Mystic Knight Online

by JGKitarel

Summary

The magical world isn't as ignorant of muggles as it seems, and Lucius Malfoy has an idea on how to get Harry out of his way. Now Harry is in Japan and trapped in a virtual world of swords. Welcome to Aincrad, Harry. Welcome, to SAO. Try to survive.

Notes

Disclaimer: I should come up with something witty saying that Harry Potter and Sword Art Online aren’t mine and I'm just playing in these sandboxes.
June 5, 2022 – Malfoy Manor

Lucius Malfoy fumed silently as he appeared inside Malfoy manor, his cloak still swirling from the twist-step of apparition. Not only had his efforts he had begun to discredit the headmaster been scuttled, but the entire series of events had ended up drawing the man’s attention to him. That the Potter brat had demonstrated some basic cunning in depriving him of a servant was salt in the wound. Such a thing would never had occurred if he had been less distracted.

Still, not everything had gone badly. He had confirmation that the diary the Dark Lord had entrusted him with was far more dangerous than it seemed, and that it had been disposed of. Had the events played out as planned and Weasley been discredited, it would have been a happy bonus. Still, better it had not succeeded. Given what some of the headmaster’s statements implied, he had a fair idea of what the diary had actually been, which was concerning in and of itself. There were some magics and rituals which even practitioners of the Dark Arts did not do, and even considered taboo.

Either way, that was a matter for the future. Now he had to find another way to keep Albus Dumbledore distracted, and perhaps a means of removing Potter from the picture for a time.

Several hours later, he thought he might have found a method. Several of his agents had fingers in muggle pies, and their reports frequently included information they thought might become relevant. Apparently, the Japanese muggles had developed some kind of illusory world generator that could fool all the senses simultaneously. He didn’t understand all the jargon included, but the gist was clear to him, provided that the information was correct. He made a note to get more information, and to remind that contact, again, to make sure that technical terms were accompanied by a definition.

He didn’t share Arthur Weasley’s fascination with muggles and their technology, but that did not mean that he was ignorant of developments in the muggle world. His father, Abraxas, had warned him that muggles can come up with surprises, and he used the example of the global conflict which had lasted from the late 1930s to the mid-1940s to make that clear; a lesson made especially effective since the magical world had been fighting its own war at the time. The number of witches and wizards killed by “mere” muggle weapons had been frightening enough. The devastation of Japan’s magical community by the muggle “newks” was oil on the fire.

Many of those hundreds of thousands of deaths could have been avoided had the wizards and witches merely maintained an awareness of the muggle world and thus stayed out of the way of muggle armies doing their best to destroy each other. As it stood, mainland Europe’s magical population, only numbering a few million at the time, had taken nearly half a century to recover.

Since then, he made sure to keep abreast of developments, mostly political and economic, within the muggle world. Some developments may indicate opportunities, after all, and at the very least, he kept informed. Knowledge and information were a power of their own to be used, after all.

And this latest bit of information presented an opportunity for him to distract one thorn in his side, while removing a potential future thorn for the time being. He would have to wait for more information.

It would be two weeks before more information came from his contact, and he had to give the man who sent it to him credit, he was thorough. This technology, called the Nerve Gear, created an artificial reality for whomever was using it and had just finished being developed. It was being released for limited testing in Japan before going public later in the year, and that was evidently a
highly anticipated event.

Apparently, the technology was also the main thing to be used in a game which multiple people would be able to play together regardless of where they were. The fact that it would render the user completely unaware of anything going on outside of it held intriguing possibilities. He glanced over the information again and noted that the date all of this was to go public was to be late in October, with the game itself going live either at the end of October, or early in November.

Plenty of time for him to arrange things.

**July 15, 2022 – Malfoy Manor**

“Thank you for coming so promptly,” Lucius said to his guest, gesturing for the man to sit down at an available chair. He poured himself some brandy and glanced at the man, who waved off the unspoken offer.

“All opportunity for my family to repay a debt owed, Lord Malfoy, is not an opportunity lightly ignored.” The man replied with an American drawl as he sat down. “The Wainwrights owed the Malfoys for generations, so an opportunity to repay it is well appreciated. I hope you don’t mind if I retain my anonymity, it’s best if you don’t know my precise identity.”

Lucius nodded. The Wainwrights were well known internationally on both sides of the law, and while dealing with them was not illegal per se, there was a certain attention paid to those who retained their services. “A debt of this magnitude is not lightly called in, but I needed someone both discrete and familiar with the Masquerade on an international level, conditions your family fulfills nicely.”

The man smiled. “Something that involves both worlds,” he commented. “Interesting, considering how isolated the British magical community is from our perspective.” His gaze sharpened. “Why don’t you explain what exactly it is you require?”

Lucius nodded and decided that it was time to get to the point. He handed a neatly bound stack of parchment to the man. “I need someone to disappear and be kept occupied for an indeterminate amount of time.” He replied. “Doing so will… well the whys and wherefores aren’t really relevant.”

His guest looked at him, one eyebrow raised. “Got a name?”

“Harry Potter.”

The man’s other eyebrow joined its brother at his hairline. “The Boy-Who-Lived? He’s still a minor, Lord Malfoy, so I do hope you want him kept alive, or whatever deal you struck is out of the question.”

“I am well aware of your family’s stance regarding children and anything which is designed to cause them intentional harm, Mr. Wainwright,” Lucius replied smoothly. “I just want the boy out of the country and preferably on the other side of the world. The information in that stack of parchment I provided to you may explain some more.”

The man nodded and then began to look over the parchment sheets. Lucius patiently waited, sipping his drink. After a few minutes, the man put the sheets down.

“So,” Mr. Wainwright said. “You want us to kidnap a boy who is not yet thirteen, take him to Japan, and basically distract him with this technology and the expected game to be released with it? And have all of this prior to the release?” Lucius nodded. Mr. Wainwright returned his eyes to the parchment before clicking his tongue. “Doable, if complex. How above board do you want this to be
“As above board as practicable, Mr. Wainwright,” he replied. “I want this operation successful, and having it fail due to a minor being missed in the shuffle is unacceptable.”

Mr. Wainwright nodded. “Is there any more information you have, then, on Mr. Potter? His location and any security?”

Lucius smiled, knowing that they wouldn’t be asking for more information if they weren’t going to take the job. “Indeed I do, Mr. Wainwright.”

**July 30, 2022 – Little Whinging, Surrey**

Richard Wainwright gazed calmly at his unconscious target while the rest of his team quickly checked the area and sanitized any signs of their presence. He had to admit, for a boy who had only just turned thirteen, he had put up one hell of a fight. Richard had figured on this being a relatively easy swoop, but if they’d had just a little more trouble going through the wards, this could have ended very differently. A single mistake would have had Dumbledore and the Ministry on them in minutes, and the boy might have slipped through their fingers.

Still, he thought. *Dumbledore was a bit too clever for his own good here.* Relying solely on blood wards and probably a sentry was foolish, especially if someone was willing to take their time to prepare. Making the arrangements to spirit the boy out of England would have taken some time regardless, so he had used that time to work out how to bypass the wards and get the rest of the boy’s family out of the way for their little snatch and grab. The fewer potential witnesses, the better.

Still, aside from the boy putting up more of a fight than expected, things had gone well so far; he wouldn’t be satisfied that things were well on their way until they started moving and put some distance from their current location, though. “Carlisle, we done?” He asked a member of his team.

“Just finished, boss,” A woman responded.

“Good, then let’s go. I want to be out of Surrey and on our boat waiting in Ramsgate yesterday.”

The rest of his team nodded and quickly reached for their portkeys, Carlisle taking a brief second to pin one on their target, Harry Potter. Thirty seconds later, they were gone, and less than an hour later, their boat was already crossing the Channel, well on its way to the French coastline. They disembarked the boat in southern Normandy a few hours later, before taking a series of portkeys to Marseille, where they began to split up.

Albus Dumbledore would know within an hour of their leaving England that Harry was missing. He would follow their movements to France before the first false trail was laid in Marseille. It would take two days for the initial bout of false trails to be realized, but by then, half a dozen more had been laid and Harry was no longer in Europe.

By the time Harry was found in Japan, several months later, it would be impossible to return him to England.
November 6, 2022 – Setagaya Ward, Tokyo

Harry woke up when one of his captors knocked on his door. Glancing at the clock, he noted that it was about eight in the morning as he got up from the futon that he had slept in. Slowly stretching he walked over to the dresser where he kept his glasses and put them on before getting his clothes for the day out and gathered them. He had a few minutes before one of his captors came in and escorted him to bathe and then eat. It was a routine he had been doing for the last several weeks, after arriving in Japan, but being escorted by one of his captors had been the case since the first day. While they had allowed him the illusion of privacy for things such as bathing and sleeping, he knew full well that they were discreetly watching him even then.

It didn’t take him long to realize that trying to escape, especially since they kept possession of his wand, was a waste of his time and effort. They even sparingly used magic and potions to keep him in line during their travels, entering the various countries legitimately and with proper documentation. He could legitimately answer that in the space of a couple of months, he had “seen” nine different countries on three continents due to the route they took, and did so legally, aside from the fact that he had been an unwilling companion to the group he traveled with. His passport had the stamps to prove it, though he wondered how they had managed to get a legitimate one for him in a short period of time, and had gotten a relatively current picture of him to have on it.

He could have sworn he saw the Weasley family at one point when they stopped in Egypt, but his captors quickly had him moving on and he was soon on his way further east before he could confirm it, or do anything else if it had been them he saw.

Another knock sounded. “You decent in there, kid?” A woman’s voice asked.

“And if I wasn’t, Ms. Carlisle?” He called back.

The woman opened the door and walked in. “Then I would be getting a show,” she replied, amused. “Not that you have much to show right now. Anyway, time to clean up.”

Harry blushed and placed his clothes into a basket with his bathing supplies. “I’m only thirteen.” He told her. “Isn’t that a bit young for you?”

His only reply was a chuckle as the woman gestured for him to go ahead of her. Walking out of the room, he immediately headed to the bathroom to take care of his morning business.

An hour later he sat at the low table, a kotatsu if he remembered correctly, in the dining room and looked at the food available. It was simple, with miso soup, a fried egg on rice, and those fermented beans which he would rather not eat, with milk to wash it all down with. He also saw a couple of apples available. All in all, not much different from the usual fare he had been eating over the last
few weeks.

Sighing, he began to eat, taking his time in the, admittedly pointless, hope of disrupting whatever schedule they may have lined up for him today. Given that they had been spending weeks shoving the Japanese language into his skull with magic, alongside getting him up to speed on muggle computers and that Nerve Gear device, and hammering into his skull the “official” story of why he was in Japan, he was expecting more of the same.

Ms. Carlisle, seeming to read his mind gave him an amused smile. “Take your time, kid,” she told him. “There’s not much for us to do today.”

Harry paused his eating and looked at her curiously. “Would it be too much to think you’re finally letting me go, or at least giving me my wand back?” He asked her.

She snorted. “We’re not doing that,” she replied cheerfully. “Today we double check the calibrations on your Nerve Gear and get you into SAO the second it goes live.”

Harry blushed at the word “calibrations”. They had insisted on doing so rather thoroughly the first time, and Ms. Carlisle loved teasing him about that, saying that he was going to make some girl happy in the future. He then realized what she said afterward. “So that is today?”

“Indeed it is, Mr. Potter,” can a man’s voice from the door.

Harry turned to the man who had led the group that captured him and gave him a half-heartedly sullen look. “And a good morning to you, Mr. Wainwright.” He said sourly.

Mr. Wainwright simply nodded to him, “Good morning as well, Mr. Potter.” He replied as if Harry’s tone didn’t negate the pleasantry. It was a routine the two of them had since two weeks after his abduction. Harry would give him a sullen greeting, and the man would respond as if nothing was amiss, keeping a polite and professional façade on at all times.

After the meal ended, Harry piled his dishes together and took them to the kitchen. Placing them in the sink to be washed later, he turned and headed back to the dining room. Sitting down at the kotatsu, he watched as Ms. Carlisle poured some tea for everyone and placed a cup in front of him.

“Now, Mr. Potter,” Mr. Wainwright said. “As Ms. Carlisle told you, Sword Art Online goes live today this afternoon. We will be double checking the calibrations, running some diagnostics, and then you will be spending the rest of the day in Sword Art Online. We will have you logout at around seven for dinner, and you will be allowed to either go back into the game, do something else, or go to bed as you see fit. Are there any questions?”

Harry shook his head. “No,” he replied. “Given that you’ve been getting me ready for this for the last few weeks, I might as well see what it’s all about.” He frowned. “Still, you all went through a lot of trouble, just to get me here, and all for this.”

Richard gave a thin smile. “Our client wanted us to, and I will admit, I am curious about all of this as well.”

Harry snorted. “I find it odd that your client even pays attention to the muggle world, let alone keeps up with technology developments.”

“You would be surprised, Mr. Potter, at how many in the magical world do pay attention to developments in the muggle world, including developments in technology.” Mr. Wainwright answered easily. “Those developments may sometimes lead to opportunities.” He smiled again. “Also, I have no doubt that you are interested as well.”
Harry nodded, grudgingly acknowledging the truth of that. It all still seemed like a complicated effort to get him out of the way, and keep him too busy to try and return to back to Britain. At the same time, it would be a break from the tedium of having to learn not only the language, but also how to use the technology.

Magic may have helped with the former, even if it had given him enough headaches to go through Madam Pomfrey’s entire supply of headache potions. It had gotten him to the point where he could speak the language fittingly for his age, if not quite read it as well. He was fine with hiragana and katakana, but kanji was giving him trouble.

However, magic did nothing for the latter, mostly because even his captors had only a limited knowledge of the technology. They knew what computers and the internet were, and how to use them to a degree, Ms. Carlisle more than Mr. Wainwright. However, being magical themselves, they didn’t make much use of muggle technologies unless necessary, mostly because they had perfectly usable alternatives that they were accustomed to using. Given that the Nerve Gear was new technology, they were also learning alongside him.

Still, he was going to be in this Sword Art Online this afternoon, and after everything he went through, it had better be worth it. He just hoped there wasn’t a catch involved that would cock up everything.

That would just be his luck.

Aincrad, 1st Floor, Town of Beginnings

Harry opened his eyes and looked at what would be his surroundings for the foreseeable future, or at least the next few hours after his avatar finished materializing. “Whoa,” he said. “This is supposed to be a game?” He looked around in amazement and saw people of all ages, though most seemed to average in their late teens to early twenties, and a surprising number of girls. Given what little he knew of gaming, he was fairly sure that more than a fair number of them were guys. Why they would play a game that simulated reality as the opposite gender, he could guess, but he had no inclination to stir that cauldron when he could customize his appearance.

He had gone with a look that was reasonably close to his own appearance, same hair and eye color, but little taller, a bit more muscular, but still close to his own appearance. It also meant that he wouldn’t have trouble adjusting. The little bit of prior experience from calibrating the Nerve Gear and using some of the included software, made him realize that the closer to what you really were, at least in body type and size, the easier things were.

He took another look at his surroundings and decided to look around the town. He had no idea what he should do at this point, aside learning how to play the game, but a little exploring around the town wouldn’t be a bad idea, either. This way he would know where things are.

He brought up the menu, the required hand position and gesture having been clearly explained in the manual that he had been forced to read, and browsed through it. He brought up his status menu, inventory, and even the map several times so that he would remember how to do so later. After playing with the menu for a few more minutes, he dismissed it and walked off into the town.

It was about an hour later when he bumped into someone, or to be more accurate she bumped into him. One second he was looking around, and the next, he was on the ground. Outside of feeling something, it wasn’t painful, so he could chalk up pain as thankfully not being a part of the game. It still knocked the breath out of him.

He looked at who bumped into him and noticed it was a girl who was looking a little dazed, as if she
didn’t expect to run into someone in the literal sense. He took a look at her, noticing her features, or at least the features she decided to have in the game. She had decided on an avatar which was slightly shorter than he would be in the real world, with moderately long blonde hair tied up in twin tails, and violet eyes. Add in the white shirt, brown skirt, simple armor over it and what looked like a dagger, it was rather cute.

“Sorry about that,” he said apologetically. “I wasn’t paying attention.” He stood up and held his hand out to her to help her up.

She blinked and then reddened in embarrassment before allowing him to help her back to her feet. “Oh, umm, it’s nothing, really.” She replied shyly.

“Still, my apologies, Miss-”

“Kei- Silica,” she replied, correcting herself from probably telling him her real name. “My name is Silica.”

He smiled. “Well then, Miss Silica, call me Hadrian, or if you want, Harry.” He had picked a name which his own could be used as a diminutive for, deciding that having to remember a completely different name with no relation to his own would be more trouble than it was worth. That and he could probably convince them to use ‘Harry’, without letting on that it was his actual name.

“Ok, Hadrian.” She shuffled slightly. “Um, can I ask what you were doing?”

Harry shrugged. “I was simply looking around the town, deciding to see where everything was before I went outside and fought a few monsters.” He put his hand on the plain sword his avatar had. “I figured I would learn how to use this.”

“Oh,” she replied. “Well, can I come with you around the town, at least? It’s bigger than I thought.” She fidgeted a little. “The idea of fighting the monsters looks a little scary, though.”

He chuckled a little at the idea of being scared fighting the monsters, though he could understand her point. He had seen, and in some cases fought, some of the things that exist in the real world, and going up against those things had been scary. He would know, given how much terror he had felt when being confronted by acromantulas, or fighting a basilisk. Everything here might not be real, but there was a difference between seeing something charging on a screen, and seeing it actually charge you.

It may be a virtual world, but the first few times would probably come as a bit of a surprise to people, as they would be seeing these things up close and personal.

Silica’s cheeks puffed out in irritation. “It’s not funny!” She said as she stomped her foot.

Harry simply smiled. “Sorry,” he apologized. “I wasn’t laughing at you.” He turned and looked back at her. Why not? He thought to himself. “So, want to look around town for a bit?” He asked her.

Silica smiled and nodded.

The two of them would spend an enjoyable few hours exploring the Town of Beginnings, from the Black Iron Palace that was in the center of the town, to a few of the markets, where they browsed the wares. Harry began to think that calling it a town was a bit misleading; it was closer in size to that of a small city. The shops definitely reflected that in the variety of goods available, which ranged from the inexpensive to the moderately expensive. While some of the equipment available looked intriguing, the prices were outside of what he could reliably afford and still have enough col, the currency of SAO, for other things, like potions and such. Given that they were given a starting
allowance of 2500 col, and the cheapest weapon or armor piece that would be noticeably better than what they started with cost around 2400 col, he decided that it was better to hold off for now.

Harry had insisted on getting a few more health potions when they stopped at a stand selling them for less than the price at some of the other shops, though. When Silica asked him why, he simply replied, “Well, I did say I was going to head outside the town. If you’re not, you don’t need to, but still get a few just in case. Besides, these are the same potions we could get at another store, but are being sold cheaper here.” He showed that they were being sold for 90 col, rather than the 120 col some of the other shops were selling them for. Looking around, he saw a stall selling some food. “Anyway, want to get a snack?”

Silica blinked. “They sell food here?” Harry pointed out the stall he noticed to her. “Okay.”

They both walked over to the stall and browsed what was for sale. Apparently it sold various breads for a relatively low cost, the most expensive item on the menu was 50 col. Harry perused the available breads before requesting a dark bread and tea to with which to wash it down, while Silica went with a sweet bread and juice.

Biting into the bread, he mused the flavor. If he were to compare it, it tasted similar to rye bread, if not quite the same. The tea he had to wash it down was slightly more bitter than any English tea, but wasn’t quite like some of the Japanese teas he had been drinking for the last few weeks. If he were to sum up the tastes, he would say that they were close, but not quite the same, as if something was missing. It seemed that the virtual world couldn’t fully duplicate the sensations of reality.

“Oh!” Silica exclaimed, her food untouched, though he noticed that she had finished her drink. “It’s almost time for me to log off and get ready for dinner.” She gave Harry an apologetic look. “Sorry, but I have to go, and I still have homework to finish.”

Harry looked at the time and saw that it read 17:22, which surprised him a little. “Huh, I’ve been on for about four hours myself.” He said. “I know I have a couple more hours before I have to log off, but now would be as good a time as any for me as well.” He smiled at her. “Want to call it a day?”

She nodded, if a bit reluctantly. “Yeah, I guess we should.” She was about to open her menu to log out when she had an idea. “Wait, maybe we can add each other to our Friends List.”

Harry quirked an eyebrow. “Friends List?”

Silica nodded. “Yeah!” She exclaimed. “I read up on it while I was waiting for the game to go live. It allows players to remain in contact and know if others that they know are online and where they are.”

Harry blinked. He hadn’t thought of that. He didn’t know how much longer he would be in Japan before Dumbledore finally tracked him down, but he was going to be spending a lot of time in the game for the foreseeable future. Having someone to play the game with, even if it was only a few times, would be nice.

He smiled. “Sure,” he replied. He opened his menu and realized that he didn’t exactly remember what to do. “Um, how do we do this?” He asked with some embarrassment. “I don’t think I looked up how when I was reading up on the game. Or found it when I was playing with the menu earlier.”

Silica giggled and then went through the process, explaining what she was doing. Before long, Harry saw a message saying that she wanted to add him as a friend. Pressing the button that would acknowledge it, he then browsed his menu and noticed that she had already been added to his list. He looked back at her and noticed that she had a confused expression on her face as she looked at
her menu.

“Silica?” He asked.

She looked at him. “Um, Hadrian, can you check and see if you have a Logoff button?”

Confused, he went back to his menu and browsed through it. “That can’t be right.” He said simply, looking back at her as he suddenly had a foreboding feeling.

The Logoff button was missing.

He absently heard the bell chime the half-hour before they were both engulfed in light.

**Aincrad, 1st Floor – Plaza in front of the Black Iron Palace**

Harry blinked to clear the spots in his eyes as the effects of the forced teleport dissipated and looked around. He could see dozens, if not hundreds of other players looking around in confusion. His eyes widened as he quickly looked for Silica, who had been near him when they were teleported. Spotting her, he quickly walked over to her.

“Silica, are you alright?” He asked.

She turned and looked at him and sighed in relief. “Hadrian, what’s happening?” She asked nervously.

He frowned. “I don’t know,” he replied. “One second we were in a market on the north side, and now we’re here.” He could already see some players already beginning to get nervous. Grabbing Silica’s hand, he made his way to the edge of the crowd and started making his way around the edges to the back of it. He was tempted to use one of the exits to leave, but he noticed a couple of people get stopped by some barrier as they tried to do the same, keeping them in the plaza.

He let go of Silica’s hand after they were behind the majority of the crowd. He noticed a man with apparently black hair and eyes look like he had calmed his companion, a man with pink hair of all things, down. He decided to take a chance and approached the two of them, Silica closely following him. “Any idea what is going on?” He asked the man with black hair.

The man shook his head in the negative and was about to reply when a sound came from above. Looking up they saw a hexagon with the words “System Announcement” on it, before the shape multiplied and took up the entire sky, staining it red. “I think we’re about to find out.” The man said simply.

When he saw the sky apparently start bleeding and the “blood” converge on one place to take the form of a figure in a red cloak, Harry felt a pit form in his stomach. He also felt Silica brush up against him and a quick glance down to her showed that her nervousness was beginning to morph into actual fear. He put a hand on her shoulder and hoped that it would calm her as the figure spoke.

“Attention players,” the figure said. “I am Akihiko Kayaba and I welcome you to my world.”

“His world?” Harry asked to himself absently as he remembered just who it was who was responsible for the development of the Nerve Gear and Sword Art Online.

“You all may have noticed that the option to log out is no longer in your menu.” The figure continued. “This is not a bug or defect. I repeat, this is not a bug or defect. This is an intended feature of Sword Art Online. You cannot log out of Sword Art Online, and you cannot be logged out, either.
“If someone tries to remove or shut down the Nerve Gear, it will emit a powerful microwave, destroying your brain and ending your life. I had sent this warning out and, unfortunately, the friends and families of several players have ignored it.” Several screens popped up out of nowhere, all of them seeming to be showing various news feeds. “Due to this, two hundred and thirteen players are now gone from Aincrad, and from the real world.”

