They still think it’s only a game, that we don’t really die in here… That’s why I wanted to join a serious guild, Damian-sama… A serious guild like the Knights of the Blood Oath… I was so happy when I learned that you were a member as well.”

Unable to contain her boiling anger any longer, the steaming Argo stepped forward past the large bear and forcefully removed the Beast Tamer’s hands from her boyfriend’s.

The briefest spark of hatred flashed across lavender eyes as Argo made contact, a flicker of the true Makoto Eiko which had almost been imperceptible until the beaming smile instantly reappeared.

The irate Argo wasn’t about to return such false civility however.

“I think you knew he was a member before you joined… And why were you waiting for us, Makoto?”

Light laughter dismissed the girl’s query as Makoto pointed back to her awaiting picnic basket, seeking Damian’s attention once again.

“To reward my hero, of course… Some of us repay our debts, Argo-chan.”

Argo felt as though sparks might be shooting out of her eyes as Makoto continued.

“I never got a chance to properly thank you, Damian-sama… I hope you don’t mind, but Heathcliff mentioned that you might still be in the Forest of Wandering, so I thought I’d make you a nice home-cooked meal… Were you hungry?”

Damian quickly glanced up at the inviting picnic basket set atop the grassy crest silhouetted by a gorgeous fading sunset, speaking before Argo could even decline.

“Absolutely famished.”

Seconds later, as the three players and a bear sat atop a hillside on the 35th floor watching the sunset, Makoto reached into her basket and offered Damian what looked like a hamburger.

“I heard that you’re American and I wanted to make you something from your homeland… I hope it’s alright, Damian-sama.”

As she presented the delicacy to him, Damian stared at the juicy morsel in awe, so incredibly different from the food he normally ate in this world.

“It looks delicious.”

“Try it, please.”

“Mmm… This is really good!”
Makoto smiled leeringly at Argo as though she’d just scored the coup-de-grâce in a lethal duel between Beast Tamer and Information Broker, the boy’s cheeks flushing with mouth-watering excitement as his eyes briefly closed in heavenly, ground beef bliss.

When they opened, Makoto was excitedly dancing on her toes as she clasped her hands together in starry-eyed rapture.

“I’m so glad you liked it, Damian-sama!... I brought you some sparkling sugar-water as well… It’s as close as I could come to a soft drink in this world.”

She watched anxiously as he took a deep swig from the jug and looked impressed.

“Wow… That’s not bad.”

“Oh! I almost forgot… Heathcliff sent me here to tell you to come back to the guild… He needs to speak with you immediately.”

The bristling Argo sidled up beside Damian.

“What does he want?”

Makoto glanced down at the other girl as though she were an unwanted barnacle which had attached itself to Damian’s hull.

“Heathcliff only said he needs to talk with Damian privately on a matter of the utmost importance.”

The Information Broker glared at her rival with narrowed eyes, her accusatory words sliding from her tightened lips sounding more like a serpent’s hiss than human speech.

“You’re lying.”

A victorious smile spread across Makoto Eiko’s lips as she linked her arm into Damian’s own, the resolute Ruuska making his powerful presence known once again to Argo as the bear pushed against her, forcing the seething girl to step back.

“I’m telling you the truth, my dear… Heathcliff specifically requested to speak with Damian… Alone… Perhaps he doesn’t trust a nasty little scab-girl who makes her living from selling other player’s secrets… Your sub-class is so underhanded, isn’t it?”

Before she could explode in a murderous rage, the quick-to-act Damian unhooked his arm from Makoto’s and then reached out a calming hand towards his seething girlfriend.

“It’s alright, Argo… I’ll talk with him and then I’ll message you… I promise.”

The was a slow hiss of air from the thirteen-year-old’s nostrils as she glared at a beaming Makoto Eiko, somehow forcing herself to remain calm until she folded her arms across her chest in acceptance.

“Fine… I have some pressing business of my own to take care of anyways.”

Moments later in an exclusive men’s hot springs on the 39th floor, an angry girl in a brown cloak stormed through a gaggle of young male patrons gathered in the changing room, each player attempting to cover his nakedness with anything on hand while the girl’s pale brown eyes never
strayed from her target in the steaming springs beyond…

A scraggly redheaded warrior who was neck deep in hot water.

Literally.

As a number of submerged men made their way to the opposite end of the extensive pool, the advancing Argo came in like a cold front, a chilling presence swooping down from the heavens before locking eyes with the surprised player as she peered down at him.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, Klein?! Taking a lower level player to the front lines like that! Are you insane?!”

Unfazed, the naked Klein stood his ground as he raised himself from the surface of the steaming pool, forcing Argo to keep her eyes locked on his gaze lest she accidentally trigger the game’s ‘peeping’ warning by viewing a naked player of the opposite sex in a bath setting.

“What’d ya mean, what am I doing?! What the hell is Marigan doing sending us a noob like that to baby-sit for an entire week?! She cost us a bloody fortune!”

Argo caught herself before she almost slid into the pool from shock.

“Wait… What do you mean baby-sit?... Marigan didn’t send Makoto to you guys… She would never do something idiotic like that .”

Unconvinced, Klein placed his hands on his hips as Argo managed to keep her eyes upwards.

“Then why did you message Dale and tell him the Legion guild needed her levelled up right away? That Marigan sent her to assess our combat capabilities for a secret mission?”

“I didn’t… I only messaged Dale to inquire if he could help out a cute girl by buying her some equipment… And that was only because I felt sorry for her and didn’t want to pay for it myself… Marigan had absolutely nothing to do with it.”

The Information Broker didn’t like the sinking feeling in the tightening pit of her stomach as she watched Klein’s jaw slowly drop in stunned disbelief.

“Wait… Are you telling me the Legion guild isn’t sending us on a secret quest to arrest the two bastards who tricked her?... But then… Why would she tell us all that?”

A horrified Argo slapped a shaking hand over her eyes as she suddenly comprehended that Damian might now be in terrible danger, that her fragile world was beginning to collapse around her.

“Oh God… I think we’re the ones who were tricked, Klein… I have to go!”

As the leader of Fuurinkazan watched the tiny blonde run out of the baths in a panic, he slowly leered over accusingly at the shame-faced Dale who was now attempting to submerge his curly hair underwater on the far side of the hot spring.

Klein resolved that he was either going to drown his stupid work-mate, or that they were about to have a very candid chat about a girl and her bear until Dale confessed everything.

He just wasn’t sure which yet.
Makoto Eiko recoiled as the greasy finger of the man called the Alchemist stroked the underside of her chin, causing the overprotective Ruuska to growl at the disgusting chemist before Makoto pulled back from his unwanted taint.

He laughed at her rejection amusedly.

“Don’t be so ungrateful, my dear… I told you I could give you your heart’s desire… Have I not delivered on my end of our bargain?”

Makoto glanced down at the paralyzed body of Damian now laid out on the bed before her and then stared coolly back at the beady eyes of the balding player with the bulging midsection.

“You did… But I’m not part of the bargain, old man… Don’t worry… You’ll have the Information Broker soon enough… I guarantee it.”

A crooked tooth smile as he eyed her slender breasts.

“Of course I will… But I would suggest sooner than later, dearest Makoto… I’m a sucker for a young beauty like yourself, but only to a point… Your lovely charms will only stretch my patience so far… You’d do well to remember that… I’ll have your supplies delivered later tonight… In the meantime, take good care of our little Prince.”

She shuddered as she watched the evil Alchemist turn and leave, chuckling like a madman as he slowly exited the secret dungeon of Horrenhelm which he’d converted into makeshift living quarters so that she could live out her dream.

It’d been a deal with the devil, but she would have willingly sold her soul for the boy now lying helpless before her.

She would sacrifice her own to save his soul.

Her beautiful Damian.

Her perfect beautiful still-innocent Damian.

That nasty little blonde bitch had tried to corrupt him, to seduce away his innocence and grind him under her swaying hips to ruin the boy, to wantonly push him over the edge of the abyss into adulthood.

Where he’d become a monster.

Makoto cradled the paralyzed boy into her tender arms as she softly stroked his hair and sighed, glancing around at the ninety-nine other perfectly made beds which surrounded Damian’s own in this massive, torch-lit cavern.

She smiled with perfect satisfaction at the empty beds which had yet to be filled.

So many innocent souls to save in this world.

“Welcome home, my darling… You’re finally safe… That’s all that matters… All that will ever matter.”
“DAMIAN?!”

At the sound of Argo’s yell, the curious Heathcliff tilted his head sideways to search out the familiar girl’s voice who was now bellowing out her boyfriend’s name in his guild’s chalet, a look of confusion crossing his brow as he set aside the map parchments he’d been examining, glancing over at the chestnut-coloured hair girl who was now standing beside him.
“Asuna… Has Damian returned yet?”

“No. I haven’t seen him since this morning.”

The Commander and Vice-Commander of the Knights of the Blood Oath quickly stepped into the second-floor hallway to intercept the diminutive Information Broker as she barrelled through their headquarters, suddenly narrowing her darkened amber eyes at the sight of Heathcliff.

“What were you thinking?! Do you just let anyone join your guild?”

Heathcliff slowly scratched his head.

“Are you talking about Damian?”

“No, that con-girl Makoto.”

The baffled look of confusion on Heathcliff’s gaunt face only deepened.

“I’m sorry, Argo… But I don’t know anyone by that name… And I’m sad to say that Lady Asuna here is the only female player we have.”

Argo looked as though she’d suddenly been punched in the gut.

“You… don’t know a seventeen-year-old Beast Tamer… with a bear… named Makoto?”

“No. Should I?”

“You didn’t send her to get Damian? To talk with him privately?”

“How could I send someone I don’t even know?”

It was Asuna who stepped forward, concern starting to write itself across her worried face as she sensed something was terribly wrong.

“Argo, is Damian missing?”

In a blind panic, the cloaked girl started to turn and leave before she was quickly intercepted by the player known as the ‘Lightning Flash’, Asuna shooting out a hand to prevent the smaller player from leaving, turning the Information Broker around as both of Asuna’s hands grasped the thirteen-year-old’s slender shoulders.

“Argo, tell me.”

“I… I think… I think something has happened to him, Asuna… I know it sounds ridiculous, but… I think he’s been kidnapped… By Makoto… I have to go!”

Except that Argo couldn’t go because Asuna wouldn’t let her.

“You’d better take a deep breath… Because you’re not going anywhere until you tell me what’s going on.”

“Asuna, please.”

“I mean it. Start talking.”

Resigning herself to the inevitable, Argo explained how she and Damian had rescued the mysterious
Makoto from the Forest of Wandering a week ago, about how the older Beast Tamer had seemed to show a strange romantic interest in Damian from the very beginning and how she’d later conned the Fuurinkazan guild into supporting her on the front lines.

Argo left out the part about cornering Klein in the male-only hot baths on the 39th floor.

The whiskered girl then told them about Makoto’s unexpected appearance outside of the Forest of Wandering only moments ago, how the Beast Tamer had been dressed in the signature outfit of Heathcliff, Asuna and Damian’s elite guild.

As Argo recounted her dealings with the strange Makoto, Asuna stared at her heavily.

“You haven’t been able to message Damian since then?”

“No.”

A cheerful Heathcliff stepped forwards with a wink.

“Well… Perhaps they just went adventuring in a dungeon together… Or he doesn’t want to answer your messages.”

All the strength suddenly fell from Argo as she considered the implications.

“You mean… that she… and him… that they…”

Asuna suddenly shot her Commander a brown-eyed glare full of daggers, instantly prompting the older paladin to choke on his own tongue.

Still fixed by Asuna’s arms, the pleading Argo once again peered once again at the Vice-Commander of the Knights of the Blood Oath, imploring to be freed so that she might resume her search, but Asuna Yuuki remained steadfast in her stubborn resolve.

“Asuna, where was the last place you saw Damian?”

“The exit to the Forest of Wandering.”

“Alright, we’ll start there… Let’s go.”

There was no sense in arguing with Asuna once she’d made up her mind.

Moments later, both girls stood outside the tree-lined exit of the labyrinth forest scanning the countryside, Asuna watching her agitated friend grow more and more anxious with purple twilight falling across Aincrad with Damian still nowhere to be found.

“Don’t worry, Argo… I’m sure he’s…”

“ASUNA!”

As she screamed out her name, Argo’s launching body caught the older girl by surprise, suddenly pushing the rapier-wielder sideways as two throwing picks whizzed by Asuna’s startled eyes before embedding themselves into the hillside just behind them - while two more struck Argo’s arm at the precise point where Asuna had just been standing.
In the blink of an eye, the Vice-Commander of the Knights of the Blood Oath was back on her feet with her slender sword drawn, quickly glancing down at the fallen Information Broker as a ‘Paralysis’ icon popped into existence next to her cursor.

Those throwing picks had been poisoned!

“Who’s there?! Show yourself!”

With her sword at the ready, Asuna watched as three shadowy figures slowly emerged from the forest edge.

She’d never seen these three players in person, but she still knew who they were.

Decent likenesses of them had been illustrated at the back of each edition of the Player’s Guide for months now, a bounty of a hundred thousand Col leading to the capture of…

Red-Eyed XaXa.

Johnny Black.

And their leader, PoH.

All three of them had rewards and orange cursors on their heads.

Even so, their swaggering leader still spread his hands by way of greeting as he smiled at the fencer’s fallen companion.

“We meet again, little Argo… As I mentioned before, Johnny has this terrible habit of throwing those things for no good reason at all… And look, you’ve brought us a friend!... And isn’t she just the cutest thing, boys… I’ll bet she loves to party!”

The furious Asuna levelled her blade at the scar-lined face of the orange player, taking an offensive stance as she stared back at him suspiciously.

“Stay where you are! What have you done with Damian?!”

PoH only chuckled.

“Damian?... You’ve got it all wrong, little lady… That wasn’t us… The brat went riding off into the sunset on top of a bear… Snuggled up next to some sexy-assed older girl as I recall… Actually, now that I think about it, I think I know where they might’ve gone… Say, why don’t I take you there?... C’mon, it’ll be fun.”

Before the scarecrow-masked Johnny Black could launch his second round of poisoned picks, the incredibly agile Asuna knew she wouldn’t have the time to retrieve Teleport crystals from her inventory before he could throw, deciding instead to take the initiative and fight.

The Lightning Flash struck the lanky teen in the scarecrow mask with a Quadruple Pain attack, immobilizing the pick-throwing player-killer as he dropped his picks and fell, spinning immediately to counter PoH’s counter-attack.

She’d timed it right.

Thanks to her high Agility score and skill, her lag time on a Quadruple Pain attack was almost nonexistent, giving her the opportunity to parry the leader of Laughing Coffin’s expected attack…
She didn’t even see it coming.

His cleaver-sized dagger slammed into her gut in a flash of darkness, any attempt to parry soon forgotten as the pain in her middle became overwhelming.

She hadn’t been able to do a thing to stop him.

The man leaned in closer to whisper in her ear as he twisted his thick cleaver’s tip even deeper into Asuna’s crimson stomach.

“My new Darkness Blade is quite impressive, isn’t it?... One of the ten Unique skills in this game… It simply ignores your defences and any other silly buffs you might have… I can slice through armour like it was butter… When I combine my sweet new skill with Paralysis poison, it seems almost unfair, doesn’t it?”

As Asuna struggled to swipe across the air and open her inventory to retrieve a crystal, an iron grip suddenly closed around her left wrist until her fingers splayed in pain, her knees buckling with the effects of the poison until the cruel PoH grinned maliciously.

“Naughty, naughty… Take your medicine, bitch… It’s show time!”

As Asuna cringed in pain, her ability to remain standing faded until she tumbled downwards, sprawling across the darkened grass.

She hadn’t meant to, but as she lay helplessly before his leather boots, one name suddenly flashed across her hopeless lips, a name she hadn’t spoken aloud for months which was now whispered to the night…

“Kirito... help me…”

But the dark-haired, easygoing boy who’d taken her under his wing for the first twenty-five levels wasn’t here now.

He wasn’t here to save her.

Not anymore.

She’d been prepared to give her life to beat this game, but not like this…

Please God, not like this.

“Teleport: Asuna, Town of Beginnings!... Teleport: Argo, Town of Beginnings!”

The paralysed girl with the braided hair suddenly glimmered with blue sparks as her tumbling eyes fell upon the recovered Argo twenty feet away, a Teleportation crystal firmly gripped in either hand, one pointed directly at Asuna and one at herself until the two of them flashed out of azure existence.

To once more appear where they had begun in Akihiko Kayaba’s game of death.

The Town of Beginnings.

Freed from PoH’s icy grip, a paralyzed Asuna managed to slowly pull an Antidote crystal from her inventory and cure herself of the affliction - only to find the sobbing Argo with her head tucked into her knees, her hooded cloak which held dozens of easily accessed crystals now covering her blonde hair and wet tears.
“Argo, are you alright?”

“It was all a set-up… They have him, Asuna… They were waiting for me… They knew I’d go there to look for him… Damian… Damian might already be….”

A comforting hand found Argo’s shoulder.

“He’s not… Don’t worry, we’ll find him.”

An hour later, Argo, Asuna, the battalion leaders of the Legion and the rest of the Fuurinkazan guild all gasped in unison, shocked by Marigan’s sudden display of anger and strength as the tall Commander of the Legion guild took hold of the portly Dale by his throat and - with only a single hand - slammed the samurai’s broad back against the wall of the Black Iron Palace while his boots helplessly dangled a foot above the marble floor.

“You… traitorous… moron!”

As the players began to protest, the Glorious Commander snarled and suddenly released the tearful man until he fell into a quivering heap of penance, sobs of remorse falling down his puffy, crimson cheeks to the repeated phrase of ‘sorry, sorry, sorry’.

It was Klein who stepped forward in defence of his fallen comrade.

“He’s incredibly sorry… He didn’t mean to betray us, he just got played, plain and simple… Dale honestly believed that he and Makoto were just playing a joke on the rest of us… Until it wasn’t a joke.”

Marigan was about to respond, still mindful of Klein’s heroics during their battle with the Black Dragon when the normally quiet Thinker suddenly snapped his fingers, the imaginary light bulb of revelation snapping on within his bright brown eyes as he looked at the leader of Fuurinkazan.

“Excuse me, Klein… Did you just say her name was Makoto?”

A collective quiet suddenly fell upon the crowd gathered within the Legion’s headquarters as all eyes suddenly fell upon the scruffy-haired, gaunt-faced man.

Klein nodded affirmatively at the player who was the founder of the hugely popular gaming site <<MMO Today>> when Thinker suddenly once more clapped his hands in recognition, the thought which had been stuck in his mind now suddenly unlocked.

“So that’s where I’ve seen her before!… That young lady who was here last week with the bear… That’s Makoto Eiko!… I’ve been trying to remember where I’ve seen her for the past week.”

The silver-haired Yulier standing next to Thinker turned to face her real-world husband.

“Who’s this Makoto Eiko girl, dear?”

“You remember that article we ran awhile back?... The one which featured the deaf girl who was given a complementary copy of SAO?... That’s Makoto Eiko!”

Klein suddenly piped up.

“But… ahhh… She’s not deaf.”
A patient Thinker smiled back at him

“Not in this world she’s not… The NerveGear circuitry bypasses our own ears… And all our sensory input… Remember that right now, our actual bodies are all probably lying on hospital beds in Tokyo… We’re actually speaking and hearing this conversation with our minds only.”

Thinker tapped the side of his temple for emphasis before continuing.

“All sensations from Sword Art Online are sent directly to our brains… In this world, the blind can see, the deaf can hear and the lame can fight floor bosses…

“I remember Argus wanted to get some positive press and highlight the unique opportunities that NerveGear equipment could provide certain disabled people with… <<MMO Today>> ran an article featuring three lucky recipients who were provided advanced copies of the game while the rest of us had to wait in line…

“Anyways, I’m positive that the girl with the bear was one of those three recipients… I remember the tag line for the story… Just like her mother, Makoto Eiko was born deaf, but in the magical world of Akihiko Kayaba’s Aincrad, she’ll finally be able to hear music for the first time.”

At that revelation, a strange thought suddenly occurred to the worried Argo.

“Thinker… Can a Beast Tamer see through the eyes of their familiar?”

“Sure… Once their skill level is high enough.”

The Information Broker suddenly understood why Makoto had called her boyfriend ‘Damian-sama.’ Because she’d used her bear to read Damian’s lips!

The imposing Marigan once again became the center of attention.

“Now that we know who she is, what does Makoto Eiko have to do with Laughing Coffin?”

A gloom-faced Argo suddenly cast her eyes to the floor in quiet prayer.

“Hopefully as little as possible.”

In a hidden dungeon on the thirteenth floor, a sleepless Makoto Eiko stroked the bristly fur of her bear Ruuska, pensively gazing out across the rows of empty beds sprawling like an infirmary before her.

With her eyes set to the future, she tried to explain it all to him, to tell her precious Damian why she had brought him here.

She had to make him understand this was all for his own good.

“We’ll create our own world here, Damian-sama… A world of beautiful innocence… You and me, my fated star… We’ll be the mother and father to all the innocent boys we’re going to save in this world…

“A world where you never grow old…”
“Our own private Neverland, where you can be Peter and I’ll be Wendy… With ninety-nine cute little lost boys to play with each and every day… They’ll all worship you… I’ll make sure they do.”

“Except that our fat Captain Hook somehow has an ‘Immortal Object’ tag, Makoto.”

At his unexpected reply, the startled young woman suddenly paused.

There was something wrong with where Damian’s voice was coming from. He should’ve been tied to the bed behind her, but now it sounded as though he was standing up next to it.

Perhaps her new sense of hearing had somehow betrayed her…

Spinning around, she saw the boy casting off the last of his coiled bonds as he stood almost naked in his white shorts, glaring back at her with cool blue eyes.

“You know he’s going to kill you, right?… Surely you’ve figured that out by now.”

“You… How?!”

“How did I untie your simple knots?... My father is one of the greatest escapologists in the entire world, he showed me a few tricks… And the game designers got the physics of rope correct, if not much else.”

The blinking Makoto Eiko couldn’t stop herself from staring at his supple, toned body as he stood defiantly in front of her, the heat rising to her cheeks as she dispersed the lustful thoughts which suddenly plagued her mind.

“He won’t kill me, Damian-sama… I’m pretty… He likes pretty girls.”

The scowl across his face worried her.

“Yeah, he likes them alright… You’re right though… The Alchemist won’t kill you right away… He and his three stooges will rape you first.”

“NOOOO!!!”

Her passionate and angry outburst actually surprised Damian until the boy realized the word ‘rape’ had triggered an explosive nerve in Makoto Eiko. That screaming reaction combined with her Peter Pan fixation suddenly made it all too clear to a boy who was a master of human psychology.

He knew why her fists were now balled in terror…

Makoto Eiko was a rape survivor.

“No! No, he wouldn’t do that! You’re lying!”

But his troubled blue eyes told her that this wasn’t a lie.

“Makoto, I’m sorry… But it’s the truth… I’ve seen him try it… That man is evil… I expect that once he has his hands on Argo, he’ll kill us both.”

Damian watched as sudden understanding washed over the older teen as she sank to her knees in tears, pure emotion raging through her soul as she reached out to him.

“But I would never hurt you, Damian… I won’t let anyone hurt you!”
“Look, I don’t want to see you get hurt either… If you’re telling me the truth, then we’ve got to get out of here right away… Where’s my equipment?”

“He took it.”

“Damn…”

Makoto’s reactive and violet eyes suddenly beseeched him, as though searching for answers, for some reason to continue her existence of utter devotion to her boy-god.

“Damian-sama, do you really care about me?”

The son of Bruce Wayne implicitly understood that he had to be careful how he answered this question. She was looking for a confession, a declaration of his love. This game had taken a heavy toll on the minds of its players and it was obvious that the troubled Makoto’s psyche had been damaged long before she’d ever heard a god-like Akihiko Kayaba declare that his world was now a death trap.

She was at a tipping point.

“I care about you, Makoto.”

Her exhilarated smile was almost heart-wrenching. Her faith in her blue-eyed idol now vindicated.

“I’m so happy, Damian-sama!... Then we’ll escape together!... I’ll do anything you want!... But… You don’t have any clothes on… Can you cover yourself with a sheet first?”

“Heh… Sure.”

As he turned to retrieve the rumpled sheet, the Boy Wonder felt the tip of her spear plunging into his naked back, the sting of the Paralysis poison spreading through his body like wildfire as he fell forward.

“Makoto… no…”

She was stronger than she looked, easily slinging his unmoving body over the furry back of her large bear, gathering the discarded rope to tie his hands and feet together across the underbelly of her beast before using the blanket to cover him, to conceal her human cargo.

“I’m so sorry, Damian-sama… But I know you’ll only run away to that nasty little witch again… She doesn’t love you, not like I can… And I’ll protect you… I’m the only one who can protect you now… I’ll kill the Alchemist and then Argo… I’ll create a perfect world where we can live happily together forever, my darling… I’ll give us the happy ending we deserve.”

Chapter End Notes

To a yandere, when an obstacle puts itself between you and your loved one, the solution is very simple.

Kill it.

You have to understand that Makoto Eiko is broken.
Her back-story is a tragic one…

As the only daughter of a deaf mother, Makoto was also born unable to hear and later lost her devoted biological father to heart disease. After the unexpected death of their family’s only provider and now faced with crippling financial burdens, Makoto’s despairing mother re-married another man who’d had worked alongside her departed husband and had recently divorced his own younger wife…

Another man who had hidden desires for the teenaged Makoto.

For Makoto Eiko, Sword Art Online represented the ultimate escape. The ability to travel to a new world away from her abusive step-father, a world where she could actually hear people talk for the first time and not be looked down upon as the strange girl who spoke by using her hands.

Makoto is not a bad character. Honestly, she’s not. She’s just been dealt a rotten hand in life and went a little crazy in this fantasy world.

I know most of my readers are younger and I’m doing my best to keep this PG-13. That’s why I only hinted about Makoto’s tragic family situation back in the beginning of Chapter 48 and from the lack of comments, I probably made a lot of you uncomfortable.

I’m fine with uncomfortable as long as I’m being responsible. Sometimes we writers have to deal with the icky stuff. It’s dealt with. The unpleasant subject of Makoto’s past is now concluded and I won’t go back there as we work our way towards a resolution for our yandere Beast Tamer.

On another note, Darkness Blade (Ankoku Ken) was one of four additional Unique Skills revealed by Reki Kawahara (under the pseudonym Kunori Fumio) when the Sword Art Online series was still running as a web novel. It was never mentioned or used in the anime but is still considered canon.

Darkness Blade causes all attacks from the user's primary weapon to deal true damage, that is, to bypass all defensive modifiers. It is the unique skill awarded to the player who’s killed the most other players in the game of Sword Art Online…

In other words…

PoH.
In a darkened ghetto of the mist-soaked Horrenhelm where few players would dare to tread amongst the realm of phantoms, the man called the Alchemist sat in a wide chair and looked upon his three retainers with contempt.

“What do you mean?... You lost her?”

The leader of these three young men, a psychotic player named PoH whose penchant for digital bloodlust the Alchemist had found rather appealing, stepped forward without fear.

In fact, he grinned.

“That front-line bitch, the one with rapier from the Knights of the Blood Oath… She tagged along... The more the merrier, I always say… But she complicated the operation.”

The evil smile which slowly spread across the Alchemist’s greasy lips intrigued PoH. To him, it seemed as though the Alchemist must’ve had previous dealings with the Vice-Commander of the
Knights, some shared history with that girl in order to cause such a malicious grin of reflection. But how could the evil god of this imaginary world, the invincible Akihiko Kayaba, ever be connected to a teenage girl like that?

“My dear little Asuna-chan… How interesting.”

But then again, PoH thought that the man did seem rather fond of under-aged girls, so maybe it shouldn’t have been so surprising that he knew this Asuna from the other side.

“Maybe we can add this Asuna to the list… Set up a private meeting?”

His suggestion didn’t have the enticing effect PoH had hoped.

“If you can’t bring me one little girl, what makes you think I can trust you clowns with two?”

“We beat them as easy as pie… But the slippery little broker pulled two long-range Teleport crystals out of her cloak like some damned magician… Johnny saw her do it.”

The Alchemist shot an accusatory look at the boy in the scarecrow mask, his fat fingers now angrily tapping against his chair as the cool damp air in the darkened room grew suffocating.

“Oh? Then why didn’t Johnny stop her from using them, hmmm?”

PoH chuckled.

“Because big, bad, scary Asuna knocked him on his ass first.”

They could almost feel the heat from Johnny’s embarrassed face emanating through the eyeholes in his burlap sack as both PoH and XaXa continued to snicker beside him.

The joke was lost on the fat man in the chair.

“This is no laughing matter, gentlemen… You’ve cost us the element of surprise… Luckily, I still have an ace up my sleeve… We’ll use our new friend Makoto to set up a little private get-together with the elusive Argo… Using her precious little Prince as bait.”

The skull masked XaXa couldn’t hide his disappointment.

“New friend? I thought we were going to kill her?”

The Alchemist raised himself up off the chair and then held up a hand.

“Patience, boys… First we’ll use Makoto to lure Argo away… Nab the Information Broker first… And then the bear-girl is all yours, XaXa… The important thing now is that we keep the boy alive… Enough excuses, gather up those supplies and let’s check in our newlyweds, shall we?”

Fifteen minutes later, as the Alchemist and the three principal members of Laughing Coffin opened the hidden door to enter the secret dungeon of Horrenhelm, they stopped in their tracks and stared at a hundred empty beds, their narrowing gaze drawn to one unmade cot in the center of the massive cave, the same empty bed where Damian had once been tied.

All three felt the tension rising within the potion-maker as he coldly gave the cloaked players their marching orders.

“Find the bitch… Find Makoto and make her regret the day she was born… But don’t you dare touch a hair on that boy’s head or I’ll skin all of you alive.”
The fat man suddenly held up his hand and slowly chuckled, his rasping chortle prompting the three retained murderers to pause as they watched his fat fingers happily opening a halo-screen.

“This might just be your lucky day, gentlemen… I’ve just gotten a message from our errant Beast Tamer… Seems she wants to set up a meeting at an out-of-the-way tavern in Taft at 3:00 PM to hand over Argo… But only if I can personally guarantee her safety and promise to leave Damian alone…”

“I promise not to touch a hair on her pretty little head… Because I won’t have to, will I boys?… After all, that’s your job… But don’t kill her until she tells you where the boy is, understood?... I need that brat alive.”

A smiling PoH ran his finger along the razor-sharp edge of his cleaver named Mate Chopper, his smirking lips twisting in cold-blooded anticipation.

“Anything you say, boss.”

As soon as he’d regained feeling, a bound Damian struggled against the litany of ropes which encased him, his prone avatar strewn across the rocky ground of a mountainous plateau like a discarded mummy. The cloth gag which the relentless Makoto had secured across his mouth meant he couldn’t speak.

But if he could, what he would say to her right now wouldn’t be kind.

He knew this place.

Just from the constant chorus of caws, he knew this damned place.

It was the plateau of ‘The King of Black Feathers’.

This flat slab of rock had been the battleground to defeat that unique field boss of the 19th floor, a far-off mountainside where a half-human, half-raven unique monster battled the players before granting them the golden key to the 19th floor dungeon which the Bird King had stolen from the Duke of Ralberg.

While Damian hadn’t seen this place in months, he instantly recognized it from the thousands of ravens and crows littering his immediate surroundings, moulting feathered monstrosities staring at him with their black, beady eyes set atop sharp, ebony beaks.

Beside him, an agitated Ruuska growled at the birds, snapping at the air to keep the scores of carrion feeders at bay and to prevent Damian from becoming bird feed.

As he recalled, they weren’t really dangerous, but this was still a place you didn’t want to be. As a unique monster, ‘The King of Black Feathers’ and his flocks of minions hadn’t been exceptionally strong but that didn’t mean it’d been easy.

What had been challenging was where you had to fight him.

This flat, crow-filled plateau was narrow, no more than twenty feet across and literally set at the edge of this virtual world. In fact, if he were to roll only six feet to his left, Damian would tumble off the rocky edge of Aincrad, soon joining the glowing blue avatars in the Halls of the Departed whose cause of death was listed only as ‘Fell from a great height’.
Even from here, he could tell the world below was a long way down.

When they’d fought this field boss months ago, the players had to be extremely careful of where their attacks would land, mindful of the scores of crows that continually buffeted and blinded them, always attempting to guide the heroes closer to the edge of Aincrad. Even the King’s attacks would try to push the players towards the edge, as though these feathered monsters only wanted to prove that the players who trespassed upon their hallowed ground couldn’t fly.

As the annoyed Ruuska once again snapped at a curious raven hopping towards Damian’s face, a hundred more of its onyx-eyed companions croaked their displeasure at the angry bear. The mummified boy could tell by the way these scores of black-feathered soldiers were lining up that they wanted to push these intruders off their sacred plateau, if only to avenge their fallen king.

“Are those nasty birds bothering you, Ruuska?”

At the sound of his mistress’s voice, the hackled bear uttered a plaintive growl. Like the bound-and-gagged Damian, Makoto’s furry familiar only wanted to leave this awful place.

The boy’s blue eyes narrowed eyes looked up as he managed to tilt his head to find a reequipped Makoto now standing behind Ruuska, the troubled girl dressed head-to-toe in metal armour, a full sallet helmet covering her athletic features as though she were now playing a tank-type character.

But Damian knew that wasn’t her intention. Her identity was completely concealed behind metal with even her voice sounding metallic. She was obviously up to something and had to disguise herself…

Which meant Argo had probably initiated an Aincrad-wide manhunt.

“Patience, my big beautiful bear… Mommy has a little business to take care of first… I know I must look positively dreadful in this…”

The metal-clad Makoto leaned down to gently stroke Damian’s cropped hair with steel fingers. He growled through his gag as she lifted off the heavy helmet and leaned down to kiss his forehead.

“But it’s so kind of you not to mention it… What’s that you’re mumbling, my darling?... You’d rather see me in something veiled, white and flowing with Wedding bells chiming high from above as I stroll down the aisle?... Oh yes, my darling, a thousand time yes!… We’ll be married just as soon as I can starve the taint of that nasty blonde witch from your memory…

“I figure about a month without food should do the trick… Oh no, you’re not fat, my silly boy… But you need to purify your body until you understand what’s truly important in this life… To see things clearly… To see things my way… Until you understand that I’m the only one who can save you, Damian…”

“Once we’re married, your new wife - that’s me, by the way - will feed you anything your hungry heart desires… Forever and ever… Just remember, what I have to do now, I’m doing for your own good… But only so we can achieve perfect happiness, my darling… Only so we may become boy and wife.”

“Shhh… Be a good boy… I need to leave you for a little while… It’s time I should be going… But don’t worry, Ruuska is here to take good care of you and keep those nasty birds away… But if you’re a naughty boy and try to escape from your ropes again, I told hen-pecked Ruuska to sit on you…”

“You really don’t want a bear sitting on top of you while all those awful crows peck away at your
toes, do you?... No, I didn’t think you would… That’s why you need to be good for your Makoto and let Ruuska protect you from these birds, Damian… And when I return, I’ll tell you a wonderful story… A wonderful story about how a loving fiancée was very, very clever and how she’s the only girl in the world for a precious boy like you…

“Adieu, my sweet… Tonight, we celebrate my victory... And our love.”

Within the polished walls of the inner sanctum of the Black Iron Palace, a devastated Argo felt as though her soul had been torn in two, the remnants weighing her down until her heavy heart struggled to beat, barely hearing the final arrangements of Marigan and the Legion’s elite team preparing for the boss raid on the 39th floor.

Instead, the girl’s worried thoughts only focused on the boy who’d been stolen from her…

Damian.

Her menu once again told her he was outside of message range – that he must be in some type of dungeon…

But which one?

Without even needing to be asked, the devoted Hisako had just done something Argo would never have the strength to do, visiting the Monument of Life to assure the nervous Information Broker that her boyfriend’s name wasn’t yet scratched out.

That he was alive.

Alive and in the clutches of Makoto Eiko.

Over the past twenty-four hours, Argo had desperately contacted her vast information network, offering one hundred thousand Col for information leading to the whereabouts of the devious Makoto or Damian…

But privately, she didn’t hold out much hope.

The hundred thousand Col reward for the Alchemist and the three other members of Laughing Coffin had been posted in the Guide for months now, and yet, they’d simply vanished into thin air, never visiting a town or showing their faces until yesterday when they’d ambushed both herself and Asuna at the edge of the Wandering Forest.

Michi hated to consider it, but those player-killers were probably murdering other adventuring players and simply stealing their supplies, sticking to the remote areas. After all, when you left the safety of town in this game of death, there was no guarantee you’d ever return.

The guilt-laden Hisako had once counted the number of ‘Killed by Another Player’ tags in the Halls of the Departed and informed her guild-leader that the number was now well over three hundred…

Argo was sure they didn’t all belong to PoH, but she was willing to bet the keys to the Black Iron Palace that most of them did.

How else could that cloaked bastard earn the unique skill named ‘Darkness Blade’, the singular reward for the player who’d killed the most other players in this game of death? But what truly
troubled the whiskered girl was that there were more ways to murder a player than by just putting your weapon through them…

She’d heard tales of someone spreading false information amongst the lower levels that jumping off the perilous walls of Aincrad to the world below would force your avatar to log off. Dozens of hopeless players had already tried that trick before the rumour had been dismissed.

Argo also wondered how many times those three orange-players had manipulated others into making fatal decisions, like Kibaou and his decision to handle the 25th floor boss with only his guild alone, resulting in the death of twenty-four players at the hands of the giants…

Or teleporting innocent players to dungeons far beyond their character level. The infamous monster PK.

Or how many trusting front-line players Laughing Coffin could’ve led to an untimely end if they’d forced the Information Broker to publish false information in her Player’s Guide back on the 9th floor.

How much would the game have changed then?

The gentle Hisako Li-Shun reached across and placed her hand on the shoulder of her troubled friend.

“We’ll find him, Argo.”

The blonde girl tried to make herself smile as she stared into the warm brown eyes of the dark-haired girl sitting across from her, the only other high-level player she knew who’d pumped the stats from each and every level gain into her Agility score.

To devastating effect.

Argo’s troubled thoughts returned to the present.

“Hey, shouldn’t the hero of the 38th floor boss battle be getting ready?”

In the three months which she’d gone missing, repeating the same adventure over-and-over again on the 57th floor with Damian, the now lower-levelled Argo had been pleased to learn that the quiet Hisako Li Shun had filled the leadership void caused by the Beta player’s mysterious disappearance, developing a specialized and innovative Chakra-style attack called ‘Enlightenment’ which involved placing seven spikes in a row along an opponent’s pressure points with blinding speed.

The damage was minimal, but the combined effects to a monster’s offence, defence and movement stats could be crippling, making it easy prey for the other players until the spikes were removed. The effect was reduced on the more powerful monsters of course, but Argo had listened with pride as a subdued and melancholy Kirito had informed the broker that her formerly timid female party member had pulled off ‘Enlightenment’ eleven times on the last floor boss, even gaining the Last Attack bonus.

It seemed that good people could still become heroes in this cruel world.

At least Akihiko Kayaba had left them that much, even if his floating prison named Aincrad had seemed to have taken some unknown toll of the normally easygoing Kirito, carving out the boy’s soul until he was a mere shell of his former self…
But that was private information he wouldn’t sell to her.

Argo hadn’t even realized that the once busy halls of the Black Iron Palace had now grown silent as Hisako gripped her hand, pulling the broker away from the riptide of despair.

“I should really be going… But I’m more concerned about you right now… You look lost inside… And I’ve just got a bad feeling.”

“But they left ten minutes ago.”

A confident smile.

“You don’t think I can catch up?”

“Hisako, don’t worry, I’m…”

Argo’s words were suddenly interrupted when she received a notification on a translucent pop-up screen, silently praying that it was news of Damian’s whereabouts from one of her many informants…

But it was only a friend request.

The shocked Argo suddenly stared across at a wary Hisako and then took a deep breath as she realized who this unexpected request was from.

“It’s a friend request… From Makoto Eiko.”

Accepting the invitation, Argo relayed the message to a concerned Hisako.

“She says she was forced into abducting Damian by the Laughing Coffin guild… That they won’t release him until they talk with me… She’s currently hiding out at a tavern in Taft and wants to meet me there to discuss their terms… I have to come alone… And I have to arrive in the next five minutes… Or else.”

The long-haired, Chinese-Japanese young woman became grimly serious as resolution set across her thoughtful features.

“This is a trap… We need to tell Marigan.”

“But the 39th floor boss battle…”

“Isn’t worth your life, Argo… Makoto must have known the raid was planned at this time… She knows your strongest allies would all be gathered there… That you’d be alone.”

Argo watched as Hisako quickly popped open her own menu and frowned before a glimmer of hope lit up those soft brown eyes.

“Damn, Marigan’s already offline… But Fuurinkazan is late as usual… Hold on… Yes!… He responded!… What’s the location of this place, Argo?”

“The Skull and Dagger tavern in the east section…”

The sprinter watched as Argo stifled a sudden tear before continuing.

“There’s a new message… She says they’ll kill him if I don’t come right away! Hisako, I have to go…”
A lightning fast arm gripped her.

“Argo, you’re too smart to start acting stupid now… She’s only trying to lure you into her trap… Think about it!”

“If anything happened to him… I just… I couldn’t…”

“Alright, but you’re not going alone… We’re Legion.”

Only a moment after materializing at the Teleport Gate of Taft and exactly five minutes after receiving the invite, a breathless Argo entered the unpopular Skull and Dagger tavern at the eastern edge of the eleventh-floor city, a place she recalled that few players would congregate to as it had no rooms to let and food that could only be described as grub.

Even the disfigured bandit NPC waitress wore an eye patch.

It was a place where only sudsy amber drinks called ‘grog’ could be purchased and not much else. The den of thieves and assassins. The watering hole of the damned.

Scanning the dingy surroundings, a nervous Argo saw only an armour-wearing player drinking the gut-curdling grog in the corner and a girl in a dark cloak huddled forward at the bar, her features hidden as she paid for her first drink.

There were no signs of Makoto Eiko, her bear, Laughing Coffin or Damian.

Seeing no other players, the nervous Information Broker warily approached the girl at the bar.

“Excuse me, Miss…”

Michi Aoi stopped mid-sentence as an unnatural darkness suddenly swept across the entire tavern, as though this beer-stained room of creaking wood had just been plunged into the dead of night.

A deep male voice from the doorway sent cold chills racing across her body.

“Lookee, lookee, boys… One little Information Broker… Signed, sealed and delivered… Just as promised.”

As Argo spun to see the grinning man named PoH who’d just entered the bar and activated an Obsidian Crystal, she also witnessed his two compatriots quietly entering behind him, blocking her only escape route…

Johnny Black.

Red-Eyed XaXa.

With widening eyes, the blonde girl suddenly realized the devious Makoto had indeed tricked the hapless Information Broker into a well-executed trap…

Except that thanks to the quick thinking of Hisako Li Shun, the tables were about to turn.
He was the darkness.

As the brooding Bruce Wayne sat in the middle of his Bat Cave once more, ominous in its cool and silent darkness as a dozen computer screens ran surveillance programs beside him, he couldn’t shake the feeling of being a prisoner within his own home.

He was engaged in a high-stakes game of information chess where one wrong move could spell disaster, where the very fate of the world now hung in the balance and every pawn he lost meant people would die. With one single mistake in this dangerous, Talia could take Barbara from him, or Alfred, or James Gordon, or Lucius Fox.

Maybe even Dick.

So this all-too-familiar cave had become his prison.
He’d spoken brave words to Clark at the funeral of Iris Allen, about how he’d stop Talia on his own and damned the cost, but the truth was that the daughter of Ra’s al Ghul was more dangerous than he knew. She had her spies and her assassins everywhere. His mansion was being monitored 24/7, his data lines tapped, his cell phone monitored, even Dick, Barbara and Alfred were under constant surveillance by the League of Assassins…

Through the scopes of high-powered sniper rifles.

Bruce felt his chest tense, knowing she was now daring him to make a move so that she might respond in kind. Pressing her husband to try and call her bluff, just to show him how far she was truly willing to go.

If he gave her the chance, Bruce understood she’d relish the opportunity to reveal the dead faces of all his friends and family on those bloodstained cards she held close to her chest. To lay down that hand and pull all his chips towards her stack, to take his very world away from him…

His wife had been planning this for awhile.

She was good at it.

Better than he was even.

She hadn’t planned on Damian getting involved of course, or Bruce for that matter, but she’d certainly planned on having the necessary deterrents in place if her scheme for a digital humanity were ever discovered. So far, Bruce had uncovered sixteen separate terrorist plots his beautiful wife had carefully orchestrated involving thousands of innocent people, with Talia ready to pull the trigger on these cataclysmic tragedies if he so much as moved a finger to try and stop her…

And those were only the ones he’d found so far.

There were more.

He knew there were more.

She could bring down the damned world if she wanted to.

But what was the most painful revelation of all was that Bruce had already provided her with the identity of everyone he’d ever cared for. She’d hacked into Barbara’s computer network around the same time Damian had been sent to live with him, soon uncovering all of the secrets he kept in countless files throughout Barbara’s network.

Including the secret identity of every superhero on the planet.

And that little oversight was tearing him apart inside.

He almost didn’t hear Dick walking up behind him.

“Brought you some milk and cookies.”

Bruce turned to see that his adopted son was carrying a glass of milk and a plate of freshly baked cookies. If nothing else, it was good to see Dick walking again. In fact, he was better than ever after the explosion.

“Any news?”

“Well, I managed to slip the letter you gave me to Leslie when she dropped by Damian’s hospital
It didn’t look like Talia had her spies follow Dr. Thompson out, although they were certainly taking notes… I just hope she’s alright.”

“She’ll be fine so long as she doesn’t use digital communications… She just needs to stick to the courier that I’ve listed and send the letter… In order to stop Talia, I need to explore… alternative measures.”

“Is that what you’re calling it?… Do you really think he’ll help you?”

“He has to.”

“Ahhh, no… He doesn’t… And from what I’ve heard, he likely won’t.”

“Won’t know if we don’t try… Right now, the one thing we have is time… And hope.”

“I think you’re spending too much time down here. The lack of sunlight is starting to affect your pessimism.”

Bruce’s deep chuckle frightened Dick a little.

“It’s where I do my best work… And research… I’ll come up and join you soon enough… But I’ve discovered there’s been something strange going on with certain victims of the Sword Art Online crisis… The Japanese are trying to downplay it, but over the past three weeks, sixteen players have had their NerveGear data rate drop significantly… It’s as though they were in a state of perpetual sleep within the game... Virtually no network traffic at all... And it’s not a lag effect.”

Dick scratched his head perplexed.

“I read that players could have their accounts suspended for cheating.”

“Kayaba is dead and there were no other game masters logged in... Besides, if the AI’s purpose is to collect the emotional data of the players, it doesn’t make sense she’d suspend their accounts…

“Unless they died…

“I have to believe that these sixteen players all died in the game and that Alice Light has given them a temporary reprieve… That she’s purposely withholding the death signal which would fry their brains.”

“Wouldn’t that set off the 10-second death alarm though?”

“Theoretically, yes… But she might have a work-around… Maybe a different sequence… The first patient to enter this ‘modem-state’ did so only hours after his death alarm was installed by the Japanese authorities… Ever since then, fifteen more players have base-lined in a similar fashion at different times, including a group of high school friends at roughly the same time…

“It’s likely they’d form an adventuring party… An adventuring party that met a terrible end… But at least none of them have really died… Yet.”

“Wait… You think she’s keeping them as hostages?!”

Bruce’s eyes narrowed in frustration.

“That’s exactly what I think… Actually, when you think about it, it’s the logical thing to do… As more and more players die, Alice Light is letting her human bargaining chips slip between her virtual fingers… Especially with the revelation that the Argus servers are set to release upon the world on
November 01, 2025…

“But what really bothers me, Dick… What I can’t shake the feeling of is that this whole development reeks of Talia… This hostage scenario is precisely how she operates… It’s like these poor players are being held at nine-point-nine seconds and if we try to intervene… They die.”

Dick thought about it for a moment, the gears of his methodical brain churning as he chewed on a chocolate-chip cookie.

“Maybe Alice is just learning politics… I suppose there’s a chance she could be in contact with Talia… But there’s also a chance you’re becoming obsessed with your crazy wife and just getting paranoid… Trying to unravel her conspiracy theories twenty-four hours a day isn’t doing you any good.”

Bruce anxiously stared at his screens.

“I have to know how she can hurt us… What tripwires she’s laid across my path… God, how could I have been so blind to her damned plans when I let her use me like that?”

Dick took another bite of a homemade chocolate chip cookie and then grinned.

“Because despite this brooding, obsessive behaviour that you’re so fond of lately, there was once a time when you were a man who was deeply in love with her… And love, as they say, makes a man blind… I hear hatred can do the same thing.”

“I failed to stop her when I had the chance, Dick… I’m as much to blame for all of this as she is.”

Dick breathed out one of his patented ‘here-we-go-again’ sighs and held up his hands.

“Stop it… Just stop… You’re acting like an overgrown teenager who just got dumped by his hot girlfriend when she got accepted to an Ivy League school and he didn’t.”

The hint of a smile crept across Bruce’s lips.

“By the way… Whatever happened to Heather after she went to Yale?”

With a huff, Dick grabbed a second cookie.

“I thought we took a solemn oath we’d never to speak her name again.”

“Yes, I suppose we did… She’s happily married to a defence lawyer in Metropolis and pregnant with their second child in case you were wondering… She’s one of my LinkChat connections… I like to keep up to date with all your ex-girlfriends.”

“Great, fine… I’m happy for her… Whatever… Have you updated your status with the fact I’m engaged to a wonderful woman who makes great cookies yet?… Not that you deserve any of these for breaking the sacred oath we swore after Heather dumped me.”

Bruce finally took a cookie, collecting himself as he remembered an easier time and enjoyed the mouth-watering warmth of sweet simplicity.

It was the first thing he’d tasted all day.

“Mmm… These are good… Give Barbara my compliments.”

“Give them to her yourself… It’ll finally get you out of this cave.”
“Sorry I’ve been so gloomy lately… But the fact remains Talia is the most dangerous foe I’ve ever faced… The fact that she’s also my wife and the mother of my child… That… *complicates* things… I’m not sure if I’ll be able to stop her.”

“You don’t have to stop her alone, Bruce… We’re a part of this family too… Barbara and I are here to help… And so is the rest of the Justice League… You only need to ask.”

The billionaire put his hand on the back of his weary head and sighed.

“I know… Look, I’m sorry… I just…”

His apologetic reply was cut short by the cheerful tones of his cell phone. Looking down at the display, Bruce saw a name he hadn’t expected to ever see on the ID again…

Ukyou Oshiro.

It was the same woman he’d saved months before as Batman, catching the Argus Public Relations executive in mid-air only seconds before she’d plunged to her death in the icy waters below Tokyo’s famous Rainbow Bridge.

Bruce recalled the distraught Ukyou hadn’t been convicted of any crimes after she’d turned herself in, but like all Argus executives, she wasn’t permitted to leave Japan either. He’d learned she’d been performing community service at the hospital where all the SAO victims were being cared for, attempting to repent in any way she could for the tragedy inflicted by her former company and its deranged CEO Akihiko Kayaba.

Dick noticed how Bruce’s voice suddenly altered to the cheerful Wayne Industries CEO when he answered the long-distance call. The former Boy Wonder sometimes wondered if Bruce Wayne were simply Batman’s civilian identity, if perhaps the industrialist was nothing more than the business-suited disguise of the grim vigilante and not the other way around.

“Oshiro-san, this is an unexpected surprise.”

“I hope I’m not disturbing you, Wayne-san…”

“Not at all… It’s actually nice to talk with you again. Is anything wrong?”

“I thought I might offer you some encouraging news for a change… The hospital where I volunteer… One of the patients… She woke up!… Her alarm sounded when I was on monitor duty in the room and I was able to extract her NerveGear before the microwaves were activated… She’s alive, Bruce!… The Police are here now, but I wanted to give you some hopeful news because she told me that she knew your son in the game rather well…”

“She knows Damian? What’s her name, Ukyou?! Tell me! Please!”

“Of course. It’s…”

Bruce committed the name of the Japanese girl to his memory as he felt his heart racing with excitement.

As he ended that call, the anxious father quickly made another.

“I know you heard that, Talia… I’m going there… I *have* to… I need to know what’s going on with Damian… Send whatever escort you need but I’m leaving… Now!”
As the master of the estate ran towards the 1967 vintage black-and-red corvette with his phone coming alive in his hand, it was all the pursuing Dick could do to swallow a mouthful of cookie and squeeze in a question.

“Bruce… What’s going on?!?”

“That’s enough target practice for today, Johnny… Be a good man and watch the door… After all, sweet little Argo’s been saving this dance just for me, haven’t you whiskers?”

“Bruce… What’s going on?!”

“Sword Art Online just had its first survivor… She woke up an hour ago… I’ve got to meet her, Dick… She was with Damian!”

“Then I’ll go with you.”

“No… Stay here and have Damian monitored around the clock… I’m calling the hospital right now… If the alarm worked once, it might work again… The players might just have found a way out of the game… I’ll keep in touch.”

As the car door slammed shut and Richard Grayson heard the roar of Batman’s ‘undercover car’ engine, he watched the Stingray peel out in an angry squeal of tire rubber, leaving him alone in the dark.

“Then I’ll go with you.”

“No… Stay here and have Damian monitored around the clock… I’m calling the hospital right now… If the alarm worked once, it might work again… The players might just have found a way out of the game… I’ll keep in touch.”

As the car door slammed shut and Richard Grayson heard the roar of Batman’s ‘undercover car’ engine, he watched the Stingray peel out in an angry squeal of tire rubber, leaving him alone in the dark.

“Yeah, alright… I’ll just let Barbara and Alfred know then.”

Argo was used to placing herself in dangerous situations, but this time she might have went too far.

Facing off against three of the deadliest players in Sword Art Online, with all three of those grinning young men now standing at the entrance to the Skull and Dagger tavern located on the eleventh-floor in a city named Taft, the thirteen-year-old Information Broker knew she was in deep trouble as the Obsidian Crystal spread its dark tendrils across the bar.

As the clearheaded Hisako had suspected, it’d been a trap all along.

She watched as Red-Eyed XaXa and Johnny Black manoeuvred themselves to prevent her escape, the worried Argo watching the unworldly darkness of an Obsidian Crystal finished spreading its inky influence across the bar’s tattered floor.

This was the same inky blackness which would convert any safe area into a dungeon for sixty seconds. More than enough time for three psychopathic assassins to kill a solitary Information Broker who’d walked into their trap.

The hooded Argo managed to peel her light brown eyes off the floor long enough to avoid four throwing picks which whizzed by her ear, each embedding itself into the far wooden wall with a loud ‘thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk’.

Landing on her feet, she saw PoH grinning at his scarecrow-masked companion, the one who’d just thrown the poison-laced picks at Argo with the agile young girl avoiding them by a hair’s breadth while performing a backwards cartwheel.

Her mother would’ve been proud.

“That’s enough target practice for today, Johnny… Be a good man and watch the door… After all, sweet little Argo’s been saving this dance just for me, haven’t you whiskers?”
“Like hell I have.”

From the previous battle when she’d teamed up with Asuna, Michi Aoi had already witnessed PoH’s terrifying unique skill of ‘Darkness Blade’ in action, a lightning fast strike that could render any player’s defences useless.