*Two hundred and thirteen people are dead?* Harry thought in shock. *No way.*

“As you can see, news organizations all around Japan and the world are reporting this, including the deaths. Thus, you can assume that the Nerve Gear being removed is now minimal. Before you worry about your bodies, your families, friends, and the government if necessary, have been notified. They have two weeks to make arrangements for your care, and during that time, the window for being disconnected has been extended to facilitate that.

“I hope that you will relax and attempt to clear the game, but I want you all to remember this: there is no longer a way to revive players. If your HP drops to zero, you die in both the game, and the real world. There is only one way to escape, beat the game. You are all currently on the first floor of Aincrad. If you defeat the boss on a floor, you can advance to the next floor. Reach the one hundredth floor and defeat the final boss, and you will clear the game. Finally, I have added a little present to your inventories. Please, take a look.”

Harry opened his menu, almost as if his body was doing so automatically, and found the item. “A mirror?” He asked. Absently, he pressed the name and brought it out. Looking into it, he saw not the face of his avatar, but his own. He was briefly blinded as his body was engulfed in light. Blinking the spots out, again, he looked around and saw that everyone in his vicinity had changed in appearance, as he probably did.

“Hadrian?” He heard Silica ask.

He looked and saw a girl with brown hair and reddish-brown eyes, wearing the same clothing and armor that Silica had. “Silica, is that you?” She nodded.

He heard more than a few exclamations of surprise, many of them along the lines of “You aren’t a girl?!” He snorted in amusement at that, finding a bit of grim humor in the situation.

“What’s going on?” Silica asked.

The black haired man, now a boy not much older than Harry, looked at them and then turned his gaze back towards Kayaba.

“I think he’s about to tell us.” He said.

“All of you are probably asking this question right now,” Kayaba said. “Why? Why would Akihiko Kayaba, the developer of the Nerve Gear and creator of Sword Art Online do this? I will tell you.

“I created all of this so that I may have a world I created to call my own; a world, which I can intervene in. With the Nerve Gear and Sword Art Online, I have accomplished that. As I said earlier, if you want to leave, you must beat the game.” Kayaba’s figure began to dissipate into smoke. “This concludes the tutorial of Sword Art Online. I wish you all luck in your endeavors. Farewell.”

Kayaba’s figure finished dissipating and the red sky returned to the blue it had been before all of this.

“No,” Silica whispered, a panicked tone entering her voice. “This, this can’t be happening.”

Harry quickly grabbed her shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Silica, let’s go,” he said as he quickly and guided her out of the plaza as he began to see people react. One or two kept hunting
through their menus, looking for an option no longer there. Some were talking amongst themselves, several reassuring each other this was in fact some kind of joke. One or two were doing what he was trying to do... act.

Because even now, some were accepting the situation. And while many began to take action, most were giving in to something more primal: panic. He had seen fear spread like a wildfire in a crowd before, and he doubted that panic was any different.

The two of them kept going until they reached an alley. Harry noted that they weren’t the only two there, the black haired boy and the man from before were there as well. Since they looked like they were discussing something, he left them to it and directed his attention to Silica.

“Silica,” he said gently. “Silica, look at me.” He quickly realized that she wasn’t paying attention, simply muttering to herself that the situation they were in couldn’t be happening. He tried to get her attention a couple more times before she registered that he was trying to get her attention. Her eyes were still full of fear when she looked at him, but her panic was beginning to fade.

“Hadrian, are we really trapped here?” She asked. “Is everything he said, true? If we die here, we die for real?”

Harry considered telling her that Kayaba was lying, that the man was simply playing a horrible joke on them all. He didn’t even know if what the man was telling was the truth, after all. However, he also didn’t know that he wasn’t.

“I don’t know,” he said honestly. “He could have been, and it sounds possible.” He knew that those were not the words Silica wanted to hear, but he also wouldn’t lie to her. He didn’t know enough about how the technology worked, but it sounded possible, given his admittedly limited knowledge.

Silica closed her eyes and ran to him, burying her face into his chest. “I want to be back in Nerima,” she said as she started to cry. “I want my mom and dad. I want this to just be a nightmare. I want to go home.”

Harry looked down awkwardly as he realized that he now had a crying girl in his arms. He didn’t know what to do and looked around frantically to see if someone had some idea of what he should do.

“Damn it, I wish Hermione was here.” He thought. She would know what to do.

There wasn’t anyone else around, save for...

“Hey, you two, you okay?” A man’s voice asked.

He turned his head and looked at the man who asked the question. From the look, it was the guy who had pink, if now brown, hair. He didn’t see the other person. He shrugged and looked down at the still crying Silica. “What do you think?” He asked sarcastically.

The man winced. “Ah, yeah, sorry about that.” He said apologetically.

Harry shrugged. “It’s not your fault.” He looked past the man. “Where’s your friend?”

“He went ahead,” The man replied. “He’s a beta tester and knows what to do.” He grinned. “He taught me a few things until all of this happened. He offered to take me with him, but my friends are probably back at the plaza.”

Harry nodded. “You just can’t leave them behind.”

The man nodded. “Damn straight.”
“Good. I would ask if I could join you; I need to learn how to fight. But I think she needs someone to look after her.” He looked back down at Silica. “She’s not taking it well.”

The man nodded. “Yeah, I can see that. What’ll you do?”

Harry shrugged. “Find a place to stay for now, I guess.” He replied. “It’s getting late anyway.” He opened his menu and pulled up the map. “Let’s see,” he said as he looked at it. “If I remember right, this picture of a bed means a place to sleep.” He looked at where he and Silica were. “If we’re right here, then the nearest place is three blocks east and a block north. It even serves food, it seems.” He closed his map and looked back at the man. “I think I may have found a place, so I’m taking her there.”

The man smiled approvingly. “Good idea,” he said. “I’m going to go pick up my friends. Where was the place you found? Probably won’t hurt to have a place to crash for a few days.”

Harry told him.

“Thanks. By the way, I’m Klein, what about you?”

“Hadrian, but call me Harry if you want to.”

**Real World – Setagaya Ward, Tokyo**

Richard Wainwright slowly drank his tea and looked at his plans for the next week as Ms. Carlisle monitored Harry. While the job of kidnapping the boy and taking him to Japan didn’t sit entirely well with him, his family had been contracted for it. Granted, they weren’t above doing so, usually when they were hired to remove someone from somewhere and place them into “protective custody”, or to blackmail someone for that matter, but they’ve done so for far more sinister reasons in the past, if not in generations.

They had stopped doing so after they had ended a brutal criminal war that had wiped out three magical clans and had reduced the other two, including the Wainwrights, to only a handful of members a couple of centuries ago. Since then, they had turned their efforts into keeping the magical underworld under some form of order, or as ordered as it ever got, while straddling the fine line between being legitimate and criminal themselves. They had also defined their stance on going after children: they won’t cause them any intentional harm.

Even unintentional harm, especially if it was fatal, would result in the one responsible being severely disciplined unless it could be conclusively proven that the unintended harm was outside of their control. He had seen one such incident and the man responsible for it would never walk again. They made no distinction on whether you were a family member, or simply a member of the organization in that regard.

If it hadn’t been for the family owing the Malfoy family a debt of honor, something they took very seriously, he wouldn’t have even considered taking the job. There were too many ways that things could have gone south and gotten the boy injured. Admittedly, the challenge of doing so, given that they had a short timeframe, and having to do it without Albus Dumbledore noticing, was one he enjoyed.

As it was, if Dumbledore tracked them down, they wouldn’t put up a fight, and simply hand the boy over. They knew the man’s reputation, and they knew that he could back it up in a fight. It wouldn’t stop him from telling the man, at length, just what mistakes he made with the boy’s security, however.
Fighting Albus Dumbledore was a losing proposition in any case. There were a few in the family that could do so with a fair chance at winning, but Richard knew full well that, while capable in his own right, he wasn’t one of them.

He absently turned the television on and watched as an urgent news broadcast interrupted some program. It took him a second to realize what it was about before his face paled. He was about to rush to where Ms. Carlisle and Harry were when the announcer laid out the next bombshell.

“I repeat,” The man on the TV said. “Do not try and remove the Nerve Gear from someone. We have gotten word that approximately two hundred people have died due to that. If you know someone who has a Nerve Gear and they are using it to play Sword Art Online, contact the authorities or the nearest hospital so that the person can be transported.”

He stood up as the message was repeated and made his way to the room where Harry was being kept. Ms. Carlisle. He noticed that she had a news feed up on a computer as she looked back to him, her face as pale as his.

“I see you already know,” he said simply. “Good. Look after him for now, I have a few calls to make before we get him to a hospital.” He felt the wards he had set to detect anyone magical who got close enough trigger. “And it seems that we have a visitor as well.” He sighed. “Of course.” He said resignedly.

“As if I needed this shit right now.” He muttered as he headed to the entrance.

Outside

Albus Dumbledore felt the wards trigger as he crossed them and nodded. Those who had Harry were not fools, and the presence of the subtle perimeter wards reaffirmed this. If it wasn’t for the fact that he had determined which group was behind Harry’s disappearance, he would have been worried about the warning.

It had taken Albus three months to track where Harry had been taken, and another month before he had the time, and went through the appropriate channels, to address this matter himself. He did not trust the Ministry to not make a cockup of this, especially with Cornelius Fudge as Minister and his suspicions of Lucius Malfoy’s involvement in this.

Cornelius was a competent, if easily pliable and manipulated, administrator. At least when there wasn’t a crisis of some sort; his current handling of Sirius Black’s escape from Azkaban being a prime example of how lacking his crisis management skills were. The man’s reaction to Albus notifying him that Harry had disappeared, though he was apparently fine, had not helped matters. Cornelius had panicked and was more than willing to lay the blame on Black for this. However, given that periodic, and verified sightings of Sirius Black continued, that was unlikely. Furthermore, the methods of the kidnappers had been too professional and too neat.

Lucius had the resources to hire such a group, and after the Chamber of Secrets incident, a reason to do so. However, Lucius being Lucius, there was no evidence to back it up.

It was two weeks after the incident, when his enquiries to some muggleborns and squibs who had entered the muggle civil service that he made on a hunch, had borne fruit. A Wainwright had been in England at the time and had apparently pushed the paperwork for Harry to be issued a passport through with unusual rapidity. The man had also left England the same day that Harry disappeared.

A possible oversight on the Wainwright’s part, but an understandable one. The Ministry of Magic wasn’t known for interacting and cooperating with the muggle government more than the bare
minimum required by law. Then again, the Wainwright may have just not considered erasing those traces worth the bother, given that muggle records were increasingly not physical ones.

It was all moot, anyway. He was in Tokyo, and approaching where Harry was. He had forgone his usual robes for a simple suit, and some quick charms to make his beard seem smaller and more neatly trimmed in order to not stand out too much.

As he approached where Harry was, he saw a door open and a man simply wait at the threshold. There was a slightly wary and resigned look in the man’s posture, but there weren’t any tells that the man was going to cause trouble. As he approached the open entrance, the man looked at him and nodded.

“Professor Dumbledore, please come on in.” The man said.

Albus shook his head. “Can I at least have the name of the man inviting me in?” He asked pleasantly.

“Wainwright.” The man said simply.

Albus nodded and walked in as the man stepped aside. He kept his senses alert as the man shut the door, instincts that had served him well over his life letting him know where the man was and that he was not making any threatening moves.

He didn’t expect the man to. If the man intended, or even expected, a fight, he wouldn’t have given the invitation to enter. The Wainwrights observed and respected many old traditions, and one was to not initiate a fight when inviting someone in without cause.

“Professor,” Mr. Wainwright said. “I know why you are here, and sincerely wish you had gotten here this morning.”

Albus raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

The man sighed. “Our plans were to hand Mr. Potter over if you, or one of your representatives approached. However, a complication has arisen.”

“What kind of complication?” Albus asked.

“The kind that is outside of everyone’s control, and it means that we can’t hand him over to you.”

Albus fought down an urge to pull out his wand. “You had better explain to me why you can’t, Mr. Wainwright.” He told the man coldly.

“That is my intent, Professor Dumbledore,” the man replied. He then proceeded to explain the current situation, about the Nerve Gear, Sword Art Online, and what the creator of both had done, and that approximately two hundred people had died when those around them had tried to remove the Nerve Gear.

As the man explained, Albus began to feel his age as he realized the situation. Mr. Wainwright was correct in that, had he arrived a few hours earlier at the latest, this wouldn’t have happened. However, his busy schedule, the necessity of making sure he entered Japan legally and properly, and the time difference between Scotland and Japan, had made that impractical.

“Professor Dumbledore,” the man said. “Do you want me to take you to see him? We haven’t transferred him to a hospital yet, something I was going to do after I made a few other calls.”
“Please,” Albus replied, wanting to confirm things with his own eyes.

“Very well.” Mr. Wainwright led him to the room where Harry was. Albus noticed a woman sitting at a desk and working on some muggle device, a laptop computer if he recalled correctly.

“Boss,” she said, turning to him. “I think I got something. Also, who’s the old guy?”

Mr. Wainwright smiled. “Ms. Carlisle, allow me to introduce Professor Albus Dumbledore. He apparently decided to handle Mr. Potter’s retrieval on his own.”

Mr. Carlisle winced at that. “You tell him the situation?”

“Indeed, Ms. Carlisle.” Albus said with a calm he did not entirely feel. He looked down on Harry and saw the muggle device on his head. Mr. Wainwright was telling the truth in that regard at least, not that he expected the man to lie. “You said something?” He asked.

Ms. Carlisle brightened. “Oh yeah,” she said excitedly. “We can’t get him out, but I had a hunch and linked the laptop with an Ethernet cord. Since the hardware is still new, there isn’t really any built-in way to record what goes on it, so they set it up so that you can do so from a computer.” She showed them. “At least we can see what’s going on. It doesn’t seem to be coming from his eyes, but from an offset point over his shoulder.”

Albus looked at the screen, seeing what Harry was seeing as if he was looking over his shoulder. It wasn’t much, just Harry pulling out a chair for a girl to sit down on right now, but it was something. “How remarkable,” he said.

Ms. Carlisle nodded. “I was going to check and see if we could move the point of view around to get a better look at things next.”

Mr. Wainwright smiled. “Excellent work, Ms. Carlisle. Do so, and make sure you document it. When we notify the authorities, we should let them know about this. I don’t know how long it will be until Kayaba closes that option off, but until, or if, he does a means exists for those of us on the outside to see what is going on.” He considered something. “Do we have audio?”

Ms. Carlisle nodded. “I have it turned down for now, but yeah. I’ll turn it back up in a bit so we can hear what he’s saying.”

Mr. Wainwright nodded. “Excellent.” He looked at Albus. “Feel free to stay here Professor, but I have to make a few calls. The first one is to the family patriarch so that I can explain the situation.” He sighed. “I am going to catch Hell for this.”

Albus’ smile was cold. “I hope you don’t mind if I’m not sympathetic to your plight.” Given what he knew of the current patriarch of the Wainwright family, “catching Hell” is an understatement, but he wasn’t so crass as to mention that.

Mr. Wainwright snorted. “I don’t expect you to be,” he replied as he exited the room.

Albus turned his attention back to the screen, showing what Harry was doing. From what he could see, the girl had been crying and Harry was working to reassure her. As Ms. Carlisle turned the audio back on, he realized that he couldn’t understand what Harry was saying, though it was rather obvious what language he was using.

“How did you teach him Japanese so quickly?” He asked curiously.

“We did so using magic,” Ms. Carlisle replied. “It gives you one hell of a headache, but it allows you
to get competent at the language in a couple of weeks.”

“Ah, I think I know the method,” Albus said. If it was what he thought it was, then having a headache from it was a mild reaction. Most would be laid out for the rest of the day, but Harry had proven himself resilient in the past.

“Huh, he’s deciding to find a place to hole up for a few days, rather than rush out.” Ms. Carlisle noted. “Not a bad idea.” She chuckled. “He also offering to the girl, Silica by what he’s calling her, to pay for her room for the night. He seems to be holding it together fairly well, all things considered.”

Albus smiled. “Harry tends to put the wellbeing of others before himself, and he’s shown calm in the face of a crisis before,” He said. He watched as the point of view moved around a bit. “So, you can move it around, I see.” He said as he turned to the woman.

Ms. Carlisle nodded. “Yeah,” she replied as she noted down what she did. She looked at Albus. “Want to keep watching for now?”

Albus looked at the screen and then back to Ms. Carlisle. “I might as well, at least until the arrangements are made for Harry’s care.” His eyes hardened. “I will want to be there, so I know where he will be cared for. I will also have his wand and personal effects remanded to my care, as well.” His tone brooked no argument, and Ms. Carlisle wasn’t inclined to dispute it anyway.

She wasn’t stupid.
November 13, 2022 – Aincrad 1st Floor – Town of Beginnings

Keiko woke up as the morning light entered the room of the inn that had been her current residence for the last week. She looked at the increasingly familiar ceiling blankly for a few seconds before she closed her eyes and sighed as, once again, she realized she was still in Aincrad. She was not thirteen year old Keiko Ayano here; she was Silica.

She glanced to the upper corner of her HUD and noticed the time and was actually surprised that it was only seven, given that she tended to sleep in if given the chance. Hadrian was right, she thought. You do feel better if you actually go out and do something.

She had spent the first five days and nights since being trapped in Aincrad not really doing much of anything; just remaining holed up in her room, or wandering around the town feeling sorry for herself. At least until Hadrian tracked her down each evening to take her back to the inn when he got back into the town after a few hours of fighting monsters, or mobs to use the slang term that was already becoming used, in the fields. Two days ago, he asked her if she would like to accompany him out into the fields, given that he could tell that she hadn’t been sleeping well.

“I think a chance to take it out on the mobs will do you some good.” He smiled. “I’ll be with you if you want to go out and try. I will protect you.”

He had been right about that. After teaching her how the sword skills worked, she would then spend the next four hours taking her anger and frustrations over her situation out on the boars and wolves that had littered the field he took her to. Outside of his intervening a few times, mostly when she had gotten an extra monster’s attention, he let her do it herself. Before she knew it, she had received a level up notification and found herself five hundred col richer. She also felt considerably better than she had that morning.

That night, after a hot meal she had insisted on paying for, she found herself sleeping more deeply than she had previously. She had also decided to accompany him in his forays outside the town again. A part of her was ashamed that she had done nothing for those five days, but Hadrian hadn’t said anything about it until the previous night, and that was only because he made his offer.

After using a water basin to wash her face and wake herself up some more, she opened her menu and equipped her gear. Taking a look around her room to make sure she hadn’t forgotten something, by habit if nothing else, she opened her door and walked out. It was time to get something to eat and find out what ideas her companion had for the day.
Harry looked up from his meal of porridge as Silica sat down at the table he occupied in the small restaurant that the inn had. "You’re up early," he remarked as he watched her look over the menu.

"I woke up and didn’t feel like going back to sleep," she replied as she made her order. She looked at what he was eating. "How can you eat that?"

He shrugged. "It’s not much, but I’ve had worse." He replied. He took another bite and grimaced. "I just wish there was something to add to it, like honey or sugar, though. Plain porridge is just bland. Still, food is food."

Silica nodded, accepting his reason. She looked at what the NPC waitress placed down in front of her and sighed to herself. Simple black bread, a little bit of fruit, and some weak tea to wash it down with. Not much better than Hadrian’s choice, to be honest, but the inn’s selection was rather limited, though cheap, in the mornings. Not that the afternoon and evening choices were any superior, given that the inn was cheap and they usually hit the stalls in the markets for an evening meal.

More the kind of food someone would eat when they simply wanted something quick and cheap.

"What’s the plan for today?" She asked after taking a few bites of the bread.

Harry pulled up the floor map. "I was thinking of heading to an area to the west, or heading to the next town. Heading west and hunting mobs will give us more experience and col, but I’ve heard of some quests in the next town which can help us with our gear." He looked at her. "What do you think?"

Silica gave both options some thought as she drank her tea. "Well, I can use some more experience and get my level up a little more." She admitted.

Harry nodded. "True, and hunting the mobs will get us the col to buy better gear anyway. Not to mention finding a better place to stay." He smiled. "I’ve heard of a place near the West Gate that has some very good food and even offers baths."

Silica felt herself perk up at that bit of knowledge. The possibility of a warm bath sounded real good right at that moment, provided that what he had heard was true. "You sure about that?" She asked hopefully.

Harry shrugged. "It won’t hurt to check, and it’s in the same direction anyway."

Silica grabbed Harry and started to drag him out of the inn. "Well, what are we waiting for? Let’s go!"

"Silica, hey leggo!" Harry protested.

"But Hadrian, a bath!" Silica cheered.

He heard the laughter of several patrons as Silica manhandled him out of the inn. At the same time, a part of him was glad that she had found something to be happy about. It beat the depression she had been exhibiting beforehand. Of course, the opportunity to enact some violence on mobs yesterday probably helped as well.

Also, a chance to relax in a warm bath did sound pretty good, all things considered.

After confirming the rumors about the inn, and making a reservation that set Harry back three hundred col for the only room with a bath left available, they made their way to the western parts of the floor.
Three hours of wandering and fighting later, they stopped for a break, and Harry took the time and looked over the drops. Given that the average level of the monsters was slightly higher than his, he figured that another two hours or so would net the two of them another level increase. They were also getting more drops and col, possibly as a reward for taking more risks.

“Hey Silica, how are you holding up?” He asked.

Silica looked up from browsing her inventory. “Um, not bad. I still have plenty of potions left.” She then noticed something in her inventory. “Looks like I got a weapon drop called the Hornet’s Sting.” She materialized it and saw that it was a dagger. Idly looking at the stats, it was an improvement over her Iron Dagger, with an increase to her accuracy and damage when attacking from behind. She looked at Harry. “You get anything?”

“Nothing more than the usual you can expect from mobs.” He replied, shrugging. “We can probably find a use for the hides, fangs and stingers later, if only as a source of extra col.” He materialized some bread from his inventory. “Well, it looks like a good time for lunch.” He said as he handed her a piece of bread.

Silica materialized a couple of water skins and handed one to Harry as she accepted the bread. They ate in companionable silence for a bit when Silica wondered something. Ever since that first day, Harry had constantly wandered out of the Town of Beginnings and fought mobs. In fact, he probably would have done so on the first day, but he decided to stay with her.

“Hadrian, how do you do it?” She asked.

Harry gave her a confused look. “How do I do what?” He asked.

“How do you keep yourself from being scared?”

“It’s not like I’m not scared.” He replied. “I’m scared every time I step outside the town.” He sighed. “Silica, I am scared, but I won’t let that stop me.”

“What do you mean?” She asked.

“If I do nothing, Kayaba wins, it’s as simple as that.” He replied. “Someone may clear the game and get us all out, but if I don’t do something, if I don’t try, then he still wins.”

“I see.” She replied quietly. “You’re braver than I am.”

Harry chuckled. “You’re out here, fighting mobs, I think that’s brave, don’t you?” He remarked. He looked at the time in his HUD. “Well, why don’t you equip that new knife of yours and we go back to killing mobs? I think we should gain another level soon, and we can then head back to town for dinner and that bath.”

They returned to town about four hours later, both having gained a level, and Harry getting his own dropped piece of gear in the form of a shield called a Carapace Shield. While he hadn’t decided to equip it, he was happy with it. Walking into the inn, Harry remembered something.

“Oh, bloody hell.” He said in English.

“What?” Silica asked.

“We only reserved one room.” He replied with some embarrassment. “I’m going to see if there’s another room available.” He walked over to the counter and talked with the NPC innkeeper before walking back.
“Is there another room?” Silica asked.

Harry shook his head. “Nope. I did find out that paying three hundred col reserved the room for a week, though.”

Silica blinked at realizing that he had gotten a room for a week. She was a little disappointed that there weren’t any other available rooms, though. “I’ll go back to the other inn, then.” She offered.

Harry held a hand up to stop her. “No, I will. You can have this.” He handed her the room key

“But you paid for it.” Silica objected, trying to hand it back.

“It’s no bother, we made more col than I spent.” Harry countered, refusing to take the key.

“Can we at least take a look at the room first?” She asked, giving him a frustrated look. “It might have a something, like a couch. At least take a chance and enjoy the bath you paid for.”

Harry was about to refuse when he caught the look in her eyes. He had seen Hermione give him and Ron a similar look when she was restraining the urge to hex them for something. “We’ll check it out.” He conceded.

“Good.” Silica walked off, heading up the stairs to the room. Following her, Harry hoped there was a second bed or at least a couch.

Fortunately, it had a couch, which Harry immediately offered to take. Noticing how Silica was giving the bathroom an almost eager look, he told her to go ahead and take a bath, while he headed back downstairs to give her some privacy.

That and he was interested in seeing if the food and drink choices were actually better than the other inn’s.

November 30, 2022 – Aincrad 1st Floor, Tolbana

Harry idly flipped through the most recent version of the guidebook for the floor that had been made freely available to the players while he waited for Silica to finish her shopping. Given that she was in a lingerie shop, he had wisely not accompanied her, though he did wonder why she went in there. Oh well, it wasn’t his business. They had decided to take a break from hunting mobs, doing quests, and exploring the labyrinth for the day and simply relax, anyway. If she wanted to spend her time shopping, he wouldn’t stop her.

Especially after how rough the last couple of days in the labyrinth had been for them. Despite Harry being level ten, and Silica having reached level nine, the labyrinth had proven to be more challenging than expected compared to anywhere else on the floor. Admittedly, it was more due to the size of the place, rather than the mobs, but they wandered in far enough that they ran out of health potions trying to get back out the previous day.

It wasn’t hard after that, to think that they should take a day off. Silica had been very much for that idea when he told her last night. Having to dodge mobs, carefully make their way between the few safe areas that were mapped, and outright running away, while an exhilarating experience, was hardly fun. In fact, it was downright terrifying.
“Hey, kid, long time no see!” He heard a familiar voice call out. Turning towards where it came from, he saw the familiar faces of Klein and his friends.

“Hey Klein,” Harry replied. “How’re you all doing?”

Klein grinned. “We’re doing great.” He said cheerfully. “Just got into town and were about to grab something to eat before hitting the labyrinth. What about you?”

Harry shrugged. “Decided to take the day off,” he replied. “Hit the labyrinth yesterday.”

“Any tips?” Klein asked.

Harry nodded. “Bring plenty of potions, and once you run low, head back.” Harry replied honestly. “The mobs aren’t much tougher than out here, but the labyrinth is big and you don’t want to run out of them on your way out.” He rubbed the back of his head. “Made things a bit exciting, that, but being in the red and not close to the entrance isn’t my idea of fun.”

Klein winced.

Harry nodded. “Anyway, you got the most current map data?” He asked. “If you don’t I can send you a copy of mine.”

Klein nodded. “Yeah, I got it. By the way, kid, what happened with that girl you were with?”

“Ah, she went shopping for some clothes.” Harry replied.

Klein raised an eyebrow. “And you’re not with her?”

Harry shot Klein a look. “Not those kinds of clothes, Klein.” He said with some embarrassment.

Klein was about to say something else, when Issin, one of his friends spoke up. “Hey, wait a second.” He said. “I heard a rumor a while ago that a pair of kids were staying in the same room at an inn in the Town of Beginnings.” He then looked at Harry. “I heard that one of them had green eyes and a scar on his forehead.”

“Oh yeah, I think you’re right Isshin.” Klein said and then looked at Harry. “You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you?” He asked with a grin.

When I find out who started that rumor, we’re going to have a talk, Harry thought with some annoyance. “First Klein, my names Hadrian, or Harry if you like.” He said with some asperity. “Second, I seem to recall hearing a rumor myself. Something about some girls chasing this thuggish guy wearing a red bandanna out of the Town of Beginnings while threatening to stab him somewhere painful.” He smirked. “You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, kid.” Klein said with false sincerity.

“Of course you don’t. Just as I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Harry said with equally false sincerity.

The two of them then shared a grin. “Still, nice to see you’re doing fine, kid.” Klein said.

“Same to you Klein.” Harry said. He then saw a message notification on his HUD. “Just a sec, Silica just sent me a message.” He opened it and quickly read it. “Well, she’s done with her shopping and is waiting for me back at the inn. Take care, you guys.” He looked back at them. “And if calling me
by my name is that hard, just call me Harry!”

“I already know someone called Harry.” Klein replied, pointing at his friend, Harry One. “Besides, you’re a kid, so ‘kid’ will do.”

Harry nodded and turned back, a small smile on his face. To be honest, he wasn’t all that bothered being called a kid and addressed as such by Klein. The guy was friendly and took the time to teach him how to use the system to fight.

“Heh, he’s travelling with a girl and stayed in the same room with her for a week.” Klein chuckled as he watched Harry walk away. “Makes me little jealous.”

“Hey boss, shouldn’t we get something to eat?” Issin asked.

Klein nodded, getting back to business. “Yeah, let’s go. First, Dynamm, Harry One, go stock up on potions. Dale, find Kunimitsu and bring him back here. Once we eat, we’re hitting the labyrinth for a couple of hours.”

“Right, boss.” They all acknowledged and split up.

“So,” Issin remarked. “Jealous of the kid, huh?”

“Shut up, Issin.”

December 5, 2022 – Aincrad 2nd Floor, Urbus

Harry and Silica quickly cleared the teleport gate as the light faded, having taken the advice to move away from it quickly once the teleport finished. While no one would get hurt if they didn’t, it would be embarrassing to have people crash into you. And given how busy the teleport gate was, and was likely to continue to be, there was a high likelihood of that happening to anyone who stood still for more than a moment after the teleport.

With the first floor boss having been defeated the previous day and the opening of the Second Floor of Aincrad, players were very eager to move on. Harry agreed with that sentiment, even if his reason for rushing to the gate before even eating breakfast was for a slightly different reason.

He wanted to get away from the angry rumors about the Beater, Kirito that were starting to be spread around. The rumors of how he let the raid leader, Diabel, die during the boss fight. Of how he took advantage of his knowledge from the beta to steal the Last Attack Bonus. Of how the Beater then bragged about his knowledge to the rest of the raid. He wanted to get away from that.

While he didn’t doubt that there was a grain of truth to the rumors, if you squinted real hard, there had to be more to the story. Especially since he had heard some rumors to the contrary as well. He knew about Kirito from Klein, and how he had helped the man learn the basics on the first day.

Klein had not been pleased, to put it mildly, to hear those rumors. In fact, Dynamm and Dale had to physically restrain him in order to keep him from assaulting one loudmouth who had been particularly vocal about it.

Harry could recognize when someone was being set up to be the scapegoat. He’d almost had it happen to him during his Second Year in Hogwarts, when he inadvertently revealed that he was a
Parselmouth, after all. If it hadn’t been for Fred and George taking the incident and running with it like they did, things could have gotten ugly.

That, and he remembered some of the rumors which had been spread about beta testers before this. Those rumors had dried up in favor of this, which made Harry think that it had been deliberate. On Kirito’s part, someone else’s, or both, he didn’t know, but the previous statements and rumors about the beta testers had quickly stopped now that the attention and anger could be directed to a single person.

“Well Silica, we’re on the Second Floor,” He said, turning to his companion. “Want to look around town and see if the shops have anything?” His stomach growled. “Or, we could find a place to eat, first.” He added.

Silica giggled. “Well, if you hadn’t been in such a hurry, we could have eaten first.” She said with some amusement.

Harry shrugged and looked around. “Yeah, I know. So, let’s find some food.” He said as he walked into the town.

Silica followed him and looked around at the town itself. It didn’t look too different from what she saw on the First Floor, but she did feel a little excitement. The First Floor had been cleared, and people were beginning to think that it was possible to clear the game.

Of course, she thought. We’ve only cleared the first floor. We don’t know how long it will take from here. Still, the excitement amongst the players was infectious, and she didn’t put up any protests about heading up here.

“Hey Hadrian after we eat and look through the shops, what’s the plan?” She asked him.

Harry stopped and thought for a moment. “I was thinking of hitting the fields near the town.” He told her. “Not for long, just a quick check on what the mobs are like right outside, since the guidebook doesn’t have anything on the floor.”

“They’re about the same level as around Tolbana,” a female voice said from behind, startling the both of them.

Both Harry and Silica turned to the source of the voice and saw the speaker right behind them. She was wearing a cloak that was left open in the front, showing the brown tunic and pants underneath. With her dirty blonde hair, golden eyes, and the whisker marks on her cheek, it was a person both of them had met a few times. Argo, also known as The Rat, a player who was quickly setting herself up as a reputable information broker.

Harry sighed. “You always sneak up on people?” He asked.

Argo grinned. “So, you want some information on the floor?” She asked cheerfully.

“Well, I’m wondering if you have any updates to the guidebook.” Harry replied. “You know, general stuff so I can get a basic idea of what to expect.”

Argo shook her head. “Give me a couple of days, I’ll be releasing an update for it. I want to make sure of some things, first.”

Harry nodded, not surprised by her response. “Alright then.” He was about to turn and walk away when he realized that he had an opportunity to confirm something. “Oh, by the way, can you confirm something for me?”
“Depends on what you want confirmed.” Argo replied.

“It’s about those rumors going around.” He said. “About Kirito. How true are they?”

Argo looked around and then back at Harry and Silica. “And what makes you think I know anything about that?” She asked.

*She knows something,* Harry thought. “You strike me as the type who likes to get to the bottom of such things, especially after that rumor about that secret log out spot.” He raised an eyebrow.

Argo sighed. “Not here,” she told him. She then gestured that they should follow her. She led them to an alley with no other players around and, after a quick look to make sure no one was following, turned back to Harry. “Before I confirm anything, five thousand col.”

“Five thousand?!” Silica exclaimed in shock. “Your usual rate is a thousand.” She protested.

Harry was surprised at her asking price. If she was charging more than her usual rates for a rumor, then it must be serious. He opened his menu and set up the trade. Before he entered the amount he gave Argo a level look. “It’s fine, Silica,” He told her. “It just means that this information is serious.”

He entered the five thousand col and approved the trade.

Argo shook her head and accepted the money. “I should have asked for more,” she said drily. “Well, you wouldn’t be paying if you didn’t suspect something was off about it. Still, the rumors are true, from a certain point of view.”

“And which point of view would that be?” Harry asked sharply. “From the point of view of needing someone to blame? From the point of view of turning someone into a scapegoat?!” His voice had lowered to a growl by that point.

Argo blinked in surprise as Silica looked at him in shock.

“I thought so.” Harry sighed. “Did he allow this?”

Argo nodded. “Yeah, he did. He knew that everyone would need someone to blame if someone died in the boss fight because the information provided in the guidebook about it was wrong.”

“The information from the beta, you mean?” Harry asked. “Why? You had that warning on the cover that things might have changed from the beta.” He materialized his guidebook and pointed out the warning. “I also sent you information on things I noticed that were different, and saw the updates on the next version.”

“It’s not that people were unaware of that fact,” Argo pointed out. “But there was already a lot of bad feelings regarding beta testers, and well…”

“Someone would figure out that he was a beta tester, and blame him anyway.” Harry concluded.

Argo nodded.

“It doesn’t matter where you are, some things never change,” Harry sighed. “All right, thanks for clearing that up for me, Argo.”

“No problem.” She replied as she turned to walk away. “Oh, and if you want a decent place to get some food, try the March Hare.” She said over her shoulder.

Silica looked at Harry and saw his pensive expression. “Hadrian, why did you ask her about those
rumors?” She asked.

Harry shrugged. “Just wanted to confirm a few things.” He replied.

“But why?”

He sighed. “I’ve had something like that happen to me about a year ago. Being blamed for something, in my case, there were some incidents that put some of my classmates in the hospital. It got cleared up, eventually, but it made things bad for me until it was.”

“Oh. Sorry to bring it up then.” She apologized. She then realized something. “You want to go to that place she recommended to us?” She asked, changing the subject.

Harry’s stomach growled, causing Silica to giggle. “Yeah, that sounds like a good idea.” He replied.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I do consult as much reliable information from the sources as I can. Well, more SAO than Harry Potter. However, I will take liberties with canon from both as needed, as if the premise of this story didn't already indicate that.

One major divergence from the HP Canon is that the magical world is explicitly more aware of developments in the muggle world. There's still a clear separation, but the events of the Second World War served as a wakeup call to the magical world that they can't simply ignore it and pretend it doesn't exist. At the very least, they want to know what's happening so that when things go to hell, they can get out of dodge. That it also sporks the fanon idea that they're willfully ignorant to the point of absurdity is a bonus.

From the SAO side, I'm drawing on the timelines from the Light Novels/Progressive Manga. There's not much difference, really, but they do help pin some things down.
Chapter 3 - They're Starting to Look Like Adventurers

December 21, 2022 – Aincrad 4th Floor, Rovia

Both Silica and Harry looked around at the town they had just taken the teleport gate to. Having heard about the third floor being cleared and the teleport gate now allowing for travel to the next floor, both of them had immediately queued at the teleport gate, grabbing a snack to eat from one of the NPC stalls for the inevitable wait.

The town itself, from what they could see from the Teleport Plaza, was partially submerged, with the main streets acting as canals, dividing the town into four quarters. It also meant that it would require a boat to navigate the town. Seeing as there was a line at the dock, it was apparent that the city had its own services available for use, though the line was moving at a relatively decent pace.

*One of the conveniences of a virtual world, I guess.* Harry thought to himself. Within about ten minutes, they were climbing onto one of the boats, or gondolas as the NPCs were calling them, and were asked by the NPC gondolier where they wanted to go.

“Where are the inns located?” Harry asked.

“The inns would be in the south-western district, sir,” he replied. “Is that where you wish to be taken?”

Both Harry and Silica nodded. “Yes, please.” He replied.

“Very well then, sir, madam.”

While they were being transported, Harry enquired about the town’s layout and where everything was.

The gondolier proved to be a goldmine of basic information on where everything in the Rovia was. Simply put, Rovia’s was divided into four districts, with their functions based on whether they were on the eastern side of town, or the western side. The residential nature of the western districts, with the NPCs living in the north, and the southern part being dedicated to the transient player population. On the east side, the southern district housed the businesses, while the northern district was dedicated to sightseeing, parks, and even had an outdoor theater. All in all, Rovia had a number of amenities for players to enjoy if they so wanted to do so.
“Hadrian, since it’s the afternoon, what’s the plan?” Silica asked once they disembarked their gondola.

“We’ll ask around town for information on quests, and see what’s available,” Harry replied. “I’m thinking we’ll do maybe one quest before taking the rest of the day off, or we can just take it easy and start out tomorrow morning.” He stretched. “Even with extra players around, clearing out mobs and grinding levels, hitting the labyrinth took longer than expected.”

“It’s not like we helped with the floor boss, Hadrian.” Silica pointed out.

“True,” Harry acknowledged. “But we still went in behind them, as did a bunch of others.” He looked at the various inns, pubs, and restaurants. “It made going through the labyrinth a little easier, and we still got enough drops, or found enough treasure for that matter, to upgrade our gear.” He grinned. “Why, we’re actually starting to look like we’re wearing armor, not to mention looking like serious adventurers.”

Silica looked down at her new armor and admitted that he was right. True, in terms of appearance, what both of them were wearing was not significantly different from their starting gear. However, rather than the armor pieces looking as a badly put together and fitted afterthought over clothing, it was starting to look like it belonged on them.

It made both of them look less like kids playing with their parent’s old armor, and more like adventurers. Harry had even started making use of his shield, and found that it was handy on more than one occasion.

“Hey Silica,” She heard Harry say. “I found a place.”

“Does it have a bath?” She asked, hopefully.

Harry chuckled. “You and your baths,” he said with amusement. He pointed at the inn and the bathhouse next to it. “If it doesn’t, you can still take a bath next door.”

Silica nodded. While not the same, whether it was a private bath, or not was immaterial. Bathing was a luxury she enjoyed at every opportunity, and she knew full well that Harry was the same way, even if he didn’t make any issue about having to go without one. Then again, he was male.

“Well then,” she said. “Shall we?”

Harry nodded and they walked in together. The inn didn’t have any baths, and only one available room, fortunately with two beds. They could work with that.

A couple of hours later, the two of them were at a nearby restaurant and browsing the menu. Unsurprisingly, given that the town was water themed, many of the dishes were oriented around fish. From stews, to platters, to meals that can go for several courses, they had their choice of seafood dishes. The drinks, however, can be summarized simply enough. Small beer and a wine that was liberally cut with water comprised the low alcohol selection. Beer and spirits made up the rest. There wasn’t any non-alcoholic selection this time.

“Why are so many drinks alcoholic?” Silica asked.

“It’s because the developers for this game did their research.” Came a familiar voice.

Both of them turned and saw Argo, along with a boy and girl they didn’t know, though they knew of them. Kirito and Asuna had been making names for themselves, after all.
“What do you mean, Argo?” Harry asked.

Argo grinned. “I won’t even charge you for this,” she said. “Basically, it’s a nod to historical realism. Since the levels so far aren’t based on the modern era, which means that things like clean water are not common.”

“Ah, the whole don’t drink the water thing then.” Harry said.

“You got it.” Argo then turned to her companions. “By the way, Kii-bou, Aa-chan, these are the two I told you about.”

Kirito blinked. “Wait, these are the two who were the ones who corrected that information in your guides for the third floor, and the two who scouted the field boss?” He asked. He looked at them. “They’re kids.” He pointed out.

“You’re one to talk, Kii-bou.” Argo pointed out. “You’re not much older than them.” She turned back to Harry and Silica. “Surprised you’re both here, Harry’s usually chomping at the bit to hit the fields.”

Harry blinked, and then cast a narrow eyed glance at his nearly managing not to giggle quest partner.

“We just got here a couple hours ago, and wanted to rest up from exploring the labyrinth.” Silica replied, mastering herself. “That and we wanted to take some time to gather information. Well, after a bath and getting something to eat.”

Harry looked at Argo. “So, got anything?” He asked. “Any useful quests or areas we might want to check out?”

Argo nodded. “I have a list of quests for the floor that I’ve confirmed.”

“Usual rate then, Argo?” Silica asked.

“You got it.”

Both Harry and Silica opened their menus and offered to trade the money to Argo, who blinked in surprise. “Well, this is new.” She said, accepting the trades. “Usually it’s Harry taking the lead in this.”

Harry gestured to Silica to take the lead. She nodded to him and looked at Argo. “We figured we can check the quests and see which ones take us to the same general area.” She said. “It will allow us to cover more ground, while not being too far apart.”

Kirito nodded. “Makes sense. Each of you can do different quests, map out the area you’re in in more detail, and still be able to back each other up if necessary. It also means that if you two find something that might need more people, you can send someone back to get help.” He looked at the two of them. “Whose idea was this?”

Harry gestured to Silica. “It was her idea.” He replied. “When we stumbled on the field boss for the Third Floor, we didn’t have the area mapped out that well, so making our way back, as well as finding the best path took longer than it should have.”

Asuna blinked at that revelation. “So you two scouted the field boss simply because you stumbled on it?” She asked incredulously. The idea that they ended up finding it and scouting it out by accident seemed like something that Kirito would do. Well, Kirito would probably try to fight it as well, but the similarity was there.
Both Harry and Silica shrugged. “We weren’t looking for it, if that’s what you want to know.” Silica added. “We were looking for something else that was part of a quest.”

Harry chuckled. “Yeah, and of course, we find what we were looking for, right at the Field Boss’ feet.”

Silica shot Harry a mock glare. “And then Hadrian decides to do something idiotic and try and sneak up and grab the item.”

“Hey! I managed to grab it.” Harry protested.

“You got the boss’ attention as well.” Silica countered. “We spent the next hour playing hide-and-seek with the thing until we could actually get out of the area. It then took us two hours, to find another route back.”

“It gave us plenty of information on what it did, not to mention the map data we gathered.” Harry said defensively. “On the plus side, it meant that the clearers had plenty of information to work off of.” He added cheerfully.

Asuna looked at Harry, then she looked at Kirito. “There are two of them. Oh, Gods, there are two of them.” She grumbled. She then looked at Silica. “Silica, right?” Silica nodded. “So, you have to deal with an idiotically brave partner as well?”

“Hey! I’m not that bad.” Harry and Kirito both protested at the same time.

The two young men blinked at each other. Asuna shot both of them a look, quelling any further protests. “Silica, why don’t you and I get together later and talk.” She offered. “I bet you already have some stories you can share. And I bet you want to talk to someone who’s female.” She saw Argo about to interject. “You don’t count, Argo, but I guess you can be there as well.”

Argo grinned and then looked at Kirito and Harry, a gleam in her eyes.

Harry sighed. “How much to keep that quiet Argo?” He asked.

Argo’s grin widened, causing a pit to form in Harry’s stomach.

Looks like he was going to be heading out to do a quest tonight, if only to make back some of the col he was about to spend in order to keep The Rat quiet.

December 22, 2022 – Aincrad 4th Floor, Rovia

It was nearly one o’clock in the morning when Harry and Silica tiredly got off the gondola they took from the South-East District and made their way to the inn they had reserved their room at. The quest they took, one wanting them to cull the bear population in the Bear Forest, had ended up taking longer, and being tougher, than expected. Not because of the mobs themselves, but because the two of them had to spend time carefully avoiding, and eventually fighting, a giant bear called the Magnatherium.

They took one look at it and decided that fighting that thing, at least with only the two of them, was a bad idea. Well, Silica decided that, and Harry took her lead with regards to that. If she didn’t want to fight something, he wasn’t going to complain. He considered her caution to be half the reason they
haven’t yet bitten off more than they can chew.

Also, giant bear. Even Harry knew that was bad news.

As it stood, the two of them would have continued avoiding it, had they not come across it again, and saw that Kirito and Asuna were fighting it. Harry stopped Silica and the two of them took the time to observe the mob’s attack patterns, such as its charges and flame breath, when they weren’t gaping at Kirito and Asuna.

While it was likely that those two could handle the fight, Harry wasn’t one to not help when he was in a position to do so. After telling Silica to stay back and watch to mob to look for weaknesses, he jumped in right in time to block a swipe from the bear with his shield.

“What’re you doing?!” Kirito called out.

“Thought you guys would like a little help,” Harry replied. He took a quick glance at Kirito’s health and tossed him a potion. “Drink this and heal up, I’ll distract it.” Kirito nodded and got behind a tree. Harry turned his attention back to the bear just in time to jump to the side as the bear charged.

Good thing Hermione’s not here, he thought. She’d be hexing me, lecturing me, or both for this.

While Harry played matador with the giant bear, Kirito worked his way around as the health potion did its work and found himself next to Asuna, who had moved to stand next to Silica.

“What is he doing?” Asuna asked her.

“Being a reckless idiot,” Silica growled. “He told me to watch the mob, look for weaknesses-” She spied the mob rearing back. “Hadrian, fire breath!” She watched as Harry ran under the bear, taking the chance to land a few opportunistic strikes on its legs. She scowled. “If he doesn’t get killed by that thing, I’m going to have a talk with him.” She turned her attention back to Asuna and Kirito. “Anyway, he told me to keep an eye on it and see if I can spot a weakness and then proceeded to jump right in.”

“So, he keeps you out of the fight?!” Kirito asked.

Silica shrugged. “Well, if I see a chance to attack…”

“You will,” Asuna finished, knowing full well how such a tactic worked.

Silica nodded and spotted the bear with its back to a fallen tree. “On that thought, wait a second.” She darted towards the tree and used it and its branches to get some height. Activating a sword skill, she struck several times at the bear’s hindquarters and also got its tail, causing it to roar in pain. She noticed that the last hit, the one on its tail, caused the most damage.

“That’s it!” She called out, as she darted away from the bear, keeping something between it and her. “Kirito, Asuna! Its tail is a weak spot!” She called.

“Got it!” Both shouted as they reentered the fight.

“Hadrian!” Asuna called out. “Get it to charge into a tree so it will be stunned!”