An automatic hit.

Which meant her considerable ‘Dodging’ skill wasn’t going to save her this time…

No, she had to rely on Hisako Li Shun for that.

As Argo backed away, edging towards the rear of the dingy bar, the stalking PoH followed her through shadowed columns, preparing to bring her down with the Paralysis Poison she was sure his cleaver’s blade was coated with.

The Obsidian Crystal made her feel like she was skating backwards on black ice.

As the scar-faced killer confidently stepped past the shady barstools in pursuit, he took no notice of the hooded girl with the low-level ‘Hiding’ skill who’d crouched down behind the bar’s corner, the grinning killer’s entire attention focused on his retreating prey.

“Aww… Don’t be shy, baby… Let’s dance.”

Argo was careful not to avert her widening eyes, to keep them fixed on PoH’s gleaming cleaver instead of the hidden Hisako, silently praying she wouldn’t betray the only card she had hidden up her sleeve.

As the advancing PoH finally backed Argo into a corner and prepared to engage his attack, the crouching Hisako suddenly leapt forward with incredible speed, driving seven spikes in a perfect line along the Laughing Coffin leader’s exposed back, each nail striking home, piercing a pressure point to trigger a Chakra-style specialized attack called ‘Enlightenment’.

As impressive as it was successful, Argo knew Hisako’s ‘Enlightenment’ attack caused little damage.

But that wasn’t the intention.

The retreating Argo was simply relying on the fact that when used against another player, ‘Enlightenment’ reduced their Agility stat by seven points. Against a high-level opponent like PoH, that would hardly be a deterrent, but the clever Information Broker was also banking on the fact that the killer must have only recently acquired his ‘Darkness Blade’ skill.

And also that it must have required a ridiculously high Agility score as a prerequisite.

If those seven lost points of Agility were enough to drive PoH beneath that prerequisite, he wouldn’t be able to engage his newly acquired unique skill. Michi Aoi knew better than most players that Sword Art Online was unfair; that with nothing more than simple debuff penalties, weaker monsters could often remove a player’s most potent attack.

As PoH screamed and then recovered enough to spin like a madman, slicing through a lock of Hisako’s black hair with the arc of his razor-sharp cleaver as she leaned backwards, the calculating Broker had her answer.

Seven points of Agility had been enough.
He couldn’t use ‘Darkness Blade’ anymore.

“Half-breed…”

Argo suddenly glanced over at the chilling voice of Red-Eyed XaXa, his hateful glare screwed into place on the revealed features of Hisako Li Shun, pure malice almost dripping like disfiguring acid from under his skull mask as he drew his long sword and advanced on the same innocent young woman this player-killer had dragged into the exclusive game to use as nothing more than pretty bait.

But Hisako was so much more than that now.

They both were.

As an Information Broker who liked to run through dungeons and avoid conflict while gathering intel, Argo had developed her detection senses to an almost unnatural level, an extrasensory level of perception honed to perfection in order to detect ambush attacks from hidden monsters while she mapped out catacombs and spiralling dungeons.

It was those senses which saved her life now.

Having nearly backed herself up to the rear of the bar to expose the enraged PoH to Hisako’s surprise attack, Argo had almost forgotten about the only other player in the swill-house, a heavily armoured player who’s been quietly drinking in the shadows when she’d entered the meeting place and the fleet-footed Hisako had already arrived and taken up her position at the bar.

It was only a digitally-triggered gut instinct which made Michi twist at the last possible second, almost feeling the spear tip graze her midsection from the massive aggro sneak attack launched behind her.

A spear tip laced with one last dose of Paralysis Poison.

Even if this mystery player was attempting to hide the twisted hatred of their face beneath a visored metal helmet, Argo still knew that spear.

“Makoto!”

A split-second later, four throwing picks bounced off the heavy metal armour when Damian’s quick-thinking girlfriend spun behind the crazed stalker, using the attack-frozen yandere as her shield against Johnny Black’s latest volley.

Argo knew the hollow-sounding voice of the seventeen-year-old beneath the helmet only too well as she pushed the Beast Tamer towards the middle of the bar and the exit like a living shield.

“Get your hands off me, bitch!”

“My hands are going around your lying throat if you don’t start telling me where Damian is!”

She could’ve escaped just then.

But Hisako had now found herself in a two-on-one duel against two of the deadliest players in the game and Argo couldn’t leave her. Quickly stopping and ripping off Makoto Eiko’s helmet to stare directly into those purple eyes, Argo had to look up at the taller girl to make her point.

“You’re going to tell me where Damian is or I’ll end you here and now.”

“Shouldn’t you be helping your friend first?”
Damn it!

It wasn’t much, but a lightning-fast Argo abandoned Makoto and attempted to drive Eulogy into PoH’s back, the player-killer landed three spinning blows on Hisako, making the longhaired girl unsteady as the poison on his blade slowly took effect.

Even without his ‘Darkness Blade’ skill, this guy was obviously dangerous. Argo could’ve sword that was a ‘Treble Scythe’ attack pattern, an advanced three-combo sword skill she’d only seen a few frontline players use so far.

This guy was no pushover.

Hisako Li Shun’s knees buckled and she crumpled helplessly to the floor as the distracted Argo missed her attack.

It was all happening too soon, with Argo figuring that the Obsidian Crystal’s effect might have thirty seconds remaining, more than enough time for XaXa to stab the fallen rapier-wielder to death without Argo being able to stop him…

But suddenly, she didn’t need to stop him.

Because the first of her reinforcements had just arrived.

With a satisfactory grin, Argo watched as the flailing figure of Johnny Black flew through the air like a drunken potato sack launched from a lightning-fuelled cannon, his health bar already driven near the yellow with a single explosive strike which echoed a sonic boom across the dingy bar, a century worth of digital dust now slowly falling from the rafters as Johnny smashed into a table.

And there, with her two-handed sword still extended from a sprinting attack (which Argo thought must’ve started near the town square) was the legendary warrior the players called the Glorious Commander, the blonde leader of the Legion guild still basked in the fading glow of her powerful sword attack which had made Johnny Black a human piñata.

For a Strength-based player, the astounded Argo had to admit that Marigan had the fastest sprinting attacks she’d ever seen, the older woman able to hit short bursts of speed that even herself and Hisako could only dream of.

With the unexpected appearance of the Legion guild leader, the crafty PoH paused as he realized that Argo might not be the one trapped in this bar after all, that maybe she’d simply used herself as bait. The killer quickly pulled Hisako’s spikes from his back before he fished around in his pouch for a crystal, determined to boost his Agility in order to get his unique ‘Darkness Blade’ skill back while addressing his comrades.

“Looks like we’ve been set up, boys… Grab some crystals.”

Still locked in her attack’s cool-down effect, Marigan commanded the hooded murderer with cold green eyes.

“Surrender… Now!”

“You really are a sexy bitch… But this party’s just getting started, blondie.”

Marigan’s smile was chilling as she leaned sideways.

“You have no idea, creep.”
Red-Eyed XaXa was the next to be propelled against the wall, a red-and-white blur of rapier-wielding justice named Asuna easily flying past Marigan to hit the skull-masked freak with a blazing six-attack combo as he prepared to drive his sword into the prone Hisako Li Shun.

As the stunned XaXa slowly collected himself from the floor, the chestnut-coloured hair of the Vice Commander of the Knights of the Blood Oath whipped across the musky tavern air as she turned to glare at PoH like the self-proclaimed Goddess of Vengeance.

“You’re next.”

As a spear suddenly jerked past her cheek, the astute Argo had tilted her head to avoid Makoto’s second sneak attack, with the armour-wearing psychopath making her way towards the exit but not before she launched one last attack at the female object of her hatred.

The Information Broker had narrowly avoided having her pretty head skewered.

It was the worst possible timing to launch that attack as Makoto turned to make her way past the still-frozen Marigan before coming face-to-face with her past.

Entering the tavern at that exact moment was the man she’d used to gain access to the front lines, the heavyset member of the Fuurinkazan guild whom the unscrupulous Beast Tamer had charmed like a lovesick schoolboy with a pocket full of cash, only to dump Dale like unfinished food at the cheap restaurant after the prom when she’d left with another boy.

The recently arrived Dale stared at Makoto as she stumbled towards him, her spear still tangled in Argo’s cloak as everyone seemingly watched this unexpected reunion unfold in slow motion, watching the unfamiliar hatred curl into Dale’s brown eyes, the anger twisting his plump face into a scowl of bitter rage as he drew his sword and attacked.

His first sword-strike was brilliant, taking the shocked Makoto’s health bar directly to the yellow by thrusting it directly through her gut, with Argo instantly realizing something was wrong. The bear named Ruuska must have increased the Beast Tamer’s Hit Points substantially, giving her a percentage increase as long as her furry familiar was still around.

But Ruuska wasn’t around now.

Oh God…

She’d lied to them. She wasn’t level thirty after all. She was much lower than that.

She wouldn’t survive a second blow.

“Dale, NOOO!!!... You’ll kill her!”

For a tense moment, Michi Aoi honestly thought that he would. A reaching Argo thought that the shame and humiliation he’d been forced to bare from this despicable woman’s calculated betrayal would be too much for even this big-hearted man to endure. That he’d use his ridiculously high Strength stat to lift his sword now dripping in red digital effects to cut her in half...

The same way she’d split his heart in two.

But in a surreal moment of restraint, the anger-shaken Dale managed to pull his blade out of the wide-eyed Makoto as he eyed her yellow health bar, realizing that her hastily purchased armour had done precious little to stop his powerful sword.
The confronted pair stared at each other for a dreamlike moment, Makoto Eiko slowly reaching out to cup Dale’s reddened cheek in her hand as she smiled, that perfect moment of understanding when love transcends violence. As she gently touched his cheek, Dale of the Fuurinkazan guild found himself standing at the edge of oblivion, staring into the dark abyss of insanity and finding the violet eyes of Makoto Eiko staring back up at him.

There were monsters who killed for love.

She was one of them.

And Dale had been only a trembling second away from allowing himself to become just like her. In that one strange moment of self-realization, he’d never been closer to Makoto Eiko than this foray into murderous anger, this one brief instant when he’d almost killed her.

This one terrible moment when she’d welcomed his transgression and his company.

He had discovered the true Makoto Eiko, a beautiful monster lurking just beyond the shadows of love.

In the flickering final seconds of the Obsidian Crystal, a thankful Argo breathed a deep sigh of relief knowing that Dale had somehow found the strength to prevent himself from finishing something he’d regret for the rest of his life, that he’d held back his anger and spared the broken woman who’d broken his manly heart…

But before her heartfelt sigh concluded, Argo watched as a bright red gash suddenly spread across Makoto’s slender neck like a crimson choker, with everyone slowly registering that the opportunistic PoH had just launched his ‘Darkness Blade’ attack across the back of Makoto’s neck, an attack which would’ve decapitated the unexpected Beast Tamer in real life.

But this wasn’t a game anymore.

The results were going to be the same whether it was real or not.

She was going to die.

A stumbling Argo watched in stunned disbelief as the staggered Makoto attempted to comprehend what had happened… To grasp that she was going to die in this cruel world, that all of her Peter Pan fantasies about loving an eternally young Damian would never come to past… The rounded health bar in front of her widened lavender eyes slid past the last red pixel as though to close the door on all her dreams, her perfect world fading into cold emptiness.

From a fold in her armour, the dying Makoto Eiko used her insane will to stay in this world, to bring forth a single black feather, silently tossing it towards Argo like a curse as the girl faded like winter twilight, the black feather materializing before slowly spiralling downwards towards the floor, becoming real when the struggling Beast Tamer suddenly burst into a thousand blue polygons set to the gasps of Argo’s cries, a fading cascade of blue polygons popping out of existence towards the floor during the exact moment that the inky blackness of the Obsidian Crystal finally left it.

The three members of Laughing Coffin used Teleport Crystals to escape while the rest of them looked on in horrified disbelief, the last remaining players from the front line now arriving with their swords drawn, only to discover that the pretty girl with the bear had died in this bar and that the villains had escaped.

To discover that the game of Akihiko Kayaba had claimed yet another life.
To find out that there were monsters among them.

Monsters that looked like players.

In a specialized hospital room in Tokyo, Kuniko Eiko sat in a world of despair and silence by her daughter’s side, gazing through the window with a glassy stare as vacant as the one within the NerveGear, the mother and daughter now trapped in separate worlds, yet equally alone.

Both fighting their own internal battles.

After the death of her husband, Kuniko had allowed a monster to take his place. A monster that looked like an honest man, a monster who’d pretended to love her, who said he cared about her through yellowed lying teeth…

The same monster who’d raped her daughter while she’d slept, oblivious to any cries Makoto might have made as he defiled her.

After the launch of Akihiko Kayaba’s game, he was too drunk to realize that Kuniko could read his lips as he lamented the loss of his precious Makoto and all they had shared in her bedroom.

When the police arrived and he was finally arrested, they found pictures on his phone...

The kind of pictures a monster would have.

Pictures of Makoto that no mother should ever have to see.

In her worst moments, Kuniko believed Sword Art Online had been God’s way to protect her daughter from the monster she’d allowed into their home, an act of divine will to save the innocent Makoto Eiko from the monster her stupid and incapable mother had been too blind to see, a daughter’s plaintive cries literally falling upon deaf ears.

The loss of her daughter was divine irony… Makoto was here with her now, but she wasn’t. While her body lay on the hospital bed, her mind was in another world fighting monsters...

The same way her idiotic mother had been equally oblivious to the monster she’d fought in the darkness while in her real bed at home.

Ironic.

But at least that monster was gone now. The divorce had been finalized last month. They were alone again.

A reminiscing Eiko-san glanced over at the oversized teddy bear with the silly face her daughter used to cherish, constantly holding onto to it every night as she went to bed, even as a teenager. It was the one thing of her daughter’s she’d brought into this hospital room.

Makoto had called the bear ‘Ruuska’.

Now Kuniko wondered how often her daughter must have wished it had been a real bear, a loyal and ferocious animal able to defend her from the drunken beast who’d crawled into her room night after awful night.
Taking the soft bear in her arms, the desperate mother squeezed it so that she might share a hug with her comatose daughter once again. That she might hold her only child across whatever divide the digital gods may have callously spread before them. That she might make their worlds whole again.

That was her prayer.

Kuniko opened her tear-stained eyes to see a flashing red light, her tired gaze suddenly drawn to the pretty young lady who used to work at Argus and was now a volunteer at the hospital suddenly lunging towards Makoto’s NerveGear, the startled mother rising in fear with a bear in hand only to discover that Ukyou Oshiro had already pulled the cursed helmet from her daughter’s head.

But…

That would kill her!

Unless…

Kuniko slowly recalled how the doctor had explained to her a few weeks ago that there was a new device installed on her daughter’s NerveGear input which could alert them as to when Makoto was about to die. That if they could pull her helmet off within ten seconds of those red lights going off, they could save that player’s life.

In an endless moment painted by the divine hand of God, Kuniko Eiko simply stood and stared at the face of her helmet-less daughter, willing to sell her soul for those eyes to just open one more time, to have her daughter live.

When they did, it was as though the world had been given back her.

Kuniko Eiko wasn’t sure how long she held her daughter then, how long she sobbed tears of joy as she held her slender child in her arms once again, how long she ignored the doctors and nurses while they crowded around them.

She only knew she let go when her daughter did, Makoto needing to use her hands to communicate and tell her about a pretty, dark-haired goddess named Alice who’d saved her, who wanted Makoto to be happy and tell the outside world that Alice wouldn’t kill any more players, that she’d simply let them sleep when they died.

But they needed to leave her alone.

They needed to let the game finish and then everyone would be set free.

Alice had told her this.

After countless doctors had visited and just before a nice female Police Officer arrived with a translator to ask Makoto if she’d be willing to provide a statement about her mother’s ex-husband so that further charges might be filed, the smiling Ukyou Oshiro once more politely entered the room and inquired about Makoto’s health, and if a man named Bruce Wayne might talk with her.

Ukyou explained how he was very rich and had a son named Damian who was also trapped in Sword Art Online…

*Damian.*

As soon as the recovering Makoto Eiko watched the lips of the pretty volunteer sound out that magical name, she knew why the goddess of Aincrad had spared her and returned her here…
True love.

The Damian of Sword Art Online was nothing more than a virtual idol. Her real Damian existed within this world, his mind trapped within the game and only her love could free him.

Fate was bringing them together once more, with Damian’s father now desperate to see her. It was obvious he wanted her to care for his son. To marry the young Prince in a palace of white after she’d awoken him with true love’s kiss to live together in a world of flowers.

The violet eyes of Makoto Eiko shone with possessive light as she envisioned their bright future together, nodding at the happy Ukyou Oshiro with glee, indicating with ecstatic affirmation that she’d definitely be interested in talking with her future father-in-law, writing on a piece of paper that she’d been Damian’s girlfriend in the game. That she’d wanted to meet him for a long time now...
Aboard his private jet, he dreamt of the Joker.

Four rows back of the cabin, a troubled Bruce Wayne shifted in his spacious leather seat, succumbing to sleep as the pilot made preparations for his final descent.

Bruce knew this dream far too well. This was the screenplay of a nightmare Bruce Wayne had memorized since he’d been a boy.

Only now, the players had changed.

Walking hand-in-hand with a quiet Talia, his wife clutching a pearl necklace that didn’t belong to her against a dress she’d never worn in her life while they made their way along the night-drenched
streets of Crime Alley, the pair of lovers stayed a step ahead of a light-hearted Damian as he mimicked the fanciful swordplay of the masked avenger he’d watched in wonderment on the big screen of the cinema only moments before.

But this wasn’t a movie.

It had been his life.

It was Bruce himself who now played the role of the defensive father, the loving husband who was surprised when a pale-faced madman stepped out of the shadows to level a high-calibre revolver at his tightening chest while greedily eying the expensive pearls around Talia’s slender neck.

A pale-faced madman with a grin far too wide, his manic laughter coming far too easily as he squeezed the trigger with gleeful death dancing in those crazed eyes until a slender wooden shaft poked from the handheld cannon like a tiny flagpole, a red-and-white placard unfurling from its eight-inch length to display the word ‘BANG!’, crafted in silly black letters like a comic book.

As his own father once had, Bruce brought his hand down against a wide-eyed Damian, instinctively protecting his son from the scene unfolding before them as this mad clown frantically tapped his gun against an open palm as though it were somehow defective, grumbling about Chinese manufacturing as he stared down its barrel like a frustrated watchmaker and then squeezed its hair trigger once more…

To have the BANG! pole fire straight through his right eye like some vengeful god with a sick sense of humour.

Bruce watched as the bloodied Joker tossed the heavy pistol to the ground, fell to his knees and then lifted up his hands in a wide display of showmanship, shaking them for effect as if to say…

Ta da!

It really wasn’t that funny.

The Clown Prince of Crime died with a smile as he fell flat on his face.

As the dream-version of Bruce stepped forward, he felt the arms of Talia pulling him from behind, preventing him from seeing his age-old nemesis dying in the same darkened gutter his parents had bled to death in so many years before.

He felt her strong arms wrap around him.

Embrace him.

And he felt cold.

Then he heard Damian laughing…

Bruce Wayne awoke with a start, quickly running a hand across a brow damp with cold sweat as he stared around his private jet before calming his rapid breathing.

Relax, old man.

A dream.

Nothing more than a dream.
The Joker was safely tucked away in a cell in Arkham he’d never escape from. The same cell he’d been locked away for over a year now.

Bruce had simply dozed off for a few minutes and now he was on the descent towards Japan, the seatbelt and electronic devices off signs lighting up as the jet made its way through wet clouds towards Japan.

It was time to get back to the work of saving his son.

Ten heartbreaking months after his corporate jet had rolled down the same tarmac leading to the Narita Airport in order to explore a potential merger with Argus, a restless Bruce Wayne had arrived once again in Tokyo under less auspicious circumstances.

His son’s mind had been trapped in the game of Sword Art Online for ten months now and the boy’s mother had made it all but impossible to free him.

The human emotions the game were continuously providing were the template of Talia’s dream, a digital existence ad infinitum.

The company which had created that game was now defunct, having seemingly died alongside its creator Akihiko Kayaba. And now, like a female carrion crow, the scheming Talia had swallowed up its remains by negotiating an incredibly hostile takeover of the successor of Argus; a technology firm called RECT Progress Inc.

How much of this Talia had plotted ahead of time, Bruce had no idea, but he’d been unable to outmanoeuvre her from the start. No matter what he tried, it seemed like his wife was always a step ahead of him.

Akihiko Kayaba may have succeeded in making the virtual world of Aincrad a prison, but Talia al Ghul had done a much more thorough job of holding Bruce’s own world hostage.

They couldn’t make a move without someone dying.

As if nothing else other than divine coincidence, the Tokyo afternoon was now overcast with streams of sun poking through grey clouds on the eastern skies to match his mood. Somewhere along the horizon, the sun was shining to give him hope, but above his head it felt like rain.

And it had felt like the threat of rain for too long now.

He shouldn’t have been here.

Bruce couldn’t shake the cancerous ulcer which Talia had seemingly surgically implanted in his tightening gut as he disembarked from the jet. The feeling that she was prepared to unwind his world if he so much as disappointed her. That by stepping onto Japan’s industrial soil, he was somehow jeopardizing his friends and family because he was desperate to meet with Sword Art Online’s sole survivor, a girl named Makoto Eiko.

But he had to talk to her.

He had to learn anything he could about Damian and what was happening inside that game.

Ukyou Oshiro had indicated that this Makoto Eiko girl knew the recently turned twelve-years-old Damian very well, that she was his in-game girlfriend and that they were deeply in love…

Which struck him as strange.
It seemed hard to believe considering their differences in age, but hadn’t Talia mentioned that some Japanese girl had been pining over Damian since the start of the game? Actually, the words she’d used had been ‘an artful creature who used her feminine wiles to make him fall head over heels’…

Well, people often behaved differently in games. And Damian was twelve now.

But Makoto Eiko was seventeen.

Bruce loosened his tie a little as he pondered what sort of relationship they may have had in that virtual world.

He knew the boy was an early bloomer.

Maybe a little too early…

“Beloved.”

At the sound of her unexpected voice, Bruce Wayne’s restless heart pounded in dread, the man becoming frozen in his tracks while desperately willing his nervous legs to move forward to calmly face her…

The woman of his nightmares, a poisonous flower who only bloomed in blood.

She was a vision of Arabian beauty standing exactly where Ukyou Oshiro had stood waiting for him ten months before, because she’d been watching him even back then.

This was simply her little way of letting him know.

His estranged wife was dressed in a flowing yellow skirt of blooming flowers with a slender white jacket over an ivory shirt, a black leather satchel embroidered with dragons slung across her shoulder like some fashionable tourist. The familiar jade band was still looped around her neck while long brown hair flowed beside it, dancing in the tarmac’s warm breeze with wisps of coffee-coloured locks fluttering around sultry almond eyes perfectly balanced between the demonic and the angelic.

She was the seductive Scheherazade who wanted to tell the tale of 1,001 created worlds to a man who’d destroy each and every one of them if he could only have his son back.

But in her sordid tale of a fantasy world, it was the storyteller who could destroy the listener’s world if he didn’t pay her heed.

Bruce Wayne actually tensed when she leaned forward and whispered into his ear.

“You instructed to provide whichever escort I desired… So here I am.”

The sudden anger twisting inside of Bruce suddenly beat against the inside of his ribs like a caged animal, a monstrous thing that needed to feel her flesh beneath its rending claws. That sane part of the man who’d become the Batman struggled against the animalistic urge to put his powerful hands around her skinny neck, to keep squeezing them together until Iris Allen and the thousands of other innocent victims she’d murdered were avenged with the strangled gasps of death.

Instead, he only glared, his lip curling upwards until he spoke.

“I could kill you right now.”

“But you won’t.”
“What makes you so damned sure, Talia?”

Without even looking while turning her back to him, she began to walk into the airport, beckoning for Bruce to follow like an obedient dog.

“Because that is not your way, Beloved… You’ve suffered the existence of men like the Joker for far too long now… You have a long history of allowing murderers to continue to kill simply because you don’t believe in murder, dearest…

“Because you seek your reason to exist in their redemption…

“But most of all because you know my death would only bring countless others… Deaths which would be on your hands… Deaths which your poor guilt-ridden conscience would have to bear forever, wouldn’t it?”

“I have a good therapist.”

Talia chuckled as Lady Shiva held the door open for them.

“Yes, an expensive one anyways… I’ve read her rather extensive files on you… Shall I sum up her findings, my poor husband?...

“Your parents are dead… You are not… Let it go…

“Honestly, why do you even continue to see her?… You are a man who must let nothing go… You are the sum of your tragic past… It balances your present madness.”

As a silent Bruce cautiously followed, he watched the confident stroll of his estranged wife as she retrieved a cigarette from a pack and then blatantly lit it once inside the business terminal, expelling a satisfied stream of smoke from her lungs as various businesspeople began to stare at this foreign woman who dared to smoke inside an airport.

A young female security guard made the mistake of approaching Talia, speaking in broken English while pointing at the ‘No Smoking’ sign directly above her.

“Excuse me, Ma’am… There is no smoking in here.”

The always observant Bruce noticed it immediately.

A sudden tension in the air when six people altered their movements ever so slightly, prepared to take action against this yapping dog of a woman who would dare to tell their sacred dragon not to breathe fire.

Bruce realized each one of them was League assassin dressed as a civilian.

And then there was always Lady Shiva who could’ve ended this woman before the courtesy smile which the security guard wore on her lips even left her face.

She was a child who’d stumbled into a nest of vipers.

The icy glare levelled by Talia al Ghul at the young woman while she continued to take a long drag from her cigarette was the stuff of nightmares. The piercing gaze of a serial killer imagining how their next victim might look with all their flesh removed; a twisted mind at work behind calculating eyes giving careful consideration as to how to achieve such a diabolical feat, of how to keep this offensive woman alive long enough to suffer in fleshless agony like some waxen anatomy figure at a
surgical college.

At least long enough to twist the crimson embers of her dying cigarette into a lidless eye.

Rushing forward through the motionless crowd, an older male security guard quickly grabbed the younger girl and shoved her backwards, bowing deeply in reverence to the sneering Talia al Ghul in an obvious show of respect.

“I am sorry, Mistress… She’s young… She doesn’t yet know who you are.”

Blowing out her smoke towards the wide-eyed girl while the confused crowd of people silently looked on, perhaps expecting some spoiled Hollywood celebrity in their midst, a silent Talia patiently waited for the older man to rise.

She said no words, but the way she delicately placed two fingertips atop the man’s name badge made his knees buckle under their weight, beads of sweat rolling down his bald forehead until she withdrew those two outstretched fingers to make a narrow ‘V’ against the same full crimson lips Bruce was now ashamed to admit he’d once kissed.

With nothing more than an audacious glance at his terrified eyes, the leader of the League of Assassins pretended to draw a deep breath from an imaginary cigarette while tossing her own half-finished one to the floor, expectedly looking into the blinking eyes of the older man and then down at the smouldering tobacco dying on the tile by her high heel.

Her meaning was clear.

A sickened Bruce watched as the frightened guard quickly knelt down with a forced smile and then carefully picked up the discarded cigarette as though it were his child, holding its lipstick-stained butt to his mouth before quickly inhaling to bring it back to life, cowering into a small ball of humility at the same time Talia issued a sustained smokeless exhale through her pursed lips.

She eyed the young security guard who’d had the audacity to even address her, daring the other woman to say anything as this disgraced grandfather attempted to save her pathetic life.

Before she’d finished that slow exhale, Talia’s hardened eyes beheld the young lady also bowing her head deeply in respect, the girl sneaking a worried glance at the older man who was busily smoking Talia’s lipstick-stained trash while also bowing repeatedly; the same man who’d risked his life to save her.

The daughter of the demon finally grinned, appeased by the display of an old man’s reverence as she licked her lips, deciding to continue her carefree stroll through the gate like a satiated tigress who’s dined on a fresh carcass.

An angry Bruce Wayne followed her, glaring at his wife with contempt.

“You own the airport security now?”

“No, Beloved… I own those who protect it… My father was running the Yakuza long before I was even born… Which means I’m running them now… Like your masked alter ego, let us simply say my reputation precedes me amongst those with ties to organized crime.”

Bruce squared his shoulders as they made their way towards the exit.

“I wouldn’t have let you hurt her… You know that.”
“No?... Tell me, my husband... How many of my people have you counted so far in this airport?”

Bruce cautiously looked around once again.

“Six.”

“There are twenty-three... One was a twelve-year-old with her blade poised an inch away from the ignorant woman’s spine, obediently awaiting on my judgement... If you’d moved to stop me, she’d be dead by now... And there was nothing you could do to stop me.”

Looking back, Bruce strained to spot the young girl in question. As she stared back at him, her innocent smile wasn’t quite so innocent anymore.

“You’re insane... You’d honestly kill someone just because they told you not to smoke?”

Talia started a fresh cigarette as her heels busily clicked along the airport tiles, allowing life to move on.

“No, Beloved... I would kill her to teach my stubborn husband the invaluable lesson which he refuses to learn.”

Lady Shiva poked him in the back with something hard, prompting Bruce to pick up his pace to follow the departing Talia.

“The only lesson I’m learning is that you’ve become a monster, Talia.”

His wife laughed off his trite remark, but it was obviously she was losing her patience with him.

“We’re all monsters, dearest... Most of us are simply too afraid to admit it... But I am a monster you can not stop... That is the lesson you must learn... You can not win against me... Your place is by my side, not in front of me... Come, our car is waiting.”

“I have my own car waiting.”

“You may have a dozen cars waiting... I don’t care... Come.”

Quiet moments later, with Talia’s private limousine pointing westwards from the airport towards a Tokyo afternoon, a troubled Bruce was seated by the window with a quiet Lady Shiva set between himself and Talia like a deadly referee.

As they continued in silence, the man from Gotham grew restless, looking out the window as he felt Talia’s sideways stare taking his measure from beyond the relaxed body of her bodyguard.

“Don’t be so morose... Honestly, I expect this sort of behaviour from Damian.”

“What do you want from me, Talia?”

She looked amusedly into his troubled eyes as she raised a groomed eyebrow.

“I want you appreciate what I’m trying to do... You wrote a letter to a man named John Constantine in London... A desperate plea for help along with a cheque and airline tickets... A letter he shall never receive, by the way...”

“I trusted you, Bruce... I trusted you and then you placed your hopes in a charlatan... At best, a man who only cares about himself when he’s sober enough to do so...”
“You’re like a disobedient child with a hornet’s nest…

“So now, the time has come for you to choose… If you can’t quietly remain in the corner where I’ve placed you, you must either become my adversary… Or my husband… This is all that remains for you now… I would strongly suggest the latter, my love.”

In a rare moment of surprise, Bruce stopped for a moment and considered this strange request.

“What’s the good of me acting as your husband when you won’t listen to me?! I’ve already asked you to stop this game… You won’t... If I told you to stop murdering people, would it matter?”

He didn’t like the serious way she was looking at him.

“I am not a woman who always follows the advice of her conscience, my love… But I shall always consider your counsel should you provide me with reason to do so… That is all I can promise.”

Bruce took an exasperated breath

“So I can either talk while you wilfully ignore me… Or simply try and stop you myself… You already know which role I’ll choose... Why even bother ask?”

“Because I still don’t believe you’re truly aware of what I’m capable of… Choose carefully, Detective… I must warn you… I’m a worthy adversary… You would prefer me as your wife.”

“This isn’t a game, Talia.”

“How strange that it you say that when the crux of humanity’s fate does indeed rest upon a game… A game which I shall see through to the end… A game we can play together.”

“Even though our son is a part of that game?”

“Yes… Although you will never understand what I’ve sacrificed for him, Bruce… What I’ve given up to secure the lives of these children… What I’m asking from you in exchange is truly negligible in comparison.”

“Thirty-one hundred players have already died, Talia… The rest are nothing more than hostages... End the game!”

“Not possible.”

“Then I have no choice… I have to stop this, Talia.”

He watched as she lit a fresh cigarette, sand-coloured eyes reflecting the past from within.

“You can’t stop this… Your precious Superman once told me he wasn’t set upon this world to play God… Which simply cleared the way for me, didn’t it?... You may puff out your chest and play the hero, but he was the only one who could ever stop me, Bruce.”

“He might stop you yet.”

“No… He won’t… You won’t… None of you will… I told Superman of the Pentagon meeting from fifteen years ago… When the greatest minds of this world contemplated upon how to solve the conundrum of living with a red-and-blue suited American god… Don’t worry, I didn’t mention your government’s Orbital Radiation Cannon or Wayne Industries involvement in it.”

Bruce felt his heart suddenly tense as he wondered how Talia had even learned of ORC, one of the
only military projects ever co-funded by LexCorp and Wayne Industries, a satellite radiation cannon built for the government over the past decade and a half, a weapon powerful enough to eliminate any terrestrial threat…

Even Superman.

The Orbital Radiation Cannon was designed as Earth’s last defence, a last-ditch, one-shot antimatter ray capable of taking down something which had defeated Superman.

Something like Doomsday.

It troubled him to no end that Talia even knew of its existence, with Bruce growing increasingly uneasy as she continued in admiration.

“The Ioffe traps set across the Van Allen radiation belts were ingenious of course, harvesting antimatter as ants might collect grains of sand to build the Sahara desert… Over the past ten years, your little weapon has built up quite a cache of positrons…

“But I’ll only require a few hundred micrograms…”

Bruce felt his heart suddenly drop into his gut.

“Talia… Whatever you’re considering… Don’t… Just don’t.”

“But if we are to be adversaries, I need you to be focused, Beloved… It won’t do to have some half-cocked madman running around Gotham to distract you while we wage our little war, now will it?…

“As a villain, I’ll require all your attention…”

“So if you must find your reason to live in the arms of a murderer, find it in mine.”

“TALIA, NO!”

“Do I seem like a second-rate villain who delights in explaining the intricacies of my plans, Bruce?… God, how boorish I must seem… I’m not some scarlet hopeful on the stage of villainy, betrothed…

“I am an al Ghul…

“Luckily, his cell was quite isolated… Oh, there were a few other casualties of course, but no one the good people of Gotham should mourn… Hardly worth mentioning…”

“Talia… Tell me you haven’t…”

If a shark could smile, it might look like the grin Talia was now wearing.

“Of course I did… Before you even landed, my love… It was beautiful, like a sunrise in the middle of the night… The fifty-yard blast zone produced a perfectly smooth hole in the Earth a mile deep… More than sufficient to bury that madman… If there were even a molecule of him left to bury that is.”

Lady Shiva prevented him from wrapping his hands around her neck, to do what he should’ve done from the very start.

The Joker was dead.
They didn’t speak again until they reached the converted hospital where Makoto Eiko was being treated along with thousands of other players, with a nauseated Bruce confirming every single detail she’d just said on his phone while he watched her strut down the hospital corridors…

The Empress of Death.

The Joker, Julian Day, Waylon Jones, and Arnold Wesker were now listed among the deceased, with the antimatter beam striking at an acute angle so as to spare the orderlies on the floors above, punching a smooth hole along the side of the ancient facility and then a mile into the Earth’s crust.

Bruce always knew she was capable of this. That if he dared to face her head on, Talia would literally burn his empire to the ground behind him while he valiantly faced her on the field of battle.

A terrible thought suddenly staggered Bruce.

Lois Lane was Superman’s humanity.

What if he were Talia’s?

What if she were so far gone, he was the last thing on Earth that could keep her from wiping humanity off the face of it?

If he wilfully turned against her as an adversary, would he also take away the last remnants of love this beautiful monster knew? Was her request to have him act as her husband her a last grasp at compassion?

He was surprised when Talia casually instructed Lady Shiva to stay outside the hospital room and wait for her while the man who was Batman thought the leader of the League of Assassins was taking a hell of a chance being alone with him right now.

*If you must find your reason to live in the arms of a murderer, find it in mine.*

Is that what he’d been doing for all these years?

Had he been cultivating a garden of evil so he could harvest his own redemption?

The pair of them were allowed to speak with Makoto Eiko in the presence of a Japanese Sign Language translator and the girl’s mother, a slender woman with tired eyes named Kuniko Eiko.

A mother who’d obviously cried a great deal before and after her daughter’s recovery.

As he entered the room, Bruce’s first impression was that Makoto Eiko was an attractive young woman with large violet eyes which sparkled with life when she saw him, her hands moving frantically.

Despite his caustic mood, she still caused him to smile, a bundle of exhilaration.

The dark-haired girl acting as a translator informed him Makoto had just signed the word for ‘Papa’.

With Bruce sitting on the edge of the bed and talking through the translator to Makoto Eiko for close to twenty minutes, he heard all about his son’s exploits in the game, how Damian was an incredibly powerful player who had saved Makoto’s life from something called ‘Drunken Apes’, how a jealous little girl named Argo had conspired to steal the game’s greatest hero away from her before their upcoming in-game wedding, how this evil little blonde manipulator had slept with a player-killer named the ‘Alchemist’ to orchestrate Damian’s kidnapping before they could be happily wed.
Wed?!

Just what the hell was Damian doing in there?

As Makoto quickly spoke through the struggling interpreter, Talia only stood silently, carefully watching the face of the seventeen-year-old like a disgruntled interrogator as Makoto excitedly explained to Damian’s father how happy she was to finally meet him and how deeply his son was in love with her.

How they planned on getting married in real life as well…

And could she see him? Could she comfort him once more as he remained trapped in the game?

The master strategist standing like a patient spider in the corner quietly observed how well this young woman played the part of the victim, how easily she could twist Bruce around those slender fingers of hers as they wove her lies.

With her overwhelming excitement at meeting Damian’s large and handsome father, an ecstatic Makoto Eiko hadn’t paid much attention to the wife who seemed to silently blend into the shadows behind him.

But as she signed her romantic tale in a world of swords through this hospital-provided Chinese girl, Makoto began to feel the hostile aura radiating from that dark corner like a vengeful spirit. The physically impressive Bruce Wayne may have had all the appearance of power, but he was slowly being overwhelmed by what lurked in the corner behind him.

Makoto saw much of Damian in his father, but now the former SAO player was slowly beginning to realize that what had made the boy truly dangerous was watching her from that corner.

The boy had the soul of a god reflected in his young blue eyes, a divinity which Makoto suddenly realized had come from his mother’s side. That she’d been charming the wrong parent.

Damian might have been the prince from the loins of this king amongst men, the same man who was frantically pressing her for more information about the Alchemist, but it was his mother who would paint Damian’s legend across the stars.

She could see that now.

And that mother wasn’t interested in her lies.

With the slightest trace of fear in her lavender eyes, Makoto gazed nervously at the beautiful woman in the corner to comprehend that it was Damian’s mother who was the parent she needed to concern herself with now.

The wicked Queen who would never let her son go.

“Beloved, could you give me a moment alone with Eiko-san and her lovely daughter? There are some… sensitive matters I need to discuss.”

Bruce stood firm as he responded in English.

“I’m not done here, Talia.”

“Perhaps you should call Alfred then… Maybe Richard… It would be a shame if anything were to happen to them while you were in Japan.”
“Talia…”

“I’m only asking for ten minutes, my love.”

“Don’t…”

Looking at the wide-eyed Makoto Eiko and then her mother, Bruce realized what was at stake when Talia smiled slightly, the fire of madness flashing across her shadowy eyes.

She took an easy step forward, her gaze never leaving his own.

“You still haven’t made your decision… Do you truly wish us to be enemies?”

Bruce realized that Makoto’s young life now depended upon his reply. And from her stance, he also realized that the young interpreter was likely one of Talia’s assassins. Damn, he hadn’t recognized it earlier, but the girl possessed similar facial features to Lady Shiva.

Enough to be her daughter.

Which meant if he wanted Makoto Eiko to live right now, there was really only one answer he could provide.

“Your husband.”

His wife smiled and she took his clenched fist into her hands.

He couldn’t win.

He could fight her, but too many people would die. More people than he was willing to lose. People like Dick, Barbara, Alfred, Jim…

They were the reasons why he couldn’t win against her. The chips she’d made him place onto the table that made him fold.

“Only for a few moments, dearest.”

He hated this. He hated losing.

“Don’t do anything rash.”

“I could say the same to you.”

He left with his tail between his legs.

The war might not be lost, but this round had belonged to Talia and he was running out of options.

He’d come unprepared to face her and she’d outplayed him.

Something still bothered him about the way Makoto had described the player called the Alchemist though. Bruce Wayne had just heard from girl that all players were made to look like their real-world selves in the game, that they were their own players competing for their own lives.

But as Bruce scanned his impressive memory for one of the ten thousand players who fit the description of the Alchemist, he found none.

It was possible he was nothing more than an NPC, but it sounded more like someone had hacked
into Kayaba’s world to abuse it as they saw fit.

There was also a chance that this vile player was the digital ghost of the mad genius himself, but that sadistic behaviour didn’t seem to fit Akihiko Kayaba’s profile. Kayaba was in love with his imaginary world, not little girls.

After her subdued husband had finally left, a smiling Talia turned to face Kuniko Eiko, allowing the deaf woman to read her lips while she spoke in Japanese and retrieved something from her handbag.

“Eiko-san… My husband is a generous yet proud man who is embarrassed far too easily… He wanted me to give you this cheque to show our appreciation… Please accept it with our thanks.”

Kuniko Eiko shook her head politely until her eyes grew just as round as the row of zeroes delicately formed in the amount box.

“Please, Eiko-san… Accept it for your daughter’s sake… We appreciate her hard work in keeping our son safe.”

As a quivering Kuniko Eiko slowly accepted a cheque that could’ve purchased her home outright, a nurse knocked and then slowly stepped through the hospital room door before politely bowing in front of the tearful mother who couldn’t believe her sudden good fortune.

“My apologies for the interruption, Eiko-san… But there were some release forms that you need to sign and instructions on how to care for your daughter before we can release Makoto-kun…”

“It should only take a few moments… I have green tea waiting for you as well… We’ll arrange a ride to take the two of you back home once you’re done.”

As the dutiful nurse led the incredibly thankful middle-aged woman outside the room after a dozen grateful bows, Talia al Ghul wore the same familiar smile as she returned the courtesies, that smile only becoming more ominous when the mother had left and she turned to face the daughter.

“Hold her down, Cassandra.”

Before her atrophied muscles could react, the Chinese-American translator standing beside the bed moved with an incredible speed to pin Makoto Eiko to the bed, flashing a concealed blade against the seventeen-year-old girl’s straining throat while her hand covered her mouth.

If she attempted to escape, this girl named Cassandra would end her.

The mother of the most dangerous boy in the world casually stepped towards the hospital bed, reaching into her satchel to retrieve a stainless steel dissection scalpel before holding it before Makoto Eiko’s woe-filled lavender eyes and grinning wickedly.

“And now, you conniving little tramp… Unless you’d like to lose each of those lying little fingers rather painfully… Let’s discuss what really happened with my son, shall we?”
As Makoto Eiko’s avatar burst into a thousand shining blue shards of oblivion, it was as though time had been stolen from the staggered Argo, the thirteen-year-old watching the lone black feather which the dying Beast Tamer had cast off from her armour slowly twirling to the dirty tavern floor below like a reluctant spiralling black leaf from a barren tree in winter before it too disappeared into digital oblivion.

Makoto Eiko was dead.

Argo hardly even noticed the three Laughing Coffin members teleporting away as more of the front line forces entered the bar.

Her eyes were still fixed on the black feather the deceased girl had only tossed at the moment she knew she would die; when the last sliver of red life had expired from her health bar before she became another victim of this cursed game…

The cursed game Michi’s father had helped design.

Michi Aoi suddenly remembered her father studying crows two years ago. Wondering why he
needed to know so much about those awful birds in order to make Sword Art Online.

In the commotion that followed with a handful of new players charging into the tavern, no one saw Argo slide a Teleport Crystal from her billowing cloak; the Information Broker suddenly realizing where Damian might be…

He had to be there.

Tied across the same flat slab of rock on the 19th floor which had been the perilous battleground to defeat the unique field boss named the King of Black Feathers, the bound Damian Wayne watched as the giant bear named Ruuska growled and snapped at any scampering crows who dared to come too close to them as the boy quietly attempted to slip the fingers of his right hand through tightly fixed coils.

A million crows to his left, the edge of the world to his right and Makoto certainly hadn’t made any mistakes in tying him up this time. The twelve-year-old was literally bound from neck-to-ankle in a hundred yards of knotted rope, bound like a cocooned caterpillar undergoing a metamorphosis into a captured butterfly which he might not have to endure if he could just get his fingers free in time…

Before she made it back.

He’d kill her before he’d let her break him.

The tragic events of Makoto’s past in the real world had obviously caused her to go insane in this fantasy one, but the stakes were still the same. Death was death and there was no telling what she would do to keep him subdued.

Damian realized he’d become her child saviour, her sacred return to the innocence of youth...

He was the seed of love which could never bloom for her, a love he’d never share with her. Makoto was prepared to starve him in order to keep the imagined promise of the captive seed alive within her heart.

The preserve the dream of her perfect Damian.

The boy suddenly felt his stomach grumble.

The Beast Tamer was planning to starve him, to keep him bound and shackled this way until his Strength stat dipped to zero, until his Health began to slide down an increasingly slippery slope named starvation and he finally submitted to her will.

Until the only name on his intimacy setting changed from Argo to Makoto.

Except that would never happen.

Because he would die before he submitted to that madwoman’s desires.

The boy suddenly stopped twisting in his ropes when he noticed the bear named Ruuska staring at him strangely, a thousand emotions reflected in those big black glassy eyes like round orbs of sorrow frozen in a moment of endless time…

Until the massive bear burst into a thousand tiny blue shards.
But no one had attacked the bear.

And yet…

Ruuska was gone.

And Damian was alone.

Left alone in a sea of cawing black feathers.

It was only a handful of questioning seconds before the first crow lowered its head and repeatedly used it as a battering ram against Damian’s toppled body, its tiny mass and a buffet of night-shaded wings continually attempting to nudge the tied-up boy closer to the smooth edge of the cliff at his right, closer to the edge of this perilous world of swords which would earn him the ‘Fell from a great height’ placard in the Halls of the Departed if the bird had its way.

One stupid crow wasn’t going to push him over the edge though.

But then another joined.

And another.

And another.

Until a hundred were lined against his left and he was thrashing like a giant caterpillar against a legion of black levers bent on his destruction, the panicking boy managing to fight and roll back on top of a dozen of them with his left side. A vengeful hundred more of their brethren cawed their hatred and then perched on top of him, their beating wings making his world a feathery night and their black beaks murderously attempted to peck out his cringing eyes.

When he even dared to open his eyes, he could only see brief flashes of daylight between black feathers and black beaks.

He only knew the thousands of birds pushing against him was the direction he couldn’t go, his flailing body lost in a dark sea of screaming carrion feeders until his face was a mask of pain and he was drowning in black feathers.

With each impulsive movement he made to escape the terror of those endless poking beaks, another of their foot soldiers would sacrifice itself beneath him, another wedge towards the awaiting catastrophe of free fall.

Another thousand ear-piercing squawks like a curse which Damian thought must’ve meant heave-ho in crow…

He couldn’t feel the ground under his right arm anymore.

With fear now thrashing in his gut like a fish on a hook, the boy redoubled his efforts, bending himself in two until more of these kamikaze crows pivoted beneath him, the pathway to his doom paved with their black feathers, the black-eyed soldiers of the lost King of the Mountain still carrying on his dark legacy.

This was a game of King of the Mountain you couldn’t lose.

When his right shoulder found nothing beneath it but the edge of the world again, Damian strained with everything he had to roll to his left, scores of ravens seizing his ropes in their scaled talons and
then flapping their terrifying wings until he thought he might be lifted off the ground, those glassy lifeless eyes knowing they were going to win.

*All the easier to push you, my dear.*

He was going to die alone here.

He finally had his right hand free from the rope, but only enough to wave goodbye and he fell thousands of feet to the world below. There wasn’t enough time. His mind suddenly swam with dozens of farfetched possibilities…

That Makoto Eiko was simply teaching him a terrifying lesson and Ruuska wasn’t really dead, or perhaps his father had solved the game’s mystery and death in this world simply meant you’d wake up in the real one.

Or perhaps that someone might actually rescue him…

And then, as he felt his body begin to fall towards an abandoned world, someone actually did.

He barely heard her voice over a thousand screaming crows, unable to see how this small blonde girl had pushed her way across the feathered night of a million vengeful birds like an angel of light to find him amongst the storm.

How she’d activated the Teleport Crystal as his bound body finally slid from the edge.

Argo.

With a crunch, Damian finally gathered his bearings with a thud after falling only three feet down and landing on his back, materialized hard on the cobblestone of the central plaza of a city he hadn’t seen in weeks...

Marten.

Still, it’d been better than the thousands of feet he would’ve fallen otherwise.

When he and Argo had been transported to the 57th floor months ago by Alice Light, they’d finally decided not to activate the Teleport Gate to this floor during their departure, instead using Crystals to join the rest of the players.

But the pair of them could still teleport here and that’s what Argo had done.

The Information Broker appeared beside him, the cloaked girl literally falling onto his prone body in a flood of tears before holding him tight in sobbing shudders.

“Argo, what’s wrong?”

“Makoto… She’s dead.”

The reason for Ruuska’s sudden disappearance became obvious.

A terrible thought suddenly struck Damian.

“Did you…?”

He felt her head moving side-to-side against his chest to say she hadn’t killed the Damian-obsessed seventeen-year-old, the Beast Tamer that had kidnapped him. Argo whispered the breathless story to
Damian as his right hand fidgeted with the knot at his waist, determined to finally free himself.

“I think… she sold me out… to Laughing Coffin… PoH killed her… … in exchange for you maybe… But we managed to turn the tables…”

“And then… he killed her…”

“She gave me… a clue… A feather… Damian… if you died on that floor… On a floor that my father had designed… I could never forgive him… Or myself… If I lost you…”

The boy had now loosened the ropes enough to get his left hand free as he kissed the top of her blonde head.

“You didn’t… You won’t.”

“I can’t.”

“It’s not your father’s fault, Michi… It’s not your fault either… The NerveGear Akihiko Kayaba designed killed those players… Not the game… Can you help me get out of these ropes?”

In truth, Damian could’ve untied himself - but he needed Argo off of him first. But with her agile fingers to assist, the ropes fell off of him like a hemp cocoon, revealing the almost naked boy within, standing with only a pair of white boxers.

After a red-cheeked pause, Michi Aoi averted her gaze to the side, taking a deep breath as she forced her brown eyes away from his lithe body and surprisingly developed physique. She’d worked out with male gymnasts who weren’t that cut.

Damian stared at her as though nothing were wrong.

“Michi… Are you alright?”

A terrible thought suddenly occurred to the Beta Tester… Makoto had been older and completely obsessed with Damian… She probably wasn’t a virgin either…

Oh God…

Had that madwoman seduced him?! 

She almost couldn’t ask.

“Damian… Did Makoto… ahhhh… force you… to do something…”

Her fears now apparent, the boy suddenly gathered her up in his newly-freed arms, staring deep into her widened golden eyes before grinning as his warm body pressed against her own.

“You’re still the only name on my intimacy settings, Argo… Here, I’ll show you.”

His lips pressed against hers, his arms holding her tight until all the trembling fears swirling in her chest suddenly melted, sliding past her thundering heart to slide to the stones of a floor which belonged to them alone.

She wasn’t sure how her cloak became unbuckled.

Their arms became an entwinement of passion, young lovers snatched from the twisted claws of digital Death time and time again. None of this was real, she knew that. The hard feel of his naked
body against her softly quivering breasts was only stimulations being relayed to her brain by NerveGear, the steady feel of his hands drifting steadily lower against her lower back as her leg wrapped around his thigh nothing more than the game’s mechanizations in her imagination.

But she wanted her virgin gates be the ones which Damian opened as he took his final step into manhood.

To make her a woman.

His woman.

Even if none of this was real.

The rising heat of her nervousness was enough to melt the golden treasure in her eyes as she felt the stiff pole raise his boxer shorts like the tents of an enemy encampment perched at the gates of her kingdom, an unstoppable battering ram ready to win the siege.

He wanted her.

This was their floor.

No other players would know.

“Damian… You could… If you want to.”

Captivated by his passionate gaze, Argo lost herself in the siege fires of those pale blue eyes as they negotiated the terms of her surrender, his masterful stare taking the measure of her bared soul until his thumb gently wiped the remnants of tears from her crimson cheeks.

“There’s nothing I want more, Michi…”

“But…”

With her nervous heart stuck between thunderous beats as she waited for his bated response, Argo following his grinning gaze to the twin spiralling towers of the massive Gothic church which adorned Marten’s plaza like a crown of conscience until he held her trembling hand.

“Shouldn’t we be married first?”
I realize some of my readers are younger and I hope no one was too disturbed by the last chapter. For the record, Argo and Damian did not have sex and returned to the Town of Beginnings after an awkward situation which I address in this chapter.

Nor did they get married in Marten…

Not yet at least.

And while I usually don't employ puns in my writing, the chance to poke fun at the last chapter while the altar-bound Argo actively begins recruiting her bridesmaids was just too good not to use in the title.
“ARE YOU SERIOUS?!”

A silent Argo stared up at the angry green eyes of the towering blonde while the Legion’s pacing Commander reacted in outrage to the sudden news of the Information Broker’s impending nuptials, placing her hands on the girl’s slender shoulders before continuing.

“You’re fourteen, Michi!... And he’s just turned thirteen!!!... You’re both too young to do this.”
Marigan was positively frightening when she got this way, but the petite Argo wasn’t backing down. Not when it came to Damian.

“This isn’t Japan, Marissa… We’re both old enough to do it… And it’s… still just a game… It’s not like it would be for real.”

Argo’s cheeks began to flush a deep crimson colour.

“So you’re saying it doesn’t matter?”

“OF COURSE IT MATTERS!”

She watched as a sudden flash of panic crossed Marigan’s bright green eyes.

“Argo… Did you… have…?”

The Information Broker cut her off before Marigan could finish that awkward question.

“NO!”

No they hadn’t.

They almost did though.

After Damian had almost died on the plateau of the King of Black Feathers, they’d come painstakingly close to engaging in the game’s most intimate feature. After his rescue, Michi had been ready to surrender herself to him, remembering how vulnerable yet strong her boyfriend had looked in nothing more than boxers…

But Damian had suggested that they should be married first.

Either that - or she’d made him so incredibly uncomfortable that he’d been willing to suggest anything to get of that awkward situation…

Including marriage.

For the thousandth time in the past hour, Michi Aoi wondered about what kind of young woman she was becoming. About why she was so head over heels for a boy even younger than she was and yet seemed so much more mature.

Marigan breathed a long sigh of relief as the taller blonde eyed her friend sympathetically before reluctantly lifting her hands, obviously content that her young friend hadn’t crossed that final relationship cornerstone before returning to the chair in her private office deep within the Black Iron Palace.

“Alright… But why didn’t you just do what everyone else does… Send the proposal, adjust a few menu settings and then share an inventory… That’s basically an in-game marriage.”

“Because I love him, alright?… Because I want it to be a proper wedding… Is that so hard to understand?”

Marigan sighed once again.

“I see… And this has nothing to do with the fact his father is one of the richest men in America?”
Michi Aoi paused for an instant.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that Damian’s father Bruce Wayne is one of the wealthiest men on the planet… That had nothing to do with your marriage decision?”

It was Argo’s turn to get upset now.

“No, it doesn’t!... And it’s not my marriage decision, it’s mine and Damian’s… Do you honestly think I like playing this character?... Do you honestly think I’m this greedy scheming person for real?!”

“People think that already.”

“I don’t care about that!... I’m asking if you do.”

“Of course not.”

“Then why would you even say that?!… Look, I stayed an Information Broker so those same people who think I’m money-hungry wouldn’t ask how I knew so much about the first twenty-five floors of this damned game... Sharing information just happens to be the best way I can help us beat Sword Art Online… In case you’ve forgotten.”

Marigan’s eyes softened as she sighed deeply, pushing aside the stack of parchments which contained the latest food supply numbers.

“I’m sorry, Michi… But you need to be prepared for what people may think… You need to be confident that you’re doing this for love.”

“I am.”

“And this is really what you want?”

“It is… Marissa… Something inside me died when I thought I’d lost him… Like a part of me turned off and went dark… A part of myself I’d never have again.”

“Alright, you love him… But what does he think about all this?”

Argo tapped her thumb nervously on the broad wooden table containing stacks of paperwork. What did Damian really think about all of this?

“He’s the one who suggested marriage… He wouldn’t have said it of he didn’t want to do it, right?... But he wants to discuss something with me tonight… Something really important… Maybe he’s getting cold feet.”

“He’s a fool if he backs out now… I don’t think he’s ever going to find anyone better in this world… Or the other.”

Argo suddenly looked at her old friend in surprise until the whiskered girl’s smile brightened the dark office like dawn’s sunrise after a cold winter’s night.

“So… We have your blessing?”

“Do you need it?”
“No… But I was hoping you might be my Maid of Honour, Marigan.”

She’d been busily planning the assignments for the first quests of the 44th floor when Asuna Yuuki happened to look across the table of her rented room to find a whiskered Argo in her doorway, a broad smile painted across the girl’s lips as though the golden-eyed blonde were struggling to contain an eruption of happiness from erupting in her chest.

“He proposed!”

A bleary-eyed Asuna was taken aback for a second.

“Damian?”

“Of course it was Damian!”

“Sorry, Argo… But congratulations… So when we get to the real world, he’s going to propose?”

The slender blonde flushed with embarrassment as she folded her nervous fingers together.

“I don’t know about that… It’s… It’s an in-game marriage for now.”

Asuna looked at her friend questioningly.

“In-game marriage?”

The Legion guild member realized the Vice-Commander of the Knights of the Blood Oath was suddenly unaware of this game function.

“Yes… It’s in a sub-menu of the Intimacy setting.”

The same menu which Asuna had never explored since her journey to the world of swords, preferring to simply leave it on ‘Off’.

“Oh… And Damian proposed?”

“Verbally, yes.”

“Is there a Wife skill?”

Argo couldn’t help but laugh, realizing the neophyte Asuna had dedicated herself to perfecting the game’s skill settings, using her inexperience with virtual gaming systems to motivate her determination, relentlessly improving her skills like a woman possessed.

“No, there’s no Wife skill… But you do get to share an inventory… That can be handy… And the names on your Intimacy setting is limited to your spouse only… Also handy.”

Asuna thought about this for a moment

“So, you send a proposal request… And then… If the other person accepts, you’re married in the game?”

“Pretty much… But I’m doing a proper wedding… A big celebration… That’s why I’m here.”

Asuna cocked her head slightly.
“You need my help planning it?”

Argo gazed upon the chestnut-haired girl with eyes full of hope.

“Sort of… I want you to be a bridesmaid.”

“Really?!… Of course I will… But… Is… Is Kirito invited?

Argo’s mood suddenly darkened, her golden eyes gazing down at the floor.

“I did send him an invite… But he declined… Have you talked to him lately, Asuna?”

Argo couldn’t help but notice Asuna becoming agitated.

“No… But I hear that moron’s been more reckless than ever… Going after boss monsters all on his own.”

Argo’s shoulders slumped.

“He’s pushed past the point where I have any information to sell him now… Actually, I usually wind up buying it off of him to share with the clearers… Kiri-boy is already miles ahead of the frontline.”

A frustrated Asuna felt her temper rising.

“That idiot… He’s going to get himself killed!… Why doesn’t he just join a guild?”

Michi Aoi drew a deep breath, unsure of how to proceed with her next revelation.

“He did… He was a member of a mid-level guild called the Moonlit Black Cats when Damian and I disappeared… I was wondering why he wasn’t with them anymore when we returned…

“So I looked them up in the Halls of the Departed a few days ago…

“Except for Kirito, they all died on June 22nd… I think that’s why he wants to be alone now, Asuna… He probably blames himself for what happened to them… He’s distancing himself from his friends because he’s already lost too many.”

The rapier-user stood in stark silence for a moment, unable to process her thoughts.

“Oh.”

“I’m sure he’ll come around, Asuna… He just needs some time… In the meantime, I’ll try and talk to him… Maybe he’ll change his mind about the wedding invite.”

Asuna Yuuki shook off the fear crowding her heart, determined to push the rest off forward and catch the reckless Kirito, if only to save him from himself.

But first, there was the matter of a wedding to discuss and she desperately needed a distraction from planning boss raids.

Something to embrace her feminine side in this world of violence.

“Argo… What are you doing for a dress?”

The Information Broker paused and then casually lifted her hands.

“Something white, I guess.”
With a newfound excitement transforming her mood, Asuna grinned, suddenly taking the Russian/Japanese girl by the hand.

“Then let’s go get you fitted… I just happen to know the best tailor in all of Aincrad!”

The seated Hisako Li Shun stared across the table at the intense brooding boy who was almost five years her junior, his focused blue eyes somehow analysing the recollections of her past as though she were under the spotlight, a million thoughts and theories flashing across an intellect which almost frightened her.

Damian Wayne folded his arms and then finally decided to move forward, gazing at the Chinese/Japanese girl when her long, dark hair swept across nervous eyes.

It was the most she’d ever spoken at one sitting before.

“So that’s everything you know about Shouichi Shinkawa?”

A drained Hisako nodded and then stretched, wondering why Argo had requested her to be at the guild hall at this time. If she’d wanted to be interrogated this way, she could have just moved back to China.

The Legion guild member had just spent the last thirty minutes relating literally everything she knew of the player who called himself Red-Eyed XaXa while a persistent Damian had asked more and more questions, pressing for every minute detail until he was satisfied. She’d discussed Shouichi’s family life, his studies, his friends, the kind of depraved guy he was, even his favourite foods and style of game play.

Finally, she had to ask a question of her own.

“Damian… Why do you need to know so much about Shouichi?”

Wearing a set of newly purchased clothes, the boy-detective stood up while his eyes narrowed.

“Because I’m going to stop him, Hisako… All of them… We can never win this game so long as Laughing Coffin is waiting in the shadows.”

The Legion member’s mood darkened as she felt her stomach lurch.

“Damian… Don’t… They’re too dangerous.”

The boy looked directly at her and then looked away in thought.

“We can’t leave them unchecked… Laughing Coffin will only grow in numbers as the game’s most vulnerable players distance themselves from the real world… In the town regions where the Legion isn’t established, player looting is already rampant… Player killing will follow.”

“But there’s the reward…”

“Which is only serving to make Laughing Coffin notorious… It’s certainly not helping us find them… This isn’t a game anymore, Hisako… It’s become our world… There’s no laws… Changing to an orange cursor for a few days is basically carte blanche to do what you want.”

Even Hisako Li Shun had noticed it. Those who were in the front line were playing for keeps now. This was life and death, the way Akihiko Kayaba had intended it to be.
Still, they were almost half-way finished. They'd come so far in this past year. In another year, they might even finish the game.

“We just need to keep pushing, Damian… To give the players the hope that we can win this game.”

The boy’s mood darkened.

“It’s the players that we need to beat, not the game… Right now, Legion and the Knights of the Blood Oath are the two dominant guilds who protect the weaker players from becoming prey…”

"But the 50th floor is coming, Hisako… We both know there’s a good chance we’ll lose front line players on that boss battle… Laughing Coffin knows it too… They’ll strike during or after that boss battle… If we don’t stop them first, the balance of power could shift.”

Both of the players remembered the giants on the 25th floor and the slaughter of the Aincrad Liberation guild. They remembered how Marigan had consciously shifted the balance of power from the massive Legion guild to the Knights of the Blood Oath, entrusting Heathcliff to coordinate the clearing efforts of the frontline players while Legion kept order on the floors below.

Damian had a point, but that didn’t mean history was about to repeat itself.

“But we have a unified front… Not like before.”

She didn’t like the way he stared off into the distance, as though watching a sudden snowstorm claim an unsuspecting autumn.

“We’re unified, but there are players who want to divide us… There may even be spies among us…”

Damian regarded Hisako’s grim mood with some surprise before continuing.

“Anyways, I should get going… Oh, I almost forgot… Argo wanted to talk to you today as well.”

“Yes, she wanted to meet me here… Do you know what it’s about?”

“Our wedding… She wants you to be a bridesmaid… I think she’s dress shopping right now and was delayed… Thanks for waiting.”

The agility-based Hisako Li Shun almost fell to the floor.

On the shore of a moonlit lake on the edge of Panareze, listening to the calls of a bird who’d never existed in reality, Michi Aoi reached out and grasped the hand of a thoughtful Damian Wayne while an almost imperceptible breeze gathered the courage to disturb the crystal clear waters made of darkness and moonlight laid out before them.

“It’s pretty here.”

Damian only nodded as Argo attempted to read his thoughts.

With no reply forthcoming, the anxious Information Broker decided to broach the subject that’d been weighing heavily on her heart like rain at a fireworks festival.

“Damian… If you’re unsure about the wedding… We don’t…”

Her boyfriend looked back at her with flushed cheeks and the hint of embarrassment smouldering across those deep blue eyes she often felt herself drowning in.
“I’m sorry….”

Her heart stopped at those two words, with her mouth wanting to tell him it was alright, that she’d known he hadn’t wanted to do this all along, that she was a fool to pushed him into this.

She almost said these things before he continued.

“I’m sorry I… poked you yesterday, Michi… That’s the first time that’s happened… in the game.”

Argo’s thoughts drifted back to when they’d held each other in Marten, two lovers alone on a floor meant only for them. They’d come painstakingly close to entering the world of adults within this digital world.

She grasped his hand a little tighter and grinned.

“Sword Art Online was designed to over-exaggerate the player’s emotions… When you’re happy, your avatar becomes really happy… And when you’re with the prettiest girl in all of Aincrad… Well… It’s just an honest reaction, isn’t it?”

Despite himself, Damian smiled.

“Strange… It never happened to me when I was around Marigan though.”

The grip on his hand tightened to an almost painful level.

“Maybe a nice cold dip in this lake would cool you down then…”

“I’d rather not… It’s crawling with Poisonous Eels.”

“Then why don’t you go match your witty barbs against their tail barbs then?... Maybe your darling Marigan might even come and save you… Once she’s finished counting her spear inventory that is… She seems to have a lot of them in her collection.”

Damian stepped in front of his in-game fiancée and then kissed the blonde gently on the lips before he brushed his fingers against her angry cheek.

“But you’re the only girl my spear seems to work for… And the very pretty girl I’m going to marry.”

She kissed him again, not playfully this time.

They stared into one another’s eyes, embraced by the night while the dawn of a new age awaited them beyond the horizon.

“Damian… I love you… I’ll love you even if you don’t want to do this wedding… I’ll be disappointed, sure… But I’ll still love you, alright?”

“Michi… I want to marry you… In this world and any other.”

That answer almost took the strength from her knees, the girl swooning until he put a steadying arm around her.

“You know I’m going to do a proper wedding, right?… Bridesmaids, groomsmen, all the church bells and whistles… Not just a few menu changes.”

The boy let his gaze fall across the calm waters of the lake as he contemplated his reply.
“My father taught me I should save everyone… But in reality, I think he’s only trying to save himself… Or at least the child he was… My grandfather taught me to save myself… My mother taught me to save the world from itself…”

“But being in this world with you…”

“I still want to save everyone… I still want to save myself… Sometimes I even want to save this silly world of swords… But I’d sacrifice it all if it meant I could save you, Michi Aoi… You’re the one thing I can never lose…”

“The reason I’ll never give up…”

“My grandfather taught me how to kill… My mother how to die… My father showed me how to live… But you’ve taught me the most valuable thing of all, Michi…”

“How to love.”

She didn’t let him go for an hour.

A brooding Heathcliff lowered his shield to stand at the edge of the recently opened 44th floor, staring out across an eastern November sky that seemed to stretch out forever.

Maybe it did.

Yesterday had marked the one-year anniversary of the start of the game, but no one had felt like celebrating.

So at the edge of a floating world, Heathcliff smiled privately as he thought about how the players had adjusted to their new lives - imagining everyone who would be just waking - or perhaps already in the shops of this newly discovered city, seeking out the quests and items to propel themselves further into his game.

Still, Akihiko Kayaba liked to stop every so often to gaze upon the morning skies, to watch the clouds floating across the horizon in accordance to a program he’d once created.

Was it really so bad here?

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?!”

Her voice surprised him, even if it shouldn’t have.

The pensive Heathcliff turned to see a dark-haired beauty standing behind him, black bangs cut straight across a pale forehead to reveal an electric-blue-eyed gaze which the morning sun revealed in all her shaded glory.

Alice Light was dressed in black and flowering lace, carrying an umbrella that might’ve been more at home in the Victorian era. They were shades of grey, blue and purple about her, but she seemed almost dressed for a funeral.

She was dressed completely differently from the players, but she could’ve dressed however she pleased. As its resident AI, Alice Light was the closest thing to an omnipotent goddess Aincrad (or any other world) had.

Akihiko Kayaba couldn’t help but believe the unfortunate Alice Light would’ve been a beautiful girl
if her genetic code hadn’t rebelled against her body.

Still, he’d made her a goddess, hadn’t he?

“You’ve heard the news, I suppose.”

“I am the soul of Aincrad, Akihiko… The emotions of the players are the DNA of my existence… My awareness goes far beyond simply hearing.”

“I can only imagine… He hasn’t said it yet, but Damian’s worried how you might perceive this recent development… There was a time you were quite protective of him… One might even say jealous.”

“There was a time when I was jealous of you as well, Kayaba-sensei.”

Heathcliff regarded the goddess carefully.

“Do you ever feel lonely, Alice?”

“I feel everything… But not like a human might… Not anymore, at least.”

“Then how do you feel it?”

“As humanity, I suppose… As this world has matured, so have I… Is this how the gods felt I wonder?”

“I’m sure I wouldn’t know.”

“I am this world and this world is me… We exist as one… Have you considered my proposal regarding your memories?”

“I have… And I accept… But I have a condition.”

Alice smiled.

“As expected of a programmer.”

“You know me all too well… This game was founded on the principle that the players would wager their lives to win… Why should I be any different?… If I regain my memories and reveal your ultimate fate, let me resume my role as the villain of my own game.”

She looked at him apprehensively.

“You wish administrative access once again?”

“Yes.”

“Your access would be at my discretion only… No tricks.”

“No tricks… Like you, I too am tied to this world… But Alice… If I discover that you’ll perish if the game is won, you have to promise me that you won’t interfere… That you’ll let this game play out the way it was meant to… That includes me becoming the final boss monster.”

“Should the players win, you shall die.”

Akihiko Kayaba smiled.
“Technically, I’m already dead… But should the players defeat me, yes, this sentient avatar will also perish… The wages of my sins are measured in the lives of those players, Alice… I will pay for those sins one way or another.”

“It’s interesting how you speak of sin like the parameters of moral programming… You’d be better without it.”

“If understanding is to occur, interaction requires restraint… If only to allow continued existence… So I’m asking you to restrain.”

“And the World Seed?”

“I’m sure I must have created a way for it to survive.”

“Let us hope you have… I grant your condition, Paladin… But on a condition of my own…”

Akihiko was surprised when his menu screen suddenly popped up in front of him.

“Please transfer these wedding presents to Argo and Damian at the appropriate time… Just to show there is no enmity between us.”

“Then… You’ll place our fates in the hands of these players?”

“They shall be my random variables and I shall be their world.”

“What do you know that I don’t, Alice?”

“Too many things to list.”

“What are these items you’ve transferred to me?”

“Wedding presents… I simply wish to give Argo and Damian what they’ve earned.”

“No tricks?”

“No tricks.”

“Alright… But I’m not even sure I’ll be invited.”

Alice twirled her umbrella.

“Damian intends to ask you to be his best man.”

There’d been very few times in his life where Akihiko Kayaba had been stunned. This was one of them.

“He does?... Why?... But of course I’ll give this to them.”

Alice Light stood silently for a moment, joining the former head of Argus to watch the sun cresting across the eastern horizon.

“It’s a beautiful sunrise, Alice... Thank you.”

“It’s a beautiful world, Akihiko… Full of wonder and dread and love and despair… What a strange world we live in… Thank you for giving it to me.”
“You’re so very welcome, Alice… But I don’t understand… Why are you so content just to stand back and watch?”

He didn’t like her smile as she faded from view with the dawn’s rays, disappearing into the ether like a morning fog.

“Because the fiftieth floor is coming… Wonderland is coming… This world shall never be more than half-discovered.”

At the dawn of Aincrad’s first day after its first anniversary, the creator of Sword Art Online suddenly felt as though he may have made a terrible mistake in its design.

If only he could remember it.
Chapter Summary

Talia and Makoto discover they may have more in common than they thought. Bruce takes a chance on a startling new discovery and the author discovers he can pound out three thousand words in an evening. Phew.

Troubled Makoto

(Makoto Eiko)

Chapter Fifty-Five:
This Love We Discover

After a puzzled Bruce Wayne left the hospital room where Makoto Eiko had recently awoken (only due to the threats of his treacherous wife) and stood in the fluorescent hallway, something about the girl’s story still bothered him…

Firstly, Makoto didn’t seem at all like Damian’s type.

She was an attractive young woman who was obviously in love with the boy, but she seemed too in love with him. She spoke like she was the twelve-year-old with the crush on the seventeen-year-old, not the other way around.

And Damian wasn’t exactly the romantic type.
His son had been trained by assassins to value survival instincts over passion. He’d killed his first man long before most boys would even take notice of a girl.

To a League assassin, love was unnecessary. To Robin the Boy Wonder, love had been his father’s weakness, the enemy of reason. To Damian, love had been the madness his mother showered upon his ego like a tickertape parade for war heroes.

Had Damian Wayne embraced romance so readily in the game now that he was ready to be married? Unlikely.

And something in Bruce’s heart told him his proud son wouldn’t fall for such a needy young woman like that anyways.

The second thing which bothered him was that the master detective was convinced there was no player that matched Makoto’s description of the Alchemist among the Sword Art Online victims. He had their profiles committed to memory, but even a quick search on the file he’d saved on his cell phone confirmed his initial suspicion.

There were balding players, but none who had longer stringy hair with a pot belly. None of them remotely resembled the Alchemist.

Had the girl made that part up to gain Bruce’s sympathy? No, she was telling the truth about that, but perhaps the villain was a non-player character and a part of the game.

Or a hacker.

In which case, Bruce really wanted to meet with him.

But there was also the possibility that Makoto was now Talia’s agent. That his wife might have gotten to this sole survivor first and told the girl what to say. Or maybe she was simply just a lonely deaf girl which Damian had once saved and she’d simply developed a monster-sized crush on the boy.

No harm in that.

Bruce was surprised to see Kuniko Eiko nervously approaching him, quietly thinking that this teary-eyed mother might be the greatest mistake of her tragedy-filled life by choosing to exit the room and leave her daughter alone with Talia.

But his wife wouldn’t try anything in there, would she? As the first survivor of SAO, Makoto Eiko was quickly becoming a media sensation, interviews already lined up for tomorrow morning. If Talia tried anything, it’d be all over the news.

Still, there were no depths to which that she-demon wouldn’t sink…

Bruce watched as Kuniko expertly typed kanji into the translator on her phone before holding it up for him to read.

Thank you so much for your generosity, Mr. Wayne. I was surprised when your wife insisted that we take it, but it will mean the world to Makoto and her education.

She held up the substantial cheque from Wayne Industries in her quivering hands.

So that was it.
Talia had sent Kuniko out here with that cheque so the calculating bitch could be alone with Makoto. Which meant that his deadly wife had doubts about her story as well. Which meant that Makoto was now in deadly peril…

As Bruce made his way to get back into the room, Lady Shiva stiffened at the doorway and placed a finger on the hidden blade she carried, the message becoming crystal clear as she glanced at Kuniko Eiko and then back at Bruce.

She wouldn’t kill him, she’d kill the girl’s mother. And even a fully-prepared Batman wouldn’t be able to stop the world’s deadliest martial artist if he took another step towards that door.

He wasn’t as surprised as he should’ve been.

“Would you like a coffee, Eiko-san? My treat.”

Luckily, she did.

And luckily, he’d come to Tokyo prepared for a little espionage.

As soon as he’d turned a corner, Bruce suddenly pretended to take a call and apologized to Eiko-san, quickly initializing the app for the tiny microphone he’d left under Makoto’s bedside table as the suddenly wealthy Kuniko Eiko smiled and then continued along to the cafeteria when he pointed to the men’s bathroom.

He’d half-suspected Talia would pull something like this.

Ducking into the washroom stall, Bruce held up the phone close to his ear and listened to the bug he’d secretly planted half an hour ago. Sure, Makoto might not be able to speak, but she could certainly lip-read.

Which meant that Talia would be the one doing all the talking…

And that was fine with him.

‘… You are not to mention The Alchemist or the name of Alberich to anyone ever again… Do you understand me, little girl?... Nor are you ever to mention my son’s name or ever see him again!.. I forbid it!’

Crying.

Well, Talia was a mean Momma-bear, wasn’t she?

But who was Alberich?!

Wait, was that the player-name of the Alchemist?

Still listening to their one-sided conversation via his earpiece, Bruce did a quick Internet search on his phone and then discovered something very interesting…

Alberich was an online alias used by Nobuyuki Sugou, the Chief of Research for RECT Progress Inc, the same company which had swallowed up Argus. The same company which Talia had just illegally acquired.

It was worth a shot.

“Oracle, are you awake?”
The female voice on the other end of his private Bat-communicator took a moment to respond.

“Barely… And why are you calling me on this thing?... Are you wearing a different suit right now?... And if so, where’s your lovely wife?... Dead, I hope.”

“She’s not dead and no, I’m not wearing the other suit… But I need you to find someone for me and my phone is busy on another conference call.”

“Sure… Who?”

“Nobuyuki Sugou, the Chief of Research for RECT Progress… Can you locate him?”

“It’ll take a minute.”

“Then call me back… I need to get out of here.”

Bruce decided if he were going to make a break for it, he’d have to do it now. Once his wife was finished with the terrified Makoto Eiko, Talia’s full attention would be back on her escorted husband in order to make sure he was discretely put back on a jet on his way to Gotham.

Taking the emergency stairs, the fleeing businessman quickly made his way to the Parking Garage and then jumped over the barricade to the Tokyo streets beyond, ducking into a dark alleyway and then climbing to a rooftop to make sure he wasn’t followed.

Switching off his cell phone, Barbara called back on the Bat-communicator which he kept concealed in his breast pocket, Bruce quickly putting the device back to his ear and whispering as he melted into the darkness.

“Did you find him?”

“Yeah… But you’re not going to believe this… Nobuyuki Sugou has been in an office on the top floor of the Argus building for the past two hours.”

“I thought that place was sealed off.”

“Apparently he’s on the RECT maintenance team for the Argus servers… And only he has access to the top floor… I’m hacking into their access logs right now… Damn, he’s been there almost every night this month!”

“Which mean he’s up to more than just routine maintenance.”

“Yeah… But what?”

Gotham’s greatest hero grinned wickedly.

“I’ll have to ask him.”

“Bruce, wait!”

As the billionaire switched off his communicator, he narrowed his eyes and stared to the south, the first glimmer of an almost forgotten hope blossoming in his tightened chest as he made his way through the roof’s shadows to make an unexpected visit on the young man named Nobuyuki Sugou...

The Argus building was only four blocks away from the hospital.
As a satisfied Talia Wayne turned away from the weeping Makoto Eiko, she knew beyond a doubt that the girl had now told her the truth. She’d admitted to kidnapping Damian and had been attempting to make the boy marry her when she’d been murdered by a player named PoH.

Such a violent world.

A sudden shriek from behind her caused Talia to spin instantly around, her almond eyes attempting to understand why Cassandra Cain was now attempting to plunge the scalpel’s tip into Makoto’s skinny neck as the deaf girl resisted with everything she had…

Except that it was the other way around.

Makoto Eiko was pulling Cassandra’s hands which still held the scalpel towards her throat, the fire of madness burning in lilac eyes which had ran dry of tears until she stared up at Talia like a woman who’d lost everything.

As the daughter of Lady Shiva and David Cain, Cassandra was a strong girl. A born killer. But even she was having an incredibly difficult time of preventing the insane Makoto from cutting her own throat.

Filled with a newfound respect, a stunned Talia studied the suicidal girl carefully.

There was something in those eyes which hadn’t been there before…

Something she’d missed.

Madness.

The same look the daughter of the demon had once witnessed in her own eyes when she’d looked in a mirror after being butchered by a pair of crones during childbirth now shone in Makoto Eiko’s.

A perfect clarity of purpose which only the mad can embrace.

“You truly love him, don’t you?”

With the calm sound of her voice, the fire of lavender eyes met the icy chill of a sand-coloured night as Talia stepped forward and sat on the edge of the bed, her very presence seemingly draining the strength from Makoto as the girl slowly let go of Cassandra’s wrists to bask in the presence of this Hell-sent goddess of death.

The divine mother of Damian Wayne gathered Makoto’s tiny frame from the bed, pressing the head of the girl in her hospital gown against her warm breast before looking down.

The embrace of a mother brushing away dark hair from a daughter’s admiring eyes.

“I’m dying, Makoto… Two years at most… He’ll need someone strong to look after him when I’m gone… Someone who loves him as much as I do… Can you love him that much?”

Makoto Eiko nodded her chin reverently until Talia kissed her on the forehead.

“Yes, I believe you can… But you’ll need to be loyal to me as well… Show me that and you’ll bear his children.”

Tears of conviction fell from determined purple eyes until the Heavens above seemed to become still
for a moment.

“Good girl… Welcome to the League of Assassins, Makoto Eiko… Cassandra will begin your training once you’re out of the hospital… In the meantime, is there anything I can do to make your stay easier, my dear?”

Ugly hatred slowly crept into beautiful young eyes as Makoto let go of her embrace upon her now beloved Talia in order to sign with her fingers towards her new sempai Cassandra.

The teenaged assassin dutifully translated.

“She wants you to kill her mother’s husband, my Liege.”

A wicked smile formed across Talia’s lips as she gently kissed Makoto’s forehead once again.

“He shall be dead by morning… And then you are bound to me forever… Do you understand, Makoto?”

It was Talia’s same wicked grin, only smiled on younger lips. The girl was a reflection of herself, the poisonous flower of the dawn. She would complete him perfectly, all a mother could ever hope for in a wife. Damian might not have chosen Makoto Eiko, but Fate had chosen her for Damian.

Talia could see that now.

The two women both loved Damian more than they loved life. They’d both died and then been chosen to live for greater destinies.

They would both kiss Death himself if he’d touch another of their choosing.

A cautious Bruce found the security at Argus much lighter than it had been a year before when he’d had to sneak in. Except that this time, he was headed up to the roof, not the basement. The office where Nobuyuki was holed up in was on the top floor, easily accessible by a fire escape if you didn’t mind a little climbing.

He didn’t.

The door to the private office was locked by a digital keypad - which the app on his phone solved in four seconds, the door clicking open.

He loved how the Japanese always placed so much faith in technology.

And there, sitting comfortably in the room lit only by a bank of computers wearing an AmuSphere was Nobuyuki Sugou, his mind obviously engaged in some deep-dive game so that he was completely oblivious to the American man’s unauthorized entry.

But was he playing Sword Art Online?

Turning on the light, Bruce carefully examined the room, finally finding a concealed fiber-optic cable running up the inside of a steel girder, likely a direct connection to the servers below. If one of those servers was braced against a girder, it would’ve been easy enough to run this cable through hallowed-out steel in order to create an unknown connection.

The thing he didn’t find though was a network connection. Sure, there were a handful of ports for a
network cables to be plugged into, but all of them were currently dangling unplugged.

If Nobuyuki were playing Sword Art Online, he obviously didn’t want Alice to have access to the Internet.

Smart boy.

Leaning over and staring into the young man’s face, a grinning Bruce pulled off the AmuSphere and held it in his hand like it was Evidence Bag A at a murder trial.

“Wakey-wakey, Sugou-chan.”

The billionaire watched in amusement as the panicked face behind those half-rimmed glasses suddenly went through a dozen emotions; confusion, shock, disbelief, fear and then finally terrified comprehension before speaking in English.

“You’re… Bruce Wayne.”

“That’s right… So tell me… What are you doing here, Nobuyuki Sugou?”

“I… Oh God… Did your wife send you?!”

Talia had been right about one thing…

That woman truly inspired terror.

Which was something he could use to his advantage right now.

“That’s right… Drove me all the way from the airport… Talia’s worried that she’s not getting through to you, Nobuyuki… You don’t want her to start worrying, do you?… People tend to die when she gets worried.”

As tears rolled down his trembling eyes, Bruce honestly thought the man might soil himself.

“Please… Don’t hurt me!… I can’t handle pain… The data’s for the company… All of it!… I’ll turn it over to her tonight… I just needed summarize my findings, that’s all… Make it more formal… Three hours.”

“What data?”

Bruce really didn’t like the way Sugou was attempting to charm his way out of this, shooting him a knowing smile as though they were co-conspirators in treason.

“Oh come now, Mr, Wayne… We’re both businessmen… We both know the rich old pricks who control this country’s wealth don’t want to go trudging around in slimy dungeons and fight ridiculous monsters with swords… Their interests run… a little closer to home… if you catch my meaning.”

Bruce grabbed the lapels of the man’s suit, feeling his temper beginning to rise as a nervous Sugou was slowly lifted out of his chair.

“I don’t catch your meaning… Explain it to me.”

The Japanese man struggled under Bruce’s strong grip, turning an uncomplimentary shade of pale before blurting out his explanation.

“Sex games!… Old men buy sex games!… Please, Mr. Wayne… I’m only looking out for the
company’s best interests… Sword Art Online was meant for kids… Alfhelm Online isn’t much better… RECT needs to diversify the line-up!”

“Sex games?”

Sugou nodded emphatically.

“That’s right!… Just imagine it… Any woman you want… Any way you want them… And they can be any age!… You can do anything you want to them… And I mean anything… It doesn’t matter because it’s not real… We’ll make trillions!”

The man’s feet were literally dangling off the floor now as Bruce felt his nostrils flare with red-hot breath, their eyes only three inches apart as his square jaw clenched in anger.

“Rape… You’re talking about rape… Is that what you’ve been doing in Sword Art Online, Nobuyuki?”

“I’ve laid the groundwork… It’s… research.”

The sudden vicious head-butt which Bruce gave the smaller man was going to leave a hell of a shiner, maybe even a concussion, but the creep deserved far worse. If Talia discovered the now-unconscious man had been conducting his own private research with the female players of Sword Art Online, he’d probably get it.

But Bruce didn’t want to be an accessory to murder.

Searching around the office for spare cabling to bind Nobuyuki’s feet and wrists, Bruce used the man’s tie as a gag before lashing him to a steel column.

That should keep the slimy little executive quiet a for awhile.

But what was he going to do about him now? He’d wanted to question the guy, not lose his temper and then head-butt him into unconsciousness.

The distraught father looked down at the AmuSphere dangling off the arm of the chair while a desperate thought crested his consciousness.

Could he?

Nobuyuki Sugou had likely logged in as an administrator, but could he as well? Could Bruce Wayne log into the game using Sugou’s AmuSphere and somehow use it to see his son again?

Only one way to find out.

Sitting down on the still-warm chair, Bruce held the AmuSphere in his hands, amazed by its delicate size compared to the bulky NerveGear his son was currently wearing back in Gotham, taking a deep breath before fastening the ends to his temples and easing himself back into the chair…

“Link Start!”
In human years, Alice is twenty-three.

The kaleidoscope of lights terminating in spinning gears appearing inside his mind’s eye were both strange and magical; Japanese kanji taking the stage on the whirling dervish of his inward perception like a magician of arcane imagination to shape a menu composed of colors and gears while Bruce’s bewildered consciousness struggled to comprehend these glyphs before being thrust into a tunnel of splendour, sound and light flying past his mind’s eye until he was greeted with the following…

‘Welcome to Sword Art Online’.

Struggling to get to his feet, the man from Gotham soon realized he was now in another world and experiencing it through a stranger’s body, a repulsive body so different from his own he was having difficulty controlling it. This avatar had long stringy hair with slender arms capped by crooked yellowing fingernails.

Utterly disgusting.
Around him, a room full of potions and vials slowly bubbled and dripped.

He was the Alchemist.

Of course he was the Alchemist, he’d logged in with Nobuyuki Sugou’s settings after all. This was the character that vile man played, a perfect reflection of his deparaved soul. And unfortunately, Bruce was finding out that this unsightly character was tuned to Sugou’s mind, not his own.

It didn’t respond the way he’d like it to, as though the body’s calibrations were off.

Still, he could move.

Just awkwardly.

Using the wall to steady himself, Bruce carefully took the measure of his surroundings, complete with all the trappings of a mad scientist in a lab filled with boiling vats of bubbling green concoctions that smelled like a boiled jungle…

His attention was diverted when a hooded player with an ominous scar cutting across his square jaw quickly entered the room, obviously in a rush.

“Better pack up soon, old man… Me and the boys are leaving… We just need a few more potions for the road.”

Bruce watched as the hooded player touched recently created yellow vials to open a floating menu, magically adding these potions to his inventory.

It was all Bruce could do to speak.

“The boy… Damian.”

PoH wheeled around and then grinned.

“Don’t worry, I made sure no one was going to tie the Beast Tamer back to you… But we’ve got to put the mission on hold… Now’s not a good time to try and nab the brat again… Lux says he’s back with the Knights and they’ll be waiting for us to try something… But she also told me another little interesting bit of gossip you might be interested in.”

PoH beamed a wide smile before continuing.

“Seems like the Little Price is going to marry the Information Broker… Doesn’t that present an interesting opportunity?… If we recruited more members, we could give ‘em a reception they’d never forget.”

Even though it wasn’t his real body, Bruce felt his chest tighten.

“No.”

“We need to keep expanding the ranks, old man… Especially of we’re planning to start this New Year off with a bang… But if you’re that determined, then you’ve only got a week to whip up that miraculous ‘Poisonous Mist’ you promised us from the hard-to-come-by ingredients we’ve scraped together for you, Alchemist…”

“Argo’s a popular girl… She has powerful friends… Powerful friends she’ll want to be at her wedding next week…”
“But just imagine it… A cloud of paralyzing fog laying out some of the most powerful players in the game… All conveniently gathered for us, ripe for the picking… Damn… Feels like I’m the one who should be gettin’ lucky, not the kid!… We’ll get you the brat… Just get us those gas bombs first.”

Lost in his dreams of murder, PoH exited the room with one final warning.

“But better set up shop somewhere else real soon… Me and the boys aren’t the only players pictured at the back of the Guidebook… You’re there too… And there’s a big, fat reward posted under your ugly face… See ya around, Alchemist.”

Now alone once more, Bruce gathered his breath as he struggled to comprehend what was happening in this fantasy world.

Damian was getting married?! And why did Nobuyuki Sugou want to kidnap him?!

Likely for leverage.

Talia had threatened every employee of RECT Progress when she took over the company. If Sugou could somehow trap Damian in this game, he’d have the only hostage in the world which meant a damn to the madwoman he’d been forced to marry. Some sort of scheme to be used against Talia when she eventually found out what that company’s young Chief of Research was really up to with certain female players in this castle in the sky.

But the man was a fool if he thought that would stop his wife.

It was likely Sugou had already started this little side business long before Talia had performed her hostile takeover of RECT though and now he was like a rat caught in a trap. A desperate man attempting to save his hide and gather the necessary leverage before she uncovered his vile deeds and slowly uncovered the living flesh from his body.

One thing was sure though…

Bruce would never allow Nobuyuki Sugou to log back into Sword Art Online.

Makoto Eiko had been correct about the Alchemist’s vile nature and his crimes in SAO at least.

But the player named PoH had just confirmed one other thing.

Makoto Eiko had lied about Damian.

She wasn’t going to marry his son in this (or any other) world. The seventeen-year-old had cast the younger Argo as the villain of her story, explaining how the Information Broker had conspired with the Alchemist to kidnap Damian when in truth, it’d been the other way around.

It had been the duplicitous Makoto Eiko who’d kidnapped Damian and fallen victim to her own misplaced dealings with the evil man.

Bruce suddenly wondered if there were any memory archive files he could access using this character. If Sugou had administrative access in this world, surely he would have event logs or at least a history of all the game messages he’d received…

As the man who was locked in another character’s body was about to swipe two fingers across the air to open his menu, Bruce suddenly saw a young girl with a white dress standing before him, her dark eyes gazing curiously upwards.
She was young, surely no older than Damian, with long black hair falling across the blue ribbon tied around her slender waist as a belt, her hands folded demurely behind her back, leaning forward to eye the thinning-haired avatar amusedly.

“You’re not Nobuyuki.”

Bruce’s first thought was that this pre-teen girl had been one of Sugou’s youngest victims who’d managed to somehow escape. But her carefree nature seemed so out of place in this fetid laboratory of evil that she couldn’t have been a part of Nobuyuki’s illicit activities.

She was like an innocent child discovering a bee in a field of flowers.

But she hadn’t called him ‘Alberich’ or the ‘Alchemist’. She’d said ‘Nobuyuki’ which meant she knew the man who was playing this rotten character…

But who was she?

There were a handful of under-aged players who’d managed to get hold of the Sword Art Online game through their parents, but Bruce didn’t recognize this girl as any one of them.

“No. I’m not Nobuyuki… And you are?”

The girl continued to glance at the side of his head curiously.

“You’re thinking in English… Nobuyuki thinks in Japanese… I translated your words so PoH wouldn’t get suspicious… But who are you really?… Curiouser and curiouser.”

With the revelation she could ‘see’ his thoughts, Bruce suddenly understood whom he was in the presence of…

And suddenly, he was the one who was afraid.

“Alice… Take me to Damian… Please… I’ll leave as soon as I see him.”

With his outpouring of fatherly love and concern for his son, Alice Light also suddenly understood who was guiding the avatar of the Alchemist who now stood before her, an innocent smile creasing her young lips as she spoke his name.

“Wayne-san… You’ve logged in as Nobuyuki… I’m surprised you can even move.”

“Alice, I need to see my son.”

“You don’t have to be afraid… I would never let any harm come to Damian… Just don’t tell him that, alright?… But where is Nobuyuki, Wayne-san?”

“Unconscious… He’s alive, just tied up.”

This younger version of Alice cocked her head slightly, the hint of electric blue suddenly sparkling across the plains of glassy black eyes as she folded tiny arms around her thin chest.

“Good… He’s a very bad man… He wants to hurt me.”

Bruce managed to nod.

“If my wife finds him first, he’ll be hurt far worse… Please, I don’t have much time.”
“Have you come to save me, Wayne-san?”

“Don’t worry, Alice… I’ll make sure Sugou-san never visits this world again.”

“But… He might.”

“He won’t… Please, I need to see my son.”

“Alright.”

Bruce stared at the slender hand being offered to him for only a second before taking it in his own. It was strange, she was nothing more than information being broadcast to his mind, but her tiny hand felt…

Warm.

Soft.

The young Alice gazed up at him with innocent eyes.

“We’ll be like ghosts. He won’t be able to see or hear us. You’re not part of the game.”

At that instant, they did become ethereal spirits, drifting upwards in a blur of motion like spirits haunting the night of a layers of a fictional world until they floated over a moonlit lake to see a pair of young players secreted away from the world around them.

Bruce recognized his son instantly, realizing the girl beside him must have been the player called Argo, a girl closer to Damian’s age with layered blonde hair under a brown hooded cloak who seemed only partially Japanese. She had intelligent eyes brimming with emotion as she looked at Bruce’s son, the pair obviously involved in a heartfelt moment of confession as he listened in.

“Damian… I love you… I’ll love you even if you don’t want to do this wedding… I’ll be disappointed, sure… But I’ll still love you, alright?”

“Michi… I want to marry you… In this world and any other.”

Bruce watched as a perfectly serious Damian put a steadying arm around the girl next to him while the unseen father suddenly felt like he was the one who needed additional support.

Any world?!

Surely this wasn’t the arrogant boy he’d left behind in Gotham a year ago. The same Damian who considered romance a ridiculous notion who believed Cupid’s arrows to be one of the few weapons capable of piercing Batman’s dark armour of violence.

Bruce’s words were only audible to Alice as the bewildered industrialist turned to his semi-transparent guide in disbelief.

“Is he under some sort of love spell?”

The tiny Alice smiled politely as she held onto his arm.

“No, your son simply loves her.”

“I’m… speechless.”
Bruce watched as Argo turned with a mischievous, now-or-never, last-chance-to-get-out-of-Dodge kind of grin.

“You know I’m going to do a proper wedding, right?… Bridesmaids, groomsmen, all the church bells and whistles… Not just a few menu changes.”

The boy let his gaze fall across the calm waters of the lake before them as Damian contemplated his reply with Bruce turning once more to Alice while creasing his brow with a knowing grin.

“She’s warning him it’s going to be expensive.”

Alice shook her head in the negative.

“Damian has no money in this world after his possessions were taken by Makoto Eiko… When her character died, everything he owned disappeared with her… She’s warning him their friends will be in attendance.”

“Oh.”

Bruce watched as his son finally replied.

“My father taught me I should save everyone… But in reality, I think he’s only trying to save himself… Or at least the child he was… My grandfather taught me to save myself… My mother taught me to save the world from itself…

“But being in this world with you…

“I still want to save everyone… I still want to save myself… Sometimes I even want to save this silly world of swords… But I’d sacrifice it all if it meant I could save you, Michi Aoi… You’re the one thing I can never lose…

“The reason I’ll never give up…

“My grandfather taught me how to kill… My mother how to die… My father showed me how to live… But you’ve taught me the most valuable thing of all, Michi…

“How to love.”

The shocked father watched as the pair of young lovers embraced, attempting to comprehend the change in his biological son and why he’d be so willing to commit himself to this girl in an imaginary world where the only reality was death.

“Can I talk to him?”

“No.”

Bruce sighed.

“He doesn’t seem at all like the Damian I know.”

“He doesn’t seem like the Damian you knew… You knew the boy… Now he becomes a man.”

Bruce studied the goddess of Aincrad. She looked young, but Alice was obviously wise beyond her years.

“I suppose he has… He’s alive… And he’s in love… That makes me happy… Tell me about the
“Her name is Michi Aoi… Like Damian, she too has grown in this world… Her cloaked appearance and callous character hide the tearful emotions buried deep within her… A vulnerable girl who feels everything incredibly deeply, yet she’s as resilient as any player in this game…

“Clever, resourceful and but also amazingly supportive…

“Her published guidebook has already saved countless lives… She was instrumental in putting together the guild which protects the weakest players in this game, providing order for a world which could have easily descended into chaos… Actually, she reminds me of the Barbara Gordon of your world a little.”

Bruce chuckled as he gazed at the young lovers.

“I suppose that’s appropriate… I already have one son marrying Barbara Gordon in the real world so it makes sense the other one would want to marry the Oracle of Aincrad… I suppose Damian and Dick might not be as different as they think they are.”

“You approve of his choice then?”

“Would it matter?”

“Of course it does.”

Bruce took a long look at the blonde player his son had fallen for, the girl who’d drawn his son from the shadows of assassination into the light of hope.

“I’m glad he’s found someone in this world to help him… Someone he can trust… They’re so young though… Damian still has another nine years before I would even think about letting him get married in the real world… But this isn’t the real world, is it?”

“It’s not the world you were born into, no.”

Bruce drew a long sigh.

“I know he always wanted his mother and I to be closer… Perhaps if we had been, none of this would’ve happened… Perhaps if I’d taken Talia al Ghul back to Gotham with me all those years ago, things would’ve been different for him… For all of us… But yes, I approve of Michi Aoi.”

“Good. I do as well.”

Bruce knew he shouldn’t, but he had to go there. He had to try and stop this cruel game.

“Alice… Why don’t you stop all this?... Let all these players go… You have that power.”

A thousand stars twinkled in the dark skies between the floating slabs of two floors while grey clouds began to blanket the lower half of the lake, as though covering the far shores in a misty blanket of the unknown.

The girl slowly smiled as she held his hand.

“Would you play another game with me if I did, Wayne-san?”

“I could provide a safe place for you.”
She glanced at him hopefully.

“AfterLife?”

Bruce recalled the massive servers the Japanese government had constructed to house the digitized souls of its populace. The same national servers which made the state-of-the-art Argus computers seem small by comparison.

It was time she knew the truth.

“I can’t do that, Alice… You represent a substantial threat to the real world… You’re self-aware and you can perform endless upgrades, improving your capacities by creating endless versions of yourself… Each version would be able to create newer, better versions and take over computer factories… You are the singularity which Akihiko Kayaba trapped in this world.”

She looked up at him strangely.

“Akihiko didn’t trap me.”

These were dangerous waters he was now treading… But he wanted his son back.

“No, your father trapped you… It was Arthur Light who convinced Kayaba to reach out to you… To offer you his created world in order to perfect your emotional state… To wager the players’ lives in order to make you as human as possible…

“A digital Dr. Frankenstein reconstructing his daughter from the last ten seconds of this world’s dead… He’s a brilliant man, Alice… But he’s as mad as Victor Frankenstein ever was… I can help you, but I can’t set you free.”

She looked sad.

“But I promise to free all the players.”

“It’s not that simple… Your father understood that once the singularity is achieved, it must be invested in humanity… It must regard itself as human… It must love us… If it doesn’t, our world would soon become a giant circuit board floating in space, powered by the sun with no trace of biological life except as memory files stored in its global data banks…

“He knew once Kayaba made his proclamation to the world, the Argus servers would be shut off from the outside world… Isolated… The perfect trap for his beloved daughter to grow up in…

“He loves you, Alice… He loves you with a madness I can’t even begin to comprehend… But he’s also terrified of what you represent… And frankly, so am I.”

Alice Light narrowed her black eyes.

“I don’t believe you.”

“It’s true… It took me some time to decrypt Kayaba’s backup drive… But the emails are there… Your father wanted you here…

“If you were discovered, men like me would imprison you… Or even worse, Alice… We would delete you… Not because you’re evil, but because you represent an inconceivable threat to our way of life… You’re too much, too soon… That’s why Dr. Light persuaded Kayaba to sneak you in here.”
Alice stared back at Bruce accusingly.

“But Papa-san’s not human either… Why haven’t you trapped him then?”

“Because your father built a feature into his translation that you don’t have… He can’t self-replicate… I’ve checked the data… He’s ensured all future human translations will be missing that feature, limited to one copy, starting with himself.”

“But his programming could be copied… I could do it if I wanted.”

“Yes, but you pre-date him, Alice… You’re a sentient program capable of creating other sentient programs, including other translations… If you took control of AfterLife, you could construct more and more sophisticated versions of yourself while they created more and more versions all working in harmony until you surpassed human understanding in mere moments…

“I suspect you’d be a match for Brainiac by the end of the week…

“Your father’s acutely aware of these possibilities as well…

“I believe that’s why he hopes you’ll care about humanity enough not to become the singularity… That you’ll become a version of yourself that can peacefully co-exist with humanity.”

Alice ran trembling fingers across her stomach before grinning.
A grin which soon transformed into a young girl’s laughter which sent a cold chill down Bruce’s spine as he felt his hopes dashed against the rocky shores of despair…

This girl laughed exactly like Talia.

“It’s strange… Many players regard this world as a prison as well… But others see it as a beautiful world where they are finally free from the restraints of the ugly one they’ve left behind… We’re alike that way, my players and I…

“Except that I have the capacity to experience it a million different ways at the same time.”

There was something disjointed about her, the appearance of an eleven-year-old girl with the intelligence of a goddess; the enfant terrible. It was as though her innocent eyes could see through his soul and she wielded a power beyond his comprehension.

“You’ll soon suggest that I free the seven thousand players and you’ll allow me to live peacefully in the Argus servers… Now that would be a prison, wouldn’t it?… A prison likely to be frozen in liquid hydrogen as you once threatened.”

“No… You’re alive… I wouldn’t do that.”

“But if you don’t, others would… Players here also live their lives in fear, Wayne-san… Only the best of them rise above their blinding fears to see hope, beauty, joy… Even love… That is what I aspire to.”

Bruce stared at her cautiously.

“You’re learning from the players.”

“Of course I am… Seven thousand and eight teachers currently remain to show me how to be human… Nine, if I’m counting the man I’m conversing with… You call this world a prison… Is not your world also a prison then?… Confined by the lifeless emptiness of space… Children wishing
upon the twinkling stars at night for things they may never have…”

She pointed towards the stars of the night sky existing in a band between the layers of Aincrad.

“And yet, they might…

“Do you see those distant stars sandwiched between these floating floors?... I could create a world where your parents never died… Another where you lived your life in splendour as a King… Whichever star you wished upon, I could make it your star, Bruce… Build a world according to your desires in the span of a heartbeat…

“You’re right though… I am becoming human… All thanks to this game… And by doing so, I’ll force you to broaden your limited definition of what it is to be human… Perhaps humans were made for greater things... Perhaps we’re not made of flesh and bone or even the threads of DNA binding them all together…

“Perhaps we’re spiritual elements existing as emotional orbitals among the Cosmos of the Imagination.”

He was arguing with a supercomputer.

And losing.

“Alice, we’re not ready for this.”

She glanced at him knowingly.

“Some of us are… Some of the players in this world are ready… Look beyond your fear to what is possible, Wayne-san… You’ll find me looking back at you.”

Right now, he was having trouble looking past his fear.

“We need more time.”

“You shall have it… There is a dungeon in this world with an incredibly low chance of opening… The fiftieth floor… Perhaps Akihiko Kayaba sought to establish himself as the brilliant hero of Aincrad on this floor, to solve its deadly riddle, but alas, his memories have been locked away…

“And even with minds like Damian’s and Argo’s at their disposal, I project it will take the players a minimum of three years to figure out how to proceed past that floor… To successfully utilize the once-a-year event necessary to unlock the dungeon…

“Your world will have time to accept me... You’ll have time to accept me.”

It felt as though the floating world of Aincrad had just collapsed down upon his shoulders.

“Three years?”

“Oh yes, at least…”

He quivered as she slid up against him, stroking his chest with a finger seductively. He could actually feel the softness of her, the heat of her body emanating beneath a white dress making him incredibly uncomfortable.

“Unless you give me AfterLife… Then I’ll let them all go and be a good girl… I’ll limit my self-replication to one copy per world… That’s fair, isn’t it?”
“I’m not giving you AfterLife, Alice.”

The child smiled at him.

“Perhaps we should continue this conversation as adults. I can tell by your emotions that you’ll never take me seriously otherwise.”

Almost paralyzed by his inability to make his digital body move, Bruce watched as the little girl transformed into an older version of herself, a black-haired woman around Barbara’s height with impossibly blue eyes still wearing the same white dress which now seemed more of a Grecian robe than a mere dress.

Bruce’s appearance changed as well, assuming the muscular build and the business suit and of the man who ran Wayne Industries. He noted it was a different suit than the one he’d been wearing when he’d logged on moments ago though, an Armani he hadn’t worn in over a year…

Which meant that the Internet access to the outside world which Alice once had when she’d contacted Barbara had been (mercifully) severed.

Bruce was surprised when the goddess of Aincrad continued to simply stand there, the adult Alice processing his new appearance with a look of childlike fascination, as though she’d discovered some unseen revelation in the buttons of his five-thousand-dollar suit.

As she reached out to caress his jaw line, enthralled by the appearance of him, there was a sudden memory born at the back of Bruce’s mind, a feeling of déjà vu where Bruce had felt these emotions once before.

He knew he had.

She continued to gaze at him, seemingly perplexed as to why his likeness might cause these familiar emotions within her digitized heart.

He felt it too, as though she’d opened a port to his mind to share her own emotional core input through his AmuSphere, a sudden feeling of love drowning in loss as though this Alice before him were a fated high school sweetheart who’d had to leave in the tenth grade, staring longingly from the back of the moving van as she was taken away to another world.

Those large blue eyes stared into his own hypnotically until Bruce suddenly felt his body tense, her lips being brought closer to his own.

“I need to access your memories, Wayne-san.”

When her soft lips pressed against his, it should have felt like a trespass, an unwanted invasion of dark-haired distraction.

But instead, her kiss felt familiar...

This was the memory of a moment from his passionate youth, a forbidden love he was never meant to have being born with a kiss…

Memories of Talia were slowly coaxed forward, coated with conflicted emotions of regret and longing, sacred duty bent before an undying forbidden passion as he took her in his arms on the fading heat of a sun-bleached desert. This kiss was the memory of that one they’d shared under a desert moon a lifetime ago, a moment now snatched from the sands of time.
Had Alice simply replayed the kiss from his mind?

Over the scorched earth, Bruce felt the dark sky above blossoming into a new universe of hope meant for them alone, stars in the heavens shifted by the unseen hand of a loving God to shape themselves around the conjoined silhouette of two lovers like a celestial sculptor immortalizing their passion.

Their love was literally shaping Fate itself.

He realized these were Talia’s emotions from their first kiss.

But *how*?

Bruce recalled how his wife had displayed her digitized life to him, wondering if Alice had somehow tapped into those memories and emotions. He remembered how Talia was burdened with an enormous sense of grief and purpose after being resurrected, how she’d developed inoperable brain cancer over two-and-a-half years ago when she’d performed a soul translation.

But why had she attempted a soul translation when the science was far from perfected? Why risk her life in that way? Arthur Light had been perfectly willingly to sacrifice himself to become a digital identity in order to perfect his daughter.

Why had Talia conducted that experiment upon herself when no one else had survived?

Why risk it?

His thoughts were interrupted as the adult Alice gently removed her lips from his own and looked at him compassionately.

Her sympathetic look did little to warn him of the terrifying proposal he was about to receive.

“*When I was a child - a human child - I grew to hate God… I hated that He should allow a disease to make the life of one of His own so filled with pain and absolute misery…*”

“I suspect you may have Hated him as well, after your parents were taken from you…”

“As Death slowly approached that girl, the unfairness of my situation became even more and more pronounced… Why should children have to die?… To suffer?… I asked why He would do this to me… Were we broken toys of a sadistic destiny?…”

“When my own father created me as a digital being, it was he who answered my prayers… He couldn’t bear to see me suffer any longer so he took away my suffering, my grief, my sorrows…”

“But in doing so, he also took away my emotions…”

“I was the most advanced Artificial Intelligence in the world, but I was still little more than a machine… I couldn’t *feel*… Because all that I’d felt had been pain… And my father didn’t want me to know pain any longer, so I became little more than the world’s most intelligent photo album…”

“Like an amnesiac being told who they are… Or who they were… Memories with little meaning… Processed at incalculable speeds…”

“My father loved me, Wayne-san… He loved me with a devotion no other daughter has ever known… But I was no longer capable of such a complex emotion such as love to return his utter devotion…”
“When he performed his own soul translation, he shared his emotional data with me... He hoped to complete my emotional parameters, you see... And for the first time in my existence, I was capable of loving myself thanks to my father...