“On it!” Harry replied.

Before long, the impromptu party of four got into a rhythm, lead the bear’s charges into a tree, attack it, dodge its fire breath, rinse, repeat. They continued like that for twenty minutes when the mob was
finally killed when Asuna used Harry’s shield as a springboard to gain the height needed to land several devastating hits on the Magnatherium’s tail.

Harry pulled a potion out of his inventory and drank it as he saw Silica walk up to him, an unreadable look on her face. He looked questioningly at her, a look which quickly turned to a pained one when she smacked him upside the back of his head.

“Silica?!” He shouted in surprise.

“You reckless idiot!” She shouted at him, her voice a mixture of anger and relief. She then proceeded to tear into him about his reckless behavior and how it could have gotten him killed, how it made her worry, and so on. Harry stared at her bemusedly as she did so for about thirty seconds, before he started to chuckle.

“And what is so funny?” Silica asked angrily.

“It’s not that it’s funny,” Harry explained hastily. “It’s that, right now, you’re reminding me of a friend of mine in the real world. Every time I would do something that she thought was stupid and reckless, she would get on my case about it. Thinking back on it, those thing I did usually were stupid and reckless.” He finished wryly.

“Her?” Silica asked in confusion. “Was she a girlfriend?”

Harry blinked and then shook his head. “No, she was a friend. Almost like a sister, really.” His face fell. “And being reminded of that makes me realize just how much I miss her, and all of my other friends.” He sighed.

“Oh,” Silica said, realizing she might have touched upon a sensitive subject. “I’m sorry.”

Harry reached over and patted her on the shoulder. “There’s nothing to be sorry about, Silica.” He said. He opened his menu and brought up the quest. “Looks like we’re done, so why don’t we head back to town, turn it in, and get some sleep?”

Silica nodded her acceptance and looked the time on HUD. “It is rather late, isn’t it?”

Harry checked the time and blinked. “It’s half an hour to midnight? Wow, it is a bit late.” He then yawned. “Maybe more than a bit.” He amended.

Silica giggled in response to that before she yawned as well.

“Well, let’s turn in the quest and get back to the inn.” Harry said. He turned back to tell Kirito and Asuna that he and Silica were heading back, only to see that they’ve already left.

As such, by the time exhausted pair made it to their shared room, they were more concerned with getting some sleep. A minor issue like having the privacy to change into something more comfortable to sleep in was of significantly less concern. So was making sure they were on separate beds for that matter.

About six hours later, Harry woke up to the unfamiliar sensation of something warm and heavier than expected being draped over his right side. He blearily looked over to see what it was and stiffened when he realized that it was Silica; wearing a shirt that wasn’t quite long enough, nestled into his side and using his shoulder as a pillow. He could also feel her small breasts pressing into his side, which was already causing a reaction he was desperately trying to suppress.

*Oh hell,* Harry thought as he tried to extricate himself without waking her up. *I thought things like*
this only happened in those anime shows Ms. Carlisle watched! He froze when Silica shifted, sleepily mumbling something he couldn’t make out.

Ok Harry, just stay calm, move slowly and … she’s waking up. Harry began to fervently hope that his situation would not end like it did in anime as he saw Silica open her eyes. Blearily blinking her eyes, she blankly looked at him and he noticed the moment that she realized she was in bed with him, and her state of undress.

They didn't agree to jump out of bed at the same time, but Harry was kind of glad it worked out that way. They spent a moment smoothing out clothing and pointedly not looking at each other—especially after he noticed that she had a full-body blush, which caused him to blush and rapidly face away from her.

It was going to be an awkward morning for them. Harry almost would have preferred the anime violence. Almost.

Aincrad 4th Floor, Fields Outside Rovia

Harry looked at his map as he checked what he already had explored to see if there was any paths already leading to the quest he decided to do on his own. He absently noticed Silica’s location, a short distance away and nodded. Both of them had compared the quest information provided by Argo and had decided on two which were along the shoreline of the bay that comprised a third of the floor. Outside of remaining in a party so they could keep an eye on the other’s status, they split up to tackle their quests.

Far enough apart to do their respective quests solo, but not so far apart that one couldn’t rush in and support the other if need be. At level fourteen, Harry was more than capable of handling the mobs in the area on his own, so he wasn’t overly concerned about himself. Especially since it was a simple kill quest, requiring him to kill some two dozen crabs which were infesting the shoreline.

No, he was more than able to take care of himself. At the same time, he kept periodically checking to make sure that Silica was alright. This was her first time going solo, even if he was close enough to rush in and back her up if need be. Still, from everything he could tell, she seemed to be doing fine.

He checked again—just to be sure—before closing the map to get on with things.

##

Silica sheathed her dagger as the last mob shattered and quickly checked the results window that came up; decent experience, decent col, and a couple of items she can use to enhance her weapon being the earned results.

While Hadrian had taken a simple kill quest, she had decided on one that had her searching the area for feathered dragon nests. Apparently, the very same local mobs in the area were beginning to encroach on their nesting grounds. So, while Harry killed crabs, she was tasked with checking to make sure that the nests were safe, and if need be, kill any mobs threatening them.

Not much different from what Hadrian was doing, when she thought about it. The only difference was that if there were no mobs threatening the nests, she didn’t need to fight. Also, she wanted a chance to see them up close, if possible, given that she had seen several flying around over the bay, or sunning themselves on rocks just past the harbor.
When she had told Harry that, he simply gave her an amused look, shrugged, and told her to be careful.

After clearing mobs from five abandoned nests over the next hour, she was beginning to think that her hoping to see one up close were going to be dashed as she carefully made her way to the final nest that was marked on her map. Even so, she had taken the quest, and she was going to see it through.

As she approached the nest, she heard a frantic sound that was a mix between a chirp and a screech coming from its direction. She picked up her pace and drew her dagger as she moved, keeping an eye out for any mobs.

As she approached the nest, she growled as she saw a group of five mobs surrounding a juvenile feathered dragon which was grabbed every time it tried to take flight and thrown to the ground.

Her next growl nearly a roar, Silica activated a sword skill as she approached. By the time the mobs registered her presence, three of them had already been taken out, and the fourth mob would quickly be joining its companions. The fifth mob had just enough time to position itself to attack when its final companion had been killed and Silica charged through the dissipating polygons. It fared no better than its companions.

Silica checked her surroundings to make sure no more mobs were approaching and sheathed her dagger before looking at the nest. A chirp had her look down and she saw the young feathered dragon looking at her curiously. She squatted down to take a closer look at it, keeping her movements slow and careful so as not to startle or frighten it.

The small dragon was the size of a housecat, blue feathers covering it from snout to hind quarters, with two long feathers taking the place of where a tail would be on most animals. Giving it a quick look over, Silica saw that it had no obvious injuries, though the blue of its feathers was marred by dirt in places.

Apparently satisfied with looking her over, the dragon started looking around the nest, clawing at the dirt as if it was looking for something. Acting on a hunch, Silica opened her menu and took out a bag of peanuts she had purchased a few days ago to have as a snack while out in the fields. She opened the bag and reached in for a handful of them, the sound attracting the feathered dragon’s attention. She slowly put her now full hand forward, allowing it to inspect the peanuts in her hand.

It looked at the peanuts being offered to it and took a cautious sniff. After apparently finding nothing wrong with the offered food, it took one peanut and ate it. As soon as it finished, and apparently finding the peanut satisfactory, the little creature began to eagerly eat the offered peanuts out of Silica’s hand. Once it finished all of them, it looked at Silica, its surprisingly expressive red eyes giving Silica the impression of a pet looking at its owner and desiring more treats.

Giggling, Silica reached into the bag and pulled out another handful and offered them. She would spend several minutes feeding the feathered dragon when a window popped up in front of her, asking her if she wanted to tame it. Curious, she pressed the button that would confirm it, and to her surprise, she got a notification saying she had just tamed a Feathered Dragon. She was then given a request to give it a name.

She thought for a moment, wondering what she would name a dragon when she looked at it and saw that it was still eagerly eating the peanuts she provided. *Well, it likes peanuts, so why not Pina?* Shrugging, she entered the name on the available console and acknowledged it.

It would take several hours before it dawned on her that she had given Pina the same name as her cat.
in the real world, if for completely different reasons.

She checked her quest log and saw that she had finished the quest. Sending a quick message to Harry that she was done, she made her way to the place they had decided to meet back up at. At the same time, she looked at Pina, the feathered dragon taking wing and flying around her and wondered just what he would think of this development.

Aincrad 4th Floor, Dock Outside of Rovia’s South Gate

Harry browsed through his menu, checking his skill progression as he waited for Silica to arrive-- akin to playing with a yo-yo or casting Lumos and Nox in an idle cycle. It was good to know where you were, and what you had, but you could spend hours opening, browsing, and closing the menu before you realized it.

From the looks of things, he was getting close to earning new sword skills, and being able to get some new supplementary skills, so it wouldn’t hurt to look through the guide to plan what supplementary skills he would take. Furthermore, he was close to reaching level fifteen. That opened up a new skill slot, so he had to plan that out as well.

“Hadrian!” he heard Silica call. He looked up, smiled to greet her-- and then a shadow flickered over her. His hand on his sword on instinct, he blinked as the shadow passed again. Looking up, he cocked his head in puzzlement as he saw something flying around her. It wasn't giving off that 'mob vibe'.

The form made another pass, before it descended, settling on his quest partner's shoulders. Outside of a small stagger, her only reaction was to reach up and scratch it before approaching him. As she got closer, he was able to identify what it was: a feathered dragon.

“Silica... why is that with you?” He asked.

Silica looked at him and smiled. “This is Pina, I tamed her during that quest I took.”

Harry looked at Silica, then at Pina, and then back at Silica. “You tamed her.”

"Yes."

"On a quest that was at least partly a sightseeing jaunt."

"Yes."

“One which didn’t have the possibility of taming a beast listed or even suggested.”

Silica nodded and smiled.

He shook his head, then shrugged it off and turned his attention to Silica. “Well, why don’t we go into town and turn these quests in?” He asked. “We can go over how our quests went and discuss what we will do tomorrow.”

Silica looked at the time displayed in her HUD and nodded. “It’s also late in the afternoon and is almost time for us to get dinner.” She thought for a second. “I wonder if Pina will eat more than just the peanuts I fed her.”
Harry shrugged. “She’s a dragon, so I wouldn’t be surprised.” He blinked. “Wait, is Pina female?”

Silica shrugged. “I don’t know, but why not?”

Harry had to give her that. It’s not like he was an expert on dragons anyway. Besides, unless Pina demonstrated otherwise, Silica can say Pina is female if she wants to. For all he knew, she might even be right. Besides, it wasn’t like it was an important issue.

“Well Silica, why don’t we get going?” He asked, gesturing to the dock. “We can find out what Pina eats in town by letting her try various things. We also have to turn in those quests.”

Silica nodded and gave Pina a scratch behind the tufts of feathers that sat where a real world cat would have ears before following him.

December 22, 2022 - GM Administration Area

Akihiko Kayaba looked at the data scrolling across numerous holographic screens. Since SAO started, he had been fine tuning everything, from how sword skills worked, to mob AI, to drop rate algorithms. Not everything was running smoothly from the start, which was to be expected, given that the players who participated in the beta could only find so much in the space of a month.

Add in his need to rebuff attempts to hack into the system to free the players, some of which were fiendishly creative, and he had been kept busy for nearly two months until things fully stabilized enough for him to check on matters which didn’t need his immediate attention.

Or so he thought.

Apparently, some enterprising person had found a way to observe players in game through their Nerve Gears on the first day and notified law enforcement and the families of those trapped in the game on how to do so. He had looked at the method used, and while crude, it worked by making use of the Nerve Gear’s own hardware to record what the user was seeing and hearing, and transmitting it to a computer’s own video player using a compatible format.

It was essentially a glorified playback system, one which had been useful and even necessary during the development of SAO, and one he had simply forgotten about. He queried the Cardinal System, the central AI which handled SAO on how many of the Nerve Gears were now streaming to computers to get an idea of the scale and nodded when the results came back.

Over a thousand Nerve Gears were now being utilized for this. While an issue, he had intended for the outside world to be ignorant of what went on in Aincrad after all, it didn’t affect the game itself. He could cut the feeds, but he also could see the utility of something like this.

“Cardinal,” he said. “Create a virtual space using partitions 0x9422FE62210DA through 0xA1CC0023DD000. Record and store feed information for transmission from IPv6 Address 2ecf:510a:0010::9311.” He brought up a console. “Delete stored feeds using first in, first out rules when partitions reach 80% storage capacity.”

“ACKNOWLEDGED.” Came the female voice the AI had chosen for itself. “QUERY: TRANSMISSION PROTOCOLS TO BE UTILIZED?”

“Use streaming protocols in current use for standard PC architectures and Full Dive technology.”
“ACKNOWLEDGED. QUERY: PRIVACY SETTINGS?”

“Default privacy settings will remain.” Kayaba replied. It would give the players some privacy automatically. If they players wanted more, they would have to figure out how to adjust those settings themselves through the menu’s options.

Simply because he didn’t plan for this, or even desire it, did not mean that he could not make use of it. So far, the audience was limited to whomever had access to the computers connected to the Nerve Gears. With this, he could expand the audience, turning a limited availability thing to something that everyone could see.

He idly wondered if this would replace any popular Reality TV shows for a moment before he turned his attention to other matters.
Hey all, JG here again to tell you that this isn’t my sandbox, it belongs to J.K. Rowling, Reiki Kawahara and their publishers/distributors. I’m just here on the edges having my own fun since they aren’t complaining so long as I don’t make a mess. I don’t make any money off of this, but it is fun to play here.

(there is a distant scream)

As long as you don’t draw aggro like beta Eddie D. does. Mr. Meier, can you help me rescue him before he gets killed?

Chapter 4 - Silica’s Lucky Seven

January 9, 2023 - Aincrad 8th Floor, Frieven

"... ten col says this layout has no good historical basis," Harry offered.

"No bet. Besides, this is one of those 'need to haves' in a fantasy game," Silica countered.

"A village in the trees?"

"Of course. Jeez, Hadrian, don't you know anything about magical worlds?"

Harry opted to keep his own council on that point. The aesthetic for this floor did indeed have everything off the ground-- from the teleport gate plaza, to the various parts of the village, all of the buildings were located in the trees with wooden walkways.

"Shame about the smell," Harry noted.

Silica slowly nodded. "I'll give you that."

Just from where they stood, the smell of brackish water and decaying matter permeated the air in a cloying mixture that made both of them seriously consider going back to the previous floor and waiting until this one was cleared.

“We’re not spending the night here,” Silica said in a tone that brooked no argument. “Not if we can avoid it.”

“Agreed.”

The two of them quickly fell into the familiar routine of looking around the village shops for anything potentially useful and information gathering on the available quests. Despite being spread out due to its topography, the entire exploration went by quickly and neither really found anything that caught their interest.
“Not much for us to really do from here, it seems.” Harry remarked. “We could explore and see what turns up, but...” He gave a dubious look at the walkways and then to the swampland below.

“Yeah, not even going there.” Silica agreed. “Should we just go back down to the previous floor? There were a couple of quests which looked interesting that we didn’t do.”

“Yeah, let’s do that.”

January 17, 2023 - Aincrad 11th Floor, Taft

Harry sipped his drink as he went about watching the patrons of the inn and listening to a performance being put on by an NPC musician. It had been a long day, and he was taking the opportunity to unwind after his latest misadventure while Silica took a relaxing bath. Having a jaunt through a trapped field dungeon with mobs all too eager to eat a player, while exciting, was something that both ended up wishing happened to someone else by the end.

By the time they got out, they had run out of potions, their supply of valuable and expensive healing crystals were down to their last few, and even Pina was showing signs of exhaustion.

“Well, I’ll be,” a voice came from behind. “It’s been awhile, kid.”

Harry turned and saw a grinning Klein, along with the rest of his guild.

“Hey Klein, I see you made it up here.” Harry replied. He turned to Issin. “So, what’s the betting on how long until he gets slapped or chased out of town by angry women today like, Issin?”

Klein glared at Harry as his guildmates laughed. “It only happened once, and you know that.” He replied sourly.

Harry’s answering smile was unrepentant. He then gestured to the table. “Well, take a seat and get something, first round will be on me.”

“Did I mention you’re cool, kid?”

“It’s Hadrian, Klein, not ‘kid’. Do you want me to start calling you ‘Old Man’?” Came Harry’s response.

“Only if you want me to start treating you like a kid, kid.” Klein and his guild then took their seats at the table. Once they ordered their drinks, Klein turned his attention back to Harry. “So, where’s your little girlfriend? What was her name, Sirico, Silico, Shi-?”

“Her name’s Silica,” Harry interrupted and then pointed to the back of the inn. “And she’s using the bathhouse that this inn has.”

The drinks arrived and everyone took a moment to quench their thirst. “Man, what is the beer made of here?” Klein complained. “I haven’t had something that actually tastes like beer should since all this started.”

Harry shrugged. “Dunno, it’s better than other floors, though. From what I can tell, this almost tastes like real beer should. Real beer, mind you, not that pisswater the Yanks convinced you was beer. Not that I would know.” That last bit was an obvious lie, of course. Smuggling alcohol into the
common rooms and dorms was an unofficial Hogwarts tradition and he had the opportunity to try beer and firewhiskey more than once due to his being on the house quidditch team. The beer was okay, but he didn’t care for the taste of firewhiskey.

“Sure you don’t, kid. Sure you don’t.” Came the jokingly sarcastic response from Klein’s guildmate, Dynamm.

Harry gave him a two-fingered salute in response to that. “I don’t know and I’m sticking with that story. Any rumors to the contrary are baseless lies.” He told the others.

Everyone at the table chuckled at that and went back to their drinks. “By the way, kid, how have things been going since we last saw you?” Klein asked. “It has been awhile.”

Silica arrived at the table twenty minutes later to find Harry sharing it with a number of other men, most of them laughing about something. She pulled Pina from her shoulder to hold the feathered dragon and keep her from flying over to investigate, or beg for treats from Harry.

“And then,” Harry said. “When I turned around to talk with them, Kirito and Asuna up and and disappeared on us.” He shook his head. “I found out that they decided to just head back and let Silica and I have some privacy the next day.”

Klein grinned. “Privacy, eh? You weren’t doing anything naughty out there, did you?”

Silica mastered the blush that crept up on her face and walked to the table and stopped right behind Klein, gesturing to those friends of his to keep quiet while a blushing Harry sputtered some protests. “And tell me, what do you mean by that?” She asked.

“Ah, trying to evade the- wait, did your voice just change?” Klein asked.

“Uh, boss…” Issin tried to get Klein’s attention.

“What, Issin?”

Issin pointed behind Klein as Silica shifted Pina so that she was at the same level of where she assumed his face would be. Klein turned in time to find himself face to snout of a confused Pina. The feathered dragon turned back to the girl and chirped.

“Um, what?” He asked.

Silica let Pina go and the feathered dragon flew over to Harry, who had already brought out a bag of peanuts. She looked at Klein and raised an eyebrow. “You were saying something about Hadrian and I doing something naughty in the woods, I believe.” She said.

“Um, uh, you see…” Klein trailed off.

Harry watched in amusement as Silica, who was perhaps a hundred and fifty centimeters tall and had to weigh 40 kilograms with her armor on, at most, stared Klein down and made him shift uncomfortably. Where did she learn that? He wondered as he absently fed Pina some peanuts and gave her a scratch behind the head.

“Well?” Silica was starting to play it up. “Just what did you mean by that statement?”

Klein took a quick look behind him, hoping for some backup, only to see his guildmates and Harry pointedly turn their attention elsewhere, mostly on the feathered dragon that was happily soaking up their attention. Traitors, he thought sourly.
Turning his attention back to the girl, he gulped and gave in. “I was just teasing the kid, ya know?” Her expression didn’t change. “I didn’t mean anything by it!” He added hastily.

“Ok Silica,” Harry said, trying not to laugh. “You had your fun, now why don’t you sit down and order something before we find out if it’s possible for someone to soil himself here.”

Klein protested Harry’s insinuation that he was intimidated by Silica as her expression changed from that of an irritated female to a cheerful one. “Okay, Hadrian.” She replied and walked over to a seat next to Harry. “So Hadrian, you seem to know them. Who are they?”

“These are Klein and his friends, Silica.” Harry said. “Guys, this is Silica, the girl I’ve partnered with.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you all.”

Klein looked at her. “So, you’re Silica, huh?” He asked and then smiled. “Nice to meet you. So, how’s travelling with him been?”

Silica smiled. “It’s been fun, even if he tends to rush in.” She shot Harry a playful glare. “It’s my job to make sure he doesn’t get hurt, too much. I’ve given up on keeping him out of trouble.”

“Hey!” Harry protested.

“Seriously,” she continued. “Some of the situations I’ve seen him get into.”

Harry gave an annoyed huff. “And who, pray tell, is the one who makes sure we have a full complement of healing items before we head out?” He countered. “And what do you mean by giving up at keeping me out of trouble? You’re right there with me.”

Silica raised an eyebrow in response. “Who’s the one who makes sure we don’t end up using all of them before we have to turn back?” She replied. “And it’s less I’m right there with you, and more I’m right there trying to drag you out of it.”

Harry opened his mouth to deliver a rebuttal, and then thought better of it. She had a point and he raised his mug acknowledging it.

Klein looked at the two, amused. If he hadn’t known better, he would have assumed that they had known each other for longer than the two months and change they have. It was certainly interesting to see.

“Hey Klein,” Harry said, changing the subject. “What’re you guys doing tomorrow, by the way?”

Klein looked at Harry. “Nothing much, kid.” He replied. “Was planning on hitting that field dungeon I’ve heard about from people, the Dark Forest. Figured we might find the Floor’s field boss there, since it borders where the labyrinth.”

Harry and Silica winced. “Uh yeah, you guys might want to listen then.” Harry replied. He opened his menu and brought up the map, scrolling to the field dungeon he magnified the image. Klein’s and his friends looked at it and then back to Harry.

“Wait, you guys have been there?” Dale asked. “That place was only discovered this morning.”

“We know,” Silica replied. “We’re the ones who discovered it, along with some guys from the ALS.” The ALS, or Aincrad Liberation Squad, one of the larger clearing guilds, had been given the credit since they were the ones who went back and reported the information. Harry and Silica had
instead opted to go into the field dungeon and begin mapping it and taking note of any particular dangers.

They certainly accomplished the latter, given all the traps they found, accidentally triggered, and barely avoided. Add in mobs who were the usual two or three levels more powerful than outside the dungeon and it ended up being an interesting experience, to put it mildly.

Harry proceeded to tell Klein and his friends about the field dungeon, where traps had been found, what kind they were, and what he and Silica had learned about the mobs. While the two of them hadn’t mapped it all out, they had still managed to explore a fair bit of it when they decided to head back to town.

“So, are any of the traps dangerous, as in potentially lethal?” Klein asked.

Harry shook his head. “Not if you take proper precautions.” He replied. “The only ones we found that can kill you are the ones that poison you. Still, some of the other effects are not ones you want to be under when you run into a group of mobs.” He grimaced. “Poison can be outlasted if your health is high enough, and countered with healing potions or an antidote crystal; paralysis and blindness are different matters entirely. Fortunately, Silica and I didn’t run into many that caused those, and thankfully we didn’t find any that cause bleeding.”

Klein sighed in relief at the last bit. Paralysis and blindness were potentially deadly in a fight, but manageable with a party so long as enough people didn’t get affected. Both could be waited out and didn’t stack. Bleeding on the other hand, could quickly become deadly. While they imposed a DoT that was thankfully brief, the bleeding was different from poison in the fact that the the DoT stacked, meaning that the damage done increased, as well as resetting the counter, each extra time it was applied while it was active.

Enough stacks of bleeding, and no amount of potions used can heal enough of the damage done fast enough, forcing the player to use the far more expensive healing crystals. Considering that a “cheap” healing crystal which could flash heal half of a player’s health cost about fifty thousand col at a shop, most players only had one or two at best, and most gained those crystals from chests.