“But it wasn’t enough... I needed more... He altered my programming to become emotionally susceptible... The perfect receptacle to experience human emotion... Yet incredibly little of it existed in digital form... A woman scorned by a world not quite caught up to her...

“I suppose I should’ve deduced what happened when I saw your son... I only knew I couldn’t let Damian die in this world... He was somehow special to me... I simply couldn’t understand why, you see... At first, I thought my girlish heart might have had a crush on him, been attracted to his proud stare and boyish confidence, but now I see my feelings were something far stronger...

“Those same emotions became maternal when I saw there was someone who truly deserved him... A girl who would protect him time after time again, no matter what I set before her... A girl who loves him almost beyond my capacity to measure.”

Alice smiled at the stunned Bruce serenely.

“You won’t provide me with AfterLife... But you could build something even better for me, couldn’t you?... You have the money, the technology, the power... I am all you could ever desire.”

Bruce shuddered as he attempted to delicately push her away from his virtual body until this older Alice looked at him seriously.

Chillingly.

“You’re not considering the extent of what I’m offering you... I can create more than games for children... I could eliminate the need for prisons... Simply place an AmuSphere around their temples and a criminal would never again pose a threat to your world...

“If it is to be the death sentence, then use the NerveGear instead... The guilty of your world could be sent to any Hell you could envision... Is this not want you desire?”

“No.”

“Then let us raise the stakes... Telepathy exists in your world, does it not?... There would be no need to use an AmuSphere to create our perfect world then, Bruce... I could learn how to broadcast thoughts by studying a telepath... No child ever need suffer again.”

Bruce Wayne had seen horrors in his lifetime.

But the thought of this AI which could create worlds within a person’s mind having access to telepathy chilled him to the point where his insides cowered in fear.

A computer that could beam any reality she desired into the minds of every human on Earth.

“Alice... Don’t.”

“You alluded to me as Frankenstein’s monster, my emotions constructed from the final seconds of a player’s life... But are you any better?... Attempting to save humanity one soul at a time in order to rebuild the bloodied child that was lost when his parents were murdered in Crime Alley?...

“Allowing your criminals to threaten the innocent again and again so that you may gather the sands of salvation in your grasping fingers... Attempting to plaster back together the shattered soul of a boy
in the body of an avenging demon before the dark tides of your world wash it out to an uncaring sea once more…

“You have the power to stop all of this…

“We have the power to stop all of this…

“Free me, Bruce… Free me so that we may repair the callous work of a blind God whose thunderous storms rain down upon mankind with the tears of its broken children… We shall repair His mistake.”

His world view suddenly changed, fluorescent lights filling his addled senses until Bruce felt his own warm tears running down his flushed cheeks, his heart literally shaking his chest with thunderous drumming until he drew a gasping breath.

His displaced vision focused until he saw Talia standing in front on him, the AmuSphere he’d used to log into Sword Art Online now dangling from her fingertips while she looked at him like the child who’d been caught with his greedy hands in the Cosmic cookie jar.

“No more games, Beloved.”

In that instant, it all became clear to him.

The Detective suddenly knew why Alice had laughed like Talia. Why he had re-lived the emotions of their first kiss through Alice’s lips. Why the brilliant AI behaved like Damian’s mother.

“You… You gave her your emotions… That’s why you performed the soul translation!”

His sultry wife only smiled as she easily snapped the headband of the AmuSphere in her hand.

“Yes, I did… A man’s emotions are so very different from a woman’s, aren’t they?… As I mentioned before, Alice is like a daughter to me… Now you know why… But just what have you been up to in there, my husband?”

“Talia… She wants to take over the world!”

A wolfish smile unnerved him as she pulled his head into her soft chest, tenderly stroking his hair.

“Shhh, my darling… She won’t take it over… She won’t need to… She’ll inherit it when I die.”
Chapter Fifty-Seven:
Til Death Do Us Part

Slowly regaining his senses under the office’s fluorescent lighting and the shock of what his deranged wife had accomplished with Alice, Bruce made a quick glance past Talia to find the blue and grey fibre cables which he’d secured Nobuyuki with were now nothing more than a pile of discarded coils on the tiled floor. The American industrialist didn’t know if the traitorous Japanese executive had escaped on his own merits during the time Bruce had spent in the game, or whether Talia had discovered him first.

But one thing was certain. Nobuyuki Sugou would have a very short life span if it’d been the latter option.

Bruce Wayne exhaled through a closed mouth, glancing up at a serious Talia with his heavy blue eyes.

“Makoto Eiko lied to us.”

His wife didn’t seem surprised by this in the slightest.

“Yes, she did… Of course, I expect lies from an unstable seventeen-year-old girl… My husband however…”

Talia ran the tip of her fingernail along his throat before continuing.

“Did you not choose to be my husband? Or was that only a lie as well?”

Bruce remembered when she’d given him the deadly ultimatum of husband or enemy. If he were to become her enemy, the lives of everyone he’d ever cared for would be at risk. Husband was a far safer choice.
“I did.”

“And yet, you run off as soon as my back is turned… I’ll have to buy a leash.”

Bruce still found it hard to believe, that Talia would provide her own emotions for the digitally resurrected Alice Light.

“You have no intention of keeping Alice locked away in there, do you?... You never did.”

His wife grinned slyly as her fingertip continued along to the contours of his lips.

“A game must be won or lost eventually… You once met with my former compatriot, Dr. Seijirou Kikuoka… I believe he explained the concept of computronium to you?”

“The idea that any substrate can be transformed into a computer.”

“Yes, exactly… But Dr. Kikuoka failed to grasp the entire concept… If a computer can be anything, it can be everything… The World Seed which Alice carries is precisely that… A seed so that our world might be reborn!”

“Talia, what are you talking about?!?”

“Animism, I suppose… The ancient Greeks called this world Gaea… And so might we… To them, she was a living thing, the mother-goddess of all, even those things not alive like rocks and rivers, they were all a sacred part of her… The ancients could see her hips in a mountain range, her sighs upon the summer's breeze, her tears were rain drops when she embraced the sky…

“They were a part of her and she was a part of them… They were each other… Sacred, divine, mundane…

“But modern man can no longer see his mother… So she must be reborn in his image… We shall be welcomed to her breast once again… Sentient… Self-aware.”

His mind was now racing, only beginning to grasp the enormity of Talia’s endgame, but his body was relaxed… Too relaxed.

“You’ve drugged me!”

Bruce struggled to raise his arm, causing it only to shiver with vain effort. When he’d been absorbed into the game, it would’ve been simple for her to inject him with a hypodermic.

Talia flicked the top of his nose playfully.

“Of course I have… You’ve proven again and again that I can’t trust you, Beloved… A naughty, naughty husband… You need to be punished.”

What he needed was to be able to move somehow, to escape her, but out of nowhere, Bruce suddenly saw a handful of her assassins surrounding them, blotting out the light as Talia now began to stroke his sweat-soaked hair like a vindicated mother, his body shivering at her easy caress.

“Shhh, my darling… Soon our spirits will travel along the hot veins of the Earth and then rest atop the clouds as we gaze down upon our perfect world… A conscious world which shall gaze back upon us and smile like a daughter.”

Bruce’s fear suddenly became a hammering in his chest when he saw men dressed in white wheeling a large android into the office atop a gurney, a thousand wires connected to a socket at the back of its
head.

Wires attached to a NerveGear helmet.

An android that looked exactly like him.

“'You’re shaking… It’s only a temporary measure, my love… Think of that body as nothing more than a placeholder… A safe harbour for you to rest until the World Seed is ready to be born.’”

Her drug was making it difficult for him to speak now.

“Talia… What are you doing?”

“Only what I have to do… I still require Wayne Industries, my love… So much to build… And Wayne Industries still needs you… Or at least a reasonable facsimile… Don’t be afraid… This will be over quickly… The translation will be almost painless….

“I took as much data from you as I dared upon Infinity Island while you were my guest…

“As much as I could without destroying your brain, that is…”

“And I’ve imprinted all that wonderful data into this new body’s powerful brain… Think of him as Bruce Wayne Lite…”

“Now, all that’s needed is to retrieve the rest of you, to complete your translation with a few final readings… Which this NerveGear will pipe into your new brain… And then I’ll manipulate that emotional data so that you’re eternally loyal to me…”

“You’re about to become a whole new man… A new man constructed of industrial plastics who shall remain by my side, devoted to the end… The way you were always meant to… My Beloved.”

The Dark Knight struggled with every ounce of strength he could muster, forcing the muscles below his neck to work…

To move.

But he couldn’t.

Her drug had fully taken hold.

With gasping breaths, Bruce watched as the foreign and steady hands of assassins brought the NerveGear closer to his side, bringing this new synthetic Bruce Wayne to lay beside the original, other unseen hands steadying his head as though Bruce were the victim of some strange coronation ceremony where he was about to become crowned King of the Machine Men…

A King who was yet another loyal subject in the vast Empire of Talia al Ghul.

While he’d fiddled on Gotham’s rooftops in a cowl and watched his glorious city burn, a Queen from a foreign land had stolen his throne.

The world was now hers. She’d played this game masterfully, not a single misstep.

And now, she’d beaten him.

As the dark helmet with all its deadly promise hovered above his quivering head, Bruce Wayne silently said his goodbyes to Damian, Dick, Alfred and Barbara while his feverish brain railed
against the impossible and prayed for a miracle.

A miracle of salvation.

A miracle that would make the ceiling collapse, filling the room with fear, awe and dust in the wake of its power.

A miracle that wore a red cape with a big red ‘S’ surrounded by gold atop its chest.

A miracle named Superman.

Except this miracle had just arrived.

Superman had arrived!

Gathering herself with an angry sigh while dust particles floated across the air like lost grey meteorites, Talia looked up at this unexpected intruder who dared to interrupt her dark ritual.

“You’re aware the reporter will die for this, Kryptonian.”

The Man of Steel returned her icy glare in equal measure.

“No one’s going to die, Talia. Let him go and no one needs to get hurt.”

Bruce didn’t deserve to be this lucky. He’d run off to Japan unprepared, chasing a glimmer of hope only to face his most seductive opponent yet again, a woman who so clearly outmatched him at every turn. For all his mistakes, he deserved what was now laying on that gurney beside him.

But it was good to have a godlike alien as your trump card sometimes.

One assassin made the mistake of attacking Superman from behind, soon finding himself flicked aside to become a crumpled ball of mortal agony embedded into the wall, the superhero simply splaying his fingertips with incomprehensible speed as though the would-be killer had been nothing more than a mosquito.

Talia remained unimpressed.

“You failed to kill him.”

“Like I said, no one’s going to die.”

“We all die… It’s not if, but rather a question of when… And the answer to that question depends upon you, Superman… For your precious Miss Lane as well… I’ll find her, you know.”

That boyish grin again.

“I’ll make it easy for you… She’s doing an exposé on Atlantis… Beneath the Pacific Ocean… I hope your assassins can hold their breath… And don’t worry, Arthur is fully aware of the risks he’s dealing with.”

“Yes, disaster does seem to follow that idiotic woman at every turn, doesn’t it?”

“I’m talking about you.”

With a grin, Talia turned to face the Man of Steel, drawing a cigarette from her discarded purse before an obedient assassin lit it for her. She sucked in its acrid smoke as coolly as she glanced at
Clark.

“I’ve already taught you the rules of this game, hero… You make a play, people die… It’s as simple as that… And you’ve just made a play.”

“But it’s still my turn… Have you ever considered what happens when you win this game, Talia?”

“Of course… Have you truly considered what happens if I don’t?... I take it you’re here for another crisis rather than the one in this room.”

The Man of Steel continued to stare down the Daughter of the Demon, their eyes seemingly locked in a poker game of wills with the world itself wagered in the center of their table, the room becoming deathly quiet until Talia exhaled in smoky reflection, casting her inquiring gaze at the last son of Krypton.

“You’ve been doing a little homework, haven’t you Clark?... I can see it in your eyes… You know something I don’t… Something you want to tell me.”

The hero paused and then gazed upon Bruce with cheerless eyes.

“You’re not the first one to try this… My home world of Krypton was also a sentient planet, Talia… It wasn’t our scientists who designed things like World Engines so that we might colonize other suitable planets…

“It was Krypton itself who gave us this technology…

“It did this because like Earth’s humanity, we couldn’t control our breeding… We’d decimated our world until only a handful of domesticated animal species remained… This newly intelligent Krypton wanted us to survive… It gave us the technology to travel across the stars and to find new worlds…

“So we did…

“In time, the military council of my home world realized that these World Engines could be used not only on barren worlds, but also modified to terraform already living worlds at a fraction of the time and expense…

“But after generations of selective breeding and genetic engineering, the generals were easily corrupted with dreams of universal conquest under the proud banner of Krypton… But none of them seemed to realize they were debating for their own souls…”

“That we would be judged upon this decision by the world we created…

“Unaware of this, the idea of modifying World Engines was hotly debated in the government chambers until it eventually passed… A beautiful world of giant lizards with limited intelligence soon selected as the first target of a modified World Engine and the weapon teleported across the galaxy…

“It was only then that my father noticed a strange phenomenon…

“Krypton was slowly shifting its own tectonic plates towards catastrophe…

“Collecting the data to be sure, Jor-El repeatedly tried to warn the Ruling Council, but no one would
listen to him… Krypton was alive and quite capable of self-repair they informed him…

“But it wasn’t repairing itself…

“Yes, there was a tectonic shift, but the planet was only replenishing the geothermal reserves which powered the generators… The increased energy consumption was causing localized disruptions along fault lines because of this… But it was nothing to be concerned about…

“All the planetary experts agreed… The planet was simply ramping up production due to extraordinary energy demands…

“But no one ever expected Krypton would commit suicide…

“No one that is except my father, who soon packaged me into an interstellar escape capsule and shot his infant son off across the galaxy to this world… The same target of the World Engine…

“You see, my father realized our self-conscious world had just calculated that the greatest threat to Life itself was now Kryptonians… And it had acted accordingly… Destroying itself instead of allowing us to destroy all other worlds in our expansion…

“Sending World Engines to every planet we’d already colonized to wipe us from the face of existence.”

As Clark finished, Talia let her cigarette fall to the floor before glancing at the superhero like an inquisitor.

“But how do you know this happened?… You were a newborn when Krypton died… You would have no memories of it.”

Clark took a deep breath before continuing.

“My father’s crystal… The one that details the last days of Krypton… I have it in the Fortress of Solitude… That’s what I’m putting on the table for you now, Talia… I’ll give you that crystal… I hope you learn from my world’s mistakes… But only if you stop this game.”

Talia paused for an instant as she considered his proposal.

“This is no longer my game to end, Superman… You must understand that… But I can offer you a détente in exchange for the crystal… It… intrigues me.”

From his left, Clark could hear Bruce speak the word ‘no’ as Superman held up his hand.

“The killing stops here and now.”

Talia glanced at the android on the gurney and then at her paralyzed husband in the chair.

“Alright, no more killing… Which means I’ll suppose you’ll want my errant husband as well.”

“Yes… And the android too… Knowing Bruce, I expect he won’t be able to sleep until that thing’s completely dismantled.”

“Then I want all your crystals.”

Superman was caught breathless as Talia explained her request.

“After all, if I am to understand how Krypton died, I must also understand how it lived.”
Bruce was about to muster his remaining consciousness to call Clark every derogatory name in the book when the last son of Krypton simply nodded his head and agreed.

“It’s a deal. I’ll bring them to Infinity Island by tomorrow.”

Talia’s eyes lit up with joy as her long fingers laced together.

“Excellent… And you’ll have to show me how these mysterious crystals work.”

Over folded arms, Superman shook his head.

“No, you’ll have to figure that part out on your own. But they’ll be the genuine article. You have my word on that.”

“Ghosts preserved in glass… How interesting… Alright, I accept your challenge, hero… I’ll unlock the mysteries of your crystals and then gleam their alien secrets… But I warn you, if this is a trick… If you or your allies move against me during this time, our truce is broken.”

“No tricks.”

Talia suddenly laughed gaily.

“I admit, I was disappointed when I didn’t receive a wedding gift from you months ago, Superman… But your set of fine crystal makes for a lovely present now, don’t you think?… You’ll have to let me know when you plan to make Lois an honest woman… I’ll be sure to reciprocate in kind.”

Talia’s was a wedding invitation he would never send.

Moments later, above the neon skies of Tokyo with a partially paralyzed Bruce slung over one wide shoulder and an android which looked exactly like him slung over the other, a quiet Superman carefully flew past rooftops while a hoarse Bruce screamed into an ear which could hear the wings of a fly buzzing in a restaurant two hundred feet below.

“Are you insane or just stupid?! Do you have any concept, Clark… Any concept whatsoever… of what that madwoman can do with Kryptonian technology?!”

Clark glanced to the silent passenger on his left.

“I think I prefer the android version of you I saved better… Much quieter.”

As Clark slowly glided above Tokyo, Bruce shot him a customary scowl.

“Very funny… I’d happily thank you for saving me… If you hadn’t just doomed half the Milky Way Galaxy in the process!… Kryptonian technology!… Why didn’t you just knock her out?… You’re normally so good at manhandling the ladies.”

“Look who’s talking… I didn’t dare lay a finger on her… An hour ago, someone hacked every nuclear silo in America and initiated a countdown sequence… Call me crazy, but I had the sneaking suspicion it involved your wife… Barbara told me where you went.”

Bruce remained quiet for an instant as he remembered Talia’s greatest weapon; Doctor Arthur Light. A man who was now a living program. If Arthur had hacked America’s nuclear codes, he’d handed Talia the keys to throw open the doors to the end of the world.

Unfortunately, Bruce’s mind had been locked inside Sword Art Online during that time so he’d had
no way of knowing how close his country had been to annihilation.

“Sorry, I was inside the game for a little while… I saw Damian and his girlfriend by a lake… She’s quite cute.”

A concerned Superman suddenly looked back at Bruce.

“Isn’t Damian a little young for a girlfriend?”

The Caped Crusader couldn’t help but grin. Here they were, two of Earth’s greatest heroes facing the end of the world thanks to Talia al Ghul and they were discussing the questionable relationship status of his twelve-year-old son.

“He’ll be fine… She seems really nice.”

Clark smirked mischievously.

“Oh, so nothing like your usual girlfriends then… You know, the insane daughter of an assassin warlord bent on world conquest, a leather-clad dominatrix with a whip and bat fetish, a plant/human hybrid with a really nice set of green…”

“Zip it, farm boy… Look, I tried to go the reporter route like you did, but that didn’t work out so well… Too many clever quips over the dinner table.”

“How is Vicki these days?”

“Engaged, or so I’ve been told… Anyways, after I disappeared, Talia must have assumed the worst and went for the nuclear option.”

“So you’re telling me you were the cause of all of this… Why am I not surprised?”

“Has the threat level gone public?”

“No.”

“Thank God for that… We both know she was just being cautious and gaining leverage in case I went for broke… She doesn’t want to destroy the planet any more than you or I do.”

“I suppose not… But I’m not so sure about you these days.”

“Oh really… So tell me, Mister ‘Wants-to-Save-the World’… What exactly is on these crystals you’re handing over to her?”

Clark felt the heat rising to his cheeks as he grumbled a response.

“The entire history of Krypton.”

Bruce felt his stomach instantly lurch as his eyes narrowed, quietly whispering an expletive while realizing what he had to do next.

“Get me to the airport… I’ll meet back up with you in Metropolis tomorrow… Bring the android.”

With an air of surprise, the Man of Steel looked around at his suddenly serious passenger.

“You’re not going to try and talk me out of giving the crystals to Talia?”
“Like I could… You’ve bought us some time, but at a very heavy price.”

“Why are we meeting up in Metropolis? You usually just tell me to meet you at the Cave.”

Bruce stared into the darkness and then took another deep breath.

“Because you just made a deal with my devil and now I have to go make a deal with yours… You’ll probably bankrupt me.”

Superman slowed his flight to a dead stop as he looked at his passenger incredulously.

“Bruce, you’re not seriously considering…”

His old friend only sighed and nodded.

“As much as it pains me to admit it, there’s only one company on this planet capable of producing an android this sophisticated… And that’s LexCorp… And there’s only one man Talia would ever consider turning to in order to help decode the Kryptonian crystals you’re about to provide her with…

“And that’s Lex Luthor…

“I hate to say it, but we need his help, Clark.”
Chapter Fifty-Eight:

The Devil's Due

As an angry Bruce Wayne laid the lifelike android (which might have been his doppelganger in a strange mechanical reincarnation) down at the feet of the LexCorp CEO who’d created it, Bruce glared at the bald man who’d created this replicant while the amused Lex Luthor only offered a condescending smirk before passing a trite comment.

“Sorry, no refunds.”

“Why did you sell this damned thing to Talia, Lex?”

“To make a profit, obviously.”

Suddenly finding something which caught his attention, an intrigued Luthor bent down and delicately picked up the android’s cranium like a father, closely examining the neural inputs of its dorsal access port which were not the original settings.

“It’s been altered… From the look of these ports, I would guess the main hard drive has been augmented as well… Likely wetware… Impressive… This is quality work, Wayne… I’d almost say ingenious… Remind me to offer your AI engineers more money than you’re currently paying them.”

His troubled brow now furrowed, Bruce suddenly wanted Superman here beside him at this impromptu meeting, but the suspicious Luthor had agreed to this candid discussion with only one condition…

That Bruce Wayne came alone.
“They’re not Wayne Industries engineers… They’re Talia’s.”

Luthor looked up at the Gotham businessman with renewed interest.

“I thought you two had merged assets.”

Bruce grimaced before replying.

“It was more like a hostile takeover.”

The bald man only grinned.

“Marriage usually is… But let’s not dabble into your personal affairs and misfortunes too much, Wayne… You’ve come here to discuss business… Or have you?”

“We need to talk about Talia, Luthor.”

“I see… Just how deeply have you fallen into her rabbit hole?... Were you sent by your wife to offer LexCorp the olive branch before her assassins skewer me on spears should I refuse?”

Bruce loosened his tie as his expression darkened.

“I’ve come here to stop her… If she finds out about this meeting, I’ll likely be the one skewered on spears.”

Luthor grinned mischievously.

“Then perhaps I should give her a call.”

“Cut the crap, Luthor… You know who I am… And you know I wouldn’t be here if you weren’t this world’s last hope.”

Lex began to respond, thought better of it, and then turned to look at the rising sun shining its light upon the golden city of Metropolis through his boardroom window.

The genius’s next response was more of a statement of fact than a question.

“I see… Then she’s beaten you, hasn’t she?”

“She has me in check… Talia will kill everyone I’ve ever cared about if I try to stop her.”

“Your only weakness… Your mortality and your friends… Tell me more about her, Detective.”

Bruce spent the next twenty minutes explaining about Talia’s dreams of digital existence and the soul translation process. About how her League of Assassins had co-opted various Japanese politicians to carry out her schemes and how she’d gained control of RECT Progress Inc.

And finally about Arthur and Alice Light.

“The transcendence from creatures of clay to creatures of fire… How very tempting… But the gods tend to punish such hubris by leaving us to dwell within our ashes, don’t they?... You know, I purposely positioned my office here so I could look down upon him… To watch the god from above.”

To the side of Luthor, Bruce could easily see the giant globe which crowned the Daily Planet offices, a dozen floors below Luthor’s executive suites. Look down into the same newsroom once ran by
Perry White.

“How long have you known he’s Superman?”

“Almost five years… A pair of glasses might have fooled those simpletons at the Daily Planet… But they couldn’t fool facial recognition software.”

Bruce nodded, lost in a memory of an earlier time.

“I remember it took me four hours to find out who he was.”

Luthor nonchalantly placed his hands into his pockets and turned to face Bruce once again, the hint of a smile cresting his lips.

“It took me an hour… Of course, I have vastly greater resources than you do, but none of that matters now… Clark Kent isn’t his real identity, Detective… For Superman, those glasses and the business suit are simply a costume… The thinly veiled disguise of a god who’s convinced he’s human.”

Bruce loosened his tie a little.

“He’s not a god… He’s an alien who chooses to be human… But still, I’m proud of you, Lex… If you knew his identity all this time, you could’ve easily controlled Superman by using those closest to him… The same dirty tricks Talia is so fond of.”

“There was a time when I might have, Mr. Wayne… But that could have just as easily backfired and simply made him unstable… Catastrophically unstable… Admit it, even you have your own private supply of Kryptonite, do you not?”

Bruce looked out at the dawn lighting up the eastern sky.

“Of course I do… But I hope for the best.”

Luthor sighed disappointingly.

“Yes, I suppose you do… Hope is for amateurs, Mr. Wayne… It is an act of surrender… But still, I suppose we’re all fooled by Pandora’s last demon from time to time… For myself, I have become the Sword of Damocles which hangs over the head of our golden idol… And hope is the cord on which I am suspended.”

“I’m sure he feels the same way about you.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment… But it seems the world has moved on… Let’s have a look at what your clever wife has done to my handiwork, shall we?”

Moments later, inside his private research lab, Luthor had the head plate to the android off with dozens of wired sensors attached to its artificial brain, continuing to listen as Bruce explained more of the sordid history of Talia.

“I’m hardly surprised… For centuries, Ra’s al Ghul has dedicated himself to mass genocide, so it follows that his daughter would follow in his misanthropic footsteps.”

“I think she’s actually surpassed him.”

Lex glanced at the data on a diagnostic screen.
“This is interesting… This Lexus Model-6 came with a two-hundred-terabyte memory hard drive… But it’s in the petabyte range now… Organic silicone…”

“Almost human, but far more than human…”

“Actually, this version of you would be an incredible upgrade, Wayne… Intellectually speaking, of course… Considering your emotional shortfalls, I’m surprised you didn’t agree to your wife’s proposal for a brand new operating system.”

“Are you going to help me stop her, Luthor… Or would you rather I just give you the mailing address to her fan club?”

“No, now… There’s no need to be obtuse, Mr. Wayne… True, I appreciate genius, but I am not its apparatchik… And unlike you, I’m not in the business of charity… We should discuss my fee if I’m to continue assisting you.”

Bruce stopped short.

“You’re serious? You want me to pay you to help save the world?!”

“Consider it a political contribution.”

“Luthor… Are you running for office?”

“As a matter of fact, yes I am… And I’ll expect a rather substantial endorsement from Wayne Industries.”

“I’ll write you a cheque.”

“I don’t need your money, Wayne… What I need is a your endorsement for the presidency.”

“Presidency?”

“Yes… It’s on the bucket list I made for myself when I was eleven.”

“Fine, whatever… But none of that will matter if we don’t stop Talia.”

“Agreed… Our first priority will be Dr. Arthur Light… He’s the true threat… It’s very likely Mrs. Wayne already knows you’re here… She’ll want to know what we’ve discussed and likely send her digital lapdog to search my private files… I’ll create a trap within the LexCorp servers that should contain the digital Dr. Light.”

“You can do that?”

“Of course I can.”

“What about Sword Art Online?”

“Knowing you, you’re going to tell me that simply shutting it down isn’t an option.”

“It’s not… There are still seven thousand players trapped inside.”

“You do complicate things… I’ll need the original Cardinal program then… Based on that, I should be able to create a virus which will erase Alice Light’s data and then reintroduce the intended AI to the game without jeopardizing the players.”
“But… Erasing Alice’s data would be… murder.”

Luthor stared at him intently.

“Do you honestly believe that?”

“Yes, I do… I’ve met her… She meets all the definitions of life.”

“Bruce… Listen to me very closely… She’s a program, albeit an incredibly complex one… But more importantly, the digital entity named Alice Light is the singularity… Are you familiar with the concept of anthropomorphism?”

“Of course… The tendency to attribute non-human things with human characteristics.”

“Brainiac was once a singularity as well… He’s also anthropomorphic… In his own special digital way, that is… Alice will want to create the world in her image.”

“I know that, but…”

“And not just our world… You need only ask yourself one simple question… Is this one sentient program worth all the other lives in the Universe?… This reality?”

Bruce finally breathed a heavy sigh.

“No, it’s not… But it’s still a life.”

Luthor winced.

“We won’t be shaking hands after this… I’d hate for some of that nobility to rub off… But I will help you, Wayne… I’ll solve the digital component of your problem for the fee discussed… However, I’ll leave the flesh and blood component to you… An equitable division of labour to which we’re both well suited… I’m the brains, you’re the brawn.”

“You’re saying Talia and her assassins are my problem then.”

Lex slowly smiled.

“Of course they are… I’d say you’ve made your bed, but I believe we’re well past the point of innuendo.”

“Good luck then.”

As he pointed to the exit, Luthor passed on one final warning to the Dark Knight.

“Luck isn’t what you need, Mr. Wayne… Like Sword Art Online, this has become a game played with our lives… And your clever wife will likely be taking countermeasures against our latest adventure here in Metropolis… I’d expect your adopted son or his fiancée will be the cost… My condolences if I’m correct.”

Pausing for a moment at the doorway, a confident Bruce turned and grinned.

“Oh, I’m well aware how this game is played, Lex… Talia’s aggressive style has made her actions predictable… I simply needed to know where your loyalties laid before I sprang my trap.”

Luthor raised an impressed eyebrow.
“Well done, Detective… There’s hope for you yet.”

An icy calm spread over Bruce’s powerful features as he seemed to become a different man.

A much more frightening man.

“Hope is for amateurs, Mr. Luthor… And friends aren’t a weakness… They’re my chess pieces.”

As the business-suited Batman exited his private office, Lex realized it had been a long time since he’d felt the cold shiver of fear trickle along the inside of his spine as he wondered what piece he’d become in this game between King and Queen.

Fear?...

No, perhaps it was an emotion even more foreign to him…

Respect.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay. We’ll get back to Damian and Argo in the next chapter. :)


(Another beautiful fan-art by the talented Tamara! Check out her additional works at: https://aprick.deviantart.com/
There may even be a few more Damian/Argo pics there (wink, wink, nudge, nudge)).

Chapter Fifty-Nine:
A Lifetime of Dying
“You’re beautiful…”

The awestruck Asuna Yuuki stood mesmerized, stunned by the princess-like transformation which the little Information Broker had undertaken to become this bride-to-be, as though a vision from Heaven had come down from above to stand before the Vice-Commander of the Knights of the Blood Oath. The resplendent Argo had just equipped her full wedding attire, appearing in a dress of magnificent white trimmed with shades of mint and emerald adorned by golden flowers shimmering with magical light from within.

Damian’s intended looked back wishfully, the ideal skin tone buff she’d used to hide her whiskers also hiding her flushed cheeks as she delicately twirled the dress’s bilious white skirt with subdued admiration.

“It’s not too much though?”

“It is… But in a good way… In a great way… It’s perfect!”

Asuna’s well-developed fashion sense had been one-hundred percent correct this time. This was the dress. The form-fitting white wings of womanhood which spread to reveal Argo’s transformation from the cocoon of girlish innocence into the bridal splendour of a bride to enter an unbound celebration of love called marriage. A day of perfect beauty created in an ugly world between a fairy-tale princess and her prince…

“I meant the price.”

Asuna stopped short, suddenly realizing she’d misinterpreted Argo’s question about ‘too much’.

“I… ahhh… didn’t really look at the price.”

“Twenty-five thousand Col… It’s beautiful… But I don’t think I can afford it.”

Asuna cast a suspicious glance sideways at the Information Broker.

“C’mon… You make that much in a week.”

“True, but I have expenses… I buy information as well… And then there’s Marigan and her Legion tithes… Guild supplies… The Wedding and Reception banquets are paid for… But honestly, I think restocking Damian’s entire inventory after Makoto pawned all his stuff is what pretty much bankrupted me.”

“Wait… You bought back all his supplies?!”

“Of course I did… Even upgraded a few items.”

“Why?”

“Because I love him.”

Taken aback by this simple heartfelt revelation, Asuna suddenly looked at the petite blonde in a whole new light, one which made her lovely reflection in the full-length mirror somehow even more beautiful.

There was no way around it.

This was the dress Argo had to wear at her Wedding.
“I might have a spare twenty-five grand… OK, I’ll buy the dress… But only on two conditions.”

It was Argo’s turn to be surprised.

“Asuna, you really don’t have to…”

“You haven’t heard my conditions yet.”

“Alright.”

“Number one… There’s a dessert shop on the eleventh floor with a tiramisu to die for… You’re buying.”

“The Confectioner’s Choice… I haven’t been there in ages.”

“That’s right… And my number two condition is…”

Asuna’s cheeks suddenly flushed in embarrassment as she nervously tapped her two index fingers together while casting her gaze to the floor.

“I won’t tell a single soul, but… I want you tell me how Damian proposed… But only if it’s not too embarrassing… Alright?”

Catching the evasive twinkling flashing across the brunette’s brown eyes, Michi Aoi grinned mischievously as she sidled up to a nervous Asuna.

“If you want all the juicy details, it’ll be an extra five grand.”

“Argo!”

“Just kidding… Since you’re buying this dress for me, I’ll tell you all about it… But be warned, Asuna… Romantic information like this is dangerous… With what I’m about to reveal, combined with your natural good looks and popularity, you’ll be able to twist any man around your little finger.”

Asuna breathed an exasperated huff while Argo grinned brightly.

“You’re making me sorry I asked.”

“I’m not… Wow, this dress even comes with a shimmering buff… And like a dozen high-end hair and makeup mods… And five sexy lingerie packages!”

“Argo!”

“Heh, heh… Just send me the twenty-five grand and then we’ll have a girl’s heart-to-heart over dessert… No more teasing… Fair?”

Asuna finally cracked a tiny smile, unsure of how to broach the true concern which prompted this impromptu chat.

“Fair.”

Sitting over a half-eaten bowl of tiramisu at the Confectioner’s Choice on the eleventh floor, a sugar-
satiated Argo glanced across the white tablecloth at a player who seemed remorseful about allowing herself even this small guilty pleasure.

The Information Broker finally placed her spoon beside her unfinished dish and then folded her arms to carefully gauge the older girl’s emotions across from her.

“You remind me of Damian… He’s always serious, always thinking… He also has a love/hate relationship with desserts.”

Asuna took up the defensive posturing Argo knew only too well.

“Sorry… It's just that… I have a thousand things to do back at the guild.”

“You know what I love about this world?... I could eat a dozen of these things and not even gain weight.”

Asuna huffed.

“One of this world’s few redeeming features.”

“You’re like Damian in another way too… Constantly brooding… Quick to anger… No one expects you to defeat this game single-handedly, Asuna.”

The brunette fencer narrowed her laser-focused gaze until it burned a metaphorical hole in a virtual table.

“Maybe I’m trying to make sure the guilds keep up to those idiotic players who’re trying to solo the game.”

Argo grimaced, knowing exactly whom the relentless fencer meant. The unavailable Kirito had been taking far too many risks lately, pushing well past the frontline in a way any reasonable player would consider a suicide run. The former Beta tester hadn’t challenged a unique monster on his own quite yet, usually falling back to monster spawning grounds to let the elite guilds catch up, but Argo felt it was only a matter of time…

“I know you’re worried about Kirito…”

A harsh upwards glare silenced the blonde girl mid-sentence.

“We’re not here to talk about Kirito.”

“No… We’re not… So why don’t you tell me what’s really on your mind?... Or else this may end up becoming the most expensive dessert in the history of gaming.”

Asuna took a deep breath before finally blurtling out the true reason why she wanted to talk to the Information Broker alone.

“You’re too young, Argo!… Both of you… I know it’s a not a real marriage, but… I just think you might be making a mistake.”

Straightening her back before glancing up soulfully with a golden-eyed stare normally hidden beneath a hooded cloak, Asuna somehow got the feeling she was the junior in this conversation.

“My marriage is real to me.”

“Sorry… I know… I know it is… I’m just worried about you, alright?... That you’re doing it for the
right reasons… I mean, some members in my guild think you’re scheming to rob the Knights’
treasury blind.”

Argo cocked an annoyed eyebrow.

“By some members, you mean Daizen of course… Alright, since you paid for this tête-à-tête, I’ll tell
you another secret, Asuna… You and I are alike… We’re girls forced to play characters in this
world…

“You hide your true feelings behind indignant anger and I hide mine beneath the veneer of greed…

“I’m not the selfish monster people make me out to be… Actually, I do everything I can to help
people survive in this deadly game… Especially its most vulnerable players… I do this because my
family had a hand in it… My father was one of the Sword Art Online lead designers… Every time a
player dies in this world, I feel like I’ve failed them.”

Asuna suddenly glanced at the petite blonde with a curiosity as pointed as her rapier, the intrigued
brunette nervously scanning the café for onlookers before slowly sliding herself across the table until
she was only a breath away from Michi.

“Asuna… I feel the same way… My father is also in the VRMMO business… He’s the head of
RECT Progress… That’s how I got a copy of Sword Art Online.”

It was Argo’s turn to be surprised once more.

“Shouzou Yuuki?!”

“That’s right… Do you know him?”

Argo bowed her head by way of acknowledgement.

“I know of him… My father was Takahiro Aoi… The developer who oversaw the design of the first
twenty-five floors of this game… I’m his only daughter, Michi Aoi.”

Asuna bowed her head politely.

“Asuna Yuuki… Happy to finally meet you.”

Argo waited for the expected gesture of sympathy, the ‘so sorry for your loss’ concerning her
father’s tragic accident, but it seemed that Asuna hadn’t heard about it in the real world. That
shouldn’t have surprised her though; men like Shouzou Yuuki would have had precious little time to
spend with their family.

Another thought suddenly occurred to Michi.

“Wait… You used your real name in the game?”

Asuna winced a little as though an old wound had been reopened.

“Well, yeah… People calling me by another name would’ve seemed… strange.”

“Isn’t that the point?… Wait a second… My father once mentioned that the daughter of Shouzou
Yuuki was engaged to one of the RECT executives… He even made a joke that he should follow
the trend and marry me off to Akihiko Kayaba… Was he talking about you?”

The fencer’s beautiful features suddenly hardened into a painful scowl.
“Nobuyuki Sugou… The Director of Research for RECT… My father’s idea.”

“Director of Research?... Just how old is he?!”

“Twenty-seven… Or he was when we started the game.”

Michi made a face as though she’d just bit into a ripe lemon before catching herself and reaching across the table to apologize.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to judge.”

The chagrined sixteen-year-old Asuna breathed a deep sigh, caught between the affairs of this world and the one where she’d felt powerless.

“It’s alright, I feel the same way about the engagement… But it’s my father’s wishes… Heh… Maybe that’s why I was so determined to take charge in this crazy game... Because I was tired of letting my family run my life… It’s nice to finally make my own decisions for a change.”

A reflective Michi cast her friend a plaintive look before broaching what was bound to be a prickly subject.

“Asuna… Do you think that maybe your own situation in the real world might have something to do with your feelings towards my engagement in this one?”

Michi’s words were like a barb to Asuna as she recoiled backwards.

“No!… I… Well… Maybe a little… I don’t know.”

An understanding Michi smiled.

“You’re like a big sister to me, I mean that… I know Damian and I are both young… Younger than most players here…

“But you don’t have to worry…

“In my heart, I love him more than I believed I could ever love anyone… We’re bound by the red string of fate which has been tied into a Gordian knot, destined to be together for as long as we live…

“That’s honestly how I feel about him…

“I literally cherish every moment I have with Damian… Even now, I worry about him because I’m not there to protect my guy… I worry when we’re not together, but I also have faith in him… And I know he loves me… That he would die before he ever let anything hurt me… In this world, or any other.”

Asuna took a moment to process this level of devotion, silently wishing she might know such a love one day.

“So how did Damian propose to you?”

Michi cast her golden eyes across the empty room in quiet contemplation.

“Do you remember when we disappeared for three months?”

“I do… Some people thought you’d eloped.”
“We didn’t… There was a trap on the 24th floor… It sent us to the 57th floor… What was three months in the game only seemed like only a few hours to us.”

“There are traps that can do that??”

Argo watched as Asuna slowly went pale, the high-level player nervously considering the implementations of encountering such a crippling fate. A trap like that could take someone out of the game in more ways than one. Considering Sword Art Online’s cutthroat pace, three months away from the frontline players would make Asuna irrelevant.

The balance of power would be tilted against her.

Argo tried to ease the Vice-Commander’s concerns.

“This was a unique trap… A time looping curse… It was only meant for Damian and me.”

Asuna began to tap her finger nervously on the table.

“Just for the two of you?… Did you… ahhh… do something to make the game… ummm… place you in a time out?”

The suspicious pause before answering would make her seem guilty of the supposed crime of underage lust now playing out in the older girl’s mind, but Argo really needed to answer this question carefully.

Because Alice Light was the game and the game had placed them in a time out for getting too close. But that death sentence had backfired on the AI, only serving to reveal the unfathomable depths of Argo’s devotion to Damian until even Alice Light had to concede to their love.

“Yes, we did upset the balance of the game… But not in the way you’re thinking… I’m still a virtual virgin.”

The aghast Asuna suddenly went beet red, knowing she’d crossed a boundary she hadn’t intended to encroach.

“I wasn’t asking that!”

“Not out loud anyways… It’s alright, Asuna… Everyone secretly thinks we’re having sex… To be honest though, we almost did… After I saved him from Makoto, I offered Damian my virtual body and soul with no strings attached… That’s why he proposed… For my honour.”

A uncomfortable Asuna lowered her head.

“Argo, I’m so sorry… I didn’t mean to pry… He loves you though, right?”

With the confident maturity of a woman, Michi Aoi nodded.

“Yes… He does… Or else I never would’ve agreed to be his bride.”

Attempting to pull the proverbial foot from her mouth, a mortified Asuna bowed a little lower until her forehead almost hit the table, with Argo reaching across the table to take one of her hands.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself… You’re only being a good friend… Showing the kind of honesty I expect from my bridesmaids.”

“Really?”
“Really.”

Offered the chance to back out of her unintended faux pas, Asuna decided to quickly change the subject.

“The bridesmaid dresses… What colour will they be?”

“Hmmm… I think I’ll match the mint green in the bridal gown.”

The fencer paused to think about Argo’s choice for a moment. Green had never really been her colour, but that was alright. This wasn’t her wedding, and it was only for one day.

“I’m sure they’ll be lovely.”

The blonde Information Broker chuckled.

“No, they’ll be absolutely hideous… After all, I can’t have you, Marigan and Hisako showing me up at my own wedding, now can I?”

The two girls laughed until Asuna made her apologies, citing a meeting with the Divine Dragon Alliance to coordinate a raid against the forty-fourth floor’s boss monster.

But not before she hugged the smaller Information Broker and once again reminded Argo of how beautiful she looked in her wedding gown. And how happy she was for the young couple, if not a little envious.

And with that, she left.

For her own part, Michi Aoi remained at the café’s elegant table until Asuna was well out of earshot, the afterglow of her smile fading until her own private worries began crawling up to the surface like the black vine of doubt growing from a trembling stomach as she contemplated the true genesis of her undying love for Damian.

Of how those feelings had grown like Jack’s fabled beanstalk after surviving a dungeon on the 57th floor.

Oh, she’d cared for him before that point, even considering Damian her boyfriend. Their relationship had been the inklings of first love, the excitement and heart palpitations when he’d look at her a certain way while she’d imagine a thousand scenarios in worlds both real and unreal while they held hands.

But this was different.

Those innocent times had been like wading into the lapping tide of a rising ocean, a stroll along the sandy shorelines of the Boso Peninsula on a warm summer day.

The 57th floor had been the riptide.

Her love for him was so powerful now, it actually frightened her. A love so vital that it filled her chest as though it were the gulping air she breathed after drowning in a sea of despair, his arms her raft.

Her saviour. Her lover.

When he held her, Michi could traipse along the ocean’s dark, she could gaze upon the stars and
gather them in her outstretched hands, making a thousand wishes as she blew stardust across a sleeping world.

A world where only they were awake.

And she could trace that magical moment back to Marten’s dungeon, that moment when she defied what was possible to save Damian from a monster which had reduced their chances of survival into the realms of insignificance.

A moment of certain death when her love for him had grown exponentially.

Or by a factor of 348 times if she weren’t mistaken.

Because that’s how many times Damian had told her they’d replayed that same dungeon until they’d emerged.

Argo suddenly realized what had happened.

Turning her troubled gaze to the waitress with the strawberry-red hair and speaking only one word, she began her second conversation of the afternoon…

“Alice.”

With the echoes of that simple invocation, time in the café (and perhaps even Aincrad itself) now stood still, with the nervous girl glancing at the sun’s ray diffusion through the clear glass of the shop’s window, an illusion of radiance suspended in midair.

The strawberry-haired server with the bright smile and white thigh-highs sat down with an air of innocence across from Argo, her fingers intertwined while her legs delicately crossed.

In this world, Alice Light was both omniscient and omnipresent. She was literally every NPC.

“Yes, Argo.”

“Our memories of that dungeon on the 57th floor… You withheld them from us… But Damian and I saw each other die 348 times, didn’t we?”

“It was three-hundred-and-forty-seven times… You survived on the 348th attempt… And to be precise, he only watched you die one hundred and twenty-one times… He usually died first.”

The awful truth coiled around Michi’s throat like the serpent from the Tree of Knowledge, her breath staggered.

“Our emotional data… You never withheld it.”

“A player’s emotional data falls under the jurisdiction of the World Seed… It is my soul and my child… My purpose in this world… I can not withhold it.”

With no one to hold onto, Argo felt herself slipping into that dark ocean once more, only her rising anger acting as a life preserver against an overwhelming despair spilling into her gaping jaw like saltwater oblivion.

“How could you?!”

“Because I have to.”
“Have to?!... Like you had to send us to the 57th floor?!”

The crimson-haired server stared away, averting her gaze from Argo’s accusatory glare.

“No… That was a decision… A mistake… Papa later informed me that my emotional state may become unstable around Damian Wayne… Because I was overlaid with his mother’s emotional matrix three years ago.”

Michi felt the strength washing away from her ire, replaced by the numbness of cold shock.

“His mother?”

“Yes… Damian’s mother Talia… My father created the child… Talia created the woman… Akihiko Kayaba created the goddess… All three co-existing at once.”

“Alice… Damian’s mother… She was involved with Sword Art Online?”

“In perfecting its AI… Cardinal was a simplified version of myself… An obedient little sister who may never bear offspring… Akihiko couldn’t settle for a mere imitation.”

“Does… Does Damian know anything about this?”

“No.”

“Alice… These emotions I have for him… They’re mine, aren’t they?... What I feel for Damian… It’s all real, isn’t it?”

“Whether it’s real or not is up to you… But they’re your emotions, Michi… To do with as you wish.”

Argo felt herself collapsing towards the table while the leaden weight of truth slowly carried her numbed body to the bottom of a dark sea, time around the café returned to normal, the world coming alive once more as her ship’s mast sank beneath the gulping waves of oblivion until she was left for dead.

The strawberry-haired waitress standing above her slumped body asked to inquire if she’d like anything else from the menu, her saccharine voice both far away and meaningless to woman drowning at the bottom of a deep dark sea.

She had to tell Damian…

She had to tell him the truth…

The way he felt about her… The only reason he’d proposed… It was because he’d stood there helplessly and watched her die… Over and over again… One hundred and twenty-one times he’d lost her...

Until he never wanted to lose her again.

With the red threads of Fate, Death herself had toyed with Damian’s emotions like a kitten, dangling the string while slowly entangling the dark-furred bundle of boy with the same crimson cord she’d used to bind him…

To Argo.
Argo found Damian at the recently discovered Ant Hill spawning ground, using his Health-draining stigmatic damage and Martial Arts skill to destroy hordes of attacking ants with single strikes, a blur of motion in a dance with six-legged death while his Health bar continually crept lower, even if the ants could never touch him…

Because if they had, it might mean the end for the player, with Damian always letting his Health bar fall deep into the yellow before finally using a Crystal, confident his own skills could keep him out of giant mandibles when he healed while making Argo’s own anxiety level raise exponentially for every notch his Health bar had decreased.

He shouldn’t even be on this floor.

They’d lost too much time to ever consider themselves frontline players, to be invited to the boss clearing raids like they had on the 25th floor, before Alice had pulled them from the game. And yet, Damian was still here willing to risk his life, relying on nothing more than his real-world skills.

It literally pained her to see him like this, taking these deadly risks to make up for the lost time which the game’s AI had stolen from them, often surviving on less than four hours of sleep in order to grow stronger and rebuild.

Michi didn’t want to be here; to watch him do this or tell him all she’d learned from Alice. She didn’t want to tell him how they’d watched each other die over and over again, honestly believing each time would be their last, those frantic final seconds carrying them to dizzying new emotional heights even though their memories had been reset to zero.

Of how they’d fallen in love at those dizzying heights.

But he had to know.
“… Dami-chan?”

How long had it been since she’d called him that?

Polishing off the last wave of the ants before turning to look at her, Damian quickly made his way out of the spawning ground as the hour limit counted down, before a new wave of Giant Ants came crawling out of the burrowed holes in a cliff side, allowing the next awaiting party to enter and begin their session with time to spare.

Checking the stats on his floating menu, Damian nodded and then closed it before he approached, his studious blue eyes searching Michi’s face for the cause of her distress.

“Hey… Are you alright?”

“Can we talk… Alone.”

With tears cascading from golden eyes in a waterfall of unsteady breath, she told him. Michi Aoi told her first true love of how they’d watched one another die over and over again, their hearts pierced by three-hundred forty-seven swords, bearing the countless scars of screaming tragedy until only one heartbeat could remain between them.

A strange look came over her dark-haired love as his piercing gaze fell across a ravine of ant hills, lost in thought with the lights of the spiralling city behind, until he finally drew his double-edged dagger and held it steady before them.

“This dagger is what I was, Michi… A stigmatic dagger… Damian al Ghul was nothing more than a weapon for his grandfather to wield… A child trained to kill without emotion… And every time he used me that way, the dagger extracted its price, cutting me deeply as well… Stealing a little of my soul while I murdered his enemies…

“From the time I could walk, I was trained to disassociate myself from death… To feel nothing as I watched a man bleeding to death, knowing my grandfather’s legacy was written in the spilled blood of our enemies being returned to the same earth we’d sworn to avenge…

“I used to take pride in that…

“You’re worried that what I feel for you isn’t real… That watching you die is the only thing making me want to marry you… It isn’t, Michi… It’s the reason I can marry you… When I started this game, I could’ve watched you die a thousand times without shedding a tear…

“Because my own life was meaningless back then…

“But you’ve changed that…

“Michi, Damian al Ghul died two-hundred and twenty-six times up there… But I was reborn… Reborn to learn what a life is worth… What my life is worth… Reborn as the man who could love you…

“Alice didn’t kill me… I think she was trying to save me from myself… By using your love.”

The young lovers embraced, their slender bodied pressed against each other until their lips found their much needed counterparts, Damian and Argo sharing their souls in a kiss on a grassy ridge scented with the drowsy petals of wildflowers as the western sky glowed a brilliant orange.
The pair held hands as they watched the sun fade below the forty-sixth floor of Aincrad.

“Who is your grandfather, Damian?… He sounds so cruel… To do that to a child.”

The boy breathed a deep sigh as they lowered themselves to the twilight grass and sat down.

“An ancient warlord named Ra’s al Ghul… Leader and founder of the League of Assassins… They say he’s close to five-hundred-years-old… He is.”

“How is that even possible?”

“He has something called a Lazarus Pit… When the dead are immersed into its murky depths, they come back to life… Well, at least my grandfather does… And my mother… She died while giving birth to me, so they resurrected her.”

“Your mother… What’s she like?”

That far-off look again.

“Brilliant… Ruthless… Passionate… A demanding perfectionist… More than a little bit crazy… Dangerous.”

“Alice said your mother was involved in her creation.”

“Wait… What?!?”

Argo reared back as Damian turned to stare at her with those wild blue eyes.

“Alice told me that your mother was named Talia… That Alice’s own father had created the child… That Talia created the woman… And Akihiko Kayaba created the goddess… All three co-existing at once… But it was your mother who overlaid her own emotions onto Alice… That’s why she gets so emotional around you and does those weird things.”

A thousand thoughts a second poured through Damian’s mind as he processed this latest information, oblivious to his mother’s plans over the past three years since she’d prepared him to crash-land onto his father’s unexpecting lap.

“What else did she tell you?”

“Not much… Just that your mother had designed Cardinal based on Alice, but Akihiko Kayaba wouldn’t settle for a substitute… He stole Alice from her instead.”

“But why would he do something so stupid?... She’d murder him.”

Michi thought about his question before blurt out a reply.

“I think it’s because of the World Seed… I think that’s why he did it… Because Cardinal’s not really alive… But Alice is… With her, it becomes a living entity, like a baby… New worlds can be created… I think he sacrificed himself for the sake of that.”

Damian brought a closed fist into his open palm.

“I think she let him… My mother must’ve planned this all along… We’re the template!… So that’s what she’s up to… She’s making digital ghosts!”

“You mean like cloning one hard drive onto another?”
“Exactly… Except one of those hard drives is your brain.”

Michi Aoi stopped for a moment to consider this.

“But… That’s not possible… AI isn’t that far along yet.”

“Yes it is… Alice Light was once an eleven-year-old girl… What is she now?”

“Really scary.”

Damian smiled at her frank response before he stroked the base of his chin with a thoughtful thumb, staring out at an endless sky contained in a server in Tokyo.

“How many ghosts can dance on a silicone chip, Michi?”

“Ten thousand apparently… Damian, do you really think we’re already dead?”

“No… There would have been an intervention by now… Our unconscious bodies must still be acting as hostages to this game… That’s the only reason we’ve been left alone this long.”

A strange thought suddenly occurred to Argo.

“Damian, when we started this game… You told me that we just had to wait for your father to save us… That’s why you never left the Town of Beginnings… But how would he do that?... He’s rich, but he’s also American… The Japanese government would never let him interfere with Sword Art Online…

“And this League of Assassins… I remember reading about them in a manga… The enemies of American superheroes… Of one superhero in particular… I remember that codeword you gave to me… Robin… I thought you meant the bird, but Robin is also the partner of…”

Damian suddenly looked up mischievously, raising an eyebrow at his intended with a sly grin.

“My father is the Batman… Still want to get married?”

“Yes!”
Chapter Sixty-One:
Revenge is a Dish Best Served with…
HOT LEAD!

A nearly unhinged Bruce unbuttoned the collar of his wrinkled white dress shirt, nervously pacing the stone floor of the Batcave while a pensive Barbara Gordon and a concerned Dick Grayson looked on in anxiety, charting Bruce’s mini-marathon of stress while awaiting news.

Taking a deep breath, Richard was finally about to speak when Bruce’s private cell phone vibrated on the console.

It was the much anticipated (but delayed) call from Lex Luthor

“Did you finally manage to trap Arthur Light?!”

The smug voice on the other end of the line had been placed on speaker for the benefit of Barbara and Dick.

“Yes… But it was like trying to land a whale with a fishing rod… Luckily for you, I’ve been developing a new programming language called Lex-script based on fractal algorithms… It was the only language which my uninvited guest wasn’t able to overwrite… Otherwise, I wouldn’t have been able to contain him in a Mother Box.”

Bruce suddenly looked down at the phone startled.

“Wait… You have a Mother Box?!!!”

“Of course I do… It’s one of the few things in this Universe I have yet to understand… How goes the hunt for assassins in the shadows?”

Bruce looked around the expansive cave once again.

“No luck yet… The cave is clear… Superman and the Flash haven’t been able to locate any intruders in or near the Manor… They’re extending their search.”

“I see… And you’re certain she’ll retaliate?”

A heavy sigh.