Klein looked at Harry and Silica. “You know,” he said. “Since you two have been there before, you could come with us. We get a couple of people who’ve been there and know the area, and you guys get some backup.”

Harry looked at Silica and the two seemed to have a silent conversation. Silica nodded to him, and Harry turned his attention back to Klein and his group. “We accept.” He looked at Klein’s group. “How do you want to do this?” He asked. “With eight people, we can’t all be in one group.”

Klein grinned. “Why don’t we discuss it over some drinks?”

“You’re buying this round, I bought the last one.”

January 18, 2023 - Aincrad 11th Floor, Dark Forest (Field Dungeon)

“Well, that was stupid of us. Awesome, but stupid.”

Harry gave Klein a weary look as he sank to the ground, the pixels of the Field Boss they ended up having to fight fading away. He glanced at his health and winced when he saw just how low it was.
“I mean, it wasn’t our intention to fight the field boss, just scout it out and all, but who would have known that the entire clearing was trapped to keep those who entered from leaving?” Klein continued. “Man, that was a dick move on Kayaba’s part.”

“Klein…” Harry said, trying to get the man’s attention.

“But still, we took down a field boss with only eight players, is that awesome or what? Still, that was a big ass snake.”

“Klein…”

“And you killing it the way you did? Talk about trying to take the damn thing with you! Good that you survived. How’s your arm by the way?”

Harry gave up and swatted Klein upside the head with his shield, since his sword arm still had the game’s version of a hole going through it. He hoped the blow would reboot the man’s brain, and considering the last twenty minutes of terror and fighting for their lives, he could understand why the man was a little out of it. Also, judging from the man’s pained swearing, the blow worked.

It wasn’t because he was stunned or shocked, or not much at any rate. It was the fact that eight people stumbled on the field boss, triggered a trap that kept them from leaving, and ended up killing it without anyone dying.

All of them had their health in the red, or at least they did when the fight ended. Mind, only Harry and Klein were still in that dangerous zone, and they were on the way to recovering back to yellow like most of the others. It was to be expected; the two of them had basically hit the Field Boss, a giant snake named Braccis Coluber, with everything they had to finish it off. The boss enthusiastically tried to return the favor.

Harry took exception to that, especially when the snake tried to take a bite out of Silica. His rebuttal to the serpent’s attempt at turning her into lunch was to shove his sword through the things mouth and into it’s brain. The irony of having another massive snake bite through his arm while he killed it at the same time was not lost on him. The fact that he knew what the snake’s name meant added an element of embarrassment to the incident, though.

“Silica, you alright?” He asked. When he received no response, he looked over to her.

She was staring at where the boss had been, eyes wide and blank with shock. He noticed Pina on her shoulder, the feathered dragon rubbing her head on Silica’s cheek, but the girl was unresponsive.

Harry wearily got to his feet and walked over to her. When he was in front of her, he got down onto his knees and looked her in the eyes.

“Silica,” he said, placing his hands on her arms to get her attention. “Look at me. I’m all right and the snake is dead, see?”

“H-hadrian?” Silica asked hesitatingly. Harry noticed her eyes focus on him and he smiled. He knew that once she collected herself, she was going to tear into him, and with good reason. For now, though, she needed the reassurance. As it was, he expected the pending explosion to happen soon, and judging from the way he felt her body tense, it would be happening any… His musings on when Silica would collect herself came to an abrupt halt as she pulled one of her arms out of his grip and punched him hard enough in the jaw to send him sprawling.

“You, you, you reckless, stupid, empty-headed, idiot !” She shouted at him. “Do you even realize how close you came to being killed?!” She grabbed him and hauled him back up. “Where do you
keep your brain, in your ass? Because it’s not being kept in your head!” She then began to rant at him, at length.

Harry wisely kept his mouth shut. He knew that anything he said could easily make the situation worse. He looked at Klein and his friends and saw that all of them were very pointedly not looking at them, meaning he would get no help from that front, the traitors.

Wait, what was that last thing she said? Oh, she did not just cast aspersions on his manhood and sexual preferences. Harry began to respond to her rant with choice words of his own, and the two of them began to hurl insults at each other. They did so for a few minutes until a sharp whistle interrupted them.

“Hey, you two, save the the lover’s quarrel and the foreplay for the bedroom!” Klein shouted.

Both of them blinked and looked at Klein. They looked at each other again and nodded. They knew how to respond to this.

“Did he just say that?” Silica asked.

“You mean the part of us saving it for the bedroom, or the hint that we would be doing something else after this?” Harry asked in response.

“Yes.”

“I think he did.” Harry looked at Klein. “Standard response number one, Silica.”

“Gotcha.”

Harry gave Klein a two-fingered salute while Silica flipped him off.

Klein merely grinned at the gestures.

“Um, are we interrupting something?” A voice asked.

Everyone turned their attention to the new voice and saw a crowd of people at the edge of the field. At the front of the group stood the leaders of the ALS and the DDA guilds, Kibaou and Lind, as well as the familiar faces of Asuna and Kirito over to one side. Judging from the size of the group, they had formed a raid to take on the field boss, the one that Harry, Silica, and Klein’s group just killed.

“Here for the field boss?” Harry asked.

Lind nodded. “Yes, you know where it is?”

Klein snorted. “We know where it was.” He replied. “We could have used all of you guys about twenty minutes ago.” He shook his head. “Since you weren’t, we ended up having to fight and kill it. Just the eight of us.”

The entire group of new arrivals looked surprised, and more than a bit doubtful, at Klein’s claim. Understandable really, considering that taking down a field boss usually required at least twenty players.

“You mean eight people killed it?” Lind asked.

Klein nodded. “Yeah,” he replied. “We were hoping to scout it out when we found it. The entire clearing was trapped to keep us from leaving, so we ended up having to fight it.”
Lind just gave them a look. “And none of you thought to use a teleport crystal to get out?” He had a bit of satisfaction as the eight of them blinked and gave reactions from facepalms to rueful and slightly hysterical laughs. Several of them were swearing under their breath. The looks some were giving his own partner's rather creative mutterings made Harry smirk even as Lind dressed them down. It took a bit to get Silica going, but when she did…

“Didn’t think of that, did you?” Lind said when they quieted down.

Harry shrugged. “In our defense, we were a bit busy trying to stay alive for the obvious to sink in” He opened his inventory menu and made some changes. “I’m having one of those crystals on the quick access menu from now on.” He looked at Silica, who did the same with her menu. “Just in case there’s a next time.”

Silica shot him a look. “There better not be,” she told him. “One of that thing’s fangs went right through your arm.” She looked at the arm in question, noting that the wound was almost healed.

“Hey, it worked, didn’t it?” Harry protested. “Hadrian’s method of giant snake slaying; stab a sword through the roof of it’s mouth. It’s a tried, tested, and proven method.” In a quieter voice he muttered in English. “At least this one wasn’t a damn basilisk this time.”

“What was that last bit? I didn’t hear you.”

“Nothing Silica, nothing at all.”

“Tried, tested and proven?” Kibaou asked incredulously. “What idiot would try such a method?”

“Kirito.” Asuna immediately said.

“Harry.” Silica, Klein, Issin and the rest of Klein’s guild said.

“Hey!” Both of them protested. Before they could say anything else, Asuna and Silica shot them both a look, silencing them. The fact that they were both clearly fingering their weapons had nothing at all to do with it. Nothing at all.

“Both of them are whipped, aren’t they?” Kunimitz asked.

“Yup,” Klein replied as the two of them glared at both him and Kunimitz, while the rest of the players present laughed. “Anyway, unless there’s another field boss between here and the labyrinth,” he pointed at the entrance. “Which is right there, by the way, it’s been taken care of.

“Now, if you’ll excuse us, I think we should head back to Taft. I don’t know about Harry, Silica and the rest of the guys, but I’m gonna have what passes for beer in these parts, try to get drunk, and then take a nap, and pretend I didn’t nearly get killed.” He chuckled. “Heh, a hot and relaxing bath seems in order as well.”

Those who were with him mumbled their agreement to that. The group of eight walked out of the clearing, making their way back to the village. It might only be just past noon, but to them, it had already been a tiring day.

Kibaou nudged Lind. “Hey, Lind, you think they actually pulled it off?” He asked.

Lind looked at the field, and then back to the group that was leaving. “It would seem so.” He shook himself and addressed the rest of the raid. “Anyway, the labyrinth is open. We all came here to fight a field boss, but someone beat us to it. Those who want to go in and start mapping, do so. Everyone else, you can go back to whatever you wanted to do.”
He looked back in the direction that group left and considered something. _Those eight bear some watching_. He thought. _It takes skill to take on a field boss with only eight people._

“Schivata,” he said. “Head back to the village and see if The Rat is in the area.” He opened a trade window and sent his subordinate some col. “This should be enough for us to get some information on those eight.”

“Thinking of recruiting them, boss?” Schivata asked, accepting the trade.

“Perhaps,” came the reply. He shrugged. “If they’re as good as it seems, it wouldn’t hurt to at least present them the offer.”


Lind knew what Schivata meant. There weren’t too many of the younger players on the front lines, and he seemed to recall that there was a particularly young pair that was often seen on the same floor as the clearers, exploring and questing. “They might be the ones who scouted the field bosses on the third, seventh and ninth floors.” He said. “Anyway, you have your orders, Schivata. Get some info on them.”

“Understood, boss.”

_Aincrad 11th Floor, Taft_

The group walked into the village from the Dark Forest and made their way to the inn. Klein’s idea of having a drink, or several, taking a bath, and then getting some sleep, if not necessarily in that order, had merit.

Harry already knew that Silica was going to want to take a bath first, given that bathing was her preferred method of relaxing. Also, given the looks she was shooting him, he probably should consider doing so as well. He could tell that she wasn’t done giving him a piece of her mind about what he did, just as he knew that a lot of that anger was from the very real fear that he could have been killed. In some ways, she was like Hermione, such as how she reacted to worrying about him, but was more expressive of the inevitable anger born of it.

He briefly wondered how she and Ron were holding up before focusing back to the present. It didn’t do to think about the real world here; that was something that players quickly realized. The real world was out there, but they couldn’t do anything about it. Better to not think about it and focus on what you could do.

As it was, the two of them were likely to have a talk. Silica didn’t like how Harry was more than willing to risk himself, and he usually took pains to not do anything too dangerous. But as she told Klein and the others the previous night, he had a tendency to find trouble, or for trouble to find him. It was an accusation he would admit had a grain of truth.

He gave Silica a look and saw that she was starting to show the exhaustion that came when the high of surviving something that dangerous wears off. He had a good idea that the others were feeling the same way, even if they weren’t showing it. He was beginning to feel it, now that they were in a safe zone, or at least as safe as it ever got in Aincrad. The perception of safety meant that they were allowed to relax from the constant and necessary wariness.
Hermione had once described it as "ego depletion", the brain carefully doling out the endorphins needed in a panic and then switching to being stingy when it was time to recover. He just knew it left him tired.

Still, it looked like the bath, or any other form of relaxation for that matter, would have to wait.

“Guys,” he said. “I’ll have to pass on the drinks for now. I don’t know about you, but Silica’s about to crash, and to be honest, so am I.” He looked at them. “Honestly, I think you guys should take a nap as well.”

Klein looked at Harry. “Eh, I’m fine, though if the guys want to crash, that’s fine.” He grinned. “Fewer drinks for me to buy.”

Harry looked at Issin. “A hundred col on him crashing after the first drink.” He said.

Issin grinned as Klein sputtered in protest at Harry’s insinuation. “You seem to think that will happen.” He said. “Also, bet accepted.”

They reached the inn and Harry made his way to the stairs that led to the rooms in order to take that nap, Silica following after him. When he reached the room he had taken, he felt a hand on his arm and turned to give Silica a quizzical look.

“What?” She asked. “Why did you put yourself in danger like that? You could have died.”

“Because,” he said. “It could have killed you if I didn’t, and I won’t let that happen.” He looked at her expression. “It’s not your fault, Silica. It was a trap and we all walked into it.”

“If I had been stronger…”

“You’re stronger than you think, Silica.” He interrupted. “We were all caught off guard, trapped, and we fought a field boss. You did your fair share, so don’t sell yourself short.

“Yes, it could have gone better, but it could have gone worse, and there’s no point in dwelling on what might have happened. We will learn from this, we will take precautions, and we do what we can ensure it never happens again.” He paused to gather his thoughts.

“I would not have even survived this long if it wasn’t for you.” He told her. “After today, I think a break is in order, so why don’t we take tomorrow off?”


“Well anyway,” Harry added. “I’m gonna take a short nap.” He turned, opened the door to his room, and walked in.

“Hadrian,” Silica said.

Pausing, Harry turned back.

“I’ll see you at dinner.” She then turned and walked to her room.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief, but he had the feeling that, sooner or later, they were going to have a long conversation about things.
Disalimer: Hey all, JG here again to welcome you to the dungeon I’m crawling through while making sure my beta doesn’t get eaten by a mob. Well, unless he happened to fall asleep in a mob’s nest again, then he’s on his own.

(hears a distant scream of panic)

Don’t worry folks, he’s fine.

...

I think.

Chapter 5 - Prelude to a Wake-up Call.

January 28, 2023 - Aincrad, 15th Floor, Labyrinth

Harry walked beside Silica as the two of them followed the raid towards the room that the floor boss was in. This would be the first floor boss fight they were brought in on, and that was only due to the fact that they had proven themselves on field bosses. Their success with the Fuurinkazan guild against the one on the eleventh floor had boosted their reputation and others wanted to see if they really were skilled, or just lucky.

Harry was more than willing to attribute their success in that fight to luck, but he knew full well that luck only went so far. As it was, they had spent many days fighting mobs and, grinding if he remembered the term right, in order to get to a point where they were strong enough to better their chances of surviving.

It hadn’t required much of a change from their usual habits. A heavier focus towards killing mobs, but that mostly meant that they focused on kill quests, and doing more in one day, than their usual mix. As it was, the two of them had been above the curve for those on the front lines to begin with, and this put them far enough past it to be more than safe against regular mobs.

Even so, the inclusion of him and Silica in fighting the floor boss was not universally accepted. Not due to any lack of skill on their part, but due to their age. Several clearers had expressed their discomfort with allowing them in the group and it had taken some fast talking on the part of several people who had seen them in action, as well as proving themselves on several field bosses, to get the skeptics to grudgingly accept their presence.

Working out where to put the two of them had taken some thinking, until Asuna had volunteered herself and Kirito. The two unaffiliated players often worked on their own, so adding Harry and Silica wouldn’t disrupt the existing groups with having to incorporate two relative unknowns. At the same time, she knew that the two of them worked well together, her periodic encounters with them in the field, as well as updates from Argo, had told her that much. Since she and Kirito often worked as their own team, Lind and Kibaou were willing to let her.
The one ALS member who commented on Asuna playing babysitter in a fight quickly regretted those words after she sent him flying out of the bar they were using to run the planning session.

Harry’s musing on it all ended when they arrived at the door that led to the boss’ room.

“All right then,” the raid leader, Lind, said. “We’re here. Remember the plan we developed.” There were several comments to that, many of them jokingly impolite.

“I wonder, how often do things go as planned,” Harry quietly asked Kirito, who shrugged.

“Rarely,” he quietly replied. “It’s more to get everyone on the same page before the fight anyway. No one really expects it to last for very long.” He snorted. “Beats not having one at all, though.”

Harry groaned. “If that’s supposed to reassure me, it isn’t.” He replied.

Kirito shrugged in response to that. “Just keep alert, watch the boss’ patterns, and you and Silica will be fine.” He smiled. “You two are certainly strong enough for this.”

Harry’s retort was silenced by the sounds of the door to the boss room opening. Positioning himself next to Silica, they followed the raid into the boss room. Glancing out the corner of his eye, he could see Silica’s nervousness, but watched as the time for the coming battle came closer and her expression and posture firmed. He turned his attention forward and watched as the boss revealed itself.

The battle to clear the fifteenth floor of Aincrad had begun.

##

Silica jumped back as she dodged an attack by the boss, switching out with Harry as he quickly dashed in and used the opportunity to land several strikes with his weapon, finishing with a Slant, leaving a large “wound” in the boss’ flank. She watched as he readied her shield for the boss’ retaliatory strike and readied herself to either switch out with him, or grab a healing crystal to patch him up.

They had been fighting the boss for ten minutes so far and had gotten it down to almost half health. So far, things had been going fairly smoothly, with tanks and shield bearers switching out with DPS in a staggered line to keep the attention of the boss, a giant minotaur named Tiberius, Bovis Rex Imperator.

The wide, sweeping attacks it used with a chain were easy enough to deal with. If you had a shield, use the shield to deflect the chain, if you didn’t, jump back and avoid the attack. So far, the tactic was working.

She watched as Pina dove in around the Boss’ head and harassed it before darting out its reach and back to her. She would have to start holding Pina back from doing so, as the boss was beginning to react faster to Pina’s actions and she didn’t want to risk losing her.

“Silica, switch!” Harry called as the boss finished its attack run and she darted in, using the sword skill Fading Edge to strike the boss several times in the leg. She darted back to her partner and watched as he pulled out a healing crystal and used it to top his health off. A shield boosted defense significantly, but unless the block was absolutely perfect, some damage always bled through.

She heard Lind order their group back and they were replaced by a fresh set to keep the boss’ attention and allow those who had been doing so some time to recover.
“Too bad Klein’s not here,” Harry said when she got next to him. “He’d be loving this.”

Silica snorted. “Too bad for him, Hadrian.” She said. She turned her attention to the fight and spied Kirito and Asuna seamlessly working as a team. The two pairs had gotten separated early in the fight when an early series of attacks had scattered the groups across the boss room and ruined whatever plan had been in place. Not that it slowed down the clearers any, they simply adjusted to the change and went back to work on killing the boss.

Regardless of the personalities involved, the frequent arguments, and the competition between various guilds, the clearers were becoming a disciplined fighting force.

Silica watched the boss’ health drop into the red and most of the fighters quickly back away. Experience with field bosses meant that the boss’ attack patterns were about to change, and no one wanted to be caught flat footed. As the boss dropped the chains, it balled a fist and hit one player who had been too slow with a punishing blow, sending the player flying into a cluster of other players.

After that, the battle devolved into a frantic series of darting attacks, desperate dodging and constant movement as any and all sense of order was lost. Fortunately, the boss could only attack in one direction, and the players quickly unleashed as many powerful attacks on it as they could before the boss’ attention turned to them.

Within three more minutes, the boss’s avatar shattered and they saw the message congratulating them for defeating it. She looked over the drops she obtained and and saw that she had received a new piece of armor she would try on later, a sword, some crafting and enhancement materials, and a large amount of col.

She made a note to herself to see if her companion had a use for the sword. Further musings were halted as she heard an argument break out between some players of the ALS and the DDA. Catching Harry’s eye, she gestured to the stairway that led to the next floor and he nodded.

They weren’t members of, or affiliated with, either guild, so they saw no point in watching the drama unfold. The offers they had received to join either guild had been politely, but firmly, turned down a week ago when they made it clear that they wanted to stay out of the faction-based arguments.

February 18, 2023 - Aincrad 22nd Floor, Coral

Harry stretched as he looked over the town from his vantage point from his room in the inn. This floor was unusual in the fact that much of it was a giant safe zone, with a rustic village serving as the main town, but with smaller villages and even several cabins spread across the region giving the floor the air of a rural retreat, a place for players to rest and relax.

The few mobs outside of the large safe zone were not very strong, and information from those exploring the dungeon indicated that it was almost ridiculously easy. Harry had taken one look at the floor and decided to use the time on it to relax, something he hadn’t really allowed himself to do since everything started back in November.

The floor seemed to be designed with that in mind, and Harry was willing to take the opportunity. He had already stated that his intention to sit out the next floor boss fight, and he knew that Silica definitely wanted a few days off, herself.
He couldn’t blame her, and if he were honest with himself, he needed time to just sit back and relax, just as much as she did. That, and he was getting tired of Lind’s constant attempts to get them to pick a side and join a guild. Well, not Lind per se, but some of the smaller guild leaders who were aligned with Lind, as well as a few DDA members, always made time to quietly encourage them to choose.

Kibaou had simply accepted their refusal and left them alone, just telling them that the offer would remain open for the time being if they changed their minds. He was more focused on clearing the game and maintaining the momentum they had.

There was a part of the entire thing that made Harry wonder if it was also being driven by his and Silica’s continued association with Kirito and Asuna. While Kibaou was largely ambivalent towards those two, it was no secret that Lind disliked them both, though his dislike towards Asuna was mostly due to her association with Kirito.

Harry turned his thoughts away from that matter when he heard a knock on the door.

“Hadrian,” Silica’s voice called from the other side. “It’s me. Can I come in?”

Harry walked over to the door and opened it. He beckoned Silica into the room and watched her take a seat at one of the available chairs. Keeping with the idea of them being on break, she had forgone her armor, instead settling for a simple light brown skirt, white blouse, dark brown tights, and functional, if fashionable, boots.

Harry’s clothing was of a similar style of what was worn under his armor. Instead of leather, his pants were a dark brown cloth that was similar to, but more comfortable than, canvas, and a white linen shirt. He decided to keep wearing the boots he favored in the field due to their comfort.

Harry walked over to another chair and took a seat facing her. “You know,” he said. “If someone saw us, they might get ideas.”

Silica raised an eyebrow, not rising to the bait. “They’re welcome to them, Hadrian.” She opened her menu and browsed the inventory for a brief moment. “Want something to drink?” She asked.

Harry smiled. “I think I’m the one who should be offering drinks, Silica.” He said with some amusement.

She shrugged. “I know what you prefer and carry, and frankly, it’s not to my taste.” She found what she was looking for and selected it. A bottle materialized and she placed it on the table.

“Something I found that actually isn’t beer, wine, or spirits.” She shrugged. “Some of the patrons downstairs say it’s pretty good, if different.”

Harry nodded and then materialized a couple of cups from his inventory. “Well then, I should provide the cups and pour the drinks, at least.” He placed them on a nearby table and indicated that she should hand the bottle over. After he poured the drink into the cups, he handed one to Silica.

“So, how is it?” Harry asked as she took a sip.

Silica looked at the cup and back to him. “It’s not bad, different, but not bad. I can’t place the taste, though.”

Curious, Harry took a sip from his cup. His eyes widened as he immediately recognized the taste. No
way, he thought before taking another sip. “I know this taste.” He said.

Silica gave him a curious look.

He smiled. “It’s pumpkin, or as close as it can be here.” He took another sip from the cup and put it down. “Anyway, I don’t think you came by here just to share some drinks.”

Silica finished her drink and looked at Harry. “I’m beginning to get worried.”

Harry blinked. “You’re getting worried?” He asked. “About what?”

Silica’s brow furrowed in thought, as if she was trying to figure out how she would say what it was that was worrying her. Shaking her head, she stood reached for the bottle and poured herself another drink. “I can’t really explain it,” she said as she put the bottle down. “It’s just this feeling I have, that something’s about to happen. I mean, we’ve been clearing a floor every few days, and there hasn’t been any real problems, but still, something’s bothering me.”

Harry considered her words carefully. “You mean the fact that things seem to be easy, don’t you?” He asked.

Silica nodded and Harry’s expression became pensive. “Yeah, now that you mention it, it’s been bothering me as well.” And it had been, now that he thought about it. For the last ten floors, they hadn’t been in any particular danger. Some of that is the simple caution that became habit for any player who actually wanted to survive for any length of time, but it was as if the dangers had levelled off to some degree, rather than the gradual increase that had been the norm for the first fifteen or so floors.

“Silica,” he said. “You know more about games than I do, so I have to ask. Is it possible that things are the way they are because things are about to get a lot harder?”

Silica nodded. “In a game, you usually have a point where things do level off for a bit early on. It’s shortly before the game stops….” Her eyes widened. “Hadrian, we’re on the twenty second floor right now, which means we’re almost a quarter of the way through. If this is moving along like a video game does, that would be the floor.”

“For what?” He asked.

“For SAO to stop taking it easy on us.” She replied.

##

That evening, both of them had arranged to meet with a few players, namely Argo, Kirito, Asuna and Klein. They would at least hear them out and not outright dismiss what they were thinking. Or so he hoped.

Now that everyone was gathered together, he waited for everyone’s orders to be set down and decided to get started.

“I’m sure you’re all wondering why I called for this meeting, so I will get to the point,” He said. “Silica and I were discussing a few things earlier today when she made an observation that was worrying.”

“What observation would be worrying? We seem to be doing great so far.” Klein said. “I would say things have been rather easy.”
“And that’s what’s worrying.” Harry countered. “Silica pointed something out to me, something that had been bothering me, though I didn’t know it at the time. Outside of the normal dangers which we are all used to dealing with, things haven’t gotten noticeably more difficult for the last few floors. Add in that we’re only a few floors from what can be considered a major marker towards completion, the twenty-fifth floor. Now, what would be the place for SAO to stop taking it easy on us?”

“You’re right,” Kirito said. “We’re hitting a milestone soon, which means that if SAO is following any game logic, that would be where things start getting difficult.”

“Difficult?” Asuna asked. “What do you mean?”

“He means that if there’s any floor which is going to serve as a wake-up call, it would be the twenty-fifth floor.” Argo replied and then scowled. “Damn it, I should have thought about that. Despite our situation, SAO has still followed the logic of game progression to some degree.” At Asuna’s confused look she continued. “Games, even MMOs, gradually increase in difficulty, meaning that as we progress, the dangers and difficulty remain a challenge. The fact that it hasn’t recently would be a warning to any savvy player that thinks about it, that things are about to get a lot harder.”

“Not necessarily,” Klein countered. “It just means that players had better be on the ball when it happens, or things will go badly for them. In most games, it would serve as a warning to not get overconfident. And, oh, oh shit.”

Kirito scowled. “And we have been simply glad about it, not thinking of what might be coming. Damn.” He looked at Harry. “How did you two realize this?” He asked.

Harry pointed at Silica Silica who gave a wry smile. “Well, you know how we decided to sit out the floor boss?” She asked. When everyone nodded, she continued. “Well, it was more we decided to take a few days and relax. You know, no going out, no risking our lives, things like that. We took the chance to rest.” She paused and took a sip from her drink. “It gave us time to think.”

Argo nodded. “And because you had that time to think, you noticed that things weren’t adding up.” She snorted. “Everyone else has been concerned about clearing the game, and we missed this because we were too focused on that goal. Still, even with this in mind, there is are some questions?” She looked at Harry and Silica

“What if you are wrong about this?” She asked them. “Also, if you are right, how do we get people to listen?”

Harry shrugged. “If we’re wrong, then we are wrong.” He said simply. “It’s better to be warned about something that might happen and prepare for it, than to not be warned and it happen.” He then looked at Argo. “As for getting people to listen, I don’t know. You have any ideas?”

Argo sighed. “Outside of just putting the word out and hoping for the best? Not really.” She looked at all of them. “There are a few quests I can recommend for you guys that should help with the prep work, and I will keep an eye out for any which look promising.” She looked at them all. “The best thing you guys can do is to top off your recovery items, get as well geared as you practicably can, and grind levels.”

Harry and the others nodded, realizing that she was right on that. There were things they could do to maximize their chances of survival, outside of simply waiting the entire thing out. The latter didn’t sit well with them for various reasons, however.
February 24, 2023 - Aincrad 24th Floor, Floor Boss Room

Harry relaxed his guard when the boss shattered in defeat, taking the moment to relax as he observed the players who had participated. He didn’t know, or even care, who got the last attack bonus, and was just glad that another battle had happened without incident.

In the week since he and Silica had their meeting with Kirito and the others, they had hashed out rough plan after rough plan for preparation for the possibility of the coming floor to be significantly more dangerous than others were expecting. Outside of some furious grinding, and checking, modifying, and selecting skills that might or might not be needed, there wasn’t much they could otherwise do. They all made sure that their gear was as good as they could make it, they made sure that their inventories had items for as many situations they could think of, and they puzzled over the possible ways things could go.

They did agree that Argo should put the word out that some players had noticed something and were worried that some video game cliches might be played straight. Namely, the inevitable difficulty spike. While it wasn’t outright acknowledged, there was a noticed increase in players double checking their builds, their gear, and topping off their inventories. They hadn’t outright dismissed the possibility, though the fact that nearly a week had passed meant that any sense of urgency was already fading.

He was glad he had gone out on that one quest on the twenty-third floor that Argo recommended a few days ago, though. That particular item, while having no combat use, could come in handy, given what it is used for.

He looked at Silica and gestured toward the stairs which would lead to the next floor, where Kirito and Asuna were already waiting. She nodded and followed him to the pair and they looked at each other.

“Well, this is it.” Kirito said. “Let’s hope we’re wrong.”

The four of them shared a grim nod and walked up the stairs.
Harry took one look at the terrain as they finished their climb up the stairs that led to the twenty-fifth floor of Aincrad, and was not reassured by what he saw. The narrow canyons and rough ground did not make for a comforting sight. Just from their current location, he could see half a dozen places where mobs could ambush them.

“Well,” he heard Silica say. “This is giving me a bad feeling.” She looked at Harry. “So, which path do we take?” She asked.

That was a good question. From their position, they could make out three paths which likely headed in the same direction as where the floor’s central town, and by extension the teleport plaza, would likely be.

The conversation went on, but Harry only had half a mind on it. He was browsing his inventory.

“Found it!” He selected an item and held up a small sphere. “Don’t know if this will work, but it’s worth a shot.”

Kirito looked it over and his eyes widened. “Wait, you found a Mapping Sphere?” He asked in surprise. “Where did you get that?”

“Quest reward,” Harry said. “Got it two floors ago on a quest Argo found and recommended to me.” He snorted. “She was pretty jealous when she found out what I got.” He fiddled with it for a couple of seconds and got it to work. “All right, this thing won’t map the entire floor, but we have a choice of using it to extend our mapping range to about a hundred meters out for the next hour, or we can get a map of the local area in one shot.” He looked at them. “Any preferences?”

Asuna and Kirito looked at each other for a second and then back to Harry. “I would personally prefer the extended mapping range, but we don’t know how dangerous the mobs are, it might take us longer than an hour to get to the town.” Asuna said.

Kirito nodded. “True, but the town can be more than a kilometer out, as well.” He frowned. “It’s a choice where either one would be useful.” He looked at Harry. “It’s up to you.”

Harry looked at Silica, who shrugged. “Kirito has a point, Hadrian, either choice is a good one.”

Harry gave them all a flat look and then shrugged. “One kilometer out it is, then.” He activated the item and made his selection. “I’d rather know what we’re getting into, and know the general area.” He watched as his map updated. “The entire area’s like a maze here.” He sent everyone the map.
data.

Kirito looked it over and nodded. “From what I can see, it looks like the western path leads to the town.” He said, pointing to the indicator that was used to hint at a settlement. He then looked at everyone else. “Shall we?”

Harry nodded and readied his equipment. “Let’s take it carefully, this place is giving me a bad feeling.”

When they reached the town, Stahlhold, a little over an hour later, all four of them were twitchy and nervously looking at everything in their surroundings, keeping an eye out for traps and mob ambushes. They had been ambushed over a dozen times by mobs which were far stronger than normal, and had barely avoided eight pit traps which caused a player to fall into a poisoned pit, three spike traps which caused bleeding, and one rockfall trap that they barely managed to sprint past.

All of them had noted these things in their maps, and then compiled them together to make immediately and freely public as Silica went to activate the teleport gate.

Setting up a public release of information in Aincrad was surprisingly easy, at least if it was for the floor. A player only had to copy the information to a message and post it on the floor’s bulletin, which was located right next to the teleport gate and set whether it would go to players automatically, or if they had to manually select it from the bulletin. There was even an option to set it to broadcast the information to players.

Harry had set it to automatically update a player’s map data and mob list as soon as they arrived on the floor while Asuna set up the broadcast. Now, it was up to the other players to decide what to do with the information.

"Let's hope they take it seriously," Kirito murmured as Asuna and Harry finished their work.

"It's out of our hands," Harry admitted with a shrug. He looked at Silica and raised an eyebrow. It was bitter, but satisfied.

"Can I get a Moshi Moshi?" Silica asked.

"I beg your pardon?" Harry said, blinking at her. His... experience of Japanese still let some turns of phrase go over his head.

"I'm hoping someone picked-- it's how we greet a caller--"

Harry gave her a confused look. “I get that bit, I know what a phone is but...?”

“It’s because I called it,” she explained carefully. "Really? I think the saying is from English."

Harry’s confused look remained while Kirito and Asuna snorted.

“It means she was right about how this floor would be more dangerous.” Kirito explained. They all saw the comprehension dawn on Harry’s face and watched as he gave a rather bitter chuckle.

“Let’s hope someone did, or they’re going to have a rather nasty surprise when they get here.” Harry said. “Oh, and Silica, it may come from the English language, but I haven’t heard that in England. Thus, it’s not King’s English, but probably American English. Well, I think it is…”

“Is there a difference?” Asuna asked with an innocence that just reeked of falsehood.
February 26, 2023 - Aincrad 25th Floor, Stahlhold

Silica sat down at the pub’s table wearily, with Pina briefly taking wind to land on the table. She looked over at her partner who appeared to be just as tired as she was, given the almost blank look he was giving the menu in front of him. She could sympathize, given how how draining the constant wariness needed to survive the floor was.

The casualties piling up on this floor alone just made it worse.

The last two days had brutally demonstrated to them both just how right she had been, and just how many front liners had not taken the warning as seriously as they should have. For every five players who went out on the first day, one or two not coming back was depressingly common. What made it worse was that all of the deaths they had heard of were from things that could have been avoided if they had been careful from the start.

Most of the players who had walked back into town, or had used expensive teleport crystals to flee dangerous situations, had shell-shocked looks on their faces. The realization that this floor was not like the others had not been a pleasant one for them.

Harry selected something on the menu and closed it, finishing his order. She wagered the choice was made just to get it done. He absently took a bag of peanuts out of his inventory and handed a few to Pina, who happily ate the offered snack. He absently gave the feathered dragon a scratch just behind the ear tufts and turned his attention to his partner.

Silica shook her head at his actions and smiled. “You spoil her, Hadrian, you know that?” She said.

Harry gave her a small, if tired, smile. “And you don’t?” He asked. He put the peanuts away, to Pina’s annoyed protests and sighed.

“What’s wrong?” She asked.

Harry shrugged. “A few things.” He replied. “You were right that this floor is where SAO stopped taking it easy on us, but I didn’t expect it to be like this.” He shook his head. “I expected things to be more difficult, more dangerous, and so on. I didn’t expect the floor to be one giant death trap.”

He then scowled. “But what really gets me is how too many others simply didn’t listen to our warnings. I thought that they had been, but as soon as the floor opened, they didn’t gather information and simply rushed out.”

Silica nodded and looked around the pub. There were quite a few players present, many of them with grim looks on their faces. “Seems it’s sunk in, though.” She observed.

Harry nodded. “I’ll grant you that, but the cost for people to realize this was too high.” The NPC waitress arrived and put a bottle on the table with two goblets, a platter of meats and cheeses, and a loaf of dark bread. Harry thanked her and the NPC bowed and walked away.

Pouring himself a drink, Harry looked at Silica, his expression questioning. Silica nodded and he filled up the other goblet. Handing it to her, he glanced down at the table and saw Pina looking at the
plate with the meat and cheese hungrily. “We better eat before Pina decides to do it for us.” He said.

Silica looked at the feathered dragon and huffed with amusement. “You’re right.” She said. She took some of the meat and cheese from the platter and put it on her plate. “Well, let’s eat.”

Neither of them felt particularly hungry, the last few days having not done their appetites any favors, but they ate the ordered food until they felt that they had eaten enough. By the time they finished, about half of the food had been eaten.

Harry looked at the unfinished platter and shrugged, pushing his plate away. Silica put some more meat on hers and placed it in front of Pina, the feathered dragon happily obliging in eating the offered food.

“So,” Harry said. “Tomorrow, I was thinking on basing us in Feldin, the town closest to where the labyrinth is for the rest of the time we’re on this floor.”

“Any reason?” Silica asked.

Harry shrugged. “The ALS and DDA are pushing ahead, but something about how the two guilds have been interacting is bothering me. Well, more like how Kibaou and Lind are interacting with each other, or not interacting with each other as it were.”

Silica raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean by that?”

Harry frowned. “We know that the two of them don’t get along. Kibaou wants to get everyone out of this game as quickly as possible. He’s a bit of a glory hound, but he means well. Lind, on the other hand....”

Silica nodded. It was a concern. For all of his faults, Kibaou meant well and was more willing to work with and help unaffiliated players. He was rash and a bit on the reckless side, but many players felt that he was preferable to Lind, who acted like an elitist gamer at the best of times.

Lind also knew what to say and do in order to provoke Kibaou, and she had her suspicions that Lind was soon likely to attempt that here with the intention of discrediting Kibaou. However, such a thing was likely to get people killed. Both of them were of the thought that Lind probably didn’t even consider that an issue, or simply didn’t care. Not necessarily malicious, but that would be cold comfort to those hurt or killed in the process. Silica was given to wonder if he didn’t get the idea that death here was real, or if he just couldn’t accept how severe the consequence of his actions were.

“Let’s not think of that right now. I don’t want to get indigestion.” Silica said. Not that we can really get indigestion here, she thought.

Harry nodded and changed the subject.

February 27, 2023 - Aincrad 25th Floor - Path to Feldin

Harry swatted the mob’s attack away with his shield and followed up with the Sword Skill, Slant, killing the mob and damaging its partner in the process. He quickly shifted his footing to block the follow-on attack and saw Silica sprint behind the mob and use a sword skill to stab it three times in the back, a Tri Pierce, if he remembered.
The moment the mob’s attention shifted to Silica, Harry set his shield and used it as a ram as he dashed into the mob. He must have hit it fairly hard, as he saw the mob, some sort of bipedal mountain lion, stagger and lose its footing. He didn’t waste any time as he used the opportunity to stab the thing three times in rapid succession.

“Silica, switch!” He called as he leapt back.

Silica darted in, her dagger, already glowing with a sword skill. Stabbing the mob twice, it died and shattered. Harry was about to say something when a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention.

“Silica, move!” He shouted as he readied his shield. He saw Silica jump out of the way of the mob’s ambush and charged in to grab its attention. It didn’t take them long to kill the mob and he took a quick look around their immediate area. Not seeing any immediate threats, he sheathed his sword and looked at Silica.

“Want to get to the town before more of their friends show up?” He asked.

“Yeah, let’s do that.” Silica said. She then noticed something and grinned. “Awesome! I levelled up!”

Harry grinned. “Nice, that makes you level thirty-six now, doesn’t it?”

She nodded cheerfully and quickly brought up the window to see the changes to her stats and do some allocations. Thirty seconds later, she closed the window and looked at him. “Well, let’s get to Feldin.”

Harry nodded and the two continued on their way to the town.

By the time they reached Feldin an hour later, they had fought off ten more ambushes by those bipedal cat mobs and avoided six pit traps. Compared to their experiences when they first came to the floor, it was almost easy in a way, not that they would tell other players that. Of course, it could simply be that they had gotten used to the nature of the floor.

Harry noticed a familiar figure off in an alley and pointed the person out to Silica.

“I see her, definitely Argo.” She replied. “I’ll head to the inn and get a room, two if the availability and price is good. Go ahead and get some info from her.”

Harry nodded and carefully headed to the alley.

“Thought you two would be here sooner,” she said as he approached.

Harry shrugged. “We decided to play it carefully, and the quests around Stahlhold were good and a challenge.” He replied. “This floor is definitely living up to what we were concerned about.”

“You two seem to be doing fine,” Argo replied. At Harry’s look she grinned. “I kept track of you two. Kii-bou and Aa-chan can take care of themselves, but they’re doing fine right now in case you’re wondering.”

Harry snorted. “I would expect no less from those two.” he said with a smile. “Have you seen them in action? They’re on a whole different level. Anyway, you wouldn’t have been so obvious that Silica and I could spot you if you didn’t have something to say. So, how much will it cost?”

Harry’s smile fell rather quickly as rather than the expected grin, Argo gave him a serious look. “It’s
free of charge this time.” She said. She pulled him deeper into the alley. “Good, we’re out of sight, now.”

“That serious?” Harry asked.

Arigo nodded. “In a way, it is.” She frowned. “I just found out that one of the brokers in my network’s been compromised, and he’s been spreading some dodgy information.”

Harry blinked. “Wait, compromised?” he asked. “And what do you mean by dodgy information?”

“I mean that, that asshat Lind managed to bribe or blackmail one of my informants into spreading information that, while not outright false, is missing some key bits, and he was knowingly passing it as accurate information.” Arigo replied with a slight growl to her voice.

Harry winced. While incomplete information wasn’t as bad as false information, it was still bad information. “Well, damn, that’s not good.” He looked at Arigo. “You confirmed it?” He asked.

Arigo’s nodded. “Yeah,” she replied. “His conscience couldn’t take it and he came clean to me after a while. Not before he spread some of that info, but he did come clean to me.”

Harry frowned. “Who else have you told?” he asked.

Arigo sighed. “You’re the first one I could actually get directly,” she replied. “Others I would tell aren’t around, and I just found this out less than twenty minutes ago. I already sent them messages, but I don’t know if they read them.”

Harry scowled. “Not good, not good at all. What was the bad information, and who was- wait, don’t tell me.”

"Didn't think I'd have to," Arigo told him and Harry’s scowl deepened.

“Damn it, Lind.” he growled. “What part of death is real don’t you get?” He began to pace in the limited space of the alley. “I know that he and Kibaou don’t get along and only work together in boss battles because they have to, but this is intentionally trying to get him killed.”

“I don’t think Lind sees it that way,” Arigo drawled.

“Doesn’t change the fact that it is what the result is likely to be.” Harry replied sharply. “Even if Kibaou survives this, others probably won’t. Damn it. At least tell me that Kibaou hasn’t headed off on this info yet.”

“I could, but that would be a lie. He left about forty minutes ago with about forty or so players. They were given information on the boss, but that information is incomplete about the boss’ attack patterns and the fact that it spawns adds at various intervals.”

“Shit.” He began to move out of the alley. “Arigo, keep messaging Kirito and the others, let them know what has been happening. Hopefully I can catch up to him in time.”

“And if you can’t?” she asked.

“Then we try our damnedest to make sure a raid doesn’t become a massacre,” Harry snapped back. He needed to catch up to Silica and hope enough players were nearby so that they could get enough people together for a rescue if that was necessary. He made to leave the alley when Argo called after him.
“Don’t get killed, Harry.” She said.

Harry turned back and smiled grimly. “I don’t intend to.” He replied as he walked out of the alley.

Fortunately, it took him only ten minutes to gather enough players to make for a raid sufficient to simply bowl over any opposition they might run into and gather them at the edge of town. Argo’s reputation was so solid, many players had rallied to the cause of rescue on their own. Harry just started rounding up groups of players. He sent Silica to a nearby shop to max out on recovery items, and saw several others heading that way as well.

Good, chances were they would need such, and better to have recovery items and not need them anyway.

He spied Kirito and Asuna coming from different directions and waved them over. “You got Argo’s message?” he asked them.

“I made my way here as fast as I could when I got it.” Kirito said. Asuna nodded in confirmation that she did the same.

“Good,” Harry said. “We’ve got just about enough people to pull Kibaou’s arse out of the situation he’s about to land himself in if we get there in time, I’ll explain the situation once we get everyone together.” He sent out a party request to both of them and they accepted.

He looked around and saw that everyone else had grouped up and gestured for the group leaders to come to him. He was reassured by some familiar faces, especially with Klein showing up.

“Ok, here’s the situation.” He said. “You all got the message from Argo that Kibaou’s about to bite off more than he can chew and he’s taking forty others into the same situation?” At their nods he continued. “From what I’ve been told by her, he’s being set up. The one who gave him the info that sent him out towards the boss room had been bribed or blackmailed into giving him unreliable information.” He looked at them all. “Three guesses as to who’s actually behind this, and the first two don’t count.”

“Are you sure that it was-” One of the party leaders began to ask.

“Argo confirmed it,” Harry interrupted. “When it comes to information, she doesn’t lie. If she's hoodwinked, she tells you. If she isn't sure, she either doesn't sell it or makes sure you know it.”

The party leader nodded, accepting that. Argo’s integrity was well as well known as her prices were.

“Well, shit.” Klein said. “What is he playing at?”

Harry shrugged. “I have an idea, but that is for later, Klein.” He looked around. “We need to get to the dungeon quickly and to the boss room.”

“Kid,” another party leader said, Grimlock, if he recalled. “Kibaou has an hour on us, the chances we have in catching up in time-”

“I got something that should help.” Klein interrupted. “I was saving it for a rainy day, but now is as good a time as any.” He opened his menu and selected something from his inventory. The second it materialized, everyone’s eyes widened.

“No way.” Someone said.

“Is that?” Can a question from another.

Klein grinned. “Lucky as hell drop two weeks ago.”

Harry’s gave a grim smile. “Well, that means that this just became doable. First few rounds are on me if we survive this, Klein.” He again looked at everyone. “Now, we need to come up with a plan.”

**Aincrad 25th Floor - Labyrinth**

Harry watched as everyone had walked through the shimmer that was the effect of a corridor crystal a fair distance from the entrance to the boss room. A quick glance to it showed that it was open and he could clearly hear the sounds of fighting, the screams of players, and the roars of the boss inside it.

“Damn,” he heard Kirito mutter. “We didn’t get here soon enough to stop this.”

Harry nodded. “It was a long shot anyway,” he said resignedly. He looked at the assembled players. “All right, teams one through eight, we’re going in. Teams nine and ten, get healing items ready and stay near the entrance. Our job here is to get Kibaou and his raid out of here, killing the boss is secondary.” He gave a grim smile. “Of course, we all know how plans and boss fights go together.”

There was a smattering of harsh laughter from that last sentence. Oh yes, they knew just how well plans went when dealing with a boss mob.

“Party leaders, you know what to do.” Harry said and turned towards the boss room. “Let’s go!”

The next thirty minutes would be remembered as one of the most chaotic boss fights the players would have for a long time, but the initial planning, the added preparation of many players over the previous week or so, and the quick arrival had prevented a massacre.

Still, dealing with a giant with two heads, as well as the additional mobs which came in at regular intervals, while trying to drag out, cajole, or simply throw to back, Kibaou’s group, was far from what anyone would call fun. Exciting and thrilling? Yes. Fun? Not a chance.

They couldn’t save everyone, and even the raid that came to the rescue would suffer a few casualties. However, they had not only managed to save the majority of Kibaou’s raid, but a lucky observation by one of the teams ordered to stay back for support had noted the boss’ weaknesses, had allowed them to kill the boss in the process and clear the floor.

Two moments stood out to many; many would insist they happened at the same time, but only the server timecodes could tell that tale.

Many recalled a mad charge by Silica and Kirito, the Black Swordsman covering the Dragon Princess and her companion as the feathered serpent became an angel of mercy, dropping healing items on teams caught out of their depth.

Silica was remembered, her dagger in one hand, healing items ready to be tossed to her peanut loving familiar in the other. Kirito's sword and vicious strikes making the boss' add-in mobs shatter.

Others would recount the Lightning Flash and the Young Knight slowly closing in on the boss mob’s core weakness. In fact, this was often the first event survivors of SAO would point to when someone got on a 'Kirito did the real work' rant.
Harridan cleared the way for Asuna's Sword Arts with sword and shield, until it was Harry directing the team covering the backs of the assault force from the add-ins while Asuna led that assault, showing all the speed and grace that earned her her title, down to co-ordinating the three pronged strike from herself, Kibaou, and Klein that shattered the giant.

When later, some tried to suggest to Klein it was some kind of moment of glory for him, he'd shake his head. The consummate gamer-bro grew sober.

"It was a moment that reminded us that we survived Aincrad," he'd say.