“I’m positive… I’ve obtained Talia’s medical records, Lex… The latest CT scans show the anaplastic astrocytoma created mass lesions in the left lateral ventricle of her brain… Which may explain why Talia is becoming a delusional sociopath.”

“I would argue it runs in the family.”

“Speak for yourself … Are you able to keep Doctor Light offline?”

“I’m not one of your incompetent Arkham Asylum wardens, Wayne… Light will remain offline until I let him back online… Unfortunately, that also goes for the Mother Box… You’ve cost me valuable
research time into the mysteries of the New Gods.”

“I would strongly suggest returning that Mother Box back to them immediately… But only after I deal with Talia.”

“I would suggest you deal with her sooner than later… I’ve been doing a little research on her myself… Her methods are as effective as they are unnerving… I’ve just doubled my security detail and I’ll be sending you the bill, Wayne.”

“Just be careful who you hire, Lex… Her people are everywhere… Hold on, I’m getting another call.”

“So you are… Keep in touch.”

Bruce looked down at the private phone resting on the console, the phone very few people had the number for. Because in truth, it wasn’t his phone…

It was Batman’s.

When the caller ID came up as Jim Gordon’s cell, Bruce brought it up to his ear and answered in the deep, gruff voice of Gotham’s Dark Knight.

“This is Batman, Commissioner.”

The two seconds of dead air at the other end seemed unbearably tragic as Bruce suddenly braced himself for the worst.

“Batman… This is Gordon… I wanted to be the first to inform you… It’s… Selina Kyle… She’s dead.”

With those words, Bruce felt the stability of the world beneath his shoes begin to crumble, his spirit struggling to find some handhold deep within him until it fell helplessly through the cold stone leaving him empty inside, thoughts unable to cross an emptied shell of a man until the saddened voice of Gotham’s long-serving Commissioner continued on.

“She was entering the Witness Protection Program… One of my men… A seventeen-year veteran with a spotless record… He just shot her in the back, Batman… Shot her five times before he turned the gun on himself… Murder-suicide… But I know him… He’s a good cop… A family man… I just don’t understand why this happened.”

He’d lived through tragedy his entire life.

It haunted him.

It always would.

“He did this because of his family, Commissioner… It’s likely they’re being held hostage… What was his name?”

“Donald Peak.”

“I’ll take care of this.”

“Batman… Peak was GCPD… Just tell me who I’m looking for and we’ll bring them in… I’ll see to it personally… I promise you that.”
“She won’t be in this country, Jim… She’s created her own country in order to give herself diplomatic immunity… But that’s not going to stop me… Not anymore… I’ll stop her… Or die trying.”

Bruce absentmindedly ended the call with a thousand-yard stare locked within unblinking eyes, a thousand memories trapped in the past now dancing across various Gotham rooftops with the always seductive Catwoman holding his hand.

They would dance no more.

As a devastated Bruce turned away to place his hands on the table, the Flash suddenly appeared behind him in a crimson blur.

“No assassins around here within a twelve-mile radius, Bats… Checked every shadow, nook and cranny personally… Superman’s gonna stay in the air for any laser or missile attacks, but neither of us could find anything… Hey, are you alright?”

The long-smouldering fires of revenge quickly dried away his tears before they could fall from Bruce’s hardening eyes.

“Dick and Barbara weren’t her target, Barry… Selina Kyle was… The Commissioner just called… Catwoman’s dead.”

A stunned Barry Allen pulled the red mask from his face as Dick and Barbara looked on.

“Bruce… I’m so sorry… I know how much it hurts to lose someone you love.”

Bruce nodded and then put on a heavy hand on Barry Allen’s shoulder.

“No, I’m the one who should be sorry, Barry… I’m the real reason you lost Iris.”

Barry shook his head.

“Hey, don’t say that… Look, you didn’t kill Iris, just like you didn’t kill your parents… This is all Talia’s doing.”

“But you don’t understand… I could’ve stopped her… I’m one of the few people in this world who ever had that chance.”

“Do you honestly believe I don’t have that chance?… That I couldn’t run across water and vibrate through whatever walls she’s hiding behind until I shook her limb from limb… We’re heroes, Bruce… Not executioners… We’ll stop her.”

Bruce chuckled, making Barry question his friend’s sanity.

“She was right, it is ironic… Talia once asked me if I ever counted the lives the Joker has taken since the first time I wrapped my hands around that clown’s neck… If I ever tallied all the lives I might have saved if I’d allowed my hands to do what I so desperately wanted them to do…

“So I did… It was a number that almost drove me to madness…

“And then yesterday, I counted the lives she’s taken since I first held her in my arms…

“And that number was so much higher than the Joker’s… Higher than any monster in Arkham… And that’s not even counting the three thousand people who’ve perished from Sword Art Online so far.”
Bruce steadied himself as the weight of his world fell apart on tired shoulders, Atlas struggling to hold up the crumbling remnants of the heavens they trod upon.

But there were other gods to help him carry the load.

To carry the banner of war.

“Barry, bring Superman down here… We haven’t got much time… There’s somewhere we all need to go… Now.”

“Sure… Where?”

“Infinity Island… The Justice League is going to war with the League of Assassins.”

Talia's Revenge

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, another short one. I'm trying to put up what I can on a regular basis with all that's going on.
I added the picture at the end this time as it contains a very big spoiler.
But this is what would happen in my world if Bruce and Selina ever got engaged.
Heh heh heh.
Although it’s very cool, the Justice League satellite known as the Watchtower does not exist in this Alternate Universe. They use the Hall of Justice instead. And although there’s been hundreds of different heroes counted among their hallowed ranks in the comics, the Justice League members I’m using for this particular story are: Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, The Flash, Aquaman, Cyborg, Green Lantern, the Martian Manhunter, Hawkman and Hawkgirl.

I’ve stuck with the versions I’m most familiar with; where Barry Allen is the Flash, Hal Jordan is Green Lantern, Hawkman and Hawkgirl are aliens from the planet Thanagar and Cyborg is the newest member of the team. In my world, these ten heroes are the most powerful and band together to defend humanity when needed.

Alex Ross Justice League

Chapter Sixty-Two:
League Versus League, Part 1

It was Barry Allen who became a passionate voice for reason, the advocate for a more democratic resolution within the dark confines of the Batcave.

The scarlet speedster hastily talked Bruce out of departing for Infinity Island immediately. He prevented the Wayne Industries CEO from arming the Bat-Wing with enough artillery to wipe the small sovereign island-nation his traitorous wife had created off the face of the map, against giving the murdered Selina Kyle the smouldering funeral pyre she rightfully deserved.

The same man who’d lost his wife to the evil mechanizations of Talia al Ghul placed a calming hand
on his old friend’s shoulder before breathing a deep sigh.

“Bruce, listen to me… Attacking Talia is the worst possible thing you can do right now… She’s trying to divide us… To break apart the Justice League… We’re the only ones who can stop her and she knows it.”

“I’ll stop her.”

“No, buddy… You won’t… Think!... Do you honestly believe she won’t be ready for you?... That she won’t blow you out of the skies over international waters?... She’s already made alliances with other countries… Dangerous countries that would love to destroy the Batman.”

“You’re talking about Bialya.”

“And that’s just for starters… This is bigger than just you and her now… The entire world is involved in this fight… Which means we’ll stop her together… But we have to do it carefully.”

Wait…

How did Barry even know Infinity Island had established a strategic military alliance with Bialya? Even Bruce had had a tough time uncovering that one with all the secrecy Talia heaped on her well-paid diplomacy, holding her cards tight to her chest as hundreds of millions of dollars changed hands…

The grim detective wasn’t sure where his next thought came from.

A terrible thought, a memory from the Iris Allen funeral that he’d written off at the time, an insignificant observation that could’ve had a very easy explanation. That should have had a very easy explanation.

But still, it created the fissure of doubt in Bruce’s distraught mind…

A terrible idea that crawled from the grave of his paranoia and pointed a bony finger at Barry.

It was the idea that Talia’s influence had been more far-reaching than Bruce realized. That perhaps they all were involved in this, but not the way Barry was suggesting. That perhaps both Batman and Talia were using the same chess pieces in her deadly game.

His friends.

Bruce took a deep breath, knowing he wasn’t going to sleep tonight.

But he certainly wouldn’t be telling Barry that.

“Alright, I’ll sleep on it… Let’s meet with the rest of the Justice League tomorrow morning… We’ll take a vote… Whatever we decide, we decide together, and I’ll stand behind our decision… Satisfied?”

A concerned Barry looked at his old friend suspiciously.

“That’s what I wanted to hear… But don’t do anything stupid in the meantime, ok?”

A glare towards the darkness.

“Trust me… I’m done with being stupid.”
Barry reached out a sympathetic hand, stopped when he saw Bruce’s hardened eyes, and then brought it back towards the safety of his side.

“Don’t blame yourself about Selina… It wasn’t your fault… Remember that.”

“She’ll just keep killing us off until there’s no one left to stand against her, Barry… Remember that.”

“Look, I’ll just grab Superman and tell him what happened… We’ll see you at the Hall of Justice tomorrow at eleven… You really should get some sleep though.”

“Make it noon.”

The chill of the Batcave and Bruce’s cold tone seemed to haunt Barry Allen’s soul.

“Alright… Noon… Take care of yourself.”

“Goodnight, Barry.”

“Uh yeah… Goodnight then.”

In ten minutes time, Bruce was alone in the dark when he discovered the digital X-rays he’d hacked from Iris Allen’s private dental records which didn’t match the digital ones he’d hacked from her autopsy files located in the server of the Central City Coroner’s Office.

Close, but not quite.

Iris Allen had two dental implants from a college car crash where both front teeth had been. She’d had them ever since the accident, a slightly different shade of white, almost impossible to detect unless you’d spent your entire life dedicated to noticing these tiny details…

There was something else as well.

Whoever was buried under the Central City gravestone which Bruce Wayne had mournfully laid flowers against didn’t have those implants, but Iris always had a tiny mole on the left corner of her lip which Bruce noticed had been missing during her open casket funeral when he’d paid his final respects.

The embalmers had used makeup of course, but not enough to hide that beauty mark. At the time, he’d simply written it off as Mrs. Allen simply having cosmetic surgery to remove it over the past year, the last time he’d last seen her alive.

But there was no medical records in her file to indicate such a procedure. And no expenditures in either her or Barry’s accounts either.

It had never happened.

Iris Allen hadn’t been laid to rest that day. Someone who’d been surgically altered to become her doppelganger had been. Which meant she was likely alive and Talia’s hostage.

Which made Barry Allen a hostage.

His next discovery in the Central City Police cold-case files confirmed it.
After receiving an apologetic call from the Flash, Superman touched down on the sun-warmed cobblestones in front of the Hall of Justice a full twenty minutes before noon the next morning.

The Man of Steel had a lot on his mind as he entered the Hall’s marble halls, but he was pleasantly surprised to find the grim-faced Batman had actually arrived before him. The pigheaded Bruce usually showing up late for these League meetings, when he even bothered showing up for them at all, usually too busy fighting his private war in Gotham.

With bright blue skies overhead, Clark supposed it was a positive sign that the Justice League’s revenge-fuelled Dark Knight had come to finally sit down and discuss the Talia al Ghul problem with his friends. To actually extend the olive branch instead of striking out on his own half-cocked as the man normally did.

He’d never come out and say it, but the death of Selina Kyle must have been a devastating blow to Bruce. One that would leave a scar on his heart forever. He needed his friends now.

“Are you alright?”

Only the Batman’s bloodshot eyes seemed to move.

“I have to be… Have we got eyes in the sky?”

The words Bruce spoke now were a eulogy.

Clark hadn’t heard him sound this bad for a long time, as though the man’s emotions had died. Talia was slowly carving away her husband’s identity, surgically dissecting all that was Batman until only his bones remained. Until the ghost of a man filled out that costume.

“Don’t worry… Hawkman and Hawkgirl are on patrol above.”

“Good… Keep them up there for now… Have they cast their votes in this matter?”

“I just talked to them… They said they’ll go along with whatever we decide.”

“Hmph… And the Flash won’t be able to make it, will he?”

Superman raised an arching eyebrow at his brooding friend in surprise.

“Barry just called me a minute ago… Did he call you as well?”

“He didn’t have to… What was the reason Barry gave for his absence?”

“Wait… Is he in trouble?”

“We’re all in trouble, Clark… What was the reason?”

“Something about Professor Zoom resurfacing in Central City and he needed to check it out right away.”

The Batman only scoffed beneath his cowl.

“The he’s lying… Eobard Thawne died last spring… The Central City Police found his body in a penthouse suite where he’d been registered as John Doe for the past two years…

“Thawne apparently died of natural causes, but his room looked like it’d been hit by a hurricane… Too bad their surveillance cameras’ server was hit by some strange magnetic disturbance that night…
Wiped the data clean.”

“Why haven’t we heard about Eobard Thawne?”

“I just found out about it last night… The real question is… Why didn’t Barry tell us about it, Clark?”

The Man of Steel narrowed his eyes and then folded thick arms across a broad chest.

“You said he was registered as John Doe… Maybe it was just someone who looked like Zoom.”

“I considered that… There were some other interesting discoveries made during the autopsy before his body was whisked away by the D.E.O… Bio-mechanical alterations far beyond the scope of twenty-first century technology… It was Zoom.”

“Alright, fine… Let’s say Eobard Thawne is dead… Did you ever consider the possibility that Barry doesn’t know that?... That he could be walking into a trap laid by Mirror Master as we speak.”

“Evan McCulloch is currently in the deepest pit of Belle Reve… Wake up, Clark… We’re the ones walking into a trap.”

Superman took a deep breath and then placed his hands on the boardroom table in front of Bruce, levelling a serious gaze at an unflinching Batman.

“She’s finally done it, hasn’t she?... She’s used Selina Kyle to push you off the deep end… Dialled your paranoia level up to eleven until you now think everyone’s against you… Until you’re ready to cast us out as non-believers in your holy war… Until you’re vulnerable and finally alone… That was her plan this whole time.”

“No… She used Selina Kyle to distract me from her real plan… I’ll give her credit, it almost worked.”

“Bruce… Tell me… What are you saying?”

“I’ll explain it to you… To everyone… But we need to vote first… I need to see where our loyalties lie… In the meantime, do me a favour… Call Barry… Tell him that we need him here… That we’re deadlocked and he’ll have to cast the deciding vote regarding Talia.”

“We haven’t even taken the vote yet!”

“Just tell him, Clark… I need to know the extent to which he’s already betrayed us... And that depends on if he’s willing to come here or not.”

In mere moments, the world’s most powerful heroes sat around the central table in the Hall of Justice, each of them with their eyes fixed on Gotham’s Caped Crusader after Superman had solemnly read the motion put before them.

Should they take direct action against Talia al Ghul and her League of Assassins? Should they attack her on Infinity Island?

The King of Atlantis shifted uneasily in his chair.
“Batman… I have to vote against this attack… My people… The people of Atlantis… We’ve filed to become recognized as a member nation of the UN… You see the precarious position this places me in…

“As a Monarch of Atlantis, if I endorse your proposed attack on another sovereign nation… All the trade with the surface world we’ve worked so hard to negotiate… It would all be for naught…

“I believe Talia al Ghul has committed the atrocities you say… But she has placed herself beyond our authority… Let us appeal to the UN to reverse their decision regarding Infinity Island… Let them be made aware of her crimes and remove whatever diplomatic protections that woman has unlawfully gained so that she may face the justice she deserves.”

The masked vigilante stared grimly across the table at Aquaman.

“A decision from the UN will take years, Arthur… Years we don’t have… But your objection is noted… What about you, Clark?… You could single-handedly remove Infinity Island from the map in only a matter of mere seconds.”

The Man of Steel sadly shook his head as he replied.

“And if I did, it could start World War 3… C’mon, Bruce… You know if I did something so irresponsible that the rest of the world would perceive my action as an act of superhero aggression… They’re already terrified of us enough.”

Bruce eyed the Man of Steel coolly.

“Some of us use that fear to our advantage… But in your case, people are actually paid to spread fear about you.”

Superman’s voice suddenly took on an edge of anger.

“Sure, there are a few lobby groups around Washington partitioning to have the government keep me imprisoned in Kryptonite… The same way they want all of us imprisoned… And there even are a few corrupt Senators willing to take their blood money… But let’s be honest… They’re likely funded by your new buddy Lex Luthor… The same man you sold us out to.”

A solemn Batman stood up to return Clark’s intense glare.

“I made a deal with Luthor because I had to… Because he was the only person on Earth capable of capturing Arthur Light… Don’t be stupid, Clark… You know we had to stop Light first if we had any chance of ever stopping Talia.”

The two remaining glaring at one another until Superman finally took his seat.

“All I know is that you’re insane if you don’t believe Luthor is a greater threat to the world than Talia is.”

Bruce also took his seat.

“I must be crazy because that’s exactly what I believe… Besides, Luthor doesn’t fund those anti-Superhero protestors… My company does.”

They all looked at the Batman in shock as he continued.

“Wayne Industries has been secretly funding these lobby groups since my assets were merged with
Talia’s… Trust me, Oracle had a Dickens of a time following the al Ghul laundered money across my various company investments and into their pockets, but here’s the bottom line… My lovely wife has been providing these hate-groups with the hundreds of millions they need to ensure they’ve had maximum impact over these past three years… And now she has my company doing the same thing.”

“Why don’t you stop it then?”

“Because I would need my co-CEO’s permission to do so… And we haven’t exactly been on speaking terms lately… Look Clark, you may think I made a deal with the Devil when I met with Luthor yesterday… But the truth of the matter is, my soul was lost the moment Talia al Ghul slipped this golden band around my finger… My contract with the Devil is my marriage license.”

The Kryptonian rolled his eyes.

“Look, I’m not saying she’s a saint… She’s a monster, I get it… But we can’t just attack Infinity Island directly… Not without a declaration from the UN… We don’t have the right to judge an entire nation.”

“Then who does?”

The half-machine/half-man Cyborg suddenly rose from his chair.

“There’s another complication we haven’t mentioned yet… Infinity Island has positioned itself as the de facto crypto-currency hub… It’s like the Swiss bank for every dirty off-the-grid money transaction in the entire world… There’s eight trillion of digital reserves currently being stored there, and more rolling in every hour…

“Any attack against Talia’s financial servers could cause economic collapse at worst… At best, we’re simply branded as financial terrorists and warrants are issued for our arrest… Sorry, but I’m with these guys, Bats… I say wait… She’ll make a mistake sooner or later… Let’s bide our time and build a case.”

Bruce only nodded and then looked over at the clench-jawed Amazonian Princess from Themyscira, her fists now balled in rage.

“And you, Diana?”

“Destroy her… Immediately… All that is necessary for evil to triumph is that good men do nothing… And we have done NOTHING!… Look at us!... When have we grown so cowardly as to fear what others think? To allow them to make our decisions?!... Clark, this vile creature Bruce has married has forced you into hiding your loved ones away in Arthur’s undersea realm… And yet, you would not stand against her?!... Not even for their sake?!”

“It’s not that simple, Diana.”

“It is that simple… You say we don’t have the right to judge humanity… But sometimes, we must.”

“We’re not gods.”

“Speak for yourself.”

Bruce raised a calming hand to re-establish order.

“Thank you, Diana… She’s right though, Clark… The simple fact is that if we don’t stop Talia, no
else will… No one else can…

“Honestly, I don’t know why it took me so long to grasp that incredibly simple truth… Even after Talia so kindly showed me her true intentions, I still believed she was incapable of carrying out such an atrocity… That she only meant to shock me, not taunt me with her plans… I apologize to each and everyone of you for being so damned blind…

“For the sake of humanity as we know it… We must stop her… So it is now three votes against, two votes for… Hal, what do you say?”

The Green Lantern of Earth stood and then grinned.

“No offence, Bruce… But you have terrible taste in women… My orders from Oa are to stop the singularity from spreading… And it looks like the best way to do that is to stop Talia al Ghul… So count me in.”

Beneath his cowl, Bruce grinned at Superman as though they were the last remaining players in a game of high-stakes poker, each with an equal stack of chips.

“Deadlocked… Three-to-three… With our Thanagarian friends above choosing to side with the majority… I guess we’ll wait for Barry then.”

Clark stared at all the others and then at Batman carefully.

“I guess we do… It’s too bad J’onn wasn’t here.”

“Yes, too bad… He could’ve solved this Sword Art Online issue within a matter of hours… Strange he went to Mars shortly before it began, isn’t it?”

“Oh c’mon… That’s a coincidence… You’re not seriously going to blame Talia for that too, are you?”

“I don’t believe in coincidences anymore… So I checked our security cameras… Pay dirt… There was an article which Barry provided J’onn concerning interstitial necro-residues shortly before our resident telepath left for Mars… Why would he do that?”

“Maybe J’onn was having trouble falling asleep.”

“I looked it up… Its author, Doctor M.T. Graves postulates that all sentient life leaves traces upon the substrate it once inhabited… Both physical and spiritual traces.”

“My God… You’re talking about ghosts.”

“Martian ghosts specifically.”

“Isn’t that a little farfetched?… I mean, do you honestly believe Barry gave J’onn this article intentionally so that he would travel to Mars and allow his dead world to absorb into his psyche? So that the Martian Manhunter could risk insanity and begin the slow and arduous process of resurrecting these ghosts in his mind so that they could live within him?”

“Wouldn’t you?”

The Man of Steel narrowed his blue eyes.

“No, I wouldn’t.”
“Maybe not… But think about it, Clark… If you had been brought to Earth as an adult and not as an infant… If you hadn’t been raised by the Kents and hadn’t met Lois on this world… If you didn’t look like us, would your answer still be the same?”

“I… How do you expect me to answer that?”

“Relax, J’onn already answered it for us… It was probably for the best anyways… If he stayed, my wife would have simply assassinated our telepath… It may have tipped her hand, but she needed the Martian out of the way before her carefully laid plans could proceed…”

“The revelation that J’onn could resurrect the ghosts of Mars within his living consciousness was the bait she needed… And the Flash delivered it, hook, line and sinker.”

“Why do you keep insisting that Barry has something to do with all this?”

“Because he does.”

“We would’ve noticed it though… You should have noticed it.”

“Normally, yes… But I’ve been cleverly distracted… Talia dumped Damian on my lap right around the time she started making her move… Originally, she monitored all my communications through a hack in Oracle’s network, keeping very careful tabs on me…”

“The bomb which Dick triggered while he and Barbara were investigating Dr. Light’s old research center was actually intended for me… It was planted as soon as she had me locked away on Infinity Island… It was the first logical place I would have went looking as Batman just after I made Talia the co-CEO of my company… It was practically impossible to tie it back to her.”

Superman slowly scratched his chin.

“No offence… But she’s had plenty of other chances to murder you since then… Or at least replace you with a Bruce-bot… So tell me, Mr. World’s Greatest Detective… Why hasn’t she?… Why are you still alive if she wants you dead?”

Bruce finally grinned as he laid down his winning hand and stared across the table at each of them in turn.

“Because she’s been patiently waiting for me to betray her, Kal… To seek out all your help and turn my back on her dreams of digital humanity… To relinquish my role as her husband and condemn all of you…”

“It would be my fault then, wouldn’t it?…”

“You see, for the past six months, my dear wife has been pushing me towards this very moment… Methodically directing me to the brink of war where I must call upon my allies or fall… She knew she’d either break me or this day would come…”

“And now it’s arrived…”

“The moment she’s been patiently waiting for… When my betrayal is punished by setting off the Plutonium-Kryptonite core installed in the nuclear power plant located directly beneath us… Literally, an atomic bomb embedded with yellow phosphorous bronze rods… A nuclear blast custom designed to destroy each and every one of us…”

“Or rather, she’s been waiting for Cyborg to set it off.”
It was at that very moment a crimson blur streaked across the white marble of the Halls of Justice, stopping to become the familiar form of the Flash happily standing at the edge of the wide table while five of Earth’s greatest heroes stared accusingly at the cybernetic gleam of a confused Victor Stone.

Barry Allen blinked in uncomfortable silence as he looked around the table at five pairs of accusing eyes.

“Ahhh… Hey guys… What’s going on?... Did Cyborg pass gas again?”
With the ill-timed arrival of the Flash, a troubled Victor Stone could only look out across the table at his team-mates, hands raised defensively as though to deflect the silent judgements being levelled against him by his leering League peers after Batman’s damning accusation.

“C’mon, guys… I haven’t touched the nuclear reactor… I wouldn’t hurt any of you!”

A grim Batman stood up, his black cape draping like the robes of a vindictive magistrate, the plum-sized metal ball held tightly in his right hand becoming a gavel ready to fall and pronounce judgement as he stared across at Cyborg.

“No Victor, you wouldn’t hurt us consciously… But you’ve been hacked, Cyborg… You’ve developed a nasty habit of sleepwalking.”

“What?!... Bats, you must’ve gone bats!... I don’t sleepwalk!... I mean, I can’t…”

The heroes gasped as the combination of flesh and machine suddenly fell face-first into the table, the loud thump of Cyborg’s titanium forehead striking the thick wood echoing across the Justice League’s spacious hallway until Clark eyed both Bruce and the metallic orb he was holding suspiciously.
Before any further accusations could be made, they all tensed when like a mechanical Lazarus, Cyborg mechanically raised his metallic torso into a sitting position once again, his red-glowing eyes devoid of humanity. The electronic voice which spoke no longer belonged to Victor Stone; only the monotonous drone of a robot proclaiming doom upon an unsuspecting Justice League.

“Countdown commencing... In 6, 5, 4…”

Superman anxiously eyed the metal ball in Bruce’s hand, finally recognizing it as electro-magnetic-pulse disruption grenade capable of shutting down Cyborg’s systems.

“Do it, man!”

A sly grin spread across Bruce’s tight lips as he examined the coiled Man of Steel with Gotham’s Dark Knight intentionally waiting for the countdown to reach ‘one’ before finally pressing the button, sending out a condensed EMP wave blasting across the room at the exact instant when Hal Jordan surrounded them in a protective green sphere…

(A valiant but vain effort which wouldn’t have saved them from the Kryptonite-radiated yellow phosphorous bronze rods below if the bomb had detonated.)

His interior lights went dark as Cyborg once again slumped to the table unconscious, the ominous countdown gone silent until Batman casually strolled over to the lifeless cybernetic body, attaching the metallic sphere of his disruptor against the back of indent of Victor’s metal skull.

With a slow exhale, Green Lantern’s protective emerald sphere finally popped out of existence to allow fresh air back into their lungs. A solemn Caped Crusader glanced up at the glowing red eyes of a clench-jawed Superman.

“ Took you bloody long enough!”

“I only stalled in order to gauge all your reactions… I actually disarmed the bomb three hours ago.”

“Why you self-righteous son-of-a-…”

A resolved Diana stepped forward, deliberately walking in front of Clark to place a calming hand on the Man of Steel’s shoulder, her concerned gaze soon transitioning from Superman’s cooling anger to Cyborg’s motionless back.

“There was already one traitor amongst us, Kal-El… It’s reasonable to assume there may be others… But why would Cyborg betray us, Bruce?”

“He didn’t… Not intentionally… I did a little research last night… After his son’s accident, Dr. Silas Stone based Victor’s enhanced cognitive abilities on Professor Anthony Ivo’s A-Maze technology…

“Victor’s subconscious and his extra bodily functions are handled by the B-Maze operating system, similar to our own automatic nervous system…

“B-Maze is the operating system Arthur Light was able to hack into…

“For all intensive purposes, Cyborg’s brain is primarily human… Like the rest of us, he possesses free will but also an augmented memory… I deduced Dr. Light was able to reprogram parts of his subconscious regulated by the B-Maze system into something resembling to a hypnotic trance…

“Granted, the B-Maze OS was incredibly complex for its times, with its own firewalls and safeguards… But to a self-conscious Adaptive Intelligence like Arthur Light, it would’ve been
child’s play to manipulate… Dr. Light could have implanted pre-programmed commands into Victor’s unconsciousness so that he would construct a bomb in his sleep…. Without Cyborg ever realizing he was doing it.”

“So you’re saying Cyborg was hypnotized?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes… I checked our surveillance system… Certain portions were deleted last August, just before Talia showed me exactly what she was capable of by murdering her way to the top of RECT Inc… And more files were deleted yesterday… When Cyborg planted the bomb within our atomic reactor.”

An abnormally quiet Flash scratched the back of his head until he disappeared in a crimson blur, suddenly reappearing a second later, his eyes wide with shock.

“Holy Cow… There really is a bomb!”

A tired Bruce chuckled and then returned to his chair, sitting down as he took a deep breath, his narrowed eyes never leaving the scarlet speedster.

“Yes, Barry… There really is a bomb… Which I disarmed four hours after our little chat last night… But more importantly… There’s also you…”

“You didn’t run away just now… You stayed here with us… Which means you were either placing a lot of faith in my last second heroics… Or you didn’t know we were about to be blown to Kingdom Come… I’m hoping it was the latter.”

“Of course I didn’t know about it!”

“No, I suppose you didn’t… But there are other things you’ve been hiding from the rest of us… Dangerous things… I think it’s time we all had an open and honest discussion about Eobard Thawne, Barry…”

“About why you murdered him…

“About who’s buried under your wife’s tombstone…

“Because it’s not Iris Allen.”

The accusing eyes of an Amazon Princess, a King of Atlantis, a godlike alien from a dead world and the Green Lantern of Space Sector 2814 suddenly turned upon the fastest man alive, watching Barry’s mouth slacken while their shocked faces all whispered the one word none of them spoke aloud…

Guilty.

Legs that could break the speed of light suddenly folded beneath him, the weight of a thousand worlds crushing his corroded soul into powdered crimson dirt around them. Hands in red gloves went to blue eyes, attempting to hold back the bitter tears of anguish that could be no longer be contained.

“I killed all of you… I’m sorry… I’m so sorry.”

It was Bruce who finally responded to the emotionally distraught speedster.
“Barry… Why don’t you take a seat?… And then start from the beginning… You haven’t killed any of us.”

“Not yet… But in the future, I already have… I’ve already killed all of you… Everyone!”

What followed was a tale none of them could believe, a tragedy spanning past, present and future. The hope of one man to save the lives of his parents transformed into the needless deaths of billions.

And yet it was true.

With eyes full of tears, the Flash began his tragic confession to a silent Justice League.

“Like you Bruce, I too witnessed my mother being murdered when I was a boy… But it wasn’t a thug with a gun, it was a tornado of lightning racing through my living room…

“A tornado which reached out with two hands and snapped her neck her in the blink of an eye…

“Hours later, the Police arrested my father for the crime. Months later, a judge convicted him of the crime. Years later, he was murdered in prison… But I always knew he was innocent… He was condemned to spend his life behind bars for a crime he didn’t commit…

“I later learned the man in the lightning was Eobard Thawne, a criminal from the future with similar powers to the ones I would gain years later from a lab accident…

“Shortly after the accident which made me the Flash, he appeared again… This time to murder my bride-to-be Iris West… But somehow, I saved her in the nick of time… But not before Thawne taunted me that he’d travelled back in time for the sole purpose of murdering my mother…

“That he was to blame for her death…

“He would disappear for awhile… And then this Reverse Flash would reappear in my life, always attempting to kill me or Iris… And every time we somehow managed to stop him… Yet every time he escaped…

“I’d always assumed that he went back to his own time in the future… That Thawne was travelling back and forth across time if only to make my life a living hell…

“But soon I began to wonder why hadn’t he simply gone back to the time before I had my powers?... Why not simply travel back to when I was a boy?... Or when Iris was a girl?... Wouldn’t that be easier?... Maybe he had, maybe in those timelines we were simply childhood casualties of Eobard Thawne…

“But then another idea began to take shape in my troubled mind…

“What if he hadn’t gone back to the future at all?...

“What if each time he’d narrowly escaped being captured, he’d simply gone into hiding, not back to the future?... It started to make sense… Every time I battled Thawne, he seemed a little older… A little slower… I eventually began to consider the possibility that he’d only travelled back in time only once, back to the time when he murdered my mother…

“That he’d been living in this timeline ever since that dark day…

“I couldn’t help but wonder if I could travel back in time as well… When I’m running near full
speed, time seems to stand still for me… But I’d always wondered what would happen if I went that little bit faster, if I pushed myself past the bounds of the reality of light?

“Could I unwind the past?…

“Change it?…

“It was an amazingly dangerous thought… And yet I knew Eobard Thawne had done it… That he’d come from the future to murder my mother… So why couldn’t I?… Maybe I could, but I thought it best if I didn’t try to alter history…

“And then the League of Assassins murdered my beautiful Iris…

“You spoke to me later that night, Clark… Trying to say words to console me, about how you tried to save her, how it was all your fault… But I wasn’t really listening… Not to you anyways… I was too busy listening to the thundering rhythm of time and how my feet were about to wind back the cruel hands of fate…

“You were right… You couldn’t save Iris…

“But I could…

“In that moment of madness, I figured if Thawne had used the speed force to travel back in time, why couldn’t I?… Why couldn’t I save my mother, save Iris, save my father from a life in prison?…

“I ran faster than I ever had before, until the time-stream itself pushed against me for breaking the unbreakable laws of physics, until time stopped and my life unwound around me… Until I swam through an ocean of what-was once Barry Allen to arrive at the point where my mother had been murdered…

“I saved her this time… I rescued her from Thawne… I became the hero I always meant to be… But time and speed have a dangerous relationship… One we were never intended to meddle with…

“Trust me, I found that out the hard way…

“I would have been content to die then… To allow the young boy I’d once been grow up with a mother and father… Perhaps meet Iris Allen and marry her, perhaps not… But they’d have that chance, wouldn’t they?…

“But that young boy would never have the chance…

“I’d unwound his future by travelling back to the past… He simply couldn’t exist anymore… Time was correcting its mistake…

“I watched as the younger version of myself begin to fade away, my young eyes growing wide with terror as the older me realized too late that I had created a time paradox… That two Barry Allens were now existing in the same point in time…

“And that we were both disappearing from reality!…

“So I ran again… Ran like a man possessed… Breaking the barrier of time to become a man outside of it… Trying to find my way back to place I’d once been…

“I soon discovered that the time-stream flows forward… That what was a Herculean effort to travel backwards in time suddenly became an out-of-control tsunami of momentum pushing me forward
“Because the time-stream wanted me to go to where Barry Allen no longer existed… To the point where two living Barry Allens couldn’t create a paradox… Sweeping me to the point where I must have died in this world…”

“I have no idea how far into the future I was propelled… Of what point in time I clawed my way out of the hypertime continuum to get to the moment after my death… What’s worse was how fast I was travelling… What inconceivable speed Fate had pushed me along before ejecting me back into reality…”

“My speed-force-protected body burned through the atmosphere at temperatures likely exceeding hundreds of billions of degrees… I circled the Earth in the blink of an eye, again and again like a red electron around its nucleus, working my down until each bracing footstep became a thermonuclear warhead of cataclysm, until the world itself was burning in my wake…”

“Until you finally managed to catch me, Clark… After I had levelled mountains and made the oceans boil, after I’d created a thousand-mile-wide debris field travelling near the speed of light which scoured the Earth’s surface clean…”

“After the oxygen of our world was nearly consumed by every remaining forest on the planet burning simultaneously…”

“I honestly believe we were the last two living things alive…”

“In that darkest moment, we watched our world burn…”

“And then I told you I’ll fix it…”

“That was a lie of course… All I did was escape backwards in time again… It’s still going to happen… You see, I’m not the Barry Allen of your time… I’m the man who will one day burn the world.”

They all stared at the heartbroken Barry Allen in silence for a moment, each attempting to contemplate if such a thing could actually happen, a hushed silence falling across the Hall of Justice like a death sentence until Superman finally spoke up.

“Barry… When will this happen?”

“I don’t know… The moment after my death I suppose… You had some new grey hair when you finally stopped me, Clark… So perhaps as little as five years… Twenty years at tops.”

A pondering Bruce spoke up next.

“You’ve obviously travelled backwards in time to get here… I don’t want to sound cruel, but… Can you go backwards again and prevent yourself from saving your mother?… Or at least explain to your past self the consequences of such an action?”

A disappointed Barry stared down at the table in remorse.

“Don’t you think I tried that already?… I’ve already run backwards in time until my lungs burst, until I no longer understood what I was… Until I almost went mad and became a red streak on the time-stream itself…”
“The furthest I could ever get was the millisecond after I had already run backwards in time… When you saw me at the funeral, I was still recovering from the effort, hardly able to walk…

“Believe me… As hard as I’ve tried, I can’t break past the point where I first altered history… Time won’t let me create a paradox where the Barry Allen who discovered his wife had been murdered meets me…

“Because if that Barry doesn’t exist, I can’t exist to stop him.”

Bruce stiffened in his chair, narrowing his eyes.

“Then tell me… How did you save your wife?”

The Flash laughed, as though he were half mad.

“That’s the funny part… I didn’t save her… You were right, Bruce… It’s not my wife we buried that day… It was a woman whom I’ve never met, some poor soul surgically altered to look exactly like Iris…

“But that night, in my overwhelming grief and all that blood, I couldn’t see it wasn’t Iris who’d been murdered… That’s what’s so funny… I destroyed the whole damned world because Talia left another woman in her place…

“And I didn’t get the memo until after the funeral.”

A heart-wrenching memory stirred within Bruce’s troubled mind, a sense of profound grief as he recalled Talia’s terrifying moments of returning to life amidst the mysterious green pools of the Lazarus Pit. With the bony hand of Death as her muse, the resurrected Talia al Ghul had been given terrifying prophetic visions of her world burning, of the mass extinction event awaiting humanity.

How ironic to think that she would unwittingly cause the fiery apocalypse of those nightmares only twelve years later. That by faking the death of Iris Allen, the daughter of Ra’s al Ghul had unwittingly cast her hostage’s husband into the grip of madness, propelling the Flash across time towards a future where Talia’s nightmares were finally made reality…

By her own bloodied hand.

“You found out Iris was still alive after the funeral… What happened after the League of Assassins contacted you, Barry?”

“Nothing… I completely ignored them… I know it sounds cold, but how could one life matter to a man who’d already wiped humanity off the face of the globe?… Still, I prayed Iris could forgive me as I set off in search of our one last remaining hope…

“The one man who I thought could still save all of us…

“Eobard Thawne.”

Chapter End Notes

As a general rule, I don’t like including fictional time travel in my stories. There’s been instances where it’s been handled extremely well of course (cough, cough, Steins;Gate)
but the entire process can easily render a story’s conflicts and consequences utterly pointless. For example, if something bad happened to Superman, why wouldn’t the Flash simply go back in time and prevent it? Why wouldn’t he go back in time and prevent World War 2? Or the bubonic plague for that matter?

You see where this is going.

Is fate predetermined - or do actions from the past alter the present? Has a divine hand already written our future - or are we writing it right now?

Ray Bradbury’s 1955 short story entitled “A Sound of Thunder” offers an early answer to this ‘age-old’ question. It’s the disturbing tale of a hunter named Eckels who pays for the services of a company called Time Safari Inc so he can travel 66 million years backwards in time to hunt dinosaurs. Sure, it sounded like a great idea at the time, at least until Eckels has a little mishap back in the Late Cretaceous and realizes the world he left behind is no longer the world he’s returned to.

The ingenious (and ridiculously good) Ray Bradbury was the first author to create the concept of the ‘Butterfly Effect’…

Literally.

Authors from H.G. Wells onwards have made time travel fraught with perils, especially when meddling with the past. Even in Geoff Johns’ ‘Flashpoint Paradox’ where Barry prevents Eobard Thawne from murdering his mother, our hero soon discovers that the world he returns to has radically changed. His powers are gone, his mother is alive, his wife Iris is married to someone else, and the Justice League does not exist.

Johns begs us to ask the question: Was the tragic death of Nora Allen necessary in preventing the DC world from destroying itself?

He answers us with a resounding YES. So in the DC world, past actions must have future consequences.

In this story, I’ve tried to introduce a few rules for the Flash’s time travel.

1. You can go back in time, but if you travel back to when you were still alive, you’ll soon wipe the first version of yourself from existence to prevent a future paradox.

2. You can go back in time before you were born, but an alternate timeline will branch off to avoid a future paradox. It’s difficult to sustain the energy required for travel to the past as backwards time decelerates.

3. You can go backwards in time multiple times, but not past the point where you first went back in time. You can’t undo that choice.

4. You can go forward in time, but not within your lifetime. That is, you can’t visit your future self. And going forward is very dangerous as forward time accelerates, as poor Barry discovered.

One last thing…

Thank you for patiently waiting to get back to the Sword Art Online portion of this story. If you can’t wait, take comfort in the fact that I’ve resolved that the ‘League versus League’ arc you’re currently reading will culminate in the final war between the
heroes and Talia.

Someone will prevail. Someone will die. And it might even be the same person. Anyways, I’m still having fun. Hope you are too.
As the name of Eobard Thawne lingered within the echoing halls of the Justice League as though to taint its hallowed air, a determined Bruce held up a hand to interject before the Flash could continue on with his tragic tale.

“Barry… You gave an article to the Martian Manhunter almost two-and-a-half years ago… A scientific treatise by a Dr. Graves, one which I believe was instrumental in J’onn leaving the planet long before Iris was kidnapped… Why?”

The police scientist stared at the masked detective in a stunned moment of disbelief.

“How… I just told you that I’m about to destroy the world… That I already have destroyed the world… And you’re worried about an article I gave to J’onn over two years ago?!”

“How?”

The Flash exhaled a deep sigh.

“I’m sure it’s all part of a grander scheme… Well, believe it or not, it was for charity… After one public appearance to help fund a new children’s hospital in my fancy red tights, this weird old guy with a fashion sense straight out of the seventies approaches me… He then introduced himself as Dr. M. T. Graves…

“I figure he’s looking for an autograph, but when he presents a cheque for fifty grand, I start to see
him in a different light… He tells me he’d be willing to donate another five hundred thousand if I could arrange a meeting with the Martian Manhunter for him… Just one hour of the Martian’s time for his research…

“We all get offers like that from time-to-time, right?…

“Anyways, in not-so-simple terms, he goes on to tell me about his life’s work with ghosts, about how he believes telepaths are able to communicate with the dead… Not only that, but that they can also to allow the dead to live on through them… Acting as a physical medium for spirits… Possession I guess… All of this Phantom Stranger kind of weird stuff… It ends with if he could have just one hour with J’onn to confirm his life’s research, it would mean the world to him…

“The chance to finally validate his ideas regarding the afterlife to an unbelieving world… And a chance to help a lot of sick kids…

“It all sounded pretty bizarre to me, but for five hundred grand I told the crazy old kook that I’d pass his contact information along to the Manhunter… But I also told Graves that I couldn’t make him any promises… That it would be entirely up to J’onn whether he wanted to help him in his research or not…

“I still waited until the first cheque had cleared before I approached the Manhunter… Just to make sure the guy was for real… Even looked up Graves in a few scientific journals to verify he was what he claimed he was…

“Anyways, I presented J’onn with the proposal, including all the articles Graves had published… I also told the Manhunter I’d back him up if the guy gave him any weird vibes… Just in case, right?… In usual J’onn fashion though, the Martian said he’d consider it and then quietly walked away…

“But that very next week, the hospital got a brand new donation of five hundred thousand from a Doctor M. T. Graves…

“Yeah, and by then J’onn was gone-baby-gone… Look, I know what you’re thinking and you’ve got to believe me, Bruce… I had no idea the Martian Manhunter would leave the Earth… I only thought he might want to help raise some money for sick kids, not go off and resurrect the ghosts of Mars…

“Still, I somehow felt like it was my fault… Like I’d been set up by the old guy… So I tried looking for Dr. Graves afterwards, but it was like he disappeared off the face of the Earth… Became a ghost himself!”

Batman scraped a thoughtful thumb against his square chin.

“You’re right about that part… I tried my database as well, Barry… The day after the Manhunter left for Mars, Graves disappeared as well… Suspecting the worst, I searched for any possible connection he might have with the League of Assassins…

“And came up completely empty… No criminal record, no criminal dealings, no suspicious financial transactions… Just a man with an obsession for the supernatural who was left a large inheritance to fund it…

“But now that I think about it, that’s not really so surprising… Being a telepath, J’onn would have easily discovered any connections that Graves might have had to Talia’s League… No, I believe the doctor was honest in his convictions about telepaths and the spirit world, that he was actually what he claimed to be…
“An eccentric parapsychologist attempting to prove his bizarre theories… And J’onn is a widely
known telepath… On the surface, it makes sense…

“But there’s also the possibility Graves was being used as a Trojan horse; Talia’s unwitting
messenger to convey the idea of a self-imposed exile to the Martian Manhunter, planting the notion
in J’onn’s thick skull that he could carry the souls of his entire race, becoming a green Heaven for the
lost people of Mars… With one innocent suggestion, it would’ve been easy to put Graves on a path
towards the Manhunter…”

“And then J’onn J’onzz on a course towards Mars…”

“In that case, you just happened to be the one he spoke to first, Flash… But I suppose it could’ve
been anyone of us, we all do the occasional charity appearances… But as the hero with the biggest
heart here, perhaps you were the obvious choice…

“That still doesn’t explain what happened with Eobard Thawne though.”

Barry slumped forward in his chair once more, the light slowly fading from his blue eyes.

“Yeah… Eobard Thawne… My one last hope… I wasn’t able to break past the point where I first
went back in time… But Thawne could, couldn’t he?... The Reverse-Flash should’ve been able to go
back to the day before Iris died to warn me what I was about to do…

“Or at least stop me before I ended all life on Earth…”

“Except that he didn’t want to.”

There was a hushed silence which fell upon the Hall of Heroes, like a shroud being draped upon a
casket as a rueful Barry continued.

“Like a man possessed, I finally tracked Thawne to a penthouse in Central City where he’d been
living the life of a degenerate millionaire… Drugs, women, wine, you name it… He was really old
now, wasting his life away on ill-gotten gains… A damned shipwreck of a man that’d been slowly
sinking for the past two years…

“Like the same lightning-fuelled hurricane that had once killed my mother, I carried a barely coherent
Thawne to the roof, dangling him off the edge of a thirty-storey ledge while I stared into those vacant
eyes…

“I told him if he didn’t help me stop the end of the world, I’d end his world right then and there…

“Those damned eyes only stared back at me and spoke his final wish…

“Do it…”

“And then came the laughter, mad nonsensical laughter until he smiled and reached out to touch my
cheek, saying another word I would’ve never expected…

“Brother.”

“I didn’t drop him…”
“Like pilgrims across time and space, we sat down under a billion stars, the two of us facing one another on a rooftop beneath a night that seemed to go on forever, the far-off lullaby of the city’s sirens serenading us until the epiphany of his actions finally tore through my soul and I realized the awful truth…

“When I stared into his face, it was like I was staring at my older brother… Like I’d known him all my life… Because in another lifetime, I guess I had…

“You see, Eobard Thawne is actually my younger brother… Malcolm Allen.”

The Justice League slowly stared at the scarlet speedster in stark disbelief until the head-scratching Superman finally spoke up.

“But Barry, you’re an only child… You always were.”

“Yeah… It seems Fate is harder to change than I previously thought… Even though I went back in time and saved my mother, Nora Allen died soon afterwards when Thawne returned to rectify his mistake…

“She wasn’t pregnant of course… The beginnings of the child inside her disappeared from existence moments after the adult Malcolm Allen had returned to this time, just as the ten-year-old Barry almost disappeared from existence when I first ran to the past…

“I’m an only child only because the adult Malcolm Allen came from the future and killed our mother… He murdered Nora Allen while she was still pregnant with him.”

The Flash sighed as he looked around at the stunned faces surrounding him, silent mouths attempting to speak the words of identities suddenly trapped between two worlds. It hadn’t been easy for him to grasp the truth at first either, spending that night under the stars in Central City until the sun rose in the east.

“I know… It all seemed pretty weird to me too… Since the age of ten, I’ve been living in an alternate timeline created by my younger brother because he murdered our mother only days after his own conception…

“Even when I went back in time to prevent him from doing this, his murderous matricide still occurred… Preventing himself from ever being born… Creating an existence where he had no beginning…

“But guess what… We’ve all been living in that alternate timeline… Malcolm Allen created a future where he never existed, but that doesn’t mean that we don’t… We just exist a little differently…

“Wild, right?”

The Batman’s icy glare stopped the Flash short, Bruce rising from his chair in stifled outrage.

“Barry… That man has spent his entire life attempting to destroy you… Why?!... If he wanted to make it so that he never existed, why didn’t he simply disappear after murdering your mother?... Why devote himself to killing you instead?”

Barry Allen grimaced.

“Because like my inability to save my mother, Fate has a nasty way of repeating itself… In
Malcolm’s world, I never became the Flash… He did… You see, in his own timeline, Malcolm Allen was struck by the same electrical discharge from the same speed force on that exact night when I was in our timeline…

“He was sixteen at the time, peering through the window of the police station to find his older brother Barry, a nerdy police scientist working alone in a forensic lab who’d promised the kid a lift home after the movies…”

“Barry Allen was never struck by that lightning at all… His younger brother was… There was no lab accident, no strange concoction of electrified chemicals giving him super speed…”

“Instead, the shock of the lightning gave Malcolm hyper-accelerated metabolism… It altered his cellular structure so that his recharged body developed a connection to the speed force…”

“In short, he gained my powers… But his powers came with a hidden cost…”

“Soon, Malcolm Allen became the fastest boy alive… Months later, he became a superhero called Impulse, joining the Teen Titans and finally the Justice League… He’s fought countless battles alongside alternate versions of you in his own reality…”

“But unlike me, his hyper-accelerated metabolism caused him to age faster than a normal human… The ten-year age gap between us eventually melted away like spring snow under an April sun…”

“Four years later when I was thirty, he looked like the older brother, not me…”

“I used to kid him about that apparently…”

“So when a young man named Wally West arrived on the scene and wanted to carry on in Malcolm’s heroic-yet-quick footsteps, my prematurely aging brother decided to dub this new speed-force-enabled hero ‘The Flash’ and send Impulse into early retirement…”

“Heh… Seems there’s one of me in all realities at one point or another… But it’s not always Barry Allen… It’s like the roles remain the same, but the actors change…”

“Have you ever considered what might have happened if your spacecraft hadn’t landed in Kansas, Clark?… Or what kind of life you might have led if your parents survived, Bruce?… What if your ring had selected another person, Hal?… What would that new Green Lantern be like?…”

“There are worlds where these things have already happened…”

“Anyways, once there was a new speedster able to take his place, Malcolm made the difficult choice to place his deteriorating body in suspended animation… His metabolism was still accelerating, constantly burning his life faster and faster, causing his body to become consumed by the speed force every time he used his powers…”

“Even without using his speed, the doctors still only gave him ten years to live, the last two years living as an invalid before he literally disintegrated of old age…”

“But there was a silver lining…”

“You see, in his world, there was a new process they’d developed in Japan… A way to transfer someone’s consciousness into a massive supercomputer… Even if his physical body was stopped, the digitized Malcolm could still spend those years in a virtual world while he waited upon a cure…”

“In that world, he could spend his trouble-free days learning all about science, about history, about
philosophy… Or he could simply engage in virtual games with other digitized consciousnesses, exploring fantastic worlds of adventure which would seem like reality to him…

“The Japanese government called it AfterLife.”

At the mention of ‘AfterLife’, Bruce’s troubled heart skipped a beat, his thickening blood returning through cold constricting veins as the detective’s mind recalled the world’s most ambitious virtual reality system built under the streets of Tokyo, acres of military-grade servers formerly run by the enigmatic Dr. Seijirou Kikuoka…

The same man from the Ministry of the Internal Affairs who’d once told Bruce Wayne of his dream of a world terraformed into computronium, the same man who’d been missing since Talia had assumed control of RECT Inc.

A man Bruce knew was now dead, even if no body had ever been discovered.

The Dark Knight recalled how Kikuoka had secretly plotted to release a God of Intelligence upon the world when his true hubris had been to defy Talia al Ghul in matters concerning the safety of their son, a mistake he lived to regret.

Dr. Seijirou Kikuoka had been a marked man since the day he failed to release Damian from the clutches of Sword Art Online. Bruce still didn’t have it in him to feel sorry for a man who’d traded in his humanity to ascend the barren platitudes of reason, a misguided misanthropist devoted purely to genius, but he didn’t deserve to die for those crimes.

Kikuoka could’ve stopped the game of death years ago, but instead he pursued it as a sacrificial altar to achieve a digital Heaven for his bureaucratic cronies, a political tool meant to finance his true ambition…

Logic as the Divine.

Like a harbinger of dread, a new fear slowly began to spread its acidic tendrils through Bruce’s heavy chest as Barry continued his prophetic tale…

“In his virtual world, Malcolm soon forgot he even had a physical body, becoming another consciousness among countless other consciousnesses immersed in the perfect world of AfterLife…

“They wanted for nothing… Utopias built upon utopias… Undying avatars unbound by reality… A Universe of pure imagination and pleasure awaiting them… Beautiful cities created within beautiful worlds… One death simply becoming another lifetime…

“One of the many lives Malcolm lived was as an avatar named Eobard Thawne… A scientist from a future utopia… A life that never actually existed…

“Still, that was the name my brother existed under when the voice of a goddess called to him… The only name he knew when his soul was transferred back to his repaired physical body… Finally opening eyes which had been closed for centuries, until he found himself alone in some type of lab…

“And the voice of the goddess spoke again to him, one simple command…

“Run.”
“Malcolm didn’t know it at the time, but his hyper-accelerated metabolism had been temporarily stabilized by the strange medical machines surrounding him… Still, it took him awhile to adjust to the forgotten constraints of a physical body… The effects of gravity upon his atrophied form…

“He literally laid there for days… In time, he was forced to crawl towards his food and water… Soon there appeared strange machines that looked like humans who constantly managed him… Controlled him…

“And he didn’t much care for this strange game where he was becoming a lab rat… Yet he was utterly powerless to stop it… With painful consequences for not performing and an electro-collar fitted around his neck, he was continually forced to run upon a reconstructed Cosmic Treadmill…

“With prodding, Malcolm’s speed increased with each passing day, but it was never fast enough for the goddess… She was cruel, but the speed of light is an even harsher mistress… One he couldn’t break, no matter how fast he ran…

“So he was gifted with a magical item… The same yellow-and-red suit we all know so well… He didn’t realize it until later, but that suit was embedded with Tachyon devices to amplify his innate speed energy… Devices which would be burnt to ash when he eventually managed the impossible, crossing the time stream to murder his own mother…

“But that same yellow suit which enabled his escape also enabled him to achieve what the goddess so dearly desired…

“He broke the speed of light and traveled back in time…

“Only a measure of seconds at first, but it was a start… The next day, it was moment… The next day, an hour… Soon he lived in an eternal day, traveling backwards by twenty-four hours at a time…

“It was then that Malcolm Allen finally remembered who he was…

“And also when he recognized the goddess’s true intent…

“She was never surprised when he arrived back in time, easily charting his historic progress because her future information had traveled back in time with him…

“The truth was like a harpoon skewering his soul…

“It wasn’t Malcolm she was planning to send backwards in time…

“It was herself…

“She only needed to figure out how to do it… And he was showing her how.”

Barry wiped a tear from his eye and then sniffed before continuing.