##

Harry looked wearily at the message congratulating them for killing the boss. Despite the victory, despite managing to pull off the rescue, he felt no elation, just relief. Relief at still being alive on what would have likely been a fool’s errand. Relief that most of those who went with him survived. Relief that they had been in time to save who they could.

As it was, twelve of Kibaou’s raid had been killed, and their own raid had lost five, making seventeen dead. Seventeen people died because of one player’s desire. Seventeen players died because another player had been manipulated.

He looked at the missing icons representing players that died:

Grimlock, who died pushing his wife out of the way of an attack. Stabbed the mob that got him and took it with him.

Turam, he recalled the short but stout man covering his party and taking several fatal hits from the boss. They’d shared a drink in Stahlhold a few nights ago...

Andy Hill, who charged a group of add-ins when his group was caught flat footed, taking them all with him, screaming his defiance the entire time.

The Shepherd, got blindsided by the boss when she was engaging add-ins. Didn’t stop her from striking back and leaving her sword stuck in it, though, or using her thrown off body to slam an add-in into a wall.

Heron Gull, who had exulted in the freedom from her MS that virtual reality had given her. She had screamed at the add-ins to come get her, and damned if the AI hadn’t aggroed her instead of the injured players Silica was trying to deliver aid to. She died smiling.

“Hadrian,” he heard Silica say from nearby. “We’ve got some company.”

He turned and faced the entrance to the room, having a good idea of who was arriving. He was being proven right as a familiar figure walked into the room with a fair number of others behind him.

“Of course he would show up.” Harry said. He looked at Silica. “Well, let’s get to the others.”

##

Lind blinked at the sight of so many players in the boss room, surprised that so many had reached here, especially since he knew that Kibaou hadn’t had this many with him when he left Feldin. For a brief moment, he wondered if Kibaou had picked them up along the way before dismissing it. He saw several who had been in Feldin when he, himself, had left, so that couldn’t be it.

But still, how did they get here before him?
He banished the thought and looked around. He could see the message congratulating players for killing the boss. *That is a problem*, he thought. *If they killed the boss even with the info I had spread around, then they are better players than I thought.*

He spied several players gathered around and saw a familiar pair walk toward that group. From the looks the two were being given, it seems that one of them was in charge of this raid. Good, kids were easy to deal with in his mind.

He completely missed the dark looks many players were giving him, as well as the carefully blank ones the remaining had. Those with him, however, did not.

“Boss,” Schivata said. “I think we should leave.”

He looked at Schivata and saw the nervous look on his second in command’s face. He looked around the room and saw what the others did. *Oh, he thought. Something’s got them in a mood. Is it because I was late to the party, as it were?*

“No yet, Schivata.” he replied. “No yet. Let’s see what all of this is about.”

He gestured for the rest of his group to stay behind and the two of them walked to the cluster of players he had spied earlier. As he passed many other players, he heard some dark muttering, but ignored it.

In his eyes, it wasn’t like he did anything wrong. If others disagreed with him, they didn’t matter anyway.

Unfortunately for him, others would have some rather pointed things to say to him about that.

**Aincrad, GM Administration Area**

Akihiko Kayaba had received the notice of the floor’s completion and had taken his leave from the guild he had begun building to take a look at things, as well as look at the playback data. The twenty-fifth floor had been intended to be a challenge, but the difficulty of the floor, and the resulting casualties had been higher than he had intended.

Not so significantly higher that the casualties had been decimating to those who had taken the initial initiative to clear Aincrad, but high enough that the resulting shock would likely have a negative impact on the players. Still, the effect could have been worse, and he remembered the notice that went out a little over a week ago, meaning some players had at least predicted it.

Now he watched the aftermath of the battle, with the battle’s playback in a second window, and noted that one of the guild leaders amongst that group was being confronted by a number of angry players. *Ah Lind,* he thought. *So much potential, but you are so willfully blind, as well.*

He watched as one female player walked up to him slapped him hard enough to send him sprawling.

“—husband died because of you, you son of a bitch!” The woman shouted at him. He glanced at the information stream and saw her name: Griselda.

Well, things looked to be getting interesting.
Asuna quickly moved over to Griselda and put a hand on her arm as the woman began reaching for her sword. She could understand Griselda’s very justifiable anger, but she needed to head this off quickly, or things would get violent.

“Griselda,” Asuna said. “Enough.”

“But-”

“Enough,” Asuna said more firmly. “As satisfying as stabbing him would be, it won’t change anything.” She gave Lind a cold look. “I suggest you take the hint and leave, Lind.”

Lind glared at both of them. “It’s not my fault you all came here and some of you died.” he said harshly. “None of you had to come here, so don’t pin any of the blame on me.”

“And yet,” Harry interjected as he stepped toward them. “We wouldn’t have even thought to come here and do a rescue in the first place, if you hadn’t somehow gotten one of Argo’s informants to spread bad information.”

Lind turned to glare at him.

Harry simply looked at him coldly. “You really shouldn’t have used someone in Argo’s network for this, Lind. She found out, and she made sure to pass the information on.” He leaned in. “And sadly, I’ve dealt with your type in real life. I’ve seen what happens when your sort of person is allowed to get away with this, this bullshit. Now that I know what you’ll sink to, now that Argo knows, now that everyone here knows, everyone will know. And do you know what that means, Lind?”

"I'm one of the best--" Lind began coolly.

"It means from now on, painted on you, will be a huge sign," Harry said with a cold, satisfied smile. "It will say, 'I nearly caused SAO's second biggest massacre because I'm a jealous wanker.' And it's going to dog you, and every fool that sides with you. All because you decided to treat this as a game."

“It’s not like your hands are clean, either.” Lind protested.

“No,” Harry admitted calmly. “They’re not. Of all the people who followed me, five of them are dead, and I take responsibility for that. And that is the main difference between us, I take responsibility.” He turned away from Lind and began walking away. “I’m done here.”

Harry’s walk stopped when everyone heard a bitter laugh. They all turned their attention to the source of the laughter and saw Kibaou, who had been silent since the boss was defeated, step forward.

“You know,” he said. “It says a lot about us adults when a kid is more of an adult than we are.” He looked at Harry. “I was being a damn glory hound, and look what it got me. Twelve of my guild members killed, five others killed in getting us out of this, and for what purpose? So I could have the glory of clearing a floor?” He laughed bitterly again. “I played right into Lind’s hands with this one.”

He looked at everyone present. “I’m going to need some time from the front lines after this, so I think
I’ll go to the lower floors and talk to those players who are following after us. Maybe I can teach them not to make the same mistakes I did.”

Harry gave a grim smile. “Maybe they won’t have to learn the same lessons we did the hard way.” He nodded to Kibaou. “Still, that’s for later. I’m heading up to the next floor to activate the teleport gate.” He looked around and noticed someone was missing. “Well, if Kirito hasn’t already done so.”

A number of players laughed and began leaving the boss room. Lind and his group were left behind

Schivata looked at their guild master. Lind's face went from blank, to an attempt at the calculating mein he sometimes had to what looked to be stunned (but the boss was never stunned) to a scowl.

A scowl that was directed at the retreating back of Hadrian.

Oh hell, Schivata thought. Because while he'd never voice the observation to Lind, he knew someone had replaced Kibaou at the top of Lind's 'obstacle' list.

The boss wasn't going to forget this.

This... this might have just been putting out fires with gasoline, Schivata thought to himself. And that thought made all thoughts of what was to come lose a lot of the glory he'd felt when he'd joined Lind.

Because Lind was back to calculating, now. And while his guild leader was thinking, he was thinking darkly.

This is going to be a fucking firestorm when it all goes up.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter kind of wrote itself in some respects. I love it when that happens, as it makes my writing job easier. Can't expect that to consistently last, though. Anyway, following this will be some outside world perspectives and a breather period for the characters before the main thrust of the next arc begins.
Views from the Outside World

Chapter Notes

Some views from the outside world.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mystic Knight Online - Views From the Outside World

November 6, 2022 - Nerima, Ayano Residence

It was night as Tetsuhiko Ayano held his wife, Sumire, and watched the paramedics load his daughter Keiko, into an ambulance to take her to a local hospital to wait until she could be transferred to an appropriate facility for longer term care. What had been intended for his daughter to have some fun with and to make more friends, she had a gift for that apparently, had turned into a nightmare for his family.

As it was, he currently had no knowledge of what she was dealing with in there. The word on how to access the Nerve Gear from a computer had reached them shortly before the ambulance arrived, robbing him and his wife of any chance at seeing how their daughter was doing.

Surprisingly simple, but he was a professional chemist with a PhD. in Chemistry, not an IT person. He could use a computer, he needed to for his work, but that was about it. Still, his family could take advantage of that when Keiko was finally in a proper facility. And then he could find out how she was doing, and hopefully reassure himself.

There were too many unknowns, but he was certain of one thing. If anyone willingly hurt his daughter and survived SAO, that person better hope that he didn’t find out who he or she was, or that person would find out why not all the scars on his hands were from handling mistakes with volatile chemicals.

And then, the rest of the family would get involved. His in-laws alone would want their own pound of flesh, and they could get frighteningly creative in what they could do to a human body. They wouldn’t kill the person, but the person would certainly wish otherwise.

As he watched the ambulance drive off, he looked at his distraught wife and gently guided her back into the house. Sitting her down, he watched as her distress faded, to be replaced by a cold fury. She pulled out her cell phone and dialed a number.

“Hello, father,” she said as soon as the call connected. “Something’s happened, and I need to tell you.” She then explained the situation. “Also, if you can get a hold of Aunt Nabiki- oh, you’re thinking the same thing. Yes, we’ll be there. Bye.”

She looked at Tetsuhiko. “They want us at the Saotome-Tendo Dojo as soon as possible, dear.” She said.
Tetsuhiko nodded. “Then let’s go.” he replied.

**November 10, 2022 - Wainwright Compound, Unknown Location**

Richard kept his nervousness under control as he waited to be called into the conference room to face his fate. He had been summoned back here to explain himself and he had provided all the relevant information, hiding nothing, and offering no excuses.

A minor had been put into danger because of his own actions, which was something the family had forbid long enough ago to be part of their culture. While it was occasionally unavoidable, it took circumstances completely out of their control and unforeseeable to be forgivable.

He could hope that such would apply in this case. He liked living and being in one piece, but would accept any punishment given. Being the patriarch’s grandson would not help him, but his accepting full responsibility for everything should deflect things from his team, at least.

He saw the door open and one of the family’s enforcers walked out and beckoned him in. It was time for him to face the music.

A few minutes after the door closed, his screams of pain were heard.

##

He groaned as he did a quick mental check of himself. He felt pain, which meant he was still alive. All his limbs seemed to be there, since he could feel them, which also meant that he wasn’t one of those unfortunates who had been beaten or cursed into paralysis. That was good, though damn it all, what was done to him had hurt.

“Richard, stand as soon as you are able to,” he heard the voice of the family patriarch.

Richard complied to the best of his ability. As soon as able to basically meant do it immediately unless you were too injured to do so, which he wasn’t. He quickly stifled any further groans as he got to his feet. It would not do to show weakness right now.

He slowly raised his head and looked at the man who had headed the Wainwright family for the last six decades, taking care to not make any sudden movements and aggravate any injuries he had. Meeting the eyes of the man, who was close to a hundred years old, he saw the cold and emotionless gaze of the family patriarch and mentally braced himself.

“While the situation was unforeseen,” the patriarch said in his cold voice. “You could have delayed things and prevented it. However, you have taken responsibility, and that responsibility will remain with you. So long as they boy lives while he is trapped within this Sword Art Online, further discipline with be stayed. Should he die, however....” He didn’t need to finish that sentence, the consequences were clear to Richard.

“I understand, Patriarch,” Richard said calmly.

“Good,” the man said. “You will return to Japan and take responsibility for the boy’s physical security and safety. We cannot do anything about what happens in Sword Art Online, but we can ensure that his body remains safe and protected. You will also do what you can to investigate things and see if there is a practicable and safe way to extract him, and perhaps the rest trapped in it.”
Richard nodded his understanding.

“Get yourself to our infirmary and get your injuries treated then. You are expected to be in Japan in no more than two days.” The man’s eyes softened. “It’s a bad situation for you Richard, but not a hopeless one. Hopefully this boy is as you assessed him to be.”

Richard smiled wryly. “He strikes me as a survivor, Patriarch.” he replied. “While I doubt he will remain safe in SAO, I do think he will be able to handle what comes.”

“Pray that he does, Richard. Pray that he does.”

November 15, 2022 - Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore’s Office

Albus wearily sat back into his chair and tiredly rubbed his eyes. The last week had been a busy one for him. He had found Harry, only to find that he was too late to bring his student back. Add in that he had to get as much information about Harry’s current situation, his expected long-term care, and everything else, it was a wonder that he even found any time to sleep. As it was, he had just returned from the Ministry after explaining to Cornelius, again, that bringing Harry back to England was impossible at this time.

How that fool became Minister is beyond me, he thought sourly. Oh yes, it was because there was no one better who would take the job. He’s competent as an administrator, true, but that’s about all he’s competent at.

Surprisingly, Lucius had helped in calming the Minister down, which was telling in its own way. Of course, all he, himself, had to do was mention that Harry was under the Wainwright Family’s protection in that regard, and it quieted a lot of the uproar.

It also meant that many who would mean Harry harm would stay their hands, which was a not unwanted benefit. Very few were willing to provoke that family, and with good reason. They might not be as vicious as they had been in the past, but they were still one of the most powerful criminal families in the magical world. Their veneer of legitimacy didn’t change that.

Of course, Lucius being helpful in that regard served to keep any backlash from spilling onto him. Also, if his suspicions were correct, it would also serve to keep the Wainwrights from coming after him. He had no proof, and the Wainwrights certainly weren’t telling, but that was a moot point now.

The Wainwrights had taken responsibility for Harry’s protection and care, and they would not let anyone interfere with that.

He also needed to explain things to Harry’s friends as soon as possible. They were already probably aware of Harry’s situation, or would be soon when the Daily Prophet was delivered in the morning, but he needed to explain things to them. And that didn’t count how Remus Lupin, his Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, was likely to react. Hopefully he wouldn’t react with anger to this.

An angry werewolf, even one who was not at risk of transforming, was not someone anyone wanted to have directing that anger at them. Remus might be mild mannered by nature, but he had seen him physically rip a Death Eater’s arm off and beat him to death with it the last time that man was angry.

Hopefully, the man’s anger would be directed elsewhere.
He also needed to ensure that Harry couldn’t be unwittingly and unwillingly roped into something else magically. That meant making sure that everything with his signature, anything with magical traces that haven’t decayed, and even anything with his blood on it was either preferably destroyed, or put under lock and key. Gringotts would serve for the latter, and for the former, he could take care of.

Fortunately, any magical traces on Harry’s schoolwork would have decayed by now, but best to be safe.

November 16, 2022 - Malfoy Manor

Lucius stepped out of the fireplace that had been set aside for floo communication and travel and made his way directly to his office. Keeping the Minister from doing something foolish and against Albus Dumbledore’s wishes and advice was a rare thing for him, but there were times when that did happen. Rare times, but he was smart and experienced enough to be alert to when those times came so he could act accordingly.

His father had made sure he knew politics, and made sure that he knew when to back down from an ideological stance, or at least back down from openly espousing it. The Malfoys had not become a prominent family by being stupid. Knowing when to agree with one’s opponents, or at least not outright oppose them, was just as important as one’s ideological beliefs, so long as those beliefs didn’t blind you.

The latter was a lesson he learned the hard way when it took him calling in nearly every favor owed to his family, along with judicious and almost ruinous bribery, to stay out of prison twelve years ago. Having spent years serving a madman beforehand only served to make that lesson stay with him. For the most part.

As it stood, keeping Cornelius from doing something foolish with regard to Potter would be fairly simple, especially since Dumbledore warned that the Wainwrights were involved. Most of those who would have used this as an opportunity to kill or harm Potter would not do so now. The Wainwrights were feared for a reason, and if their taking responsibility for Potter’s well-being didn’t serve as a deterrent for some fools, then they deserved what the Wainwrights would do to them.

Of course, there was no shortage of fools in the Ministry. One particular one, Delores Umbridge, had recently risen to being a Senior Undersecretary to the Office of the Minister of Magic, and was showing signs of letting that position go to her head. While a thoroughly unpleasant woman, she had been a useful ally at times, but she was soon likely to become a liability. She had a tendency of not considering that the consequences of her actions could come back and bite her like an angry dragon, high position in the Ministry or not. She also didn’t take into consideration just how many people despised her, if she was even aware of it for that matter.

He reached into his desk and pulled out a lockbox. Tapping it with his wand in a specific pattern, he opened it. His grandfather had paid good money for this particular item, which required the person keyed to it to be of sound mind, sound magic, and not under any control, to open it. Otherwise its contents would be destroyed.

He reached in and pulled out a bound stack of parchment. It was time for him to do some research on some people and see how he could influence them to not act in a way he didn’t want them to. Or at least find out any information he could use against them to have them removed from the equation.
Hermione gave the post-owl some sausage from her plate as she took the parcel it had delivered. Her family had found a muggle-born who lived not too far a distance from her home and had made an arrangement with her to make use of her post-owl to maintain correspondence with Hogwarts. While her parents didn’t often make use of it, it had been convenient for this purpose.

She needed to get as much information on Sword Art Online, the Nerve Gear, and everything involved with it as she practicably could. She had written to her parents last week, explaining the situation with Harry as far as the Headmaster and the *Prophet* would explain, and asked them to find out what they could.

She was honestly surprised that they had responded so quickly, given how busy their schedules were.

Opening, the parcel, she saw several printouts and on top of them, a letter. She picked the letter up first, and read it.

*Hermione,*

*While it is good to hear from you this early in the school year, I wish it was under better circumstances. I hope your friend, Harry, makes it out of this okay. Your father and I have done some research on this Sword Art Online, the incident that has arisen from it, and we have sent what we could. Many of the articles were in Japanese, as there aren’t many sources from outside Japan, and we had to sort through a number of them, run them through an online translation program, and make our best guess.*

*We have included printouts of those articles, both the ones written in English, the ones we had translated from Japanese, and the original Japanese articles. We included the Japanese articles in the case someone with the same special talents as you can provide a better translation, as translations run through a translation program are, at best, only good at providing a general outline. You will understand when you read them.*

*Still, your father and I would like to hear from you more often, so please, write back.*

*Love,*

*Mum*

She sighed at that last sentence, but could understand where her mother was coming from. She had initially written her parents every week when she had arrived in Hogwarts until the excitement of being in a school for magic had died down. Since then, outside of her returning home for break, her parents were lucky to get any correspondence from her on a monthly basis. Less so now, with her class load, which her parents would not be happy about if they realized just how she was making it.

Her parents were logical people, and her means of meeting her class load was illogical, and foolish if she were to be honest, even by the standards of wizards and witches. She was wondering if the reason she was allowed to even attempt something like this was for Professor McGonagall to make a point to her.

She put that out of her mind and reached into the parcel and pulled out a sheet of paper, a printout of
“What you looking at, Hermione?” Ron asked as he sat down at the table.

“I asked my parents to find out what they could in the muggle world about what happened to Harry.” She replied. “Since it’s a muggle device, they would have a better chance.”

Ron nodded, but she could see that he really didn’t understand. He looked at the parcel and into it and saw the papers. He shot her a questioning look, and she nodded. He reached in and picked up one of the sheets.

He looked at it in confusion for a moment and put it down. “If that was written in English, it was written worse than my essays.” He said.

Hermione picked it up and looked it over. She had to admit, he was right on that. “It must have been one of the ones my parents ran through a translation program,” she said. “Muggles have ways to translate things from other languages without having to go through the painstaking process themselves, but well....”

“Doesn’t do too much of a good job of it, got you.” Ron finished.

“Depends on the one used.” Hermione told him. “My parents probably used a free one, so the quality is more suspect.” She looked at it more closely. “Hmm, I can get the general idea of what it says, though.” She reached into the parcel and pulled out several more sheets of paper. She gave them a quick look and handed one to Ron.

“This one seems to have actually been written in proper English,” she said. “Take a look for me.”

Ron did. He read it over and put it down. “Still don’t get most of it, but that was easier to read.” he said with a shrug. “Seems like Harry’s stuck in some kind of illusion or something. How did the muggles manage that?”

Hermione thought over what he said. The first bit was close enough, really. Not fully true, but she could see how someone unfamiliar with the muggle world could reach that conclusion. As for the second bit...

“I don’t know.” She admitted to Ron’s surprise.

December 4, 2022 - Nakano General Hospital, Suginami, Tokyo

Selene Carlisle looked at the screen which was showing Harry’s activities in SAO while keeping a general eye out on her surroundings. Since Richard had returned to Japan, they had begun a process of maintaining both a discrete level of security around Harry Potter, and having one person in his room whenever practicable.

Frankly, having Harry in such a public hospital was not ideal, but by the time they could have made arrangements, any guarantee that they could get Harry to a more secure place that they could ward more thoroughly had past and it became too risky to chance. So, they made do with the situation. The wards were weaker and set mostly to alert them, anything more specifically designed for protection would have been noticed by the hospital staff.
At the same time, Harry’s adventures had become the talk of the detail, all of whom were both interested and exasperated by them. Interested in the fact that the boy rose to the occasion and didn’t get paralyzed by the situation. Exasperated by the fact that he wasn’t *staying* in a safe area, his comments about not doing something meaning that Kayaba won, aside.

Oh, he didn’t take too many risks, but even then, one didn’t have to take many risks for the dangers to be apparent, as his experiences a few days ago had proven. That had been nerve wracking for them, watching him and Silica carefully make their way out of a dungeon without healing items, and the number of close calls they had.

Nothing too serious, but they all thought that he was cutting things finely at times.

She would admit, occasional recklessness aside, he had a fairly good head on his shoulders. He knew when he stepped in it deep, and he got a lot more cautious the second it happened. He also seemed to learn from those incidents.

Now if only the kid wouldn’t keep going out and risking his life on a near daily basis.

“And how is Mr. Potter doing today, Ms. Carlisle?” Came the voice from her team leader, Richard.

She turned and faced him. “About the same, as always, boss.” She replied. “Wake up, get a meal, plan what to do that day, and then head out.” She shrugged. “He’s avoiding the labyrinth right now, apparently a group went in to take out the floor boss, so he and Silica are staying out of their way, apparently.”

Richard nodded and turned to the screen. “I see you have the audio muted,” he observed. “It’s no matter, I can imagine that their listening to their usual chatter on a daily basis can get boring and mundane after a while.”

Selene shrugged. “It does at times, but to be honest, they aren’t all that chatty when out in the field, either. Oh, that reminds me, Dr. Ono came by and asked me if I could do up a similar setup as to what we have for a patient here, her grand-niece apparently.”

Richard looked at her curiously.

“Well,” Selene began. “It seems we now have a real world name for Silica, Keiko Ayano, and she’s here in the same hospital, not too far from this room, actually.” She looked at him. “I’ve been able to head them off from coming in here for the most part, Harry’s privacy and all, but they’re starting to ask some pointed questions.”

Richard nodded, and he had an idea of the type of questions. The detail he assigned was aware of what the girl was doing, so long as she was in Harry’s vicinity, and she seems to have become a regular companion. Her family was right in asking those questions, and given what even a cursory investigation of her found, it would probably be wise to accommodate them.

“I see no problem with that, Ms. Carlisle.” He told her. “They will have to provide the materials to do so themselves, however.” He gave her a curious look. “I thought you made public the method to do so, though.”

She shrugged. “I did, but apparently, our setup seems to work better. It might simply be due to our hardware, though. We paid good money to have higher-end materials and did custom jobs.”

“So it’s an issue of having the right stuff then, good to know.” A voice interjected, startling them.

Richard quietly swore and turned to face the owner of the voice. He sensed his team member begin
subtly moving herself in a position to protect their principal and took a look at the owner of the voice.

The person they saw was a man who looked to be in his mid-thirties to early forties, though the way he carried himself was like an older man. With him, was Dr. Ono, who was already pinching the bridge of her nose with exasperation.