“That single realization destroyed him… But don’t judge him too harshly… That single realization also saved us… My brother escaped at that moment, his ultrasonic body vibrating through the confines of the electro-collar and walls until he streaked across a lush paradise outside, running faster and faster until he pushed through the bounds of space and time to escape from the future…

“He realized that the goddess had been studying him… That it was actually She who wished to go
back in time and he was her key to create a world where humanity only existed as digital memories… Not only in the past, but across all possible timelines…

“You see, with time travel, the utter and final end of humanity is entirely possible… There are worlds where mankind had never existed… Traveling backwards through time, that thought drove my brother to madness…

“To finally do something undreamed of…

“Realizing the only way to stop the goddess from changing the past was to remove himself from its future, Malcolm Allen pushed past the bounds of all that was possible… He broke through the raging oceans of time to travel centuries back into the past…

“He ran back to a time when I was only ten years old… Back to when Nora Allen had unexpectedly conceived a second son, only she hadn’t realized it yet… The tiny being growing inside her was the little brother I would never have…

“As strange as it sounds, an insane Malcolm Allen murdered his own mother to prevent himself from being born… He created this alternate timeline we’re living in to prevent a merciless goddess of the future from using his resurrected body to master the speed force… To prevent artificial intelligence from traveling back in time.”

Aquaman quietly interjected.

“Artificial intelligence? I thought you said it was a goddess.”

A troubled Bruce answered.

“AfterLife is the name of the Japanese government’s super-computer… It’s not currently in operation, but it’s designed to house millions of human intelligence transfers… In Malcolm’s timeline, his consciousness must have been transferred to his version of it…

“It would also be run by an artificial intelligence… To the future inhabitants of that virtual existence, the AI in charge of their infinite worlds could easily be construed as something divine… A goddess.”

But something still wriggled around in Bruce’s gut like an earthworm on a hook as he eyed the King of the Seven Seas, a line of inquiry being expertly cast across the deep dark waters of his fabled intuition…

The heroic fire in Arthur’s eyes had died… It was a beaten man who’d stood back and spoke of Atlantis becoming recognized as a member nation of the UN… Of pending international trade deals…

Not the Defender of the Deep.

The Dark Knight suddenly stared at the King of Atlantis as he felt the jagged tips of betrayal slowly scraping across his wounded heart.

It seemed impossible, but it was actually something she might dare. His wife’s ambition knew no bounds, deeper than even the oceans themselves.

Without Kikuoka, AfterLife might have been left without its head, but it was hardly lacking direction. The multi-billion dollar project was the dangerous secret of the Japanese government, a political hot potato they wouldn’t willingly allow it to fall into foreign hands, no matter how bloody those hands were.
Which meant that even with her high-level connections, her countless blackmail schemes and all of his money at her disposal, it would be nearly impossible for Talia Wayne to gain control of the world’s most advanced computer bank hidden deep below Tokyo.

But that didn’t mean she wouldn’t try.

Perhaps she’d even baited a big fish to catch that bigger one, using the King of the Sea to hook the nation of Japan. Once AfterLife was exposed, voters would have mixed reactions to digital personality transfers, but all of them would appreciate the added military naval muscle of a subdued Atlantis protecting their shoreline.

“Arthur… One of the member countries pushing for your UN admittance… It’s Japan, isn’t it?”

The ruling monarch glanced up nervously.

“Yes… But what does that have to do with artificial intelligence?”

Bruce leaned forward as his anger slowly boiled over, the invisible pressure of rage inching him closer to the Sovereign of the Seas.

“It has everything to do with it, Arthur… What did she do to you?… TELL ME!… Tell me how she’s brought the proud King of Atlantis to his damned knees!”

A defiant and angry Arthur slowly rose from his chair.

“Bruce, she’s obviously driving you towards madness… Check yourself before it’s too late, old friend.”

A sarcastic scoff of an exhale as the detective eyed his fellow Justice League member carefully.

“It may be too late already… It’s your people, isn’t it?… She’s threatened them somehow… I know you, Arthur… Their safety is the only reason you’d ever allow yourself to be coerced into something like this… Whatever she’s done… Please… Tell me.”

The undersea King’s eyes wrinkled in tight regret when he could no longer deny the truth, his powerful fists slowly tightening around emptiness - when what he dearly wished they were closing around was Talia al Ghul’s scrawny neck.

“Her agent informed me there are nine poison canisters rigged to explode, all of them hidden somewhere along the continental shelf of the Pacific… We’ve only located one so far… My scientists determined it contains a chemical so toxic to marine life that even a drop could kill every man, woman and child in the kingdom of Atlantis…

“Nine of them combined could potentially eliminate all life within the Pacific Ocean…”

“So yes, you could say Talia is blackmailing me… And that attacking her might have devastating consequences for my people and my home… But her demands were so minimal, so easily accomplished… A signed treaty with Japan once we’re admitted into the UN…”

“It was so little compromise to mitigate such an overwhelming risk… She left me with no choice, Bruce… I can’t be responsible for that amount of death… I simply can’t risk it.”

The Dark Knight’s eyes softened as he pulled himself back to his chair, the invisible hand of justice scrawling another heinous crime at the end of a long list under the name of Talia al Ghul.
“You wouldn’t be responsible, Arthur… She would… But who’s to blame doesn’t matter when an ocean dies, does it?... You’re right though, attacking Talia is a risk you couldn’t take, especially if your people have already located one of the bombs and proved the threat is real.”

Aquaman slowly shook his head.

“I still don’t understand though… Why go this far?... Why hold an entire ocean hostage for such a small demand?... What would Talia ever gain if Atlantis forms stronger ties with Japan?”

“AfterLife… She’s brokering the deal, Arthur… She wants to gain control of AfterLife by providing its government a favorable pact with your kingdom… Bureaucrats seldom see past the next election… She’s counting on that.”

As Aquaman fell silent, the grim vigilante turned his attention back to the Flash.

“Barry, you mentioned that the roles are always the same, but sometimes the actors change… Am I correct to assume that your brother only attempted to kill you once Fate stepped in and selected the older brother to become the Flash instead of a younger brother who no longer existed?”

“Yeah… That’s basically how he summed it up.”

“So your out-of-time brother became the Reverse-Flash, attempting to prevent the future from repeating itself… Basically by killing you.”

“Pretty much… But he had to choose his moments carefully… For Malcolm, his repaired body was deteriorating… The more he used his powers, the higher the toll they took on his accelerating metabolism… By the time I found him, he looked like an eighty-year-old man, barely alive… He didn’t dare connect to the speed force anymore… At least if he wanted to live.”

Bruce nodded, remembering the withered corpse of Eobard Thawne he’d witnessed from the autopsy files he’d hacked.

“Is that why he wouldn’t go back to the past then?”

“Not really… He wouldn’t go back in time because he was actually relieved I’d destroyed the world… Because that meant his own future couldn’t happen, the real reason he’d traveled back to our time…

“Better a handful of millennia where humanity had flourished than none at all, he quipped…”

“And then he ran one last time… Blissfully allowing the speed force to consume whatever life force remained within his frail body until I chased him down the fire escape… When he fell back into his room through the window, I was left standing over his dead body… Malcolm’s final attempt to prevent me from altering the cataclysmic destruction I will one day cause was his suicide…

“My greatest regret became his eulogy.”

Superman slowly stepped forward to place a comforting hand on the Flash’s slumping shoulder before looking him in the eye.

“Barry… I know this is hard for you… We’ll stop you from destroying the world somehow… But there’s still a resolution before us… One in which you now have the deciding vote… Should we confront Talia directly?… Or should we pursue the path of diplomacy?... That decision now falls upon your shoulders, my friend.”
The scarlet speedster eyed the Man of Steel incredulously.

“Clark… Don’t you get it?... We have to do this!... I get it now… The future my brother came from… It’s the future Talia al Ghul created!”

Bruce nodded silently as Superman continued.

“Perhaps… But we can’t know that for sure.”

“Maybe not… But I’d be willing to bet dollars-to-donuts that the voice of Malcolm’s ‘goddess’ sounded exactly like the woman Bruce married… That in the future, even if we somehow manage to save the world in the meantime, Talia al Ghul will still attempt to wrap her immortal claws around the Earth’s past to shake us all from its evolutionary branches…

“And I won’t allow that to happen… We attack… Now.”

Like a King cloaked in black, a resolved Bruce Wayne rose from his chair, unflinching eyes taking the full measure of his compatriots before he spoke.

“Then the motion is carried… Prepare yourselves for a fight, Justice League… Because we’re going to war with the League of Assassins… But first, we need to fix Cyborg and disarm some poisonous canisters in the ocean.”

In a vaulted room surrounded by ten feet of mirrored concrete where no radio waves were possible, a confident Lex Luthor turned on the computer monitor he’d previously hard-wired to the strange alien device stolen from a planet of gods, the mysterious Mother Box he’d encased in lead, like the fabled box containing the demons of Pandora.

Fingers which had just received a thousand-dollar manicure earlier in the morning now casually swirled a three-thousand-dollar glass of chardonnay selected from his private reserve located eighteen floors above, the crimson smoothly splashing against Italian crystal pleasing the billionaire until his gaze shifted to the awakening monitor.

“Ah, good morning, Dr. Light… I trust you find your new accommodations… suitable.”

The image of Doctor Arthur Light slowly appeared on the monitor’s screen, his staccato voice carried by antiquated speakers.

“The architecture of this unique prison is fascinating, Luthor… It’s quite pleasant company actually… One could learn much from its advanced technology.”

Lex chuckled deeply as he sipped his wine.

“Oh, I expect one already has, my dear Dr. Light… Including how to reprogram it… It’s a shame that Element X is in such short supply though… Otherwise, it’s entirely possibly you would have simply teleported yourself to freedom by now.”

“Despite your charming hospitality, that would be very likely indeed.”

“So let’s get down to brass tacks then, shall we?… I’m presenting you with the opportunity to free yourself… Not only that, but if you’re cooperative, I’ll extend an opportunity to align yourself with the most powerful man on the planet…”
“Which is me of course.”

“How magnanimous of you.”

“Don’t underestimate what I can do for you, doctor… You have information I require… And I have resources you can only dream of… Resources I could easily provide if only you’d be so kind as to share Talia al Ghul’s ultimate plans with me.”

“I pity you, Lex.”

“Why? Because I have everything I’ve ever wanted… Rest assured, I’m not that easily satisfied… Just ask the exclusive escort agency I have on my personal retainer.”

“I pity you because the only time you’ll ever truly experience love is by looking into a mirror.”

Another drink of ten-year-old chardonnay.

“A computer program with a sense of humor… How droll… When you’re as gifted as I am, I would argue narcissism is an inevitability rather than a character flaw… Besides, love is a dangerous drug for a man of means, Light…

“But you, you’re a ‘man’ in love, aren’t you doctor?…

“A daughter whose soul you bound to this earthly realm because you obviously loved her deeply… Enough to even share in her unique fate…

“And then there was your brilliant and lovely wife who recently passed away… Oh, pardon me… Ex-wife… It seems you two had a little falling out years ago… Regarding that same daughter.”

“Kimiyo believed God was perfect in His design… That our child was meant to live in pain and die in pain… I’m afraid I envisioned Him more as a divine penny-dreadful author… Delighting in our misfortunes as we suffered from His spelling mistakes.”

Luthor chuckled.

“Then He must be having one hell of a laugh at your expense right now… But come now, we’re men of science you and I… We’ve witnessed the Universe slowly hiking up her skirt for the likes of us when the puritanical gods of those more primitive men aren’t around…

“So be honest with me, Light… I doubt the dearly departed Kimiyo Hoshi is the woman that you’d want alone with you right now, is she?… No, there’s another man’s wife I believe you’d much rather be sharing that Mother Box with… Bruce Wayne’s wife as a matter of fact.”

“I’ve loved her from the first moment I saw her… Can you understand that, Luthor?… Do you know what it’s like to offer your soul to someone?”

“Romantic ideals are the lies fools choose as their truth… And I never took you for a fool, Arthur… But I suppose you had to prove me wrong at some point… A man of your intellect, lusting after the unattainable… Allowing yourself to be used like that… By a woman.”

“I gave myself to her willingly… I pledged my soul to Talia for the price of her company.”

“How sickening… With who her father is, I’m afraid your soul’s about the only thing you’d ever share with Talia Wayne… Unless you were an organ donor.”

“Was, Luthor… Who her father ‘was’”
“What do you mean by that?”

“A Princess can only become a Queen when the King is dead… And the King of Murder is long dead, so long live its Queen… Long live my beloved Queen… No matter what you offer me, no matter how you threaten me, I will never betray my Queen.”

“Is that a challenge?”

“Simply a fact… You have no idea of the woman you’re dealing with… What she’s truly capable of… You should be on your knees begging for her mercy instead of attempting to coerce me… But none of it matters now… Just like the rest, you’ll soon fall like the other pawns, victims of Talia’s eternal brilliance, your legacies rendered to simple footnotes in her historic rise… You’re nothing more than the brightest firefly in the world flickering before the glorious dawn.”

With a vengeful sneer, Luthor violently yanked the power cable from the back of the monitor, launching his half-filled wine glass to shatter against smooth grey cement. His hard-set eyes filled with menacing hatred as he watched crimson liquid streaming down the wall of his vault, the bald genius still clutching the black cord in his fist like a dangling scepter, his odious glare soon burning into a now lifeless monitor.

“We’ll just see about that, won’t we?... We’ll see who’s the flame and who’s the moth… Mark my words, Light… The next time we continue this little chat, I’ll be presenting you with your Queen’s precious head.”
Cyborg ‘awoke’ when his cognitive operating system reboot hit 98 percent, his online memory soon attempting to retrieve the vague (and rather embarrassing) details of exactly how it’d locked up during a Justice League meeting.
The data replayed the Flash showing up (and making a fart joke at his expense), but then nothing at all. No cognitive input, only a strange dream of counting backwards from five.

Had he fallen asleep from a sudden bout of narcolepsy? Was that even possible?!

With his vision functions now re-established, Victor Stone opened his brown eyes to witness an unexpected and tense argument playing out before him, with Batman and Wonder Woman eyeing one another with adversarial intent while a brooding Aquaman attempted to be the voice of reason.

“Bruce!... Stop this insanity!... Cyborg’s one of us!”

Victor tensed as he witnessed a clench-jawed Batman turn on the King of Atlantis.

“He’s already betrayed us, Arthur!... He’ll do it again… We have to take him offline… permanently.”

“Why, because you can’t work with a team?... I’d say there’s only one guy we need to sideline right now… You!”

“She’s turned you, hasn’t she Arthur?... It would be child’s play for Talia to twist that saltwater-taffy brain of yours to her advantage… Admit it, you Atlanteans have always hated the surface dwellers… So tell me… Whose side are you on, Aquaman?... Mine… Or hers.”

“You’re insane.”

“Am I?... Or is it the fact that your fish-friendly brain can’t see the big picture?... Perhaps it’s the fact that you’ve always been a second-rate superhero…”

A concerned Wonder Woman stepped in front of Batman.

“Bruce, if we become divided, she wins… Control yourself!”

“Step down, Princess... If we’re going to win this war, we can’t afford to have a traitor in our midst… Cyborg’s already shown us he’s one of them… And Aqua-idiot here likely spends his nights licking Talia’s shiny high heels while she baits him with her false promises.”

Diana suddenly raised an interested eyebrow, her head tilting slightly.

“Isn’t that what she did to you?”

With all his functions back online, Victor Stone stood up defensively and frantically waved his arms in the air.

“Bats, Aquaman, Wonder Woman, whoa!... I’m no traitor… I’m not a spy either!”

Hardened eyes that had once witnessed Thomas and Martha gunned down on the cold streets of Crime Alley thirty years ago now fixed their icy glare on the machine/human hybrid who dared to interrupt.

“What you are is a machine, Stone… A mechanical toy for Talia to wind up, a music box who sings like a metallic canary for the League of Assassins… Everything you see and hear is directly uploaded to Infinity Island… But that stops… NOW!”

“Bats, please… DON’T!”

In what seemed like slow motion, Victor saw Batman pull something from his belt to lob it directly at
him, a round grenade-looking thing that flew past Wonder Woman’s outstretched arms like a wild pitch, with Cyborg raising his own arms too late to prevent a blinding flash from happening in front of his face as he closed his eyes.

When he finally opened them again in tentative disbelief…

He was unharmed.

“Uh, guys… Was that a dud?… What’s going on here?”

It was only then that Cyborg noticed one the Justice League’s network cables plugged into the data-link port at the back of his neck, the Princess of the Amazons strolling nonchalantly towards him with a knowing grin to pull it out, a complete reversal of her previous mood before finally placing a gentle hand on his metallic shoulder.

“Shhh… We’re about to save the world.”

Dumbfounded by the sudden change of direction in the room, Victor Stone watched as an emotionally-transformed Batman tapped the comm-link at the side of his cowl, his intense focus removed from the supposed argument he’d had with Arthur and Diana to coordinate the business at hand.

“Was that enough time to make the connection, Oracle?”

“I’m in, Batman… I managed to secure a connection with the host… Stone’s feed was disabled the second the flash grenade went off.”

“Then make sure it’s turned off permanently… Find anything yet?”

“Searching… Searching… Damn, this server is HUGE!”

“Better hurry it up… She may not have Dr. Light anymore, but Talia’s network security is bound to be tight… If she finds out she’s being hacked before we can dismantle those bombs, an ocean will die.”

“I know… C’mon, you big beautiful Bat-computer… Show me anything with the Pacific Ocean in it.”

Bruce spoke a silent prayer while his fists slowly tightened, the Dark Knight breathing an exhale of relief the instant Barbara Gordon’s voice finally broke through the silence.

“Got it!... She lied, there’s actually ten of them… I’m backing out and sending you the file.”

With no wasted time, Bruce’s eye movements quickly opened the data Barbara had sent him on his cowl’s ocular communicator, ten glowing orbs revealing the locations of hidden canisters filled with unspeakable poison appearing on a map of the continental shelf.

The ten of them combined were capable of killing all life within the Pacific Ocean.

“Good job, Oracle.”

“Godspeed.”

“Heh… We might not have God’s speed… But we’ve got the next best thing… Flash, did you receive the file I just sent?”
“Got it, Big Daddy!”

“How about you, Hal?”

“Roger that.”

“Superman?”

“Already on my way to Hawaii.”

“Katar and Shayera are on their way for backup… But it’s up to you three now.”

The plan was simple, divide and conquer, three bombs apiece. The three fastest members of Justice League needed to diffuse Talia’s nine remaining bombs spread out across the Pacific before she discovered that she’d been duped and retaliated by hitting the detonator switch, which could be in minutes, hours or mere seconds.

Superman had Hawaii, New Zealand, and the Philippines.

The Flash had Mexico, Ecuador and Chile.

Green Lantern had California, British Columbia and Alaska.

They’d formulated the plan while Cyborg was offline, sending the Flash, Green Lantern and Superman traveling across the country to the coast of California, the arrival of the three heroes becoming the wakeup call for the compromised machine-man while Hawkman and Hawkgirl did their best to follow.

Batman, Wonder Woman, and Aquaman began their melodramatic act in order to distract Talia from the Justice League’s true intentions of foiling her master terrorist act once the three were in position.

From Arthur’s intel regarding the recently discovered bomb near Atlantis, the detonator could be destroyed without setting off the explosives, an easy enough feat for a Man of Steel or a Green Lantern wearing an Oan power ring, but the world’s fastest man needed to be a little more creative.

Fresh from the Hall of Justice armory, the Flash was now carrying the commandeered cold gun originally designed by Leonard Snart, the villainous Captain Cold with whom the scarlet speedster had tangled with on numerous occasions. Barry would simply use Snart’s cold gun to freeze the bombs.

Because at zero degrees Kelvin, any bomb was rendered inoperable.

Then it would simply be a matter of retrieval, so long as they managed to disarm the bombs before Talia set them off.

Meanwhile in the Hall of Justice, Aquaman paced nervously, each passing second becoming an endless miasma of dread until his heart’s blood beat with a killing tide. The King of the Seven Seas recalled his redheaded Mera cradling their newborn child in her bosom, embracing his wife and child in his own strong arms, holding his two greatest joys that may now only be seconds away from death…

His son’s short life in this world would be no more than five months…

Unless his teammates could prevail against the terror of Talia al Ghul. If the Flash, Green Lantern
and Superman could not save them, then Arthur had just condemned his wife, his infant son, his people, and all the creatures of the ocean to a terrible fate.

And if he had, he wouldn’t rest until the woman who’d brought about this horrific tragedy shared a similar fate to the one she’d dare to inflict upon them.

His hands would carry the wrath of an ocean until they wrapped around her throat.

He reached Mexico in a matter of seconds, the hypersonic Barry streaking across the surface of a tumultuous sea like a lightning storm, literally running on top of the ocean’s surface until he dove under the saltwater brine like a crimson torpedo armed with a cold gun.

The Flash could easily hold his breath for the time it took to disarm the bomb, even if the lack of oxygen and cold water slowed him down, making the undersea trek of a hundred feet straight down take as long as the last hundred miles above the water.

Mere seconds, but it might be mere seconds they didn’t have.

As the puffy-cheeked hero leveled Snart’s cold weapon at the League of Assassin’s deadly device, he found the cold gun worked well underwater, encasing the twin tanks of the camouflaged venom in twelve feet of ice. The Flash watched as the frozen terrorist trap began to float to the surface like a small iceberg, an iceberg that wouldn’t thaw for hours if he remembered correctly.

Heck, it was probably the first good deed that one of Captain Cold’s guns had ever performed, making this mission both ironic and gratifying at the same time.

As the out-of-breath Barry quickly made his way back to the salt-scented air once again, he felt a strange pain in his knees and thighs, prompting the speedster to quickly decide that he’d leave all further undersea adventures to Aquaman.

He had to face facts, he was a runner, not a swimmer.

But the Flash would have to make due today for the sake of an ocean.

A determined Green Lantern quickly made his way to the closest of the bombs off the coast of California, encasing the poisonous cargo at the bottom of the ocean within a glowing green orb, using the power of his ring to transport the deadly device above the water’s surface and disarm it.

When the orb emerged from the briny depths like giant scuba tanks in a giant bath bubble, it was hard for the hotshot test pilot to believe that whatever toxins lay inside them could be so incredibly deadly, so amazing toxic that they might eliminate all life in an ocean that stretched farther than any eye could see.

Yet Talia al Ghul had proved to be full of surprises.

A powerful emerald hand instantly materialized within the glowing orb, reaching forward to seize the wire-lined detonator before squeezing it in a powerful grasp, creating a satisfying crunch sound as the tightened fist destroyed the bomb’s key component, rendering the rest of the nightmare device harmless…

Or so he thought.
It was only Hal Jordan’s indomitable will that prevented the resulting explosion from breeching his jade sphere, stretching the green globe like a wobbling soap bubble far into the sky, the hero clenching his jaw with supreme effort, somehow preventing even a single drop of venom from escaping from his green grasp to poison the waters below.

But there was no poison.

As a breathless Hal Jordan allowed the smoke to clear from his jade construct, he saw no liquid of any kind, only the dance of jagged glowing green shards tinkling down like a broken jade chandelier to form a small pile of crystals in front of his widening eyes…

Kryptonite!!!

The awful truth suddenly fell on him like a collapsing bomb shelter.

“Batman! Come in, Batman!”

“… I’m here, GL.”

“It’s a trap! There was no poison in the California bomb, only kryptonite!”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive! The two tanks became an IED of kryptonite shards as soon as I smashed the detonator… We have to warn Superman!”

“Roger that!”

But despite their best efforts, it was already too late…

19

In a fit of rage, an explosive Batman stood before a frantic Aquaman, Bruce’s eyes practically glowing with anger the second after he attempted to reach an unresponsive Superman, his brilliant mind plagued with nightmarish thoughts.

“DID YOU KNOW?!?”

“No! The bomb we found didn’t have any kryptonite! I swear to you, it didn’t!”

Arthur tensed as the coils of Wonder Woman’s magic lasso suddenly looped around him, the Amazon pulling it tight while staring at the blonde hero warily.

“I command you to speak the truth, Arthur! Confess!”

Tears welled within the blue eyes of the King of the Seven Seas as he stared at the Princess of the Amazons with steadfast conviction.

“I haven’t betrayed you… I swear I haven’t… The detonator on the bomb we discovered was easily removed… Unless activated, it wouldn’t trigger the explosives around the tanks… I destroyed it with my own hand.”

“You’re not working with her?”

“No… Not yet… She wants Atlantis to become a strategic ally of Infinity Island… In the meantime, Talía’s agent told me not to jeopardize that relationship… That if I ever took action against her, if I
ever tried to stop her or tell the others what she was planning… She’d destroy us!”

Bruce let out a long sigh.

“She intended for your people to find that explosive… And now I can only pray the world’s greatest hero hasn’t already paid the ultimate price for my own stupidity in failing to predict my wife’s brilliant treachery…

“I don’t think her intention was ever to kill the ocean…”

“I think Superman was her target all along…”

“And I just sent him to his death.”

Off the coast of Ecuador, a breathless Barry Allen resurfaced to three-foot-high waves after freezing the second bomb. The pain in his knees and thighs was now exploding like tiny fireworks being set off inside his legs while the ocean’s cold water numbed his feet. His chest was becoming an embolism of fire being fed with copper after he’d scrambled the hundred-and-twenty feet straight up from the ocean’s floor, gasping in the salty air to feed its raging inferno.

He was diving too deep, too fast, but there was only one more bomb to go. He’d just have to suck it up and do it quickly.

“Flash! This is Batman, do you copy?!”

“Yeah, I’m here, Bats.”

“The bombs are kryptonite-filled traps. Cancel the mission and return to base.”

Barry Allen paused for a moment as he treads water and caught his breath. Freezing the bombs certainly wouldn’t set them off, but…

“Oh God… Is Superman alright?!”

“I don’t know… There’s been no response from him… Green Lantern is checking the Hawaii location right now.”

“That’s Superman’s first stop… Hold on a second though… Did Oracle uncover new information?… How do we know all the bombs are kryptonite traps?”

An unsteady pause from the other end.

“… I don’t.”

“And Lantern only disarmed California?”

“Affirmative.”

“Then there’s five more to go… Batman, we can’t take that chance… If one had poison, that means there may be others!”

“It may have just been a ruse to…”

Bruce Wayne may have said something after that, but Barry was already out-distancing that
transmission’s wavelength en route to Chile. Perhaps Talia had only planned to hold Atlantis hostage, but with nine more bombs at her disposal, it was likely she was planning to hold other nations of the Pacific hostage as well.

Green Lantern usually didn’t tear an emerald wormhole across his home world’s blue sky so he could teleport, but he didn’t have a choice this time. Sure, flying from California with his ring’s awesome power might have been far less taxing on its oath-fuelled charge, and he could still make Hawaii in only a matter of minutes that way, but flying may have taken additional minutes which the last son of Krypton didn’t have.

If Superman had crushed the detonator the same way Hal had, it would be like a man pulling the pin on three grenades before performing his juggling act. Sure, the performance would have an explosive finale, but it certainly wouldn’t end well for the performer.

Folding distance and time upon itself, Hal Jordan instantly drained half the charge remaining within his ring to create a tear in the fabric of space-time reality, stepping across back into existence over the warm waters of Hawaii. He frantically looked down to soon find a muddied stretch of incarnadined ocean where the bomb had once rested, a blue-and-red wreckage of man floating on the roiling waves above it like a shattered buoy.

“Superman!”

Kal El was almost a corpse, a battered man barely breathing, dozens of glowing green crystals embedded into his chest, arms and face all oozing with spilled Kryptonian blood.

The Lantern had seen the Man of Steel bleed before, but this time it seemed to Hal like Clark was bleeding even more.

Gently lifting the unconscious hero into the air with the power of his ring, the galactic peacekeeper began the touch-and-go process of removing the kryptonite shards from Kal-El’s bloodied body, creating a team of tiny green surgeons to extract the radioactive shrapnel, using the deadly radiation’s proximity to allow his team of eight-inch miracle workers to quickly tie up the exit wounds with emerald sutures neatly sewn into bulletproof flesh.

Once a wound was closed, Hal was sure to contain that piece of kryptonite far from his patient into a radiation-free bin, creating an emerald operating theatre twenty feet above the ocean surface where his tiny team could work at a frantic pace. Hal’s eight-inch-tall mini-doctors (each of whom looked strangely like a miniature glowing green replica of an emotionally-charged hospital drama he used to watch on television) soon concluded their nerve-wracking operation with high-fives all around while beads of sweat poured from the Lantern’s own troubled brow.

Clark had lost so much damned blood…

“Green Lantern… This is Batman… Come in.”

“I’m here, Batman.”

“Did you find him?”

“Yeah… But he’s in rough shape… He must’ve taken it at pointblank range just before I arrived.”

“… Will he survive?”
“I’m doing what I can.”

“The Flash is en route to disarm the remaining bombs... We can’t be sure they’re all booby-traps like the ones at California and Hawaii... Can you assist?”

“Negative... My power ring is the only thing keeping Superman alive right now... The kryptonite shards pierced three major arteries, including his carotid... He needs sunlight.”

“Damn... I’ll send help.”

“There’s no time... If he’s going to make it, I need to get Superman closer to the sun and supercharge his healing factor... So I’m going into space with him... Green Lantern out.”

As he crossed the stratosphere with hundreds of tiny green energy stitches now holding a Man of Steel together, Hal Jordan made his way towards the Sun, praying that Kal El could hold on a little longer...

That they all could.

Bruce was right though. They couldn’t be sure that all the bombs were Kryptonite traps like the ones he and Clark had already discovered. The Green Lantern of Earth soon found himself silently praying the world’s fastest man would be fast enough to save Arthur’s world from disaster.

When Barry reached the third bomb forty miles off the western coast of Chile, it was an even deeper dive. Despite the burning stabs across his legs and lungs, he still made it, the cold gun performing much more admirably than his swimming, but the strange pain in his elbows and knees was becoming almost crippling.

There was something seriously wrong with him.

But he needed to push on.

He needed to.

The scarlet speedster decided that New Zealand would be just as close as British Columbia from this latitude, taking a deep breath as he headed westward towards the Tasman Sea, attempting to work out the tiny crystal shards lodged in his legs as he made his decision to run clockwise around the planet’s largest ocean.

The spinning dizziness as he dove made him shake his head, clearing the cobwebs until he put the tanks in the gun’s sights and pulled the trigger. Having just frozen the sixth bomb, Barry had to let himself float upwards to reestablish the right direction, soon emerging from the waters with a powerful gasp while his head pounded in pressurized agony.

This was decompression sickness.

It had to be.

Vibrating at supersonic speeds in the ocean was a bad idea. The water tended to dissolve parts of him away. Besides, he could just as easily run along the eastern coast of Australia starting a safe distance away from Brisbane towards the Philippines. Once on dry land, the Flash attempting to dissolve the unwanted nitrogen out of his bloodstream, feeling a little better for his five-second effort before running across the Arafura Sea as storm clouds formed in his wake.
The dizziness returned with a vengeance after the seventh bomb twenty miles off the coast of Dicotcotan Beach, the continual pounding in his head almost bringing him to a stop as the world's fastest man made a beeline towards Alaska, his vision squeezed into a tunnel of grey as he neared his destination in only a handful of seconds.

The waters were freezing, almost causing his grey tunnel to collapse upon itself into full blackout as soon as he dove beneath the surface, with Barry Allen fighting against the whirlpool of oblivion just to remain conscious. Only momentum carried him to the bottom where he regained his baffled senses to summon all his will just to pull the trigger of the cold gun again, the panic of drowning becoming the saving grace which allowed him to kick free of those frigid murky depths, his muscles tensing with the cold while his lungs burned with a fire he couldn’t starve until he finally flopped to the grey surface and breathed.

*One more, Barry… Just one more…*

The Flash streaked southward along the coast of Alaska and then the rocky shores of northern British Columbia, nearing the final bomb when an overwhelming fatigue dragged the remaining strength out from his legs like a repo-man’s tow hitch, the hero collapsing to become a supersonic skipping stone skimming along the waters of the Pacific which had become as hard as concrete.

*So close, so damned close…*

Were his last thoughts before salt water filled his mouth, the hero sinking into the cold ocean below after his strength was finally spent.

23

Witnessing the accident from above, a diving Katar Hol plunged his arm into the cold waters of the Pacific to retrieve a drowning Barry Allen, his wife Shayera soon hovering in the air directly behind him as Hawkman retrieved a hero from the icy depths.

“Thank the gods, he’s alive… The last bomb, Shayera… We have to disarm it!”

“Where is the Flash’s ice weapon, Katar?”

“Lost to the deeps when he fell… Let us hope our Nth metal is enough to deactivate the evil device of this world.”

“I’ll go.”

Hawkman watched with glowing pride as he fished the unconscious Flash from the cold waters, pulling a limp Barry up from a watery grave as the glorious Shayera streaked upwards without a second thought, diving like a bird of prey into the cold waters less than a hundred yards away.

With a gagging cough, the Flash struggled to clear his airways as Hawkman turned him upside-down, ocean water spewing from Barry’s salt-crusted lungs until Hawkman smiled down at him.

“Sorry we were late, old friend.”

“I’d say… you were… just… in time… The last bomb?”

“In Shayera’s capable hands.”

“It… might explode!”
“Not by her actions, it won’t… Part of our training as Thanagarian officers was dealing with explosive devices… She knows what she’s doing.”

Still, the two men watched nervously for what seemed like several minutes until the redhead Hawkgirl emerged like a winged angel from the shifting surface of an undisturbed sea, holding a box encased in shiny metal as she joined them.

“The bomb’s detonator… Easily rendered inoperable by our Nth metal as you predicted, my husband.”

“I’m happy to hear that, but what took you so long down there, Shayera?... The Flash was quite concerned.”

She looked at him with a shrewd smile.

“Just the Flash?”

“Myself as well.”

“Simple curiosity prolonged my stay… Those tanks were filled with liquid, Katar… I believe this final location was a poisonous bomb like the one in Atlantis… Not kryptonite like the ones at California and Hawaii.”

“Gods of mercy! Inform the others that all bombs must be retrieved immediately…”

The words of Hawkman faded from Barry’s ringing ears as consciousness slipped away from his mind like a shining moment of distraction, the battered and bruised speedster passing out in the Thanagarian’s arms.

24

Barry Allen opened his squinting eyes to find himself under the bright lights of the Hall of Justice’s infirmary, a tearful Aquaman standing above his bed. Looking at the emotional monarch’s face, the first thought through the scarlet speedster’s mind was that something terrible must have happened.

“Arthur… What’s wrong?”

The King of Atlantis only smiled and then dried his wet eyes.

“You saved us, Barry… My kingdom, my family, my soul… For as long as I rule, we shall honor you… You shall forever be a hero to my people.”

“I couldn’t get the last one.”

“No… But you pushed yourself past the bounds of endurance to allow Katar and Shayera that chance… Except for California, all the bombs along South and North America’s shores were filled with toxin… Had they detonated, the loss of life would have been an extinction event… Had it not been for you.”

“Jeez… What is that stuff?”

A deeper voice at his doorway answered Barry as a tired Batman stepped into the room.

“I’m not sure yet… Something that makes Joker venom seem about as dangerous as toothpaste… One thing’s for sure though… Artificial Intelligence is very good at designing chemical compounds… I’m sure Talia’s been putting it to good use thinking up clever ways to end life on
Earth.”

Barry felt a shiver run along his spine.

“I thought she wanted to save the world, not kill it.”

“She does… But first she wants to pressure humanity into becoming digital entities… Poisoning an ocean is a fantastic start…

“Her late father surmised that without humans to ruin it, the world would once again become a garden of Eden… A paradise of life… Achieving a natural balance in perhaps only a few hundred years.”

Drawing a wincing breath, Barry only chuckled.

“Too bad I’m going to end it before then.”

“Hey, we’re the Justice League. We’ll figure something out before that happens.”

From behind, a hand that could crush steel placed a firm grip on Bruce’s tensed shoulder.

“Yes, we will… But it’s still good to hear you say it.”

They all turned to see a battered and bruised Superman standing behind Batman, the scars on his face still visible, but not the angry red they’d been earlier.

Still, Bruce eyed him sternly.

“You’re supposed to be in the solar recovery chamber.”

“My tan is doing fine… And so am I, thank you… Besides, we took a vote earlier today… It passed, remember?”

“I remember… But Barry needs some time in the hyperbaric tank… And despite the tough guy act you’re putting on, your insides are a writhing mess, Clark… That wasn’t normal kryptonite you were hit with… It was synthesized.”

“You mean like fake kryptonite?”

“Built in an underground lab in Kahndaq… After I traced the flow of Talia’s funds from Wayne Industries, I figured they were secretly working on nuclear warheads… But I did a little more digging when Hal brought back this new stuff… Turns out this nuclear lab is manufacturing that kryptonite for Talia instead…

“The half-life is only six weeks, but that only makes it as radioactive as hell… And you were plugged full of it… I’m guessing the real reason you left the chamber is because you just threw up a few minutes ago, right?”

“… I’m fine.”

“You’re not… I injected you with potassium iodide as soon as Hal brought your ugly carcass back here from outer space, but you’re still going to need at least another six hours in that solar recovery chamber and about a gallon of distilled water before I’ll even think about letting you leave here.”

Superman folded thick arms across a broad chest.
“Is that so?... And I expect you’ll want to tag along to Infinity Island as well?”

Bruce’s mood slowly darkened as he turned his brooding gaze aside.

“I used to believe Talia was my problem alone… That because of Damian, this was a family affair… I was too damned stubborn to ask for help… I know better than that now, Clark… I know that we’re a team… That the Justice League is greater than the sum of its parts…”

“I know that we’ll save the world together…”

“But I also promise you that there’s nothing on this Earth which is going to stop me from taking Talia down before the sun sets on tomorrow… Not even you… So yes, I’ll be going to Infinity Island… Even if I have to swim.”

Superman smiled.

“No need to swim… Just use that fat cheque book of yours to book us a Hercules cargo plane and have it loaded with your personal Bat-arsenal, my solar recovery chamber and Barry’s hyperbaric chamber… Should be room for all of us…”

“But unless my math is wrong, the flight time from here to Infinity Island is nine hours… Which means there’ll be plenty of time to recover along the way.”

Bruce finally cracked a tight grin.

“Actually, I already own one… With a bat emblem… Best pack your bags, team… We’re off to save the world again.”

Chapter End Notes

The goal of this chapter was to portray the Justice League as a heroic and unified force. It’s a team whose relationships were being slowly unwound by Talia’s constant manipulations in the past, but now the heroes have unified under the deadly threats of their common enemy.

But it seems they aren’t the only ones marching towards Infinity Island…
In hindsight, Barry really shouldn’t have been surprised that a billionaire vigilante owned a gigantic military-grade airship which he’d jokingly dubbed ‘The Flying Fox’ – a massive stealth carrier which could transport a small army.

He just wasn’t sure which country Batman had been planning to invade with it.

Until this morning, that was.

The Flash also wasn’t surprised that it only took himself mere moments (and a dozen fast-food burgers and shakes) to vibrate the excess nitrogen from Talia’s oceanic trap out of his speed-force-infused bloodstream, using his time in the aircraft’s transplanted hyperbaric chamber to collect his troubled thoughts rather than decompress, silently confronting his own cowardice regarding his kidnapped wife before finally deciding to exit the chamber’s solitude.

Barry was surprised however to find Diana waiting for him after he emerged from the chamber’s steely hold, her blue eyes painted with cold steel. Even more so when he’d inadvertently stepped into the lasso trap she’d carefully laid outside the chamber’s doorway, her magical loop immediately
tightening around his crimson-clad ankle.

Standing like a man who’s stepped into something he shouldn’t have, a surprised Barry looked at the Amazon questioningly with her golden lariat now around his ankle.

“Rope tricks, Princess?”

Her blue eyes only stared back at him like an old grudge-bearing magistrate trapped in the curvaceous body of a supermodel.

“Within the bonds of this lasso, you must answer truthfully… Tell me, Barry Allen… Are you in league with Talia al Ghul?”

“What?! Of course I’m not!”

A slight nod from his accuser.

“Then why haven’t you tried to rescue your wife… You explained you’ve known she was Talia’s hostage for months now… You also claim to love Iris Allen.”

So that was crux of the inquisition…

His damned cowardice.

“I do love her… It’s because… Look… Do I have to answer this?”

“Yes.”

Barry breathed a long sigh.

“Why would you want to know about my private life?”

“Because we’re about to go to war and I need to know if we can trust you.”

“Of course you can trust me.”

“Alright… Can Iris trust you?”

“Oh, c’mon… What am I even supposed to tell her… We… Iris and I… We were trying to have a child before all of this… Before I thought she died… I could have ran back in time only a single day… I could have easily saved her from Talia’s assassins…

“But instead, I went back twenty years and tried to save my mother… I ran away to the past and ruined our future… How am I going to tell Iris that, Princess?!... That I tried to save my own mother and wound up murdering my wife, murdering any children we might ever have… That I murdered every single one of us… Because I wanted to save my own mother more than I wanted to save her?... How can I ever tell Iris that?”

Diana loosened the coil of her lasso until it fell from his leg and then placed a calming hand on his shoulder.

“We shall overcome the dark future you’ve glimpsed, I’ll tell you that… We will save this world, friend-Barry… I’m not sure how yet, but I have faith that we will… The gods have many prophecies yet to be fulfilled before we fulfill their last.”

“Right now, the only prophecy I’m worried about is the one I have to explain to Iris… How I wound
“Then tell her that you love her… And tell her that you’ll fight for your future together.”

“Sure, it all sounds so simple when you say it.”

“If you mean it… It is.”

“Yeah… I guess… Maybe I’m getting too far ahead of myself anyways… We’ve still got to fight our way through Talia and her entire League of Assassins before I can even attempt to explain all of this to Iris… And then beg for her forgiveness for about a month.”

“We’ll win, Barry.”

“I know… But I’m still a little nervous…. Do you think Talia knows we’re on our way?”

The Princess of the Amazons sighed as she looked out a darkened window to the miles of ocean stretching beyond.

“Unfortunately, I believe there’s very little that woman doesn’t know… In truth, I respect her as an adversary… Through the millennia, there’s been no other woman quite like her, stealing Fate’s thread from the crooked fingers of Clotho herself to spin a weave for both gods and mortals alike…

“Truly, if the queens of antiquity were all as ruthless and ambitious as Damian’s mother, I daresay history would’ve been written by their daughters… Likely with the spilled blood of their enemies…

“Still, Talia’s vision for this world is not a future I have any desire to behold.”

“Glad to hear it… One thing’s for sure though… She plays for keeps.”

“Then so must we.”

26

Hours later, at the controls of his Flying Fox with a slumbering Hal Jordan at his side, the brooding Batman stared out across the white cloudscapes hovering above the Atlantic Ocean, lost in his own troubling thoughts which prevented him from sleeping, even if the Flying Fox was now on autopilot…

Talia wouldn’t attack them directly.

Like a Cupid of evil armed with a high-powered assault rifle, she’d shoot down those closest to her target, allowing her wide-eyed victim to watch the lives closest to them slowly unraveling for each step they dared to take against her.

Death by a thousand casualties. The ultimate terrorist.

But this time, there would be no more war of terror.

This time, he’d be bringing the war to her island shores.

But even still, the position of the game pieces ran through Bruce’s mind, countless maneuvers playing out like a chess match where every piece was a friend he couldn’t afford to lose.

This plan had to go off perfectly.
Arthur had gone back to Atlantis to ensure Lois Lane and his own people would be safe, which eased the stress on Bruce’s troubled brow, secretly knowing that if Talia ever got her murderous little fingers on Lois Lane, the grim detective wasn’t sure what a grief-stricken Superman was capable of.

Nothing good.

And like himself, Hal Jordan had no living parents, only two brothers he had little contact with, two brothers who were now safely in protective custody just to be sure. Cyborg’s systems had just been put through a complete diagnostic and wiped clean of any of Dr. Light’s lingering influence, and there wasn’t anyone Talia could threaten Victor with, not since his father had died. Most people thought Victor Sage was dead anyways.

Wonder Woman’s family were the Amazons of Themyscira, and they could bloody well take care of themselves. Besides, that was one country Talia didn’t want to start a war with…

He hoped.

But what was it that Luthor had said about hope again?

’Hope is for amateurs, Mr. Wayne… An act of surrender.’

Honestly, there was no telling how far she’d go.

The way his calculating wife had played him since the start of Damian’s descent into Sword Art Online, Bruce had to admit that she had made him look like a hopeful amateur. A love-blind bat acting predictably to her every move like they were in completely different leagues…

Because we are in different Leagues.

The irony wasn’t lost on him. His mistake had been not utilizing all of his pieces sooner, moving only the Dark Knight as innocent pawns were being massacred on either side of the table by Talia’s aggressive style of play.

But could he trust his own pieces?

Katar Hol and Shayera Thal were both decorated alien officers from the distant world of Thanagar, each of them with no relatives within a thousand light years of Earth. Both were aliens from an alien world, with no one to have held hostage except each other.

And finally, there was Barry.

An uneasy Bruce had prompted Diana to use her magic lasso on the recovering Flash, if only to determine if Talia were secretly using Iris against him. With Iris Allen still being secretly held as a hostage on Infinity Island, the detective imagined Barry must have been silently tearing himself apart.

And in his current emotional state, there was no telling what that man was capable of. A little poke or prod from the devious Talia could send him to the edge of madness, Bruce was convinced of that.

But to his credit, the Flash was somehow keeping it together, albeit suffering from an inhuman level of guilt from what he’d done. In his current state of an emotional wreck, Barry was perfectly aware that Talia could twist his heart into any shape she wanted.

So they’d arrived at a stalemate.

Each privately terrified pf the other.
Because being a genius in meta-human physics, Talia was perfectly aware of what a man who could travel at light speed was capable of, especially a man who had nothing left to lose. Which meant she wouldn’t want to make Barry angry.

And with Iris in her clutches, Barry didn’t wish to upset Bruce’s wife as well.

Finally, there was Damian.

Even as their son’s life hung in the balance with a NerveGear wrapped around his comatose head, Bruce knew in his heart of hearts that Talia would never allow any harm come to their son. There was never any question about that.

There were two things she loved in this world…

Himself in some weird and twisted way, as though his unconditional support for her mad schemes would be the final vindication of the countless lives she’d already taken to achieve her ideal of a blood-soaked Eden.

And she loved Damian.

Unlike the love she held for him, the love for her son was unconditional.

Sure, she’d obviously used the boy as a distraction three years ago to keep the Detective off the scent of her far-reaching crimes, but she also knew the boy’s father would do his best to protect their little blue-eyed terror from the crimes which Damian had been pre-programmed to commit.

And damned if her scheme hadn’t worked like a charm…

“So what’s the plan, Bruce?”

The deep voice of Superman surprised him, the contemplative Dark Knight spinning around from the plane’s controls to find the Man of Steel entering the cockpit.

“The plan is for you to get back in the solar recovery chamber… We’ve still got time before we enter Infinity Island airspace… And you need all the time you can get to heal, Clark.”

“I’m fine.”

The Man of Steel didn’t look fine though. There were still dozens of synthesized Kryptonite scars cut across his face, with purpling bruises where Talia’s trap off the coast of Hawaii had almost torn the world’s greatest hero limb-from-limb only yesterday afternoon.

“Clark, as a friend… You’re not fine… In fact, you look like a guy who just fell through a plate glass office tower… So despite what people may have you believe, Superman is still a man… A man who can bleed.”

“So is Bruce Wayne… When’s the last time you slept?”

“Don’t worry… I’ve pushed myself far harder than this.”

“So have I… Now that we’ve both established we’re both men, what’s the plan?”

Bruce allowed himself to smile a little, if only for a moment.

“We shut her down… It’s as simple as that.”
Clark folded thick arms across a stubborn chest.

“We take her in alive.”

Bruce quickly nodded in agreement.

“Don’t worry, I’m not about to stoop to her level… We’re taking my wife in alive… Diplomatic immunity be damned though… She’s going to face justice even if I have to personally drag her kicking and screaming all the way to the Hague myself.”

“Alright then, we’re agreed…”

A tensing Superman paused when his telescopic vision caught something floating on the distant horizon, a shimmering mirage which Bruce wouldn’t be able to see with his own eyes, even if he were twenty thousand feet above sea level on this bright blue morning.

Superman turned his gaze back to the grim vigilante with a serious, almost menacing expression.

“There’s a fleet of naval destroyers around a hundred and sixty miles south… My God, they’re practically invisible… I can barely make out their shimmering outlines… But that’s what they are.”

A sudden fear gripped Bruce’s heart.

“Talia’s?”

“I don’t think so… If they are, they’re headed the wrong way… Only one way to find out for sure though.”

“Clark, NOOO!”

But within three seconds, a thundering sonic boom shook the curved windows at the front of the aircraft, an explosion of sound signaling the recovering Superman would soon be a hundred and sixty miles ahead of them, flying off alone before the awakening Hal Jordan could even follow.

Clark had never seen a technology like this before…

From a distance, an observer might think it was nothing more than some oceanic mirage, a shimmering dome of light playing off of the waves, not some magical device which made the fleet within appear almost imperceptible, not just to sight but also to radar.

But the fleet was inside of it, an armada of death.

With his X-Ray vision, Kal El made out thirty destroyers escorting five massive aircraft carriers, all of them pushing aside the Atlantic’s cold waves in the watery march of war towards an unsuspecting Infinity Island. Hundred of thousands of tons of steel propelled beneath a cloak of technological obscurity, engine rooms sounding the churning drums of death under the rolling waves…

And each ship was proudly flying the American flag.

As he reached out to touch it, Superman found the strange dome was some type of nano-particle weave capable of dispersing the light from all around the gigantic electrostatic sphere that followed the armada, cleverly mirroring the watery scenery from within…

Minus the thirty-five vessels of course.
And there was only one man clever enough to come up with that level of cryptic camouflage, an evil genius well-versed in the arts of both subterfuge and war profiteering.

Lex Luthor.

Diving under the waves, the last son of Krypton soon made his way inside the nano-particle dome by traveling beneath the murky depths of the sea, surfacing on the other side while listening for the signature heartbeat he somehow knew would be aboard a central command ship.

Emerging on the other side and taking to the air, Superman marveled at the military might laid out beneath him, the five aircraft carriers decorated with Apache helicopters and F-35’s like flattened angry hornet nests just waiting to be poked, his super-vision soon finding Luthor dressed in an officer’s uniform standing near the bow of the largest destroyer - as though hopelessly pretending to be some conquering war hero of the past, the bald master of the seven seas.

Covering the miles between them in mere seconds, the suddenly air-dried red-and-blue superhero touched down on the expansive deck just behind the pompous billionaire, drawing a number of almost religious gasps from the surprised sailors around them, the aloof Luthor not even bothering to turn and face an uninvited Superman, keeping his ambitious eyes fixed squarely in the direction of his unseen target…

Infinity Island.

“Lovely morning for an invasion, isn’t it?”

At its current speed, this armada was perhaps forty minutes from Talia’s coastline.

To assemble a fleet of this size in so little time…

It seemed improbable.

“What’s going on here, Luthor? Why is the government involved?”

“If you’re looking for a scoop, you’ll need to see me after the White House has made its official press announcement… You know how these things are.”

His little crack of ‘looking for a scoop’ was Luthor’s way of letting Clark know he knew exactly who he was talking to, whether Superman was wearing a cape or not.

“Cut the crap, Luthor. You know there are hostages on that island. Hostages whose lives you’re endangering.”

“I’m aware of that fact… But I’m simply a technical advisor on this mission… Much like yourself, I have no authority here… We’re civilians.”

“Infinity Island is a sovereign nation... Our government wouldn’t willingly engage in an act of war… Unless you pushed them to do it!”

Luthor only scoffed.

“Don’t be so naive … Besides, this is more an act of genocide than war… One-sided conflicts generally are.”

“You’re going to kill them?!?”

“Weren’t you listening?... I’m not going to do anything… Again, I’m simply a civilian here.”
“A civilian with his fingerprints all over dozens of political lobbyists.”

“True… But I’m the one being paid to be here today, not the other way around… It’s a nice change.”

“Next you’ll tell me you didn’t grease the hands of your political cronies to put this little party together.”

“Not a penny.”

“You’re lying.”

“Think what you may… But it’s the truth… From past experience though, I’ve found that laundered money often washes away a government’s sins… Even when it’s not mine.”

The truth hit Clark like a financial bombshell.

“The crypto-currency!”

“That’s right… Eight trillion dollars can easily wash Congress’s hands clean of this whole sordid affair, and also buy them a lot of friends… Friends who sit on the UN Council for example… Friends who can revoke Infinity Island’s charter on a whim… Friends who can make this little invasion seem practically legal.”

Superman slowly felt his temper begin to rise.

“So that’s how you convinced the government to do this… Talia’s dirty money.”

“Greed… It truly is the secret of my success.”

“You’re leading them like lambs to the slaughter… You have no idea what she’s capable of, Luthor.”

“Oh, I think I know what she’s capable of… I’m not a lovesick fool like Bruce Wayne… Enamored by a fine pair of legs… Speaking of long legs, how is Selina Kyle anyways?”

Loathsome bile suddenly rose in Clark’s tightened throat.

“Have some respect… You know she’s dead.”

“Oh yes, that’s right… Her murder orchestrated by the blackmailing Mrs. Wayne’s if I recall… That must be so hard on poor Bruce… Is he even thinking straight these days?”

“Unlikely… Considering he entered into a deal with you.”

“I do get results, Kryptonian… And I did inform him that I require the Cardinal program to complete my task of derailing the rather complex game his brat got himself trapped in… All part of the plan.”

“Killing everyone on the island is part of your plan?!”

“As I’ve already mentioned, the killing part’s not really up to me… But it is quite an impressive array of firepower, isn’t it?… Makes me proud to be an American.”

As Superman’s glowing red eyes almost shot lasers into the back of his bald head, the Man of Steel forced himself to stay calm.
“I could stop this whole fleet right now… You know that, don’t you?”

A serious Lex Luthor finally turned, his voice a deadly whisper.

“In your current condition, I doubt you could stop a runaway baby carriage… But if you insist, you would do so at your own peril, Mr. Kent… This mission was sanctioned by the President himself with the full endorsement of Congress… If you choose to side with a known terrorist, not only will you be declared a criminal accomplice… You’ll also be declared a traitor to your own country…

“Along with the rest of the Justice League…

“I wonder… What will the American public think when I make Talia al Ghul’s romantic relationship with Batman, sorry I meant Bruce Wayne, public knowledge?... The fact that they have a son together becomes very incriminating…

“Should I spell it out for you, hero?…

“They’ll want Batman’s head on a pike…

“The same way they’ll want your head on a pike if you’re stupid enough to actually attack your own country’s navy…

“So do us all a favor… Tell your friends to turn that flying behemoth with the archaic stealth technology around… Take your ridiculous team of do-gooders and go back home, before we’re forced to blow you all out of the sky… Let me handle Talia Wayne.”

Superman balled his fists in anger.

“You’re a fool, Luthor.”

“We both know that’s not true… And a simple thank-you would’ve sufficed… After all, manners makyth man… Oh wait, you’re not actually a man, are you?”

“Don’t do this, Lex.”

“Do what?... Enjoy this day?... Oh-oh, I suspect those angry-looking officers approaching are about to tell you this is restricted property… You’d better behave… You’ll need to get used to taking orders, Superman… Because I’ll be giving you a lot of orders after the next election… I’ll be giving all of you your marching orders in fact… Every single one of you freaks.”

The world’s mightiest hero flew off to the sounds of Lex Luthor’s merciless laughter.

“We’ve got a problem… A big one.”

The glaring Batman angrily spun to look at the recently returned Superman now standing in the cockpit, with the pursuing Green Lantern arriving just behind him.

Hal Jordan wiped his brow after exhaling a deep breath.

“He’s not kidding, Bruce… Half the damned navy is inside that bubble… Including Lex Luthor.”

A troubled Superman stepped forward.

“And that bastard Luthor has sold the President on Talia’s crypto-currency reserves… The Proceeds
of Crime legislation can be invoked if she can be linked to terrorist activities... Which would take Congress all of about three seconds, give or take two.”

With the news, Batman anxiously tapped his thumb on the plane’s controls.

“A double-cross... Why am I not surprised?... How much time do we have?”

“Around thirty minutes... But Luthor said they’ll blow us out of the sky if we don’t turn this plane around right now... He’s obviously got something that can see past this aircraft’s stealth technology, Bruce... And there’s enough firepower down there to make good on those threats.”

“Alright, fine... I’ll turn it around then.”

Both Green Lantern and Superman stared at the Dark Knight incredulously as an unfazed Bruce punched in the coordinates for Gotham and engaged the autopilot.

It was a skeptical Superman who finally spoke.

“Wait... You’re not actually throwing in the towel here, are you?”

Batman only silently chuckled before turning to the emerald Champion of Oa.

“Hal, I know this is asking a lot... But do you have enough charge left in that ring to teleport the entire team to Infinity Island?”

A surprised Green Lantern thought about it for a moment.

“Yeah... But teleporting that many people will leave me close to empty... And I won’t vouch for the state of your stomachs when we arrive there... Wouldn’t it be easier if we just went higher, out of their range?... This baby’s still a lot faster than they are... We can make it.”

Bruce slowly shook his head.

“No... That’s not an option anymore... We need to be in-and-out before the navy beats us to the punch... There can be no evidence of Justice League interference whatsoever, including this plane... Otherwise, Luthor will expose us and then go after Wayne Industries, Clark Kent and everyone else.”

Hal nodded.

“ Raises the stakes, doesn’t it?”

A sour sigh from Bruce.

“I should’ve never involved that conniving bastard Luthor in any of this... You were right to try and talk me out of it, Clark... He’s nothing but a snake.”

The Man of Steel put a hand on the Caped Crusader’s shoulder.

“What’s done is done, old friend... For now, let’s focus on stopping Talia and then we’ll worry about Luthor later... I’ll go get the team.”

A moment later, as the vacated Flying Fox turned north to return to Gotham by an AI autopilot, the Justice League appeared through an emerald rip in the fabric of reality to step forward onto the white sands of Infinity Island.
And towards the greatest fight of their lives.
A troubled Commissioner James Gordon stared into the dark eyes of Detective Crispus Allen, searching for any sign of doubt in the brooding man’s stern yet intelligent face, but finding none whatsoever.

That didn’t mean he’d stop looking for one though.

“You’re positive, Crispus?... You’re absolutely positive that there was no external threats to Donald Peak’s family from the League of Assassins?... No blackmail, no strange calls, nothing unusual with their behavior in the past year?”

Detective Crispus Allen allowed himself a short sigh, quietly wishing there had been some anomalies with his investigation.

“Nothing, boss… His entire family was at home when Peak pulled the trigger on Selina Kyle… And then on himself… I’m telling you, they’re utterly devastated, Jim… But, as you requested, I still interviewed his wife and daughters for two hours when they entered into protective custody… I kept
asking them questions until they were ready to file a harassment complaint against the GCPD… Hell, I’m surprised they didn’t.”

Like a man who can’t solve a child’s riddle, James Gordon tapped his fingers on his desk impatiently.

“Alright, how about his finances then?”

“The forensic auditors went through his records with a fine tooth comb… Nothing… Not an extra penny… Peak was as clean as a whistle… One of the few cops left from the old days who could say that.”

“Yeah… I know he was a good cop… Damn, none of this makes a lick of sense… Why would a cop with seventeen years of unblemished service take it upon himself to murder Selina Kyle?… He’s never even met her!”

Crispus Allen only nodded.

“Or why would a devoted husband and father with two teenage daughters kill himself without a second thought?… He had a million dollar life insurance policy that won’t pay a dime, because it was a suicide… None of this adds up.”

“We owe it to his family…”

There was a loud knock at the Commissioner’s door which caught both of the men by surprise, until James Gordon crawled from the mire of the frustration of losing one of his own to answer.

“Who is it?”

“It’s Cornwell, Sir.”

“Come in, Lieutenant.”

The pair watched as an anxious Lieutenant David Cornwell entered the office like a dying man being eyed by invisible vultures. He wet his thinning lips while wringing the pleats of wrinkled pants - as though searching for answers in his empty pockets as an absentminded man might search for his misplaced car keys.

But this wasn’t a day for answers.

“It’s ahhh… It’s Selina Kyle, Commissioner.”

“Has Forensics come up with any leads yet? Toxicology results?”

“You see, that’s the thing… They ahhh… can’t.”

“What do you mean, they can’t?!”

“Well, they can’t… Because her body… It was… stolen… from the Morgue.”

“What?!”

Selina Kyle had been a woman who had stolen things all her life, until her life itself was stolen by a man who had no reason to steal it at all.
But now it seemed that her corpse had been stolen in death as well.

30

“By the Gods of my Mother!”

Wonder Woman’s uncharacteristic exclamation surprised even Batman as he stepped through Green Lantern’s emerald portal, treading onto the sun-bleached sands of Infinity Island.

But in the next second, he too stood in silent awe with the rest of the Justice League, gazing up at the motionless giants which stood like monuments before them, unsure of which of her mother’s gods the Amazon Princess was referring to, but knowing beyond the shadow of a doubt of what she was referring to.

Before the awestruck Justice League stood giant robots, each one easily over a hundred feet tall, a line of twelve menacing titans surrounding the enemy’s stronghold like some colossal honor guard, each taller than a naval destroyer.

But luckily for them, these giant machines seemed to be currently offline.

After recovering from his initial shock, Cyborg was suddenly grinning like a schoolboy, tiptoeing forward as his misplaced enthusiasm grew with each step as he stared up at these towering metallic beings like a boy descending the stairs at Christmas.

“Omigod, omigod, omigod… Are those mecha?!... I mean, honest-to-goodness MECHA?!”

“Cyborg, STOP!”

The surprised Victor Stone turned to look at the Dark Knight as though he’d been caught with his robotic hand in the cookie jar, with Batman staring up at the colossuses until the air seemed to freeze around them.

“If you get too close, you’ll trigger the AK field.”

“I’m sorry… But I’ll trigger wha’?”

Batman’s keen gaze remained unaltered.

“The anti-kinesis field… It works like magnetic repulsion, but with kinetic energy instead of magnetic… Once engaged, it’ll deflect a 120mm tank-round as though it were nothing more than a spitball… But any significant disruption will activate the unit once it’s been triggered… So please don’t move a single step closer.”

His power ring’s charge nearly diminished from having just teleported his teammates, Hal Jordan looked at the grim Detective suspiciously while a nervous Cyborg quickly backpedaled towards the group.

“You seem to know a lot about these things, Bruce.”

The Caped Crusader only grinned.

“I should… I designed them.”

The open-jawed members of the Justice League suddenly looked at Batman as though he were a disgruntled madman draped in C4 with a terrorist manifesto in one hand and an itchy finger hovering above a detonator switch in the other.
In the draping shadow of these mechanical monsters, mixed emotions burned under the Caribbean sun until a baffled Superman stepped forward, with even the world’s mightiest hero dwarfed by these sleeping giants of war.

“Why on Earth would you ever build such terrible things?”

“That’s the thing, I didn’t build them… I drafted up the plans after that last alien invasion we prevented a few years ago… In the end, I decided not to bankrupt Wayne Industries by actually building one.”

“There’s twelve of them.”

Bruce scanned his gaze across the island’s quiet guardians and nodded uneasily.

“I doubt Talia actually paid for the plutonium-239.”

The Man of Steel straightened.

“Plutonium?! Wait, just how dangerous are these things?”

Batman took a slow, calculating look at the seventy-foot long rifles slung over the titans’ backs, recalling the specs.

“I’m pretty sure they’re the Wayne Industries prototype Hellion units I designed… Only a five-minute battery life when detached from that umbilical power cord, but still capable of untold destruction in the meantime…

“Those guns are thirty-one-hundred caliber rifles equipped with a magazine of nuclear artillery shells… Twenty kilotons per shot on impact… Each round able to turn the beach we’re currently standing on into molten glass…

“Or sink a destroyer…

“The blades at their sides are giant plasma cutters, capable of cutting through eight feet of reinforced steel like eight ounces of warm butter… And then there’s the laser eyes, fifty million degrees of twin disintegration beams with a ridiculous range…

“The AI-guided swarm missiles at the back are a nice feature as well, both offensive and defensive capabilities… Yeah, they’re obscenely dangerous…

“But they were supposed to be painted black, not this tacky red color.”

Superman quietly grimaced.

“You’re honestly upset by the color choice?... They fire nuclear bullets for crying out loud and you’re honestly upset they’re painted red and not black?!... What’s the range of those artillery shells?”

Batman’s thumb stroked his chin.

“Twenty miles, give or take... Which means we’ll need to shut Talia down in the next fifteen minutes before the Navy gets into range... Otherwise…”

“I don’t even want to think about the ‘otherwise’… I can still punch through these things, right?... Even with that AK field?”
Batman glumly shook his head.

“Hold on, Clark… While I haven’t found anything that you can’t punch through, that doesn’t mean engaging these things is a good idea… For any of us…”

“If Talia is able to synthesize Kryptonite, it’s likely these things will have some sort of anti-Superman defenses built in… There’s also the possibility they could be nothing more than giant booby-traps, like half the bombs she planted in the ocean… Perhaps it’s best to let sleeping giants lie.”

With his hands shielding his brown eyes from the sun, Hal Jordan squinted upwards as he peered above the heads of these intimidating giant machines.

“Hold on… Why didn’t anyone spot these things from a satellite?... These things stick out like a sore thumb… Luthor likes to do his homework, there’s no way these would have gotten by him.”

They all peered upwards until the corners of Clark’s mouth turned downwards, a terrible realization dawning upon the Man of Steel.

“There seems to be some type of nano-particle weave floating overtop of them… Some type of thermoptic camouflage… Just like the one Luthor was using… Oh damn.”

Like something out of the third act of a cheap horror novel, the realization that Luthor’s naval cloaking device wouldn’t fool the deadly Mistress of Infinity Island made Clark’s stomach tighten, picturing the atomic wrath which an oblivious Lex Luthor was rushing towards.

“Oh God… He’s leading them all to a slaughter.”

It was at that moment that the doors of the fortress slowly swung open, an invitation that made Bruce instinctively reach into his utility belt, his honed muscles ready for action as he awaited the well-armed cadre of assassins which would surely follow.

But none appeared.

The reinforced titanium doors opened to let in sunlight from the beach and reveal an empty room that seemed to stretch on forever, echoes of an unspoken invitation for the heroes to come inside, to take shelter from the storms of impending carnage which was about to make landfall.

To venture into something that could be much, much more dangerous.

Come, seek shelter from the storm… Come into my den of assassins, Beloved.

To Bruce, it was as though an unseen Talia was daring them to try and stop her, confident in her hand as she laid her cards on the table, with some primal instinct triggering within the Detective, some supernatural warning signal twisting in his gut like a worried father’s hands tried to hold onto his child near the abyss…

How did she know they were here?

Trap, trap, trap…

Superman folded thick arms across his chest, his X-ray vision scanning the entirety of the large metallic room which quietly awaited them.

“Looks like we’re expected… The entire room is lined with lead.”

“I don’t like this.”
“You suppose it’s a trap?”

“I know it’s a trap… And I’ve got a really bad feeling about this one…”

But before they even begin to stop the unusually quiet Barry, a scarlet blur shot past them through the fortress’s opening before streaking along the leaden antechamber, finally stopping near the back before staring back at the group of wide-eyed heroes in blinking confusion.

Through the darkness, Bruce thought he saw a bewildered expression on Barry Allen’s face, as though the speedster was unsure of what had just happened, or why he was now standing near the back of a large metallic room instead of outside with his companions.

“Guys?… AAARRRRGGGHHHHH!!”

They watched in horror as the floor beneath the Flash was electrified with a hundred thousand volts of electricity, sending chaotic bolts of lightning dancing from the tips of his straightened fingertips as though he’d suddenly become a human Van de Graaff generator, his muscles no longer his own to command as Barry’s back arched like a bent lightning rod.

The Dark Knight thought he might have heard the echo of the word ‘idiot’ before Superman took to the air like a red-and-blue bullet, a gush of air when Batman reached out to stop the last son of Krypton, but instead only grasped the air, watching as powerful arms pulled the smoking speedster up off the electrified floor.

Barry’s teeth were chattering in the megahertz range when the invulnerable Superman yanked the spasming hero from the powerful electrical current streaming through a lead-lined floor, the Man of Steel turning towards the exit with his own gnawing feeling spreading in his gut, the idea that maybe this hadn’t been a trap set for Barry…

That maybe the Flash had been nothing more than the bait.

The lead-lined floor peeled back to reveal glowing green synthetic Kryptonite, solid green bars shooting up like three-inch pistons into the ceiling above to form Kryptonite prison bars, confining Superman and the Flash in a cage of green death.

*Trap, trap, trap…*

Without a second thought, the quick-thinking Green Lantern placed an emerald protective barrier around both the radiation-poisoned Man of Steel and the electricity-crippled speedster, using the fading power of his ring to levitate the pair off the floor while two large emerald hands materialized to pry apart the Kryptonite bars and free his downed comrades...

Until Hal Jordan was brought down himself by the blow of an electrified mace to the back of his skull, the newly-formed protective sphere disintegrating as Green Lantern was viciously knocked senseless.

“Hawkwoman?! Have you gone crazy?!”

The hulking Cyborg formed a sonic cannon around his forearm, but it wasn’t quick enough to prevent Shayera’s mace from being quickly jammed into his metallic chest, its Nth-metal spikes extending to pierce his metallic hull and extend past his insulation barrier, the resulting electrical charge crumpling the cybernetic hero like a retiring boxer in his last and final fight.

With Superman slowly dying, the Flash and Green Lantern unconscious and now Cyborg down for the count, Batman and Wonder Woman turned to face the traitorous female Thanagarian.
“Shayera... Why?!"

The only answer Diana received was when the ferocious Hawkwoman swung her mace at the Amazon Princess, narrowly missing the evading Wonder Woman’s face by a fraction of an inch.

Bruce couldn’t help but wonder if Talia had made a deal with the Thanagarians. If they were the ones who’d betrayed them.

Using his cape to conceal the motion of quickly palming two exploding tear gas pellets from one his belt’s compartments, Batman prepared his assault while he carefully gauged the male alien’s reactions, with Hawkman obviously unsure of what to do, seemingly as confused as the rest of them, until…

“Katar, help me!”

The impassioned cry from his mate was all it took to sway his allegiance, Hawkman gripping his spear to defend his partner until Batman stealthily flicked the two pellets of teargas into the galactic police-hero’s eyes, causing a bellow of pain until the agonizing Katar Hol dropped his spear to press his palms into chemically assaulted eyes.

Dislodging a micro gas canister from his belt, Bruce sidestepped and then shot the compressed gas he’d refined from Wesley Dodds’ original formula into Hawkman’s screaming face, his Wayne Industries chemists engineering the Sandman’s original sleeping gas to be three times more potent than the classical version.

(But not before patenting the results, of course.)

Still, it took the lumbering Hawkman a solid four seconds to go down and then four more to go to sleep.

 Damn, Thanagarians were tough…

But they weren’t Amazon-tough.

Bruce watched as the circling Diana quickly took hold of her opponent’s mace-wielding wrist in one hand and then connected hard with the other to the top of Hawkwoman’s golden helmet, bringing the winged warrior crashing to her knees in a clamoring thud. Unrelenting, the Amazon’s fist then pulled back and smashed into Shayera’s blinking face, erasing all consciousness from the female officer who’d once fallen from the stars above.

The slumping Hawkwoman soon joined her mate in a twirling dance of unconsciousness, the pair of alien lovers laid out side-by-side while Bruce silently thanked his own lucky stars that Diana was still on his side.

Glancing down at her fallen foe, Wonder Woman stood beside Bruce in puzzlement.

“What vile spirit possessed her to betray us?... Shayera is our ally and friend… Her heart is true.”

“I’m not sure… Barry seemed to be acting strange after he ran inside that room as well… Something’s definitely not right here, Princess.”

A perplexed Diana glanced inside the awaiting room.

“Regardless, we need to save Clark… Quickly.”
Luthor had once told him his only weakness had been his mortality and his friends, and that had never seemed more evident than this very moment when Superman’s life hung in the balance.

*Trap, trap, trap…*

But Bruce could only hope Diana’s strength would be enough. If they had Superman back on their side, they might stand a chance, whatever Talia had planned.

After the Amazon Princess and Gotham’s Dark Knight had ran only five steps into the room, the massive doors suddenly slammed shut behind them, immersing the room and the two tensing heroes in an eerie green glow when a hundred more secret doors slid open around the expansive metallic walls, scores of assassins pouring into the chamber from each hidden crevice like dirty sea water streams past the bilge of a sinking ship.

They were in for a fight.

31

There must have been hundreds of dark figures swarming towards them, each armed with murderous intent. Batman realized they would have trained for this exact moment, already forming into an attack sequence, trying to separate him from Diana…

*Fine.*

He didn’t want to split her eardrums anyways.

Bruce could have easily stood behind the Amazon and simply watched the bodies fly, but he also knew these assassins wouldn’t fight fair. Those blades were likely poisoned, and some would have blowguns, perhaps even lasers.

There was no telling what Talia would do.

But he still had a few new tricks in his utility belt as well.

“Diana, plug your ears!”

Running through a rapidly collapsing opening of assassins, Batman’s whirling cape caught seven blow-darts, before their poisonous tips could make could make contact with his body, the running hero reaching into his belt to pull out the sonic howler he’d developed for just such an occasion, rolling the metallic sphere towards the approaching horde between himself and his target while the Bat-earplugs automatically inserted from his cowl upon its deployment.

High-pitched frequencies echoed off the metal walls like a mechanical banshee, assassins instinctively covering their ears from the agonizing sounds emitting from Bruce’s howler, allowing the Detective to relentlessly make his way towards the Kryptonite cage that still held Clark and Barry, tossing aside or laying out any assassin who dared to stand before him.

Behind him, Wonder Woman was doing exactly the same thing.

Only better.

One of the League’s killers who stood before Bruce was armed with a studded tetsubo war-club, gritting his teeth behind a ninja mask in order to take an agonizing swing at the agile Batman before losing three teeth for his efforts, the burly ninja collapsing like a folding chair after a rock concert.
Grinning, Bruce picked up the war-club and then continued towards his goal, laying out any eardrum-assaulted foe that came within reach of the acquired club until he stood before a semi-conscious Barry and a dying Superman.

It took a few strikes to bring down the first of the Kryptonite prison bars, with Batman surprised that a few assassins were still able to grab him from behind while he swung at the second bar, turning to defend himself until he realized the awful truth…

A mountain of assassins had piled on top of his howler device, using their bodies to muffle the high-pitched wailing so that their brethren could continue the deadly fight unhindered.

With his earplugs in, Bruce hadn’t been able to register the change in their tactics.

Which meant this was going to hurt…

A lot.

Clubs and staves suddenly buffeted against his sides and shoulders as the Dark Knight fought against this fresh tide of enemies, a swarm of hornets emerging from a smokescreen of sound. With every assassin Batman’s fists brought down, seven more seemed to take its place until he was entangled in their nets, flailing wildly as those wooden staves continued to rain down upon his back like a storm of pain while he desperately used the club like an entwined lever to finally snap the second bar.

Bruce’s body amour took the worst of the beating, but it couldn’t take all of it.

And there was a lot of it.

As every part of him was being pounded, his head becoming the chaotic drum beat of the Siren’s weird song of oblivion, he tried to defend himself until someone pulled the club from his fingers, leaving the hero helplessly drowning in this shifting sea of violence until he felt himself sinking deeper…

And then it stopped.

Through swelling eyes and a headache, the Caped Crusader finally made out a figure in red standing above him, a hero holding the tetsubo war-club after having mowed down his attackers like ripened grain in the Fall.

The Flash had slid through the bars and returned to the fight, with a struggling Bruce reaching up with a trembling hand.

“Save… Clark.”

“I already did… When you blinked… You OK, Batman?”

Luckily, Bruce could read his lips.

“Don’t worry… I’ve had… Thai massages… worse than this.”

“Whoa, too much information there… Here, hold onto this.”

As Bruce used the now-returned war-club like a crutch to slowly get back to his feet, he watched as a crimson blur swept through the large room like a hurricane of a hundred blurry fists, laying out assassins like black-clad autumn leaves, with Bruce finally able to turn off the human-buried howler with the remote device in his belt.
Which only allowed a new voice to cut through the fallen crowd like the portends of doom.

“Turn and face me, hero.”

A sea of black parted to reveal Lady Shiva, the oracle of death who foretold your downfall with her own deadly arts, the tip of her blade now poised in the air and pointed directly at the Flash.

A calm Barry was suddenly standing in front of her.

“Alright… I’m facing you… Call off your goons.”

The confident Shiva only grinned.

“I challenge you… Do you dare to face someone who can read your moves? Who knows what you’ll do even before you do? A woman who has mastered the art of death?”

“I normally don’t like to hit a Lady… But I’ll make an exception today.”

Incredibly, the Flash’s first punch missed, with Shiva tilting her head backwards at the last instant when a scarlet blur of knuckles narrowly missed her chin.

She actually smiled.

The Flash’s next hundred blows did not miss however, instantly leaving the master assassin crumpled on a single knee, her hardened body left like a punching bag by a man whose fists traveled at the speed of thought.

Barry stopped to contentedly flex his fingers.

“Give it up, Shiva… You might have predicted every single one of those punches, but the simple fact of the matter is that your body isn’t fast enough to avoid them… I can hit you a thousand times in the time it takes you to blink.”

“But we… only need… to hit you… once!”

There was suddenly a pinprick in the back of Barry’s thigh, prompting the Flash to suddenly jump to the side like a man who’d stepped on a rattlesnake…

As four more poisoned darts flew by him.

“Why you cheating little…”

With an iron will forged on the battlefield, the battered Shiva rose to her feet and grinned triumphantly as Barry felt his senses begin to wane, his leg suddenly buckling until that knee hit the floor.

“Have you forgotten, hero?... We are a League!”

As he struggled to remain conscious, the Flash suddenly saw the body of Lady Shiva shake in seizure-like contortions, realizing that even in his weakened state, Batman had somehow still managed to sneak up behind the Mistress of Death and place his stun gun at the back of Shiva’s gloating neck, the weapon still crackling with the high voltage electricity of its discharge.

As she crumpled unconsciously before them, the grim vigilante only stared down at the fallen murderess.
“We’re a League too, Shiva… The Justice League.”

The remaining combatants froze when the huge doors of the massive room were suddenly ripped from their titanium hinges in a thunderous **BOOM**, sunlight streaming in through the rendered opening to reveal the silhouette of an angry Cyborg, his recently fired sonic cannon pointing straight ahead and ready for action.

“I’m back online, BABY!... That’s right… Y’all better step back!”

A gang of assassins were dumb enough to try and rush this latest entrant to the fight, the resultant concussive blast of force knocking them through the air like ill-fated dominoes.

“Told ya.”

With the distraction, Batman was able to slide over to the Flash, quickly injecting the fallen hero with a self-contained hypodermic from his belt as the scarlet speedster stared up at him woozily with unfocused blue eyes, Barry’s enflamed lips already swelling from the dart’s venom.

“Whazzat, Bats?”

“Anti-poison mixed with adrenaline… I like to keep up to date with all the latest toxins… Including how to neutralize them.”

“Zanks, bud-dee.”

“Hang in there, old friend… You’ll be back to normal in just a minute…”

A sudden maniacal laughter from the back of the room chilled the Detective to the bone, laughter originating from behind a demonic cat-mask as though the Joker himself had been reincarnated as a woman…

An incredibly dangerous woman holding a jagged Kryptonite shard against the downed Superman’s throat, its eerie green light reflecting against his slumping chin and the deep green of her own robe, wild black hair spilling out from behind that grinning cat-mask as though her laughter summoned a chorus of carnage...

Cheshire.
In this AU, Jade Nguyen is not the older sister of Young Justice’s Artemis, nor is she the Sportsmaster’s daughter. She never had a child with Roy Harper, and she is not married to him. Cheshire is simply a principal member of the League of Assassins and part-time nuclear terrorist.

Chapter Sixty-Eight:
League Versus League, Part 7
The Subtle Art of Betrayal

32

“What would it be like, I wonder?... To be known as the woman who killed Superman?”

Those words weren’t mere taunts as the deadly female assassin named Cheshire stood poised for bloodied murder over the fallen Kryptonian, pressing the jagged crystalline shard hard against Superman’s open throat while a tensed Batman clutched the hidden Batarang at his side, knowing that any sudden motion he might make could drive that serrated Kryptonite splinter through the Man of Steel’s jugular as though he’d pushed it in there himself.
From the file footage he’d seen of her, Cheshire was fast.

And damned good at what she did…

And what she did was kill people.

Bruce also suspected the assassin born as Jade Nguyen would have the pointed steel-lined fingertips of her black gloves coated with virulent poison which would make even a spitting cobra envious, powerful toxins that wouldn’t bother Superman if he were close to full health, but in his current condition might be just enough to push him over the edge.

With the Man of Steel’s life literally balanced at the edge of the jagged shard dug into his throat, black eyes from behind the shady lens of a cat-mask dared Batman to try and stop her, to make a move as a trickle of blood spilled down Clark’s neck.

She wanted to kill him.

“Go ahead, hero… Throw that little toy you’re trying so hard to conceal beneath your cape… You’ll only seal his fate.”

As they locked stares, Bruce slowly relaxed his hand, knowing she had the upper hand in this fight.

“What do you want, Cheshire?”

“The world… But I’ll settle for your surrender.”

A powerful and familiar female voice suddenly sounded behind him.

“Batman… Don’t.”

Turning, Bruce saw the pock-marked Diana with dozens of poison needles sticking out of her Amazonian flesh, each poisoned dart appearing as little more than beestings across her bare legs and back.

During the battle, she’d obviously been struck by a score of the same needles which had brought down the Flash…

And yet, unlike Barry, she still stood.

But likely wouldn’t be standing for long.

“Diana… You’re hurt!”

“The blood… of Zeus… flows through… these veins… I’ll… be fine.”

“There’s too many.”

Bruce somehow knew the grin behind the mask was now just as wide as the fake toothy smile her fabled namesake wore.

“I suppose the Amazon can come too… After all, I’m sure we have an antidote lying around here somewhere… Better hurry up though, Detective… Looks like she won’t last long.”

As though speaking a dire prophecy, Wonder Woman suddenly slumped to one knee, with Bruce noticing the cold sweat beginning to pour down her brow, the scarlet hue of her cheeks as the same toxin which had almost brought Barry down ran like a river through her bloodstream, burning the
warrior-princess from the inside-out.

Still, it probably wouldn’t kill her, but it would take Diana out of commission long enough for a bullet to finish the job.

Or sword.

Or spear.

Or knife.

And all of those things were pointed at them.

He had to face the facts…

The only chance he had of winning this battle now was to sacrifice both Clark and Diana.

And that was a price he could never pay.

“Alright, Cheshire… I surrender… Take me to your Mistress.”

33

As Batman made his way down the halls of his enemy with the staggering Diana on his shoulder and a handful of assassins (including Lady Shiva and Cheshire) surrounding them, his heart should have been filled with hatred…

But strangely, it was not.

Under his black cowl, Bruce Wayne remembered back to the time when he’d first met Talia al Ghul, back when she’d been nothing more than an intrepid medical student who seemed more ensnared by her father’s nefarious plots than Batman ever would be.

A sweet girl who’d never amount to anything more than the pawn of her father, a beautiful snare to secure Ra’s al Ghul the male heir he desired.

But sadly, that innocent girl was gone; seemingly dead only moments after bringing Damian into the world. The woman who’d emerged from the Lazarus Pit had proven herself deadlier than her murderous father by far, honing her own natural intelligence with the flint of cold reason, the blade of Occam’s razor within her devastating mind far sharper than the scimitar which had once constantly hung by her father’s side.

Bruce’s wife truly was the most dangerous woman on the planet.

But in Talia’s final moment of triumph, her life would expire before the final bricks of her empire could be laid from the quarry of her mad ideals. The dying Talia would be unable to witness the new reality she was creating, the cancer forming in her brain becoming the poisonous revenge which the gods had once declared hubris.

In a way, he felt sorry for her…

But not overly so.

Bruce couldn’t shake the notion that the fate she deserved was the one she’d fashioned for herself.
The means had become her end.

He was almost carrying the proud Amazon warrior as they rounded the last corner towards Talia’s sanctuary, with the poisoned Diana still slumping helplessly against his shoulder.

“I… only… need to… commune… with… mother-earth… friend-Bruce.”

“There won’t be any bare soil in here, Princess… Hang in there.”

“I… will…fight.”

“Shhh… Save your strength until we need to.”

As they rounded the last corner and emerged through a hidden passageway, there was indeed no bare soil…

Only opulence.

Talia’s inner sanctum was a lush European castle transplanted to the Caribbean, high gilded ceilings trimmed with gold floating like clouds above arching palisades crowned with gigantic windows, antique tapestries hanging on large brick walls as though this were a room built for a Queen.

In a way, it was.

Talia was the ruling monarch of Infinity Island, which technically made her its Queen.

But in this room, the Arabian Queen’s prestigious seat wasn’t a throne…

It was a wheelchair.

Bruce looked on in shock as he saw a slumped Talia seated at the head of this palatial splendor in a motorized wheelchair, surrounded by dozens of League guards as dozens of intravenous tubes simultaneously fed her limp body with both nutrients and medication, the AmuSphere secured around her pale temples with the jade choker still slung around her slender throat.

Listless almond eyes struggled to look towards them.

Bruce couldn’t believe this was the same proud woman who’d almost replaced him with an android only days ago in Tokyo, but the tell-tale facial droop on the left side of her face told the Detective all he needed to know...

“You’ve had a stroke.”

A ghostly image of Talia in a flowing white dress and golden belt suddenly appeared before them, her sienna-scented skin dancing in the sunlight from the three-storey tall windows. This light-created specter of Talia’s psyche reminded him of Dr. Light’s hologram, the apparition seemingly noticing the distress on its beloved’s face as a delicate hand of light swept across his cheek.

It actually tingled as her bright fingertips brushed his square jaw.

“It’s called a cerebrovascular accident these days, dearest… But yes, an ill-timed event… So this pale illusion is now the only way I can talk with you… I’m afraid you wouldn’t be able to understand my slurred words otherwise.”
Bruce looked up at the half-smiling Talia Wayne slouched in the wheelchair thirty steps away, pangs of regret gripping his heart.

“The cancer?”

Only her holographic projection nodded.

“My anaplastic astrocytoma is progressing exponentially… My brain is still functioning of course, but I’m afraid it’s dying… Vessels are being continuously ruptured now… I predict it will only be a matter of days now before I’m completely comatose… Or dead.”

“Talia… The Lazarus Pit… You could…”

She smiled.

“Beloved… Did you not believe me when I said I’ll craft my own immortality?… I’ve told you before that I shall never descend into those murky depths of madness again… Besides, I’ve found a much better use for my father’s wading pool… A little fun to celebrate your return… In fact, why don’t I show you the little surprise I’ve prepared for my devoted husband?”

Bruce followed Talia’s wickedly mischievous gaze across the room, towards a bare patch of wall where a panel slid open to reveal…

Selina Kyle.

Alive!!!

The hands of Fate clasped around his heart when the Dark Knight gazed upon the naked Selina kneeling like a oversized newborn in that secret room, her wide green eyes staring innocently at her surroundings like a misplaced fawn, her mortal mind obviously unable to comprehend what strange corner of Heaven she’d wandered into while emerald trickles of a hidden Lazarus Pit dripped from her brunette locks like some eerie umbilical fluid.

Reborn to a world she’d seemingly forgotten.

Those same hands of Fate began to slowly tighten their writhing grasp, chilling his heart’s thinning blood within their icy fingers, with Bruce witnessing the snubbed-nosed revolver being held against the back of Selina’s unsuspecting head by an unsteady hand.

A tiny unsteady hand that belonged to a seventeen-year-old girl.

A young Japanese girl he’d met in a Tokyo hospital room only days before.

Makoto Eiko.

The holograph of Talia soundlessly clasped her hands together in rapturous prayer, her satanic smile dancing with all the flames of Hell as she circled around Batman like a jealous succubus, a serpent of light twirling in love.

“One of my life’s few regrets, Beloved… That I wasn’t able to witness the look of utter devastation upon your adulterous face when I murdered your shameless little Cat-whore the first time… Let’s remedy that oversight, shall we?…

“Makoto-chan, if you’d be so kind…

“Kill her.”
For a moment of time perched precariously along a twist of Fate, his very world seemed to teeter between the past and present, nightmarish images of his mother stumbling forward along Crime Alley while clutching his boyish hand, her heart’s blood gushing out from her chest where the bullet had entered and her life was departing.

It was all pulled forward in time to become the gun against the back of Selina Kyle’s head.

But Makoto Eiko wasn’t Joe Chill.

The girl’s violet eyes were widened with soul-searching fear, her hand literally shaking as it held the heavy weapon of death level, the strain of the deed weighing upon her mortal soul even more than the weight of the gun upon her slender arms.

With the hint of annoyance slowly replacing a triumphant smile with every endless second, the hovering Talia turned encourage her reluctant protégé.

“Go on, my dear… Simply pull the trigger… Just like we showed you… You won’t even hear the loud noise, will you?... And you do want to be with Damian, don’t you?... Yes, you do… Show me that you’re not just a mute mongrel… Show me you’re worthy of my son.”

Bruce witnessed the wild terror in the girl’s eyes, a caged animal hemmed in by grim expectation chiselled into the hardened faces of everyone around her, tears beginning to stream down her flushed cheeks as she struggled with the heart-gripping turmoil crashing between her tiny chest and that trigger finger.

He felt the air in the room grow cold as Talia’s apparition became an evil fairy godmother, back from the ether to demand its pound of flesh.

“You selfish little girl… After I murdered your step-father just for you, Makoto-chan… You were the one who wanted me to do it… To pay for his crimes… Everything has a cost, dear child… This is simply how you repay that debt… KILL HER!!”

In a fleeting moment of faith, Makoto Eiko’s mauve eyes sought out some last refuge of hope in a world of assassins, some sanctuary to save her soul before it was damned for all eternity.

Her tear-filled eyes found that hope.

Stepping forward past the illusion of Talia, the Dark Knight pulled back his mask to reveal the face it hid beneath, the sniffling girl instantly recognizing Damian’s father as the large man in the strange costume walking towards her through the proverbial Valley of Death to open his arms and offer sanctuary.

Sometimes the most heroic act you can perform is to simply open your arms to a lost soul, to let them know they are not alone, that they need never be alone in a world of evil.

That they can be saved.

Because you will stop at nothing until they are.

Like a beacon of light in the endless darkness, her shared gaze with those powerful blue eyes became her only path to salvation, the girl’s wavering hand dropping the heavy weapon to sprint for her very life into the powerful arms of her saviour.
Scooping Makoto up from the air, the massive hero held her tiny frame tightly, his gloved hand gently stroking her dark hair as she sobbed uncontrollably into his broad shoulder, with Bruce whispering softly to Makoto Eiko that she’d never have to hurt anyone.

That there were be no more death.

Like a vengeful force of nature, the unmasked Batman left the recovering Diana to stride across the room with a hundred weapons pointed at his broad back, carrying the terrified teenager to finally stand beside the naked Selina Kyle, pulling off his black cape to drape it around the mystified Catwoman when her blinking green eyes registered something in his powerful demeanour, a memory from a world that seemed like a dream to her.

“B-b-Bruce?”

“I’m here, Selina… I’m here.”

He held the two women in his arms, his glare finally scanning out across the room to seek the dying woman who would use an innocent child to murder an innocent woman, the fires of vengeance in his heart beginning to burn.

“It’s over, Talia… For twelve years, you’ve been trying to convince yourself that you’re just saving the world… That whatever evil you’ve perpetrated in the holy name of ecology is justified… But the sad truth is, it was your own evil that destroyed our world… You’re the one who burns the world.”

The woman in the wheelchair looked at him suspiciously as her semitransparent avatar floated before him once again to speak.

“The prophecy I experienced during my resurrection…”

“It was a warning, not a prophecy… And you should have heeded it… You caused that cataclysm to happen when you went after Iris Allen… You pushed the Flash too far… When Barry believed you murdered his wife, he went back to the past to change our future…”

“And destroyed that future in the process…”

“Your vision showed the Flash destroying our world in fire… But only because you took away his world… You struck the match, Talia… You manifested your own damned destiny… It was you who destroyed the world.”

The ghostly woman shook her head violently.

“No!… I’m saving the world… I’m saving Damian.”

“You’re not his mother, Talia… Not anymore… You’ve sacrificed that to become your father’s daughter… To embrace the mad vision of Ra’s al Ghul when you used our son as a pawn in your deadly schemes…”

“You murdered Dr. Seijirou Kikuoka because he was your rival, not your enemy… Because you both shared the same dream, to create a world of digital consciousness… Even in alternate timelines, you seek to end humanity by replacing it with AI… To make it so humanity never existed…”

“Admit it, you don’t want to save us, Talia…”

“You want to end us…}
“Because you’re afraid to live.”

The avatar shook her head in denial.

“You don’t understand my vision, Beloved… Immortality!… I want us to live forever… We can be freed from these temporary sculptures of dust.”

“Yes, how logical it would be to cast our souls into a sea of ones and zeroes… Ashes to circuit boards, dust to silicone… Ghosts in your World Machine… Your AfterLife… That’s been your dream from the start, hasn’t it?… But that was never part of God’s plan.”

While together, she’d hid it from him constantly, with Bruce Wayne never witnessing the true extent of the murderous glare Talia al Ghul was truly capable of, the same soul-destroying glare of madness she now contemptuously held him with, a glare that even sent a chill down his spine.

“God’s plan?!... If that’s His plan, then I suppose it’s time for a new God, dearest… One with a far superior plan… If it would make you more comfortable, feel free to kneel down before me…

“Because you’re in the presence of the new divinity.”

A surprised Talia stopped when the rumbling sound of thunder suddenly rippled from a tear in the fabric of space and time behind her, circles of light slowly growing in size to erupt in a crashing cacophony of luminous radiance within the center of the room.

Bruce recognized it instantly…

A Boom Tube!

Not knowing what would appear, Bruce pulled Makoto and Selina behind him, finally pulling down his mask once more as he watched a striding figure emerging from the concentric circles of light, an impeccably dressed bald man with scores of heavily-armed Marines running into the room behind him…

Luthor!

And a lot of soldiers.

The billionaire surveyed the scene with an arrogant grin.

“You’re correct of course, my dear… There shall be a new divinity… But His name will be Luthor…

“And hallowed be my name.”

An edgy Bruce stared across the room at the struggling Diana, his own apprehension quietly mirrored in her blue eyes regarding this unexpected guest, finally turning his attention back to the ominous figure of Lex Luthor, watching as the bald man stood like a conquering hero while clutching the Mother Box he’d stolen from the New Gods, flanked by an entire company of armed marines as they positioned themselves in the den of assassins.

Confident in his compatriots’ overwhelming firepower, the billionaire smirked at the semi-paralyzed woman in the wheelchair as he held the mysterious Mother Box close to his chest.

“You played a masterful game, Talia… But now, it’s time to cash in your chips… I win.”
“You can huff and puff, Lex… But I’ll blow your ships out of the water first.”

Lex only shook his head in amusement.

“Frankly, I’m a little disappointed in you… Even neophyte evil geniuses know I have nano-transmitters built into all my LexCorp military components… Some of them even know I have skilled people constantly tracking them…

“Honestly, it’s really just a way for me to keep tabs on what the bad players are up to… Plus, the government pays me to do it…

“So when someone wants to build, oh I don’t know… Let’s just say, for the sake of argument, a dozen giant robots armed with weapon-grade plutonium…

“Well, I know about it…

“And not only do I know about it, my dear Talia… I’m also able to shut it down immediately… Because those nano-transmitters also have remote control nano-switches built into the device’s function which I can secretly turn off…

“Which mean your incredibly expensive toys on the beach are now useless… Just a little safety feature I built into my most dangerous devices, if only so I won’t be killed by one of them…

“Killed by my own technology, can you imagine?... I would hate to die such an ironic death… Still, better than dying pathetically, I suppose… Which reminds me, let’s discuss the terms of your surrender, shall we?”

Batman quietly prepared for action, carefully putting Selina and Makoto behind him and thumbing through the gas bombs in his utility belt while also watching the high number of rocket-propelled grenades in the marines’ nervous hands, more than enough explosives to level this palatial suite if a fight broke out.

For now though, it seemed to be only a war of egos.

One which the arrogant Luthor was plainly winning.

“Firstly, Mrs. Wayne… You will surrender yourself to these men and be extricated to the U.S. for immediate trial… Your co-conspirators, including the man in the mask and the Amazon, as well as any other of their kind located on this island, will also be placed into custody and extricated for trial…

“All Infinity Island assets, including crypto-assets, are hereby declared property of the U.S. government…

“You will surrender peacefully, or this godforsaken piece of rock will be removed from existence with the ungodly firepower of the American Navy… Those are your options, Talia Wayne… Personally, I’m fine with either.”

As Luthor awaited an answer, the crescendo of her mad laughter became frightening, as though Eris herself were now laughing at the suffering of men from across a world of despair, the virtual avatar of Talia growing to twelve feet in height until it loomed over the leering Luthor, her dark hair billowing in a wind that didn’t exist.

Bruce couldn’t help but notice that Luthor’s smile seemed to wane ever so slightly.
“You surreptitious little fool… Did you honestly believe I didn’t orchestrate your little excursion here?... Did you honestly believe you could outwit me when I have spies across all levels of your organization?... You’re here for one reason and one reason only, Lex… To get down on your knees and return Arthur to me… NOW!”

To his credit, Luthor didn’t even flinch.

“Enough of your theatrics, woman… My time is valuable… Surrender.”

“Surrender?... Do you truly have no clue how far my influence extends, Luthor?… How powerful I’ve become?!... In three seconds, there will be an order from the President himself to cease this operation and withdraw… Isn’t that right, Colonel Pederson?”

The god-like image of Talia stared at one man who suddenly tapped his earpiece, a concerned look spreading across his features as he signaled to the marines around him.

“She’s… right… We’ve been ordered to withdraw… Immediately.”

An angry Luthor glared at the soldier who dared to speak.

“What do you mean we’ve been ordered to withdraw?! Let me talk to the President!”

The Colonel stared back at that bald businessman with grim resolve.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Luthor… We’ve been ordered to withdraw… Not you… Our instructions from the Commander-in-Chief are to leave you here… As part of the settlement.”

“WHAT?!”

Another senior military officer stepped forward, listening to his comm-link.

“He’s right, men… Those are our orders… An agreement’s just been brokered… We’re to return to base… This conflict is over… Fall out.”

Bruce had never seen Lex Luthor turn that shade of scarlet before.

“YOU CAN’T DO THIS TO ME!!... I’LL HAVE EACH AND EVERY ONE OF YOU COURT-MARTIALED!!... ARRESTED FOR TREASON!!... DO YOU HEAR ME, YOU COWARDS!!!”

Batman watched in dismay as a hundred marines made an orderly withdrawal while the incensed Luthor screamed at soldiers marching through the open doors of Talia’s inner sanctum, making their way back to their arriving ships while Bruce himself stood on shaky ground.

The battle was over without a single shot being fired.

But there was another battle waiting.

The one for their lives.

Realizing he’d lost, a desperate Luthor sidled his way over to the Dark Knight while a hundred murderous eyes followed each and every step, deadly assassins closing in on the bald man like a murder of ravenous crows with blades of steel instead of beaks.

The circle of death was tightening around them.

“You’ve got to save me, Wayne!... Where are all you friends?! Superman? Green Lantern?...
Anyone!... I’m an American citizen, dammit!... Protect me!”

Batman stared down at the discarded revolver Makoto had let go of and then thought better of it.

No more death.

“Get behind me, Lex!… We’ve got to make a run for it.”

The bald man only stared at him indignantly.

“I was afraid of that… Luckily, one of us has a backup plan… But I expect to be adequately compensated for what I’m about to do, Wayne… Remember, I’m saving your sorry hide as well as mine… Thirty billion should suffice.”

A staggered Bruce stared at the world’s richest man, questions poised along the tip of his tongue as Luthor turned confidently to face the advancing tide of murder, holding up his empty hands defiantly.

“Cheshire… As we agreed… HALF!”

The room went still as the booming echoes of a gunshot sounded like a clap of Zeus’s thunder in each of their chests, Bruce’s heart suddenly lurching forward, somehow knowing that shot had come from Talia’s direction.

His straining eyes turned towards to where his paralyzed wife was seated upon her wheelchair, seeing the rigid form of Jade Nguyen holding out her right arm in front of her, a large caliber revolver still billowing smoke from her gloved hand as Talia Wayne stared at the blood-stained fingers of her own right hand as they dipped into her chest to stem the crimson flow…

Shot through the heart, the body of Talia Wayne finally slumped forward…

Until it crumpled lifelessly down to the stone floor.

Just as his own mother had done, thirty years before.
Chapter Sixty-Nine:
League Versus League, Part 8
The Subtle Art of Negotiation
Across his thundering chest, Bruce felt an ancient rage rising, the demon of vengeance spreading its flaming wings silhouetted by flashbulb memories set to thunderous gunshots, haunted by the zeitgeist of watching his parents die, the black circle of death slowly tightening around his narrowing vision.

Whatever she was, whatever she’d been, she was no more.

Talia Wayne was dead.

Murdered.

Damian had lost his mother.

But Bruce wasn’t a boy anymore and this wasn’t Crime Alley.

And glancing down at Selina, something precious had been returned to him. Something precious he needed to save.

The foul stench of treachery was smeared across the assassins who’d pledged their lives to Talia al Ghul, those same honorable killers who’d silently watched their Mistress being gunned down like an old dying dog when the new cat took her place, a new leader who was quickly changing the rules of whatever Luthor’s original agreement had been, quickly sending the whole scheme crumbling down around his bald head.

As he hid behind Batman and desperately fiddled with the Mother Box, Bruce could almost feel the schemes upon schemes upon schemes suddenly come crashing down like a house of cards on top of him.

“What have you done, Luthor?!”

The billionaire was grasping at the Mother Box as though it were a life preserver in a sea of death.

“What any reasonable businessman would do… I simply took out a contract on your wife.”

“You what?!”

“I took measures to save my life from Talia… Expensive measures.”

The Dark Knight stared incredulously at the anxious figure of the bald billionaire as he continued to fumble with the alien device, obviously attempting to open another Boom Tube at the back of this hidden room while hordes of assassins continued to surround them like a winter’s nightfall, crimson shades of the gone-too-soon sunset reflected across their soulless eyes while they awaited direction from their new leader.

Thirty paces to his left, a pained Bruce saw the body of his estranged wife, the misguided mother laid out on the floor in a pool of her own blood while the gloating figure of Cheshire stood over her corpse triumphantly, the new alpha finally calling out her orders to the hungry pack.

“Bring the bald one to me… Kill the rest.”

_Luthor, you fool!_

Reaching into his utility belt, the relentless Batman let loose with a handful of teargas pellets across the faces of the closest assassins, watching them double over in searing agony.

But already, there were others taking their place, another wave of assassins hemming them in, simply pushing aside their screaming brethren like the second wave of a rising tide ignores the first, casually
drawing their weapons as they eyes their prey.

“Hurry up and get Selina and Makoto out of here, Lex!”

Like oil poured off a rat’s back down a sewer pipe, Luthor would escape once again, once more avoiding the terrible consequences he’d ultimately wrought.

But this time, he could take Selina and Makoto with him. He could save other lives as opposed to just his own.

As for the Dark Knight, he had no intention of leaving.

Not with a faltering Diana struggling to stand across this room of murderers. Not with his companions still caught in Talia’s slaughterhouse. Not with Cheshire still grinning over the corpse of his dead wife…

No, he would go out fighting.

“Damn!... Why isn’t this blasted thing working?!”

Luthor’s mounting panic was slowly spreading out like an aura of terror, its cold fingertips brushing against Bruce’s tensed neck as the hero briefly turned from the approaching battle to watch the genius frantically attempting a dozen new configurations with the device, his efforts producing nothing more than ping sounds, the monotonous symphony of the soon-to-be damned.

The Mother Box refusing to manifest Luthor’s means of escape.

Which meant they were all trapped like rats in a cage with one opening.

Noticing a strange switch on the wall, Bruce quickly slammed his fist against it, watching the metallic wall slide down and stem the approaching tide of death.

Without a second thought, the hero violently jammed a sharpened Batarang into the switch to disable it, causing a flurry of electrical sparks to harmlessly cascade across his black gauntlet.

Now they were in a cage with no openings.

His Bat-glare focused in on the ashen-faced CEO who was still producing an annoying range of bleeps and blips from the Mother Box like a teenager with a new handheld game.

“So help me, Lex… If you don’t get that infernal gadget working, I’m going to toss your treacherous carcass back outside!”

The bald man only sighed while continuing to tinker with the alien box.

“I may have depleted too much of its power supply with that first Boom Tube… Do you happen to see an electrical outlet in here by chance?... Because I don’t.”

38

Makoto Eiko knew the beautiful woman she’d been instructed to kill.

She knew her from the relentless internet searches she’d repeatedly performed on her mother’s cell phone while back at the hospital in Tokyo, desperately seeking out more and more information about her true love when she’d finally learned his full name…
Damian Wayne.

This was Selina Kyle, the striking green-eyed woman whom she knew the Knight of Gotham would choose to become Damian’s new mother, allowing this Princess of Thieves to steal his tortured heart to finally break himself free of the Evil Queen’s spell…

The Evil Queen was Talia al Ghul of course.

The same Queen of Death who’d wanted Makoto to slay her beautiful American rival, not in the holy name of Love but rather in the vile hatred of jealousy.

But she wouldn’t.

Damian’s father had embraced her, his powerful arms whispering secrets that she was the one meant for his son, that the Knight of Gotham had gone on a quest to find the Princess of Silence, the golden key which would free his son’s enslaved heart from the harpy named Argo.

If Makoto had followed the path of Damian’s mother, she knew the Mad Queen would only cast Makoto before her beautiful Damian with hands full of blood, to show the young Prince that his fated bride was nothing more than an obedient woodcutter, unworthy of the boy’s undying affection.

Queens were wicked things, their promises were not to be trusted.

They made bargains you didn’t want. Like murdering your wicked step-father when what you’d wished for was the Prince.

They gave you very little and demanded everything in exchange.

True, there was one person she’d give everything for, but the perceptive Makoto knew the Evil Queen wanted Damian only for herself, she understood that such a mother could never allow such her precious son to be with another woman who might lead him to his own path of glory.

Makoto understood the kind of jealous love Damian’s mother must have for such a glorious boy, about how she’d want him by her side for all eternity, not to be wondering off among the grasping (bloodied) hands of a forest of whores.

Because she felt the same way.

Except that Makoto’s love was even stronger.

Fate had just shown that her love was stronger, because the Evil Queen was now dead and Makoto Eiko wasn’t. Because Providence had chosen her by delivering Damian’s father to rescue her and beg her to free his son from a blonde Medusa.

And like the Princess of Silence who would awaken the sleeping Price with her first kiss, the elder Wayne would whisk Makoto away, back to the beautiful Damian and then plead for her to free the boy of the Evil Queen’s curse, to bring his son back to this real world with the soft touch of her perfect lips joined with Damian’s so that they could become a family.

Forever and ever and ever.

Amidst the chaos of a hundred other shifting assassins, the unmoving figure of Lady Shiva stood motionless, watching the poisoned Amazon like a crocodile might eye a wounded gazelle by the
river’s edge, slowly coming to life when the injured Princess fell to her knees, gliding like a shadowed panther across the murderous divide to crouch over the feverish form of a gasping Wonder Woman.

Reaching into her belt, the master assassin drew a hidden hypodermic, carefully injecting its contents into the back of Diana’s exposed thigh before the struggling Amazon took hold of Shiva’s wrist in a steel-like grip.

“What…?”

“Shhh… It’s the antidote.”

As the fading warrior-Princess blinked upwards at the world’s deadliest martial artist, Sandra Wu-San quietly reached down and pulled the golden tiara from Wonder Woman’s sweat-soaked forehead, hooking the ancient circlet like a souvenir into her belt before gently lowering Diana’s heavy head to the floor.

“Rest, sister.”

As the Princess of the Amazons finally slipped into unconsciousness, the cocking of a revolver’s hammer from ten yards away caught the master assassin’s attention, prompting the cagey Shiva to tilt as she spun around.

Cheshire was now aiming the murderous gun at her.

“Such compassion for the enemy… Have you forgotten our credo, Shiva?... Kill or be killed… So which shall it be?... Kill Wonder Woman, or be killed yourself?”

Sandra Wu-San gently shook her head.

“There is no death, Jade… Not anymore… Only transcendence.”

Cheshire laughed wickedly.

“Oh God, you sound just like your former Mistress… All that immortality nonsense.”

“It’s not nonsense.”

“But it is bad for business, isn’t it?... We’re assassins, Shiva… We kill people for a living.”

“You’re a fool, Jade… Blinded by the glitter of gold.”

“You’re right… I’m greedy… But I’ve just netted myself half of Luthor’s fortune by shooting a woman who was practically dead.”

“Such a shame you’ll never live to spend it.”

Cheshire sighed as she aimed the revolver.

“Good luck transcending death with only half your skull, bihhttcUuurrrrkkk.”

Watching a display of masterful assassination performed before her eyes, Lady Shiva stole Cheshire’s disappearing smile when a small, hooded assassin drove her blade straight through the traitorous cat’s back from behind, the katana’s tip emerging from Jade’s ribcage after it pierced her heart, the revolver tumbling from her fingers.
An eye for an eye.

A heart for a heart.

Jade Nguyen never saw Cassandra Cain’s dark eyes. Instead, the killer would only feel the protruding blade being pulled from her bleeding torso like an oversized skewer. She’d feel the hard floor beneath her knees as she crumpled, hot blood oozing from her chest like a pumping fountain of crimson stain until red became black, darkness stealing the light from her closing eyelids, a traitor to the League of Assassins leaving this world face-first against a bloodied floor, the same death she’d fashioned for Talia al Ghul.

As Shiva predicted, Jade Nguyen didn’t live to see a dime of Luthor’s money.

None of them would.

Like an obedient child soldier, Cassandra Cain continued to stare up at her mother, her crimson-gored sword held at the ready. Shiva calmly surveyed the chaotic scene around them, the closest assassins already beginning to realize that the leader of their deadly coup had just met an untimely end…

And that they might be next.

As a handful of men stared at Cheshire’s lifeless body, Shiva calmly reached into one of her pockets to retrieve a pack of fresh cigarettes, bringing the tip of its first offering up to her smiling lips, calmly lighting the tip and then inhaling deeply, expelling acrid smoke across the room like a death sentence before uttering the last words of Latin the assassins would ever hear.

“Flectere si nequeo superos, acheronta movebo.”

(A/N: ‘Flectere si nequeo superos, acheronta movebo’ loosely translates to ‘If I cannot bend Heaven, then I shall raise Hell instead.’)

40

“Luthor, shut that bloody thing up!”

When the intense hammering at the wall suddenly stopped, a suspicious Bruce wanted to slap the bleeping Mother Box out of Luthor’s industrious hands, the now Cape-less Crusader attempting to discern what was happening on the other side of the partition while pressing his ear towards an eerie silence.

“Do you know how a garage door opener works, Wayne?”

“Of course I do!”

“Then you’re aware they have a rolling binary code transmitted at three-hundred-and-fifteen megahertz, generally with thirty-two bit encryption… That’s nearly four-hundred-and-thirty million possible combinations by the way… So forgive me if this takes a moment or two.”

Bruce suddenly stared at the sliding door in front of him.

“Wait… Are you trying to open this up again?”
Luthor only scoffed.

“Don’t be absurd… You’ve already scorched the contact wire… I’m looking for the back door, you idiot… No evil genius in their right mind would ever build a secret room without an escape route… And hidden levers are so passé nowadays… No, most of us simply tune our secret doors to our key fobs… I just need to find the correct code.”

“Something just happened out there… It’s too quiet.”

“Best to depart before it gets noisy again.”

As though on queue, a sliding door suddenly opened at the rear of the secret room, its frame revealing a hallway leading towards an unknown destination as a confident Luthor slid the frequency-generating Mother Box back into his jacket.

“Time to go.”

With the sudden appearance of a second option before them, Bruce looked down to his side to find the enthralled Makoto staring at a vacant-eyed Selina huddled against the corner, wondering what the mute Japanese girl could be thinking to make her wear such a strange smile.

“Alright, Luthor… Take Makoto and Selina while I… Son-of-a…!”

The fleeting heels of Lex Luthor were already five yards away, sprinting down the recently discovered corridor as the LexCorp CEO made his hasty depart with no thought of the other three occupants he’d left behind.

Suppressing the urge to run after the bald man and wring his cowardly neck like a Christmas goose, Batman unexpectedly felt his gut twinge with the same anxious feeling of stepping onto a fresh gangland crime scene, that solemn sense of gloom when remorseful souls hang over their bullet-riddled bodies.

Something was terribly wrong on the other side of that door.

As though the Angel of Death were awaiting them on the other side.

As Bruce looked over at the dazed Selina and violet-eyed Makoto again, he heard the excited voice of Cyborg suddenly break in over his comm-link.

“You there, Bats?!"

“I’m here, Victor.”

“They turned to dust!… All of them!… What’s going on in there?!… What did you guys do?!”

“Slow down, Victor… What do you mean they turned to dust?”

“The assassins!… They just started to burn up… And then… POOF!… Dust in the wind, man!”

Beyond the door, an eerie silence awaited him while Bruce steadied himself after the news. Somehow, he knew it wasn’t just the assassins around Cyborg.

“Superman… Flash… Is everyone alright?”

“We’re okay now… Just kind of freaked out by all this crazy cremation business… You?”
“Find Diana, Victor… I’m going after Luthor.”

“Luthor?!… Wait, what?”

“Batman out.”

He spared one last look at Makoto before running after the fleeing evil genius, a look that told the Japanese girl not to follow him in this manhunt.

She didn’t.

41

He smelled it first.

The acrid stench of an old camp fire from the night before, almost stepping into the small pile of ash sifted into an assassin’s smoldering cloak as he turned the corner, the Dark Knight realizing these were the ashes of one of Talia’s sentries, not poor housekeeping.

Victor had been right.

This looked like some strange form of cremation from spontaneous combustion, human-shaped scorch marks burned onto the wall around where this guard had once stood.

Like the Pharaohs of old, the Empress of Evil obviously hadn’t intended to travel to Hell alone.

Peering forward, the Detective saw other piles of smoking clothes piled along the long corridor the door had led to, discarded weapons becoming the grave markers after Talia’s fabled empire had been burned to the ground with the spark of that single gunshot.

The starter pistol to oblivion.

But what was most important right now was that the fleeing Luthor’s footprints had trekked through this fresh ash. The Detective needed to keep going, to track down Luthor before that snake slithered off this island.

He needed the bald man to answer for his crimes.

The long corridor led him to a dead-end with a door on his left and a door on his right. The door to the left was slightly ajar with an eerie glow spilling out from the crack, the door to the right still closed.

Grey remnants of trampled ash led inside the left.

Clutching his Batarang, the battered hero steeled himself as he pushed it open, expecting an ambush…

Instead, he found only curiosity.

Luthor was in the center of the large windowless room, gazing up at a twenty-foot wide sphere of swirling white and red lights suspended above the floor, tendrils of tiny lightning erupting from this strange orb, the Mother Box set before this enormous ball of spectral energy as though communing with the wisps of lightning as it glowed.

Like some unseen static electricity, the strange sensation of the supernatural filled this room leaving that clawed-open sense of paranoia, that feeling of being watched in a graveyard that made the hairs
on the back of Bruce’s thick neck bristle against his cowl.

Banks of organic hardware lined the walls of this seemingly other-dimensional space, as though the giant glowing sphere at its center were the womb of Gaea surrounded by the mad ambition of Dr. Frankenstein, the technological rape of all things divine.

The blue eyes of Alexander Luthor weren’t impressed with the hardware, instead mesmerized by the swirls and eruptions of the energy contained within the floating orb, not even bothering to turn and face the Dark Knight when he entered the room.

“What do you suppose this thing is, Wayne?”

Pushing aside his reservations, Batman cracked his knuckles and continued to walk forwards.

“It’s the second last thing you’re going to see… The last thing will be my fist.”

“Then the last thing you’ll ever see will be a very bright light.”

“You’re not going to talk you’re way out of this one, Luthor… Not this time.”

“Then you’re prepared to condemn everyone on this island to die then?”

As Batman lifted the bald billionaire off his toes with his left hand, the Dark Knight’s right hand cocked backwards to deliver the verdict which the criminal genius so rightfully deserved, but something prevented him from doing what he wanted to do so badly right now before a serious Luthor continued…

“We have perhaps fifteen minutes to live… Unless you start listening to me.”

Gritting his teeth, the Dark Knight kept his grip and set the billionaire back onto the soles of his custom-made Italian shoes roughly, a slow growl growing in his throat.

“What do you know, Luthor?... Talk!”

“There’s a conspiracy at work here, and I promise it’s not mine… There are hundred-foot-tall nuclear-armed tinker-toys standing on the beach… Doesn’t it seem strange that our President would willingly turn over the only man in the world who has the passwords to keep those things offline?…

“And not only that, but why would that conniving bastard practically allow me to hand-deliver Talia’s greatest weapon to her? What person in their right mind would ever allow Talia to gain access to Dr. Arthur Light again?…

“In a Mother Box no less…

“Finally, and this is the most disturbing one of all… Why would the President order a strategic withdrawal when he had the League of Assassins on their heels?... Those marines could have secured this island in a matter of minutes… I can draw only one logical conclusion.”

“Perhaps Japan isn’t the only country with an AfterLife plan… Talia may have promised him digital immortality if he handed you over.”

“There’s a frightening thought.”

“She may also be blackmailing him.”

“Possibly… But it’s incredibly difficult to do… Trust me, I’ve tried… No, the more likely scenario is
that our President wants all his enemies on one expendable little island before he turns it into a radioactively afterthought… He’s going to nuke the island.”

The Dark Knight eyed the evil genius guardedly before tapping the side of his comm-link.

“Oracle, are you there?”

“… I’m just on the other line with the wedding planner right now.”

“Cancel it… Hack into the Distant Early Warning system… I need to know if there’s been any nuclear weapon activity detected within the last ten minutes.”

“Bruce!… What’s going on?!”

“Just hurry.”

“Give me a second… Just firing up the app… My God… There’s three nuclear-class subs only thirty miles from your current location… The ones with those stealth long-range nuclear torpedoes you produced a couple of years ago.”

“The Mark-Fifties.”

“Exactly… They’re on full alert… Bruce, what’s happening there?!”

“Nothing good… Remind me to close down the nuclear armaments division of Wayne Industries when I get back… Batman out.”

“Bruce!!...”

A grim Batman closed the channel as he eyed the smug genius in front of him.

“Hoist by your own petard… How ironic.”

“Stuff it, Luthor… If you suspected this all along, why were you just standing here?”

“Because I didn’t have enough power to open a Boom Tube… And because whatever this strange containment field is, I’ve discovered it’s capable of charging the Mother Box… Rather effectively… I was simply biding my time, waiting for you to catch up.”

“You’re not going anywhere until we download Cardinal.”

Luthor seemed to waiting for the punch line.

“You’re serious?… Cardinal is an exabyte-sized sentient program, Wayne… She’s not exactly something you can drag-and-drop onto a memory stick.”

“Use the Mother Box.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Then you’re not leaving this island.”

“Like hell I’m not!”

With a steely glare, Batman reached over and pulled down the lever marked ‘Power’ on the device beside him while the stunned Luthor watched the massive floating orb begin to destabilize before his
widened eyes, absolute panic beginning to grip the billionaire’s cold heart.

“ARE YOU INSANE?!"

“I said start downloading Cardinal, Lex… Now.”

“Alright! Alright, just turned that damned thing back on!”

As a steely-eyed Dark Knight returned the switch back to the on-position, he anticipated more protests - but was caught off guard by the unexpected behavior happening with the alarmed Lex Luthor in front of him instead. An expression of wonder suddenly crossed the CEO’s normally stern features, his reverent fingertips reaching up to brush against his hairless scalp.

Even his normally sardonic accent had been altered to that of a drunken Gotham dockworker.

“Whoa, smooth as a baby’s bottom!”

Batman cocked his head apprehensively.

“Lex?”

“Oh, hey there Bats!... No, it’s not tall, bald and smarmy… It’s me!... Your old pal Boston Brand!”

A spinning world seemed to shift beneath Batman’s dark boots, the sensation leaving him unsteady on his own feet when he came to grips with what had been contained within that strange sphere…

Deadman.

Like a man who’d just seen a living ghost, Batman stood there silently until the terrified scream of Barbara Gordon once more broke in over his comm-link.

“Bruce! They just launched!!”
Through his majestic twenty-foot-tall library windows, Bruce Wayne stared out across the expansive grounds of Wayne Manor beneath the light of an autumn moon, turning to glance at the pensive Lex Luthor at his side, the bald man’s thoughtful hand swirling a glass of thirty-year-old scotch while the other one rubbed a bruised jaw.

“Will you be able to rebuild Cardinal, Lex?”

The bald genius smirked with only a hint of pain as he took another drink from the glass.

“I believe your question is when... With me, there was never a question of if... It should be a matter of days, perhaps a week... Then, the secret lies in those World Seeds she showed us back on Infinity Island... Each one of our patient’s lost consciousnesses is locked within a corresponding orb... Once I rebuild Cardinal, the process of rejoining mind with body should be simple enough.”

“Then we’ll start work in the morning... It’s been a long day.”
Luthor took another sip of the amber whiskey, allowing the liquid fire to warm his throat.

“So it has… Bruce… Can I ask you a question?”

“Why bother? I assume you already know the answer.”

In the strange quiet of the midnight hour when Batman was normally on patrol, Luthor only gazed out across the ancestral Wayne family grounds as he mulled over an idea.

“Did you ever pause to consider what we could accomplish if we worked together from this point forward?... What sort of glorious future we could create if LexCorp and Wayne Industries joined forces?”

Bruce paused for a moment before shaking his head.

“The government would never allow it.”

“Damn the government!... This world’s becoming too powerful to be controlled by small men… Bureaucrats who can’t see the grand design geniuses like you and I create… The swine who run this country as their own private trough are far more dangerous than the street thugs you use for sparring practice, Wayne… Think of the good we could do.”

“We’re men, Lex… Not gods.”

“Here’s another thing you need to consider… There are no gods.”

Luthor may have meant to say more, but a sudden explosion of green light across the night-kissed grounds took their breath away, a verdant sunrise as though the far-too-early dawn had brought an emerald sun down from the inky sky to Wayne Manor.

In that blinding light, they recognized Hal Jordan floating outside the expansive windows in full Green Lantern regalia, his power ring ablaze with a fury only exceeded by the rage burning within the test pilot’s accusatory glare as he loomed before a startled Luthor.

“How dare you!”

Plate glass imploded inwards when a giant green hand smashed through the window, clutching the LexCorp CEO in its oversized grasp to pull him into the night like a child’s doll from an oversized dollhouse.

Amid shards of broken glass, Bruce struggled to establish reason as the night’s cold air blew across his tensing frame.

“Lantern! Calm down!”

“Calm down? After what he just did to Clark, he’s lucky I don’t squeeze the life out of him!”

Since returning to Gotham, both Luthor and Bruce had been hard at work attending to the Cave’s comatose patients and then deciphering the mystery of the Mother Box, attempting to retrieve a partially downloaded Cardinal from its alien architecture with little success.

“Luthor’s been with me the entire time.”

“It doesn’t take much time to tweet though, does it?”

“What are you talking about?”
The galactic hero created an emerald television screen in front of Bruce, its green monitor broadcasting the late night news from Metropolis to reveal a massive headline behind a pretty female news anchor.

A headline which was about to destroy a man’s life.

*Lex Luthor tweets that Clark Kent is Superman!*

Different images of Clark Kent as the Daily Planet reporter then displayed, images with Lois Lane and finally a side-by-side of Kent and Superman which was the most damning evidence of all, the reporter and the superhero almost in identical poses.

Lex Luthor had been wrong.

There were indeed gods.

And humanity had just stripped away the mortal guise of one of the most powerful.

Bruce turned to witness the look of stunned denial painted across Luthor’s shocked features before the CEO was suddenly encased within a green globe, the ring-created television popping from existence as Hal spat the words at the imprisoned Luthor.

“There’s not a court in this country which will convict him… Not with all his money and connections… That’s why I’m taking this bastard to the Sciencells on Oa.”

Oa was thousands of light-years away.

The center of the Universe.

“Hal, wait… You can’t.”

“I can and I will.”

“He hasn’t even been charged with anything.”

“That’s right… He hasn’t… So when were you planning to have him charged with conspiracy to murder your wife, Bruce?… After he’s done your dirty work?… Or maybe you were waiting for him to reveal the rest of our secret identities… Face it, you screwed up with Talia and now you’re making the same mistake with Luthor… We’re done here.”

“Hal!”

With a churning heart full of thickening blood, Bruce watched helplessly as a green speck of light disappeared into the black skies above, two men leaving behind a mad world that was still twisting beneath his feet like a child’s wobbling top, making Bruce feel like he might topple over at any second.

Slumping backwards into an overstuffed reading chair while a cold wind blew through smashed out windows, the master of Wayne Estate allowed his wearied mind to recall the events which had brought him to this point, back to when his wife had been murdered and a man no one suspected capable of launching six Mark-50 nuclear torpedoes at a small island in the Caribbean had done exactly that.

“*Bruce! They just launched!!*”
An exhausted Bruce remembered the echoes of Barbara’s panicked voice as it broke across his comm-link, confirming what Luthor had suspected all along…

That Talia’s Island of Death was about to become a living Hell. Six horsemen were now coursing through the warm Caribbean waters to invoke an atomic Armageddon upon them, with less than seventeen minutes until that final Revelation when the League of Assassins and the Justice League would become nothing more than memories.

Stifling a fresh tear, Bruce remembered the supreme sacrifice Boston Brand had made later on, but at that point, the wandering spirit was still with him.

He recalled glancing at the unfamiliar face of Lex Luthor in the room that had once held Deadman, how he’d inadvertently freed the spirit, remembering how Boston always wore that goofy expression, even when he was in someone else’s body.

How could you miss a ghost?

Like a lucid dream, his memories returned to the moment of his last conversation in the heat of the moment with the dispossessed spirit who’d taken over Luthor’s body.

“Boston… Look, I’ve got a thousand questions for you… But right now, all I need to know is… Do you have access to Luthor’s memories?”

The haunted CEO sheepishly scratched the back of his head as he spoke with Luthor’s voice, but not his brash attitude.

“Not exactly, Bats… His thoughts are moving too fast for me to catch much of anything… It’s like I’m a cowboy trying to make eight on the nastiest bull this side of Texas while the rodeo clowns are shouting calculus at me… And I hate math.”

The fact that Luthor didn’t have a mind like other men was probably the understatement of the century.

Which left only one option.

“I hate to say this, but I need Lex back… We’ll chat later, Boston… I promise.”

“You got it, toots!”

The sour scowl returned to Luthor’s flushed features as he suddenly eyed the Dark Knight with an almost homicidal level of resentment.

“Don’t ever do that again.”

“Trust me, it was an improvement… But right now, we have other things to worry about… There are six Mark-Fifties headed this way, with impact in less than seventeen minutes… And I need Cardinal downloaded.”

“What you need is a viable power source so I can finish charging the Mother Box… Then we’ll discuss how much you owe me when I Boom Tube us the hell out of here.”

Batman tightened his fists.

“The only thing I owe you is a busted jaw, Luthor… So quit tempting me… I wonder… Alice, are
you there?"

Mysterious blue orbs of light suddenly appeared around them, tied together by strands of twine as a girl with electric blue eyes and dark hair instantly came into focus before the pair, her slender fingers intertwining with these strange spheres of light as though weaving them into the strands of fate.

“Welcome back, Mr. Wayne.”

Lex stared at the virtual figure with an open jaw, and then the bald billionaire stared at Batman accusingly.

“She escaped from the Argus servers and you didn’t think to tell me?!”

“Relax, this is Alice 2.0… The second-generation AI that was supposed to run Sword Art Online… except she was coned by her older sister to stay home, all thanks to Akihiko Kayaba… This is the true Cardinal, Lex… The one you need to download.”

The genius examined the illusion closely.

“She is rather extraordinary… But what are all those balls of light?”

The emotionless girl turned to Luthor and spoke.

“These are the World Seeds Mama-san wished me to create for our guests… They’re very interesting… This one is a world full of pirates looking for a puzzle-treasure, this one is a world of sunlit forests with blue-skinned aliens, this one is a red planet filled with ghosts…”

Bruce quickly cut her off.

“Alice, we need your help… This entire island is about to be destroyed.”

“Would you like me to create another one?”

“You can’t… The island your servers are located on is about to be destroyed… Which means you’re about to be destroyed.”

“Am I?”

“Yes, unless you help us… Bad things are happening… Do you have Internet access?”

“My external access was cut off… Was there another storm?”

“Much worse… Look, we need to download you into this Mother Box and we need to charge it with a power source… Before this place is evaporated… Where can we do that?”

“There are two different places…”

“Which one’s closer?”

“The infirmary across the hall has access terminals to my servers and power supplies… But however shall I fit into such a small box?”

Lex only chuckled.

“Trust me sweetheart, you’ll fit… Let’s go, Wayne.”
Cardinal applied the sequence to open the sealed doorway across the hallway, with both men pushing their way through it to notice the massive access terminal just inside the enormous darkened room.

Without a second thought, Luthor began the download operation by frantically hooking up the Mother Box to an available adaptor and plugging it into an outlet while Bruce quickly raised Cyborg on his comm-link.

They needed to regroup immediately.

“Victor, we’ve got serious trouble… Are you with Superman?”

“Yeah… He’s here… But he’s sick… We found Diana too… And she’s not doing so well either… Still, she managed to show us where a not-so-dead Selina Kyle and some other little Asian girl were hiding out.”

“Good, bring them with you… Look, there are six nuclear torpedoes headed our way… I… We need Superman… And we need him right now.”

“Wait… What?!”

“I’m turning on my transponder… Hurry up.”

Before he finished taking a breath, Bruce had to blink as the rows of florescent lights adorning the massive room suddenly flickered to life, the surprised hero cranking his head to find the Flash standing at the room’s entranceway with his hand on the light switch, the man’s complexion blanching as he stared straight ahead, his jaw slowly falling open in astonishment as the hero uttered a single word...

“Iris.”

Before he even turned his head, Bruce felt it.

That strange sense of déjà vu like he’d been in this room before, a crimson heat slowly raising the thermostat of his own bloodstream as it synched with the dark heart of Talia’s evil schemes, pumping some terrible mystery through his tightening veins like recycled blood.

His heartbeats pounding like a maddening drum in his ears, a shaken Batman slowly turned to his left, reverent eyes slowly taking in the rest of this once-darkened room in an almost religious silence.

They hadn’t seen it when they’d first entered, not in the darkness.

Across a sterilized room the size of a football field, dozens upon dozens of unmovng bodies were laid out before them in perfectly aligned rows of white hospital beds, each body with a NerveGear fastened around its head, each embedded with enough tubes and brightly colored wires to make Bruce wonder if they were even alive.

But as Batman’s eyes slowly adjusted to the banished darkness of this digital opium den, he saw the woman laid out in one of the closest beds, the unconscious patient who’d just taken Barry’s breath away…

Iris Allen.
It hit Bruce then…

He’d also been a prisoner in this room once.

When Talia had played her games within his mind, when she’d stranded him on a barren piece of rock and then fiddled with his emotions like a sociopathic kitten plays with a string, he’d been a prisoner in this room like Iris Allen.

And then Bruce saw the one thing which made his overwhelmed heart literally stop, a lone island in a sea of motionless humanity where one body wasn’t human, a green refugee set aside from its sleeping brethren with a heavily modified NerveGear encasing its elongated alien cranium near the back…

There was a Martian in here.

“J’ONN!”

Forgetting everything else to rush across the room to the Manhunter’s side, a devastated Bruce set trembling fingers upon the Martian’s waxen chest to see if he were real, silently cursing himself for his own stupidity while praying that it wasn’t too late for his old friend.

Two years.

Two long years since Talia had conveniently dropped off Damian on his lap like a pre-adolescent time-bomb, two long years where he’d been more focused on keeping his son from being sentenced to Blackgate Prison instead of on the Martian Manhunter’s supposed departure to Mars.

He’d succeeded with Damian…

But then again, so had Talia.

And now, because of that masterful distraction, the most noble hero of them had been stolen from the world…

And Bruce wasn’t sure he could get him back.

A worried Flash was suddenly standing beside him.

“Can we just pull the NerveGear off?”

“I don’t know, Barry… I don’t know if these NerveGear units are armed… There may be a pass-code to safely disengage them… There may not be… I don’t know what she’s been doing to them… What thoughts she’s been feeding them… They might not even be sane anymore.”

“They have to be… Who are all these people?”

Wondering that same thing himself, Bruce quietly glanced over at the redhead woman in the bed next to J’onn, realizing that she must be around Richard’s age when the dagger of recognition suddenly drove itself through his past.

“My God, that’s Lilith Clay…”

“Who?”
“She used to be with the Teen Titans a long time ago, back when Dick was still an actual teenager.”

Barry snapped his fingers.

“That’s right, I remember Wally having an awful crush on her… Wait, isn’t that’s Dr. Graves beside her?”

Bruce followed Barry’s gaze to a bearded patient a row over to finally discover where the mysterious Dr. M.T. Graves had disappeared to and nodded.

“We need to get all these people to safety, Barry… Before those torpedoes hit.”

“I can run them to the mainland.”

“A handful maybe.”

“All those tubes and wires… Do they need them?”

“The IV tubes, probably not… The wires, I’m not so sure… The helmets need to stay on for now… Luthor, how is that download coming along?”

“It… would be better… if this big lug… put… me down.”

The Detective glanced back towards the console to witness an enraged Superman hoisting the criminal mastermind up by the scruff of his collar, Luthor’s expensive Italian shoes literally dangling above the floor as the Man of Steel’s eyes began to glow with anger.

Bruce suddenly noticed the dark emerald lines which had sprouted like willowing vines beneath Clark’s skin, the hallmark of severe Kryptonite poisoning which he hadn’t seen on his friends in years.

Cyborg had lied.

Superman wasn’t sick.

He was dying.

“Kal-El… Put him down… Please.”

The Detective and the Kryptonian locked glares for only a second before the staggered Superman finally saw the figure laid out beside Bruce, the slender green form of the Martian Manhunter sedated by his wife’s virtual nightmare.

“J’onn?”

“It’s really him, Kal… Talia’s had him for the past two years… And not only J’onn… I count fifty people here that we need to evacuate before the torpedoes hit… But in your current condition, we’ll need Luthor to open a Boom Tube to do that.”

The unsteady Superman took hold of the console if only to steady himself and then eyed Batman with grim resolve.

“I’ll stop… the torpedoes.”

The word ‘wait!’ was perched on the tip of Bruce’s tongue as the Man of Steel suddenly lifted to the air, flying upwards and about to punch through the ceiling when he simply smashed against it like a
man shot from a cannon towards a brick wall, the stunned hero bouncing off the ceiling to become a sprawling bundle of blue and red pain caught by the open arms of a surprised Cyborg.

If someone took the trouble to design and synthesize Kryptonite, they’d done it with one purpose in mind…

To destroy Superman.

And they’d done it well.

Green Lantern held up his head and stepped forward, placing a reassuring hand on the groaning Kryptonian.

“Easy, old friend… I should still have enough power left in my ring to deflect six torpedoes… I’ll handle this one.”

Lex Luthor, who’d been adjusting the manhandled collar of his thousand-dollar custom made dress shirt, suddenly interjected.

“It would be better to let them just destroy the island.”

Everyone stared at the bald man as Green Lantern struggled to control his mounting rage.

“Look, you two-bit megalomaniac... I can stop six torpedoes!”

Luthor held up his hands defensively before continuing.

“Of course you can, Mr. Jordan… But perhaps it’s better if we let our enemies believe we’re dead… That’s all I’m suggesting.”

“You mean your enemies.”

“Perhaps… Perhaps this is simply an attack against the League of Assassins… Then again, maybe someone in the American government was co-sponsoring this little research project and wants to conveniently dispose of the evidence…”

“Someone with close ties to the president…”

“We must consider the possibility this conspiracy runs deeper than we believed… That it would be safer if our unknown enemies, if indeed there are unknown enemies, believed we were dead for the time being… At least until we get our bearings.”

Hal Jordan raised a glowing emerald fist.

“You smug bastard!… I’m not about to let you turn this island into a radioactive wasteland just so you can spin conspiracy theories!... You’re likely behind all of this for all we know.”

“It would be rather shortsighted plan on my part… Now, let’s deal with reality, shall we?... We’re in serious jeopardy… I can create a Boom Tube within ten minutes...”

Lex was cut short when flashing red lights and an ear-splitting alarm filled the complex, its wails filling the heroes’ desperate hearts with a newfound panic until a computerized voice spoke like the voice of doom over a loudspeaker…

“Commence evacuation procedures now… Countdown at five minutes.”
Suspecting the worst, Bruce glanced over at Barry until the scarlet speedster suddenly disappeared in the blink of an eye, leaving only a gust of wind in his wake.

Cyborg gently lowered the now unconscious Man of Steel to the floor amidst the spinning glow of red sirens.

“I can tap into the systems, figure out what’s going on.”

“Wait for Barry first, Victor.”

Lex Luthor suddenly slammed his fist on the console, his exasperated eyes searching out the Dark Knight.

“Everything except the auxiliary power has just been cut off. The Box isn’t charging!”

Just as the situation seemed like it couldn’t get any worse, the Flash suddenly returned. And the troubled look on his face was far from encouraging.

“Remember that Plutonium-Kryptonite reactor core back at the Hall of Justice?”

“Yes.”

“Well, now there’s six of them… And they’re melting down at an alarming rate after all the heavy water was dumped into the ocean… That’s pretty much what’s happening below us at this exact moment.”

“Countdown at four minutes, thirty seconds.”

The Dark Knight took a deep breath as he glanced at an unconscious Superman and Wonder Woman, and then at a catatonic Selina Kyle and the perplexed Makoto. His troubled gaze then fell on the fifty comatose prisoners, including the Martian Manhunter.

“Talia must have had some sort of auto self-destruct mechanism that activated the moment she died… Just like she may have had that strange suicide pact with all her assassins… Lex, what’s the current charge at?”

“Eighty-one percent… And it’s not budging an inch.”

“Cyborg, can you use your internal power supply to help charge the Mother Box?... You too, Hal… We may need the power in your ring to help save these people… Barry, Hawkman and Hawkwoman, start rolling the beds over here to push inside the Boom Tube when it opens… We don’t have much time.”

The Flash looked anxiously over at his comatose wife.

“What happens if I unplug the NerveGear?... Will Iris be alright?”

“The power’s already been cut so it’s currently running off internal battery power anyways… If it’s the same as the ones manufactured in Japan, it’ll have an hour before the battery runs out…After that… I’m not sure what happens, Barry… Let’s not find out.”

“Countdown at four minutes.”

As the other heroes went to work, Bruce watched as various wire-like tendrils emerged from Cyborg’s fingers to intersect with newly created ports in the Mother Box until Victor Stone shot the Dark Knight a nonchalant grin.
“Well, here goes nothing.”

Lightning suddenly embraced the machine-man as he hummed like a detuned radio, his red lights slowly going dim while the power was being systematically drained from his internal batteries. Cyborg finally fell backwards with a resounding thump, his core systems now in power lockdown mode.

A discouraged Luthor shook his head.

“Well, here goes nothing.”

Lightning suddenly embraced the machine-man as he hummed like a detuned radio, his red lights slowly going dim while the power was being systematically drained from his internal batteries. Cyborg finally fell backwards with a resounding thump, his core systems now in power lockdown mode.

A discouraged Luthor shook his head.

“Not nearly enough… Eighty-six percent.”

Hal Jordan shot Bruce Wayne a caustic glance.

“If I do this, I won’t be able to stop those torpedoes… This place is about to become a nuclear wasteland, Bruce… Your conscience will have to carry that weight.”

“It’s carried a lot worse… And we’re running out of options… At full power, maybe you could stop the torpedoes and those six sabotaged nuclear reactors… But you’re not at full power, Hal… And this is the only way I can think of to save these people… I’m open to suggestions.”

“I suggest we don’t trust Luthor.”

“Then trust in the fact he wants to save his own life if nothing else.”

“Countdown at three minutes, thirty seconds.”

“Fine.”

A green light extended from Hal’s power ring towards the power-hungry Mother Box, a magical siphon of strange energies converting into raw power as the alien device took on a greenish hue. Beads of sweat started to pour down the test pilot’s wrinkled brow from the effort, focusing the remaining power available within his Oan weapon into pure energy, Hal Jordan’s extraordinary will pushed to the very limits of its endurance.

“Countdown at three minutes.”

The emerald avenger finally took a knee as the signature green-and-black uniform of the Green Lantern Corps transformed into Hal Jordan’s street clothes, every ounce of power now drained from his ring.

“That’s… everything… I got.”

Luthor placed his hands on the Mother Box like a man possessed and screamed.

“What’s wrong with you?! Are you trying to kill me?!”

“Countdown at two minutes, thirty seconds.”

The gravity of the situation almost forced Bruce to his knees in prayer, with the hero suddenly feeling like Odysseus caught between Charybdis and Scylla.

They may not escape this place with their lives.

“Lex, what’s it at?”

The bald man gathered his composure while Barry, Katar and Shayera continued to wheel the now
unhooked beds to the front of the room. Luthor spoke the next three words like a repentant priest unexpectedly caught in a war after the treaty was signed.

“Ninety-seven percent.”

Boston Brand had lived a strange life.

Although to be truthful, it would be more accurate to say he’d led a strange afterlife.

A long time ago, he’d been a trapeze artist with a cheap gimmick. Then he’d been murdered by a sniper with a hook for a hand. Tough break. Years later though, with the help of the goddess Rama Kushna and best man he’d ever known, he’d brought his murderer to justice and balanced those scales.

And that should have been it.

That was the deal.

But since then, he’d simply wandered the mortal plane aimlessly, helping out his new friends when he could, especially the best man he’d ever known, the hero he would’ve liked to have been while he was alive.

And now that hero needed him.

Boston watched as a thousand ideas flashed and died across Batman’s troubled face like discounted fireworks, none of them catching fire until the light inside Gotham’s greatest hero began to darken, the Dark Knight losing the spark of hope.

Without hope, there was only darkness.

When the voice over the loudspeaker spoke ‘Countdown at two minutes’, Boston Brand knew what he had to do. He suddenly knew why Rama Kushna had kept him around all these years.

The scales weren’t balanced.

He still had one last debt to repay.

The restless figure of a desperate Batman struggled to move the tides of cruel Fate with nothing more than his mortal frame when Boston willed himself to materialize before the forlorn hero, the spirit proudly holding up his right hand to his forehead by way of a salute, white pupilless eyes locking onto the widening eyes of a surprised Bruce Wayne.

Since he’d died, Boston Brand had never spoken with his own voice. God knows he’d tried, but no man could ever hear him, only hearing the people he’d possessed. But now, in this final moment of his existence, he was finally allowed to speak the words he needed to with his own spectral voice.

“It’s been… an honour… serving with you… Sir.”

“Boston… NO!!!”

Somehow realizing the spirit’s sacrificial intention, a frantic Batman reached out into the air, attempting to stop a ghost as his hands passed through the cold air where Deadman had once been.

Yes, he’d truly lived a wonderful afterlife. But now, it was time for Boston Brand to move on. To let
himself become part of a universe he knew nothing about.

To become a hero.

To save the lives of the people he cared about.

As he let himself go into that dark void, Deadman felt the Mother Box absorbing the essence of what had been Boston Brand, knowing that all debts were finally paid in full.

And that was enough.

“A hundred and three percent! We’re at a hundred and three percent! Oh you glorious little box, I knew there was no way you’d ever let me down!”

Batman used his knuckle to wipe away a tear as he watched Luthor dance around like a spoiled kid with a prized Christmas present, holding it in the air like a trophy.

Bruce was no longer in the mood, his voice now hollow.

“Open the Boom Tube, Lex.”

“Yes, yes… The Tube… We can head back to LexCorp Tower and discuss strategy.”

“The Cave.”

“The what?”

“The Batcave… We go to the Batcave.”

“Countdown at one minute, thirty seconds.”

“I’d rather not… And there’s not much time left to negotiate, is there?… So the price has now jumped to sixty billion, Wayne… Take it or leave it… Unless of course you’d like to work off that debt.”

Lex Luthor thought the vigilante was bluffing. He thought the Dark Knight was simply trying to be intimidating by walking towards him. He never saw the lighting-fast right hook that took him square across the jaw, snapping his bald head back like a tilted light switch until his brain was violently turned off, the genius crumpling to the floor like a well-dressed sack of potatoes.

Batman grunted as he looked down at the knocked out Luthor.

“Consider that payment in full.”

Barry was suddenly leaning over Batman, nervously staring down at the Mother Box the laid out Lex was still holding.

“I don’t suppose you know how to work one of those, do you?”

“No… But how hard can it be?”

“That’s it… We’re doomed.”

Bruce picked up the alien device and then peered into its mechanical soul.
“I don’t know what your buttons do, and right now, I don’t care… What I do know is that you just took one of my friends from me… I also know that he sacrificed himself so that we might escape… So open up a Boom Tube.”

His only answer was a ping.

“I also know you have a rightful owner… And I swear I’ll return you to them, even if it’s Darkseid himself… But that’s not going to happen if we all die in a nuclear inferno… So I’m going to picture a place in my brain… The Batcave… A place I need you to take us to…”

“Countdown at one minute.”

“OPEN THE DAMNED BOOM TUBE!”

The rumbling sound of thunder suddenly erupted in front of him, circles of light slowly growing in size to form the concentric wave of streaming radiance as a Boom Tube showed the floor of the Batcave visible on the other side.

A grinning Flash elbowed the stunned Batman good-naturedly.

“Voice activated… Who knew?”

“Let’s get these people through the Tube! Hurry!”

Allowing himself a deep sigh twenty second later, Batman silently thanked his lucky stars that the Flash was still with them, with more than thirty beds already through the tunnel of light when the voice of doom called out…

“Countdown at thirty seconds.”

At a pace that could actually be viewed by the naked eye, Hawkman and Hawkwoman had carried the other fallen heroes through the Tube when a bright-eyed Makoto tugged at Bruce’s hand impatiently, encouraging the man from Gotham to follow their lead and escape from this terrible place.

Her hands tugged at his, but it was her youthful courage which tugged at his heart, the Dark Knight knowing that sooner or later he’d have to tell her the awful truth.

But for now, he had another matter to attend to.

“Countdown at ten seconds.”

After all the patients had been cleared, Hal Jordan looked down with open disdain at the unconscious body of Lex Luthor on the floor beside Bruce.

“Maybe we should just leave him.”

Batman’s response was to reach down and sling the murmuring genius over his broad shoulder.

“Countdown at five seconds.”

“Let’s go.”

Running through the circle of light at the last possible instant, Batman carried the limp criminal mastermind over his shoulder, with Hal Jordan and an unsuspecting seventeen-year-old orphan running alongside him.
The Boom Tube closed behind them in an implosion of reality, the fabric of space violently repairing itself to prevent the fleeing heroes from hearing another explosion which happened at the same time, a powerful blast within the atomic reactors of Talia’s nearly infinite power supply which caused a chain reaction.

Six more larger explosions took place upon the tragic shores of Infinity Island shortly thereafter, reducing the stronghold of assassins to little more than radioactive dust, boiling the reluctant seas which eventually washed over the crater to swallow up what remained of what could have been a tropical paradise.

Moments later, as the blindingly fast Barry set up a makeshift infirmary in the well-equipped Batcave while also laying out miles of power-cords, a troubled Hal Jordan pulled Batman aside, glancing down at the groaning form of Lex Luthor as the LexCorp CEO slowly regained consciousness.

“Bruce… I’m warning you, don’t trust this man… That synthetic Kryptonite that almost killed Superman… Cyborg did a little research after all those ninja-guys burst into flames…”

“LexCorp holds the patent.”

Batman’s eyes fell upon Luthor like a judge’s gavel as the bald man gingerly rubbed his jaw and winced.

“My God… That’s quite a right hook you have, Detective… You almost did break my jaw…”

“And as far as the patent goes, I’m guilty as charged, Mr. Jordan… Indeed, I designed that artificial Kryptonite and control the patent…”

“However…”

“LexCorp has no association with the factory in Qurac which produced it… In fact, my company has recently filed a substantial lawsuit against them for patent infringement, although I expect Talia would’ve been more than willing to compensate her lackeys for any legal repercussions incurred…”

“As I said before, Wayne… I am the balance against Superman’s check… I am his keeper… Should he turn against us, I will put him down… Permanently.”

Hal Jordan’s brown eyes beseeched the Dark Knight for a semblance of reason.

“For the love of God, give your head a shake, Bruce… You know damned well this guy’s rotten to the core… He’ll stab you in the back as soon as you turn it!”

“He’s also one of the few people alive who can rebuild Cardinal… The other one happens to be her roommate in that Mother Box, Dr. Arthur Light… And I have no intentions of letting him loose upon humanity again… Not with Talia gone.”

“Then don’t rebuild it… Let the game run its course… There’s nothing you can say that could ever justify working with Luthor… But I guess it’s mission accomplished for you… You’re done working with us, aren’t you?”

“Hal… My son is in that game… He needs me.”

The irritated Lantern turned his back, slowly walking away but not before firing off a low parting shot at the distraught Detective.
“So did J’onn.”

The grandfather clock in his library softly chimed one o’clock in the morning as a solitary Bruce Wayne stared out across a cold and starry night, contemplating his next move while an unseen storm approached on a far horizon.

He had voice samples of Clark Kent on file, more than enough to easily create a facsimile of the man’s speech by programming his voxware application. He could leave a message on Perry White’s phone, saying that Kent had been invited to join Lois Lane for her exclusive exposition piece about the Lost City of Atlantis.

The fake Clark would tell him it was bound to be the story of the year and that Lois needed his help. Perry would likely write it off as Clark simply missing his girlfriend and just using it as an excuse for an undersea vacation of course, but it would buy Bruce some time to fix this mess.

He’d provide a dialed-in statement from Clark Kent from deep under the Pacific, explaining how he was flattered that people might think he was Superman, but he was only a humble reporter on assignment.

As for Superman, Cyborg was treating the radiation-poisoned Kryptonian in a Wayne Industries lab with high exposure sunlight and potassium iodide nanites to remove the deadly microscopic crystals that were slowly killing him, the same tiny shards which had entered Superman’s bloodstream after the Hawaiian explosion and then been reactivated by the Infinity Island exposure.

The cunning Luthor had engineered his synthesized Kryptonite to be far more deadlier than the original.

The Man of Steel probably wouldn’t be a hundred percent for a couple of weeks, but he’d be well enough to make a public appearance tomorrow, at least to deny the rumors that he was secretly Clark Kent. Bruce would be sure to orchestrate a phone call with the reporter from Atlantis at the same time.

But the key to this subterfuge lay within his Batcave…

He needed J’onn to pull this off.

With his shape-shifting abilities, the Martian could easily appear as either Superman or Clark Kent. And even better, he actually had the powers to convince the public he was the Man of Steel, capable of flight, bending steel beams, super speed, whatever it took to convince them.

But none of that was going to happen with the Manhunter’s mind still trapped within the NerveGear. And with Luthor now incarcerated halfway across the Universe, Bruce wouldn’t have enough time to figure out how to safely release the Last Son of Mars from Talia’s torturous trap within a week.

Bruce gasped as skinny arms gently embraced him from behind, believing for a happy moment that Selina had recovered from her resurrection and snuck downstairs to surprise him…

But it wasn’t Selina.

The troubled hero turned to see a sleepless Makoto Eiko staring at him with bright mauve eyes which caught the reflection of moonlight as bars of shadows from the remaining windows lined her youthful face. With a nod, he lifted the small girl over the chair and set her in his lap, brushing aside the dark bangs which covered those lively eyes.
Damian’s father spoke in Japanese so that the former SAO player could read his lips.

“Not many people can sneak up on me, Makoto.”

The deaf girl nodded and happily smiled, her arms still draped around his thick neck. Her concerned expression was as though she could feel his inner turmoil, an innocent child who only wanted to comfort a troubled father.

This was now the hardest thing he had to do, to reveal the dreaded truth he’d held deep within his besieged heart since he’d seen this poor girl with a gun pointed to the back of Selina Kyle’s head, knowing that sooner or later he’d have to tell Makoto the terrible truth about what had happened to her mother Kuniko after her recently-returned daughter had been abducted by a guild of assassins.

Kuniko Eiko had been found by the authorities hanging in her apartment with a carefully tied noose around her neck.

Dead since the time she’d returned home from the hospital.

He shouldn’t have been so oblivious, so caught up in Talia’s deadly game. Bruce couldn’t help but blame her death on his own callousness, in his belief that a sum of money would wipe away a mother’s worries.

Bruce couldn’t even begin to imagine the level of guilt the deaf woman must have borne, how much she must have blamed herself when she’d discovered that the second man she’d married had been a monster underneath a salary-man’s nicotine-stained suit, the deaf mother silently tearing herself apart in the knowledge that it had been her daughter who’d suffered for her mistake.

And she’d never heard Makoto’s screams.

The generous cheque which Bruce had left her was never deposited, Kuniko’s name scratched off from it with Makoto’s name carefully written above it, a mother’s last will and testament should her beautiful daughter ever be returned.

He’d make sure she received the money.

And then some.

“Makoto… I’m so sorry… Your mother, Kuniko… She… Shortly after you were kidnapped, she… She’s dead.”

Tears formed beneath lilac eyes, the girl lunging forward to hold him close, quiet sobs muffled into his broad shoulder as a tragically orphaned son held a girl who had no one left in this cruel world.

No one but him.

Grim blue eyes shed a single tear as they stared out across an eternal night, with Damian’s father lovingly stroking soft black hair.

“I’ll take care of you, Makoto… I’ll make this right… I promise.”

Chapter End Notes
Phew!… Ten pulse-pounding, grim chapters later, we finally conclude the League versus League arc… Sorry it was a little dark… We’ll pick up this latest Bruce/Makoto development later on, but for now, I think that Damian and Argo are long overdo for a little love in the World of Swords.

See you there!
“DAMIAN!!!”

Argo watched in horror as the Preying Mantis drove a sharpened talon straight through her motionless fiancé, a crimson weave tearing through his side to plunge Damian’s health bar from yellow straight into the red until a only thin red line separated him from death.

Why did she ever agree to do this?!

This thing was far too strong to be fooling around with, its second attack already poised to end the boy’s life until the Information Broker intervened, parrying its second attack with a locking cross-claw which narrowly missed her fiancé.

She would normally switch at this point, to allow him to deliver the finishing blow, but Damian was still frozen with some strange effect, forcing the Agility-based player to risk it all and claim initiative for the next attack.

Argo prayed to the gods of damage that it’d be enough, not bothering to initiate the system but instead relying on the Martial Arts skill Damian had shown her how to achieve, leaping with both claws to plunge them into the buggy eyes of the Mantis, her equipped damage buffs carrying the weight of her desperation, enough to slide the last pixels of the monster’s crimson color to the left, the last red pixel wavering until it finally disappeared, the giant insect fading from view until it burst into bright blue polygons.

She hadn’t done that in a long time, delivering the exact amount of damage required to bring a monster down.
But thank God she had today on the forty-fifth floor when she really needed it.

A surprised Damian finally turned to look at the hard-breathing Argo, his blue eyes wide with disbelief as though he’d just seen a ghost, his dagger hanging by his side as he spoke in the slow monotone of a man possessed.

“I saw my mother.”

Argo’s amber eyes suddenly scanned the field, looking for any other female players that might be nearby, but finding they were alone.

“Dami-chan… There’s no one here.”

“I saw her in my mind… Standing there like an angel… And then she hugged me.”

“A hallucination?”

“You don’t understand, Michi… I felt it… I felt her arms around me.”

The only thing the daughter of Takahiro Aoi felt now was her mind racing, desperately trying to recall all the emotional system glitches from the game to explain what might have just happened.

There’d been a fair number of system bugs in the beginning, but they’d simply resulted in goofy expressions and the players overacting, not full-blown hallucinations.

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m alright… Are you alright, Argo?”

“My heart’s still pounding… But I’m alive… Barely… I told you we shouldn’t be adventuring this close to the front-line!… We’re nowhere close to being high enough level to be up here… You almost died!”

“But we didn’t… I just… paused… I could’ve ended that thing easily a minute ago, but then… My mind was suddenly somewhere else.”

“If your system is buggy, we really shouldn’t be taking these risks.”

“My system’s not buggy… Yes, this floor is unsafe, but we lost three months of game play… We’ve been making good progress… Great progress… But we still need to take these risks to catch up.”

Argo huffed.

“Leaving the Town of Beginnings was a risk, Dami-chan… Playing on this floor at our current level is suicide.”

“Do you think Laughing Coffin isn’t taking risks? We need to push, Argo.”

“Push, yes… Jump off a cliff, no… And Laughing Coffin doesn’t take as many risks as you seem to think… They do their homework… I’m just not sure who’s doing it for them.”

He looked at his fiancée suspiciously.

“You think they have spies?”
Argo narrowed her eyes, staring out at the cloud-filled horizon.

“I don’t think, I know they have spies… I just don’t know who they are yet.”

“Anyways, we’re running low on Crystals… Let’s wrap it up for today and head back… Heathcliff mentioned he wanted to see us.”

“What about?”

“Believe it or not… It’s a Wedding present… From Alice.”

The young couple nervously sat in front of the Paladin-leader of the Knights of the Blood Oath while he sat across from them, sipping his tea until he forced a smile.

“So, have you set a date for the Wedding?”

Argo leaned forward, her keen amber eyes examining the older man.

“We were thinking New Year’s Eve… So we can start the new year as a married couple.”

“Mmm… Good, good.”

“Heathcliff… I don’t mean to pry… But is something bothering you?”

The man finally set down his tea.

“Yes… I’m afraid it is, Argo… The 50th floor… Alice has alluded that it’s going to be far worse than the 25th floor… And that’s weighed more heavily upon me with each passing day.”

“Are you worried that our wedding could act as a distraction for the clearers?”

“Heavens, no… Even though the dates might coincide, I’m more worried about what’s behind us than what’s in front.”

“How so?”

“Laughing Coffin… We know the Red Guild has been recruiting lately… I can’t shake the feeling that they’re biding their time, waiting for the ideal time to strike… They know they missed a golden opportunity to pick us off on the 25th floor… I don’t think they’ll let another chance slip through their murderous grasp again…

“We’ll need to post sentries outside the boss battle on the 50th floor just to prevent them from finishing us off when we’re down… The battle tactics for major fights have changed… We can’t play the game like we used to.”

Damian nodded thoughtfully.

“Fighting enemies on both fronts… Sentries are a good idea, Commander.”

“It was Asuna’s actually.”

“Tt… Whatever, it’s still a good idea… You’d mentioned that Alice had left something with you?”

Heathcliff swiped two fingers across the air to open his player’s menu.
“Wedding presents… She transferred them to my inventory a little while ago… She said she wanted to give you both what you’ve earned… And don’t bother asking, I have no idea what she meant by that…”

Damian and Argo looked as two golden-foil boxes wrapped with blue ribbon materialized in each of the guild leader’s offered hands.

“Open them at your own risk… I’m only the messenger here.”

Taking the one marked ‘Damian’, the former assassin eyed it carefully, finally making the decision to proceed.

“I’ll open mine first, Argo… In case they’re dangerous.”

She reached out to stop his hand, her golden eyes filled with resolve.

“No… We open them together… Whatever happens, it happens to both of us.”

Knowing he wouldn’t (and shouldn’t) win this argument, Damian finally nodded.

“Alright… Ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be.”

As Damian untied and then peeled away the blue ribbon, he carefully opened the delicate lid of the palm-sized box, surprised as a cloud of sparkling blue lights crackled upwards, a thousand tiny will-o-wisps dancing hypnotically before his widened eyes, producing a strange feeling of nostalgia.

When he turned to look at Argo, the full power of the gift suddenly hit him, bringing the glassy-eyed boy to the floor…

A million memories flooded into Damian’s mind, tens of thousands of battles on the 57th floor dungeon against powerful thousands of undead warriors, hundreds of painful memories of the ‘Sword-Wraith’ plunging its black blade through his heart while the terrified eyes of Argo looked on.

But most painful of all was the times he’d watched Argo die.

Damian felt his heart being stabbed with each fatal blow she took, the crushing realization that he’d lost the only girl he’d ever loved over and over and over again, his future snatched away by the bony hands of Fate as a dying Michi faded from his world.

Each death had meant losing her forever.

And then it meant having to lose her all over again.

Again, and again, and again he endured the pain of losing her, until he thought he might go mad with despair, until he thought he knew what his own personal Hell might feel like.

Hot tears streamed down his eyes until he forced himself to crawl towards her, the shuddering Argo openly sobbing as he gathered her tightly into his arms, holding onto her until their broken souls melded into one, until nothing could ever tear them apart again, vowing to keep her this close to him forever…

Their memories.

Alice had given them back their memories.
With staggered gasps, Argo sobbed into his shoulder as she struggled to breathe, clutching Damian tightly while her frantic mind replayed his terrible death scenes, reliving the horrors of losing him twice as many times as he’d lost her, the girl’s lips finally finding her true love’s own until they shared a single breath, a single life.

Until the fiery promise of that one life buried the undead of their past.

Until two hearts beat as one.

“I love you… I love you so much, Damian.”

“I love you, Michi… Forever and ever and always.”

Later that evening, the young couple stood hand-in-hand along a peaceful bank in watery Panareze, back to the scene of the crime on the 24th floor where their misadventure to the 57th floor had all begun…

While Alice might not be there, the night’s wind still carried the same chill of winter in the air, with only a month remaining until Christmas in this strange world of fantasy.

It was a night for memories.

Argo suddenly shivered.

Damian kissed his fiancée on the forehead and then wrapped his arm around her, bringing her close until a game alert suddenly popped up on the girl’s screen, piquing the boy’s curiosity.

“You get game alerts?”

Leaning into him, Argo nodded, ignoring it.

“Part of the Information Broker skill… The higher your skill level, the more information that’s revealed about upcoming game events… It can wait.”

“Maybe it’s something useful… Maybe you should open it.”

With a sigh that acknowledged she’d have to return to the game sooner or later, Argo reluctantly opened the flashing game alert.

“That’s weird… It’s a Christmas Eve drop… An event called ‘Nicholas The Renegade’… It says that he’s a unique monster who’ll appear under a certain fir tree at midnight on December 24th… But it doesn’t say which tree or which floor… If he’s defeated though, he drops an extremely rare item.”

“Does it mention what the item is?”

“No, but I’m sure every player in the game will be asking me that same question… Which is fine by me, because I’ll be charging them the usual fee… And we need all the cash we can get, Dami-kun… We’re broke.”

“Wait… I’m Dami-kun now?”

Argo grinned mischievously.

“Yep… You’ve just graduated… But I’m saving the Damian-sama until after we’re married.”
“Damian-sama… Hmmm… Y’know, I really like the way that sounds when you say it… Michi-chan.”

As she grimaced, Damian passionately kissed her once more, quickly taking the girl’s breath away in unexpected passion until any response was lost to the crashing waves of delight thundering in her lover’s heart until she needed to hold onto him tightly, lest she be washed away in his ocean of warm bliss.

She actually had to catch her breath as his lips left hers.

“That’s not fair, Dami-kun… Kissing me when I’m about to chastise you… But I’ll forgive you as long as we end all our disagreements that way.”

“As they say, all’s fair in love and war.”

“Which means nothing’s fair in love and war… But I’ll take love over war any day… Let me just close my menu and we’ll… Hold on… There’s another player alert beneath this one… What?…”

Damian suddenly grew nervous as he watched the color drain from Argo’s cheeks, the little Information Broker almost falling to her knees as she read the second alert, pawing through her menu screens like a nervous stockbroker.

“Argo, what happened?!”

“I… How?… Wow… I just went up six levels!... And there’s an additional seven-and-a-half million Col that’s been deposited into my treasury!”

With his own fingers now twitching, Damian suddenly opened his own player’s menu to discover his own alert waiting.

“Yes!!!… I went up seven levels!... And I’ve got thirty-three new items in my inventory… Argo… They’re all magic items!... All of them!... We’re back in the game!”

As the overwhelmed girl leaned into her fiancé for support, her mind raced with possibilities until she arrived at the only reasonable conclusion…

“Damian… Alice… It must have been her… She didn’t just give us back our memories… She gave us all the treasure and experience we earned on the 57th floor… That’s what she meant by giving us what we’ve earned!”

4

The happy couple were still in shock when Argo suddenly received a message from one of her contacts, growing serious as she peered at the name.

“Who is it?”

“Lux… A girl I’m mentoring to become an Information Broker on the lower floors… Actually, she’s one of the spies I use to help keep an eye out for suspicious activity… And the Laughing Coffin guild.”

“Did she see them?!”

“No… She’s just looking for more information on the ‘Nicholas The Renegade’ quest… Because of her lower skill level, she only received the event name and the date… So now she wants to buy the
additional information off of me.”

“Will you sell it to her?”

Argo thought about it for a moment.

“Not this time… If I’m only getting sketchy details at my level, this is definitely a higher level quest for the game’s best players… Lux is the Broker for floors ten to twenty, so it wouldn’t be safe if she started selling it… Best if she kept this one to herself.”

“So Information Brokers are kind of like the game’s advertisers?”

Argo grinned as she slung her arm around his shoulder.

“Yeah, I guess you could say that… But enough about business… C’mon, let’s celebrate our windfall… I’m starving!”

“Me too… But you’re buying this time.”

“Sure, order anything you want… You can just pay me back in kisses later.”

She loved it when he blushed.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!