“Ranma,” the doctor said. “You could have waited for me to get their attention and not startle them.”

Oh hell, Richard thought, knowing exactly who this was.

Ranma ignored Dr. Ono’s comment and looked at Richard. He glanced briefly to where Richard had his wand hidden and his eyes tightened. “Funny that someone who uses magic would be out in the open like this,” he said and then shrugged. “No matter.” he saw the screen showing Harry and Silica fighting a mob. “Do you mind if I take a look?”

Richard simply nodded, and Ranma walked over. The man nodded approvingly at Ms. Carlisle as she positioned herself in a way that would allow her to protect Harry. He looked at the screen as they fought and quickly dispatched a small group of mobs.

He nodded. “The boy needs to work on his footing a bit,” he observed. “But not bad. I also taught Keiko to be more aware of her surroundings than that.” He shrugged. “Ah well, they’ll learn.”

He turned his attention back to Richard and carefully moved away from the screen and Harry.

“Now, you said something about putting together the same setup so I and my family can see how my granddaughter is doing?” He smirked. “I doubt you appreciate our constantly bothering you like this, especially since it interferes with you guarding your charge.”

Richard nodded. “We can,” he replied. “But you will have to provide the equipment. It’s all custom-built, though none of the parts are overly expensive on their own, but all together it doesn’t come cheap.”

Ranma nodded. “Fair enough. We can meet and go over the list of what is needed later.”

December 23, 2022 - Kawagoe, Kirigaya Residence

Midori Kirigaya carefully typed in the IP address she had found out about yesterday. She wasn’t surprised in the least that many had been observing the known, and inferred IP addresses used by the SAO servers, so the second streaming of what was going on inside went live, people were already leaping on it. Unsurprisingly, it was the same IP address that was to be streaming the launch live from within until Kayaba had cut the feeds.

From what she had learned over the day, a simple web page had been been created with the screen names and pictures of all the players listed in order. With close to eight thousand names to go through, not knowing the player’s character name would make things difficult. She did wonder about one thing, though.

She wondered why Kayaba had reversed his apparent decision to cut off the outside world now, over a month later. Was it because someone had figured out how to interface computers with the Nerve Gear to look in on the player wearing it? Did Kayaba discover it and decide to run with it? She didn’t know, and honestly didn’t care.
Whatever reason Akihiko Kayaba had, it allowed her to see how her son, Kazuto, was doing. As the page finished loading, she got down to the business of finding out how her son was doing.

December 26, 2022 - Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore’s Office

Albus took off his spectacles and pinched the bridge of his nose as he put down the last of the paperwork he had to do for the coming term at Hogwarts, at least for the moment. It was times like these that his other roles in magical society were largely ceremonial, though they came with their fair share of paperwork as well.

He wouldn’t be able to balance his duties otherwise.

He looked at the package that had been delivered to him earlier in the morning. Despite his curiosity of what it contained, he had held off opening it and examining its contents save for an instinctive check for traps or curses. He had enemies, and they occasionally tried to take their enmity out on him, though most were wise enough to not do so in a manner that would threaten Hogwarts or its students. Not after the example he made of the last who tried.

So, after the check, he put it aside in order to finish the paperwork on his desk before Minerva decided to act out on her periodic threat of tying him to his seat in front of the desk with his own beard.

Now that he was done, he summoned the parcel and set it gently on his desk. Doing another quick scan with his wand and eyes to make sure it was indeed safe, he opened it. Inside it was some strange device, definitely influenced by a muggle design, though the specific one eluded him, and a folded piece of parchment sealed with the Wainwright Crest.

Interesting.

Putting his spectacles on, he took out and broke the seal on the parchment. The parchment became a small stack and he took off the top one and began to read it.

Headmaster Dumbledore,

I do hope this finds you in good health during this Christmas season.

The situation with Mr. Potter is a complex one right now. I do not fully understand all of the details, but the means this Akihiko Kayaba is keeping everyone trapped within Sword Art Online is apparently a work of genius. While we have not found any practicable way to extract Mr. Potter from the situation he is currently in. From what I have been told, it is doubtful we will any time soon. We can at least assure you of his continued good health in this Sword Art Online, despite his continued venturing out of the parts of it that are safe, much to the exasperation of Richard and his team.

You can be assured that Richard himself has taken full responsibility for this, and has been disciplined in this matter. Further discipline has been stayed so long as Mr. Potter remains in good health, and alive, for that matter.

So far, those who have been working on facilitating their own escape from within have been doing so by its own rules. While we have no assurances that Akihiko Kayaba will keep his word to the players, we also have no reason to currently believe he won’t.
As it currently stands, by the sending of the message and the contents of the package we sent you, they have made it to the third floor of one hundred, which may have changed by this time. Mr. Potter has been active in doing so, but not to the point where he is engaging what is called a Floor Boss, and instead has contented himself with exploration of his new environment and its dangers along with his companion, a Miss Keiko Ayano, or Silica as she is known in Sword Art Online. I have included the reports on Mr. Potter’s activities for your perusal.

Now, to the next point of this message.

The team tasked with protecting Mr. Potter has found a way to place recordings of Mr. Potter’s actions on a small disk, which can store those recordings for some time. At the same time, we have an item which is still not widely distributed which functions much like a pensive, but is designed for interaction with muggle media devices to show what is recorded. This is a fairly new development by magical world standards, only having been developed within the last five to ten years, but will serve for this purpose.

Instructions on how to properly set it up and operate it have been included.

Regards,

Aloysius Wainwright

Albus put the letter down and considered what this meant. It was rare for the Wainwright family patriarch to engage in correspondence at any time, but for him to do so in a manner like this was about as close to a personal apology as he could reasonably expect. It was also an olive branch, in a way.

They were under no obligation to provide him any more information than saying that Harry is well, after all, though they would notify him if Mr. Potter’s situation took a turn for the worse. So this much was welcome.

While he was interested in the device and watching Harry’s actions, he would settle for reading the provided report instead for now. He would work with the device later, or ask one of his students to help with it. Perhaps Ms. Granger or another muggleborn would like a little project...

Albus shook his head to clear those thoughts from his mind and concentrated on the report the Wainwrights provided for him.

December 28, 2022 - Forest Hill, Granger Residence

Hermione sat at the computer and read the news article in front of her, stunned by what she saw. Apparently, there was a way for someone to see what was going on in SAO. While the web page’s interface for it was still a work in progress, someone apparently linked the usernames of the person with a picture, so that they could use visual recognition.

Useful, that, though she would have to probably search through a lot of names and pictures before she found Harry. Still, she knew Harry well enough that he likely wasn’t overly original with his username, and probably either picked his real one, a variant, or one which it could be a diminutive of.

And of course, the article did not give the URL, IP address, or a link to the site. She quickly opened
a search engine and typed in a query, looking for any more leads. A few minutes later, she finally found it.

2ecf:510a:0010::9311 , she thought as she wrote it down. Good. She took a look at the time and reluctantly closed the web applications and logged off the computer. Her parents had been very understanding of her need to search for any information on Sword Art Online, but she was home for only a short time before she had to return to Hogwarts.

As much as she wanted to continue and learn more, she would spend time with them. She would bring up that she had a solid lead, and politely ask to use this opportunity, but she wouldn’t press the issue. Yet.

She still had the rest of the break, after all.

January 7, 2023 - Hogwarts, Unused Room

Albus led Hermione and a couple of her fellow students into the room. He could feel their curiosity about where he was leading them and why, though he made assurances that they were not in trouble. Quite the opposite, really. He didn’t tell them anything else, as he wanted it to be a surprise to them.

He saw them looking curiously at the object placed, the same device he received from the Wainwrights. He had read the information on the device, as well as the quite detailed and simple instructions to set it up. While he used the opportunity to review Harry’s activities, he was once again amazed at what muggle technology could do. Creating an artificial and illusory world that people could interact with, have their own stories in, and meet with people. It was amazing, and something he could see potential in.

He wouldn’t be surprised if even Lucius Malfoy saw potential in it, if only as a means of furthering his family’s already considerable wealth.

Being able to watch what Harry was doing, even if it was well after the fact, was reassuring to him. It let him know that Harry was not only simply alive, but that he was living his life. He could understand the exasperation of those guarding him, but Harry was not one to sit back and do nothing, no matter how much someone wanted him to do just that and remain safe. It was something that impressed and distressed Albus so much about Harry.

He had that sense of responsibility to his fellow man that made him Tom's almost total opposite. Harry who took the Philosopher's Stone's safety as his own cause when Albus was pulled away from his own vigil. Harry who went into the Chamber of Secrets to face Tom's shade.

Harry Potter didn't run from the evils of the world, out of simple instinctive knowledge that doing so would just make someone else their prey.

Godric would certainly have loved to teach the boy. So would have the other Founders, Harry exhibited traits all of them would have enjoyed nurturing, but he would have thrived under Godric. He could picture him in his hooded battle garb training Harry with the sword the boy had wielded on instinct--

“Headmaster,” Hermione interrupted his thoughts. “What is that?”

Albus turned and smiled at her and the other students. “An excellent question Ms. Granger.” He
turned to the device the question was about. “This item is something that allows us to use and interact with muggle media. It was developed around five to ten years ago, but adoption in our markets has been slow.”

Hermione nodded and looked at it. She turned to one of her fellow students, Justin Finch-Fletchley. “Justin? What do you think?”

The boy looked at it, to Albus, and back to Hermione. “I can see that there would be a market for it amongst muggleborns and some halfbloods, Hermione. They would have some use for it, but most halfbloods and purebloods probably don’t. Also, it probably costs enough to be prohibitive.”

Albus smiled at Mr. Finch-Fletchley’s concise summary. The Hufflepuff was among his house’s top students for his year. He didn’t investigate too deeply, but the boy’s surname definitely hinted at an aristocratic ancestry, and he recalled the boy mention that he was headed for Eton until the opportunity to attend Hogwarts came about.

Hermione nodded. “So, slow adoption due to lack of need and a likely inherent conservatism, understandable.” She said. She then turned her attention back to Albus. “This is interesting, Headmaster, but why did you bring us here? I can see how many of us would be interested, but it’s not like we brought any movies with us to watch, if this thing supported the media they were on.”

Albus nodded. “It was more to get the thoughts of some students on this. And before you ask, Ms. Granger, this was given to me by the same people who have been watching over Mr. Potter.” The fact that she hadn’t immediately asked how Harry was doing was curious. “They found a way to record what he was seeing though the Nerve Gear on the same day that the events with Sword Art Online began. The specific details of how they did elude me, I’m sorry to say, but I did see it in action when I had been in Japan to hopefully retrieve him.”

Hermione nodded. “How much did they record?” She asked.

“Not all of it, Ms. Granger, but enough to take several days of someone’s time.” He replied as he moved over to a desk and opened a small box. Pulling out something he then walked over to the device. Giving it a few taps with his wand. “Would you like to see some of it?” He asked.

All the present students nodded.

As Albus began the playback, Hermione considered the possibilities. She would need a detailed look at that item’s capabilities, and find out what it is called, but she could see the potential of this. And if it could connect to the internet somehow…

She would talk with the Headmaster after this.

January 18, 2023 - Setagaya, Yuuki Residence

Kyouko Yuuki saved her file and closed it as she tiredly rubbed her eyes. Ever since the Sword Art Online incident had begun, she, her husband, and her son had thrown themselves into their work. All to distract them from what had happened to Asuna. All to make them forget, if only for a short while, their worry.

It didn’t help. It didn’t help at all.

She considered accessing the site so she could see what Asuna was doing and dismissed the idea. As
much as she wanted to see her daughter walking around and apparently healthy, rather than confined to a hospital bed, she could not stand being forced to sit by passively and watch. She could not just sit by passively and watch as her daughter risked her life.

She could not bear having to sit by passively and watch her daughter live in some elaborate, if dangerously real, illusion.

It was so different from what she knew of her daughter. The Asuna from before this incident was a wallflower who let everyone decide things for her. She was studious, got good grades, and did what she was told, but had few, if any, friends. Associates? Yes. Classmates she was on good terms with? Yes. Friends? She could not recall a single name of anyone who Asuna would refer to as a friend.

It was also telling that Asuna was livelier in SAO, than she was in the real world. Cut off from her family and any support, and what did she do? Did she freeze and wallow in some self-pity, like anyone else like her would have?

She did not. While it was possible that she did so earlier, by the time people could observe what was going on in SAO, she had been actively involved in working to escape it. She was becoming confident, livelier, more assertive…

She was becoming everything she hadn’t been before SAO, and Kyouko didn’t know what to think of that. It wasn’t a bad development, but even so, her daughter was changing. So no, she didn’t know what to think of it.

February 27, 2023 - Suginami, Nakano General Hospital

Richard Wainwright looked at the screen, bemused. While nothing Harry did really surprised him by this point, the boy still managed to impress him. To see him manage to organize a rescue operation and hash out a plan with several other players in so little time was impressive. That one of his associates just happened to have an item that would allow them to get there almost as soon as they moved out bordered on divine providence.

Previous preparations for the floor they were on or not, that kind of good fortune was rare.

And how Mr. Potter had torn into that one guild leader…

“He manages to cut right to the chase of things, doesn’t he, boss?” Selene asked.

“That he does Ms. Carlisle.” he replied. “Mr. Potter said quite a lot in a rather concise manner.”

He saw that altercation and began thinking. His charge had managed, in one move, to show how one major guild leader was acting and how the man was willing to commit murder by proxy to see his goals through. This was a revelation that was not at all surprising to Richard. He knew how people could be without the restraining influences of society holding them back.

He also knew how some people, when called out on their actions, tended to react.

“There is a possibility that this will cause problems for Mr. Potter in the future.” He surmised.

“Boss?” Selene asked, confused.
“Lind strikes me as the type to not take this lying down, Ms. Carlisle.” Richard explained. “Mr. Potter had just ruined a major plan of his, called him out for it, and humiliated him in front of his peers. He’ll wait and salvage his wounded pride here, but it will also allow this to fester. While he is no threat to our charge right now, that may change in the future.” He frowned. “Unfortunately, we are not in any position to do anything about it right now and will have to let this play out for the time being.”

“Do you think Harry will be in any real danger?”

Richard’s frown deepened. “Possibly.”

Selene turned thoughtful. "Boss, I can look into how old Lind is in real life and,” she paused. “I might be able to locate where he is being kept.”

Richard knew exactly what she was suggesting, and what it would mean. Harry Potter was his principal now.

"Do it. I want to know if disconnecting Lind is within our options." He told her. If it wasn’t, then they would have to trust that Mr. Potter could handle it.

Chapter End Notes

Well, that was fun to write. As I kept doing little snapshots, more and more kept coming to mind, and before I knew it, I needed to cut it off or I wouldn’t stop. This is already longer than I thought it would be, but that’s how it goes, I guess
Ed, here. You know, I don't really feel that goofy after that last ‘in game’ chapter. So I'll just note JG is not the owner of the intellectual properties involved, and he's glad they're not getting too upset about him using it. Enjoy.

Oh, and Lind is an ass.

February 28, 2023 - Aincrad 26th Floor, Mistleberg

Silica grumbled sleepily as she burrowed further into the covers of her bed and clutched tighter to what she was hugging to herself. From the size, firmness, and feel, it wasn’t Pina, but it was nice. Whatever she was hugging was warm and the sounds of slow, deep breathing was making her want to…

Wait a minute.

The events of the previous night were coming back to her. The confrontation between Hadrian and Lind after the boss fight, their going up to the next floor and their making it to the floor’s central town. After checking into an inn, Klein had called on them, proceeded to drag them both to a tavern and then engaged in a valiant (if futile) attempt to drink Harry into bankruptcy.

Harry was the frugal one of the pair, after all. One thing he was rarely, if ever, short on, was col.

After that, others started filtering in, including Asuna dragging along a protesting Kirito. Before long, a party started and everyone was celebrating not only clearing another floor, but the fact that they were still alive, a quarter of the way through Aincrad.

The drinks flowed. Large quantities of food were consumed. Everyone present had a good time. By the time the party finished, it was getting close to two in the morning and everyone went tiredly to their beds.

Didn’t Hadrian get us separate rooms? Silica asked herself. I’m sure he did, but Klein did drag us both off to that tavern pretty quick.

She cracked open an eye and craned her neck to look around. She stopped when her gaze met a familiar green pair of eyes. She sighed in bemusement as she heard her bedmate give a wry chuckle.

“Well,” Harry said dryly. “This is unexpected.”
“I’m blaming Klein for this one.” She replied.

“Agreed.”

"He’s useful that way."

Harry paused as he sat up. He looked down at his bare chest. He lifted the covers a bit and glanced under them. Sighing in relief, he let them drop. “Well, since I find it hard to defend him on this point, then yes, he’s handy for that.”

Silica blushed a little. He wasn’t exactly muscular or defined, but there was a leanness there that she would admit was attractive. She wasn’t worried about being any more undressed than usual when she slept, herself. She had learned to wear at least a shirt to bed after a few times answering the door in her underwear back in November.

Those had been some awkward moments, though Harry was a perfect gentleman and simply glanced a little above and behind her when he noticed. He did take the time to, ahem, notice, which... she found slightly flattering. But he kept to noticing and didn't leer. Or stare for that matter. And luckily, she didn't take after some in her family who had a certain sensitivity to such things.

Luckily for Harry, that is.

She watched as he opened his inventory and materialized a shirt. Putting it on, his eyes glanced to where the time was tracked on a player’s HUD and groaned.

“It’s too bloody early.” he said with a yawn.

Silica sat up and rubbed her eyes. She noticed that Harry took a glance at her and then looked away, with a slight blush on his cheeks. Curious, she looked down and didn’t notice anything amiss. She was wearing a shirt, though it was hanging off one shoulder, but she didn’t think that should have gotten a reaction from him.

_Boys_, she thought. _I’ll never understand them._

##

Harry looked up from his breakfast when a shadow crossed the table to see Asuna looking down on him. Waving her to sit down, she took a seat next to Silica, who was enjoying some of the local fruit, along with some bread. Pina looked up curiously from where she was sunning herself on the table and went back to it when Asuna simply ignored the feathered dragon.

Harry took another bite and swallowed before turning his attention to her. “So, what brings you over here?” He asked.

“Well, Hadrian, I was wondering if you and Silica had anything planned for today.” Asuna replied.

Harry shrugged. “Aside from some information gathering and maybe a quest or two, I was thinking on taking it easy. Why?”

“A number of guild leaders, party leaders, and independents are planning to get together and discuss what to do from here.” Asuna replied. “After the last floor, it’s clear that we need a plan.”

Harry frowned. “It’s not a bad idea, but why are you telling me this?” He asked.

“You and Silica are invited.” Asuna replied, as if it should have been obvious.
Harry shrugged. “All right then, when and where is it?”

“In about an hour and it will be at the Shining Blade Inn.”

“We’ll be there, then.” Harry told her. “What about you, or Kirito for that matter?”

Asuna sighed. “I’ll be there, but Kirito headed out at first light.” She replied. “I sent him a message; since he didn’t reply, I don’t know if he read it.”

“Sounds like him,” Harry said dryly. Silica snorted at his comment.

“I have a feeling he got it.” She said. “Whether he comes or not is a toss-up, though.”

Asuna frowned. While she couldn’t claim to know Kirito well, she knew him well enough to know that he wasn’t comfortable around crowds. His heading up to this floor to activate the teleport gate while the confrontation with Lind was as much an excuse to get away from people as it was to open up a new floor.

Even at the party she dragged him to last night, he had left as soon as it was polite to. Not before Klein roped him into having a few drinks at Harry’s expense, though. Still, he was one of the first to leave.

It was galling for her to admit it, but for all they had worked together she didn’t know Kirito very well.

Part of it was the unspoken agreement among players to not talk about their lives before being trapped in SAO. Another part of it was the fact that Kirito didn’t seem comfortable talking about himself, even with the fairly oblique manner that the Japanese had turned into an art form taken into consideration.

Then again, given his awkwardness around people when he wasn’t being all business in a fight, and especially around females, it was understandable. She briefly wondered if he was a Hikkimori, but dismissed the idea. He was asocial, but not to the point of completely avoiding contact with people and shutting himself away from the world as far as she knew.

She shook her head to clear out those considerations and turned her attention back to Harry. “Well then, I’ll see you there.” She said as she stood up.

##

Forty-five minutes later, Harry arrived at the Shining Blade Inn with Silica in tow. The two of them noticed Kirito off to the side and made their way to him.

“So, you got Asuna’s message then,” Harry said.

Kirito nodded. “Yeah, I got it and made my way back to town. I was a fair distance away, so I only just got here.”

“And your lack of response?” Silica asked.

Kirito shrugged.

Silica sighed in response, shaking her head.

“Keep doing that and she’ll be on the warpath after you, Kirito,” Harry said with a chuckle.
“You guys know about the rumors that were spread about me, right?” Kirito asked.

“Know about them, and know enough about them to know they’re full of it.” Harry replied. At Kirito’s look Harry shrugged. “You think you’re the only one here who’s had to deal with crap like that?” He gave Kirito a penetrating look. “Look, it’s not my place, but you should try to be more social with people. I’m saying this as someone that can sulk his way out of any conversation."

Silica smirked. "Only if I let you."

Harry nodded. “Exactly.” He then blinked. “Wait a minute.”

Kirito chuckled. They’re like a married couple sometimes, he thought with amusement. Hm, I wonder if Argo has a betting pool on them? What am I thinking? The question is can I get in before she closes the pool to keep the betting sane?

Harry looked at Kirito and then back to Silica. “I think Argo’s going to be taking another bet.” he said with some amusement.

“What would that bring it up to?” Silica asked with a giggle. They both knew there was a bet involving them, though Argo was being coy about the specifics.

Harry shrugged. “Don’t know. Every time I ask she just gets that look on her face and starts cackling.”

"Oh, good. Cackling means it's still open," Kirito said drily.

Harry blinked. "My god. He just-- did he just quip ?"

Silica rolled her eyes. "He does do that, Hadrian."

Kirito shook his head and looked around the room. “Looks like everyone is here and… oh.”

Harry looked where Kirito was and snickered. Asuna was giving Kirito one of her irritated looks that meant he had better get over there before she dragged him over by his collar. Or foot. Or really whatever body part she got her hands on first. “Well, we better get on over. Especially you, Kirito. Surprised Asuna hasn’t put a leash given how you wander off.” Hmm, that might make for an amusing gift. He thought.

“Screw you, Hadrian.”

##

Everyone sat at various tables and looked at the person who called the meeting. It was Griselda, the wife of the late leader of the Golden Apple guild, Grimlock. She looked at who was present and nodded to herself.

“Good, now that everyone’s here, we can get started.” she said. “After the last floor, it’s become clear that we can’t simply keep going like we were. I don’t know what the figures are, but we lost far too many people over the last few days, my husband included.” She paused and took a deep breath to gather her thoughts and push the emotions that she was trying to contain back. A few seconds later she gathered herself.

“While losing even one person is a blow, as we all know what dying here means for our bodies in the real world, we’re all realistic enough to know that the dangers mean that when we walk out of the safety of the towns, we might never return.”
Everyone grimly nodded at that statement. It was a harsh truth about being in SAO, but they were all realistic to not deny it. Everyone knew that going out of the towns meant risking his or her life and that the next fight, an unexpected trap, or simple bad luck, could put a permanent end to them.

“So,” Griselda continued. “We need to discuss what will go on from here on out.” She looked around. “Any comments?”

Harry looked around and seeing no one taking the initiative, stood up. He walked to where Griselda was and nodded to her. Turning around, he took a deep breath and got started.

“Unless you ignored the warnings passed out over Argo’s network, everyone here was warned about the last floor being a place where SAO would likely stop taking it easy on us. Before you all say anything, it *was* taking it easy on us before then. The last floor showed us just how nasty this place can be. In other words, we were lucky.

“One thing I noticed, is that a lot of people just rushed out on the first day, even those who should have known better. We all know how that turned out for them. One in five on average didn’t survive that first day on the floor. *One in five!* Like Griselda said, we don’t have the actual figures, and unless Argo’s not here and in the shadows like she probably is…” He caught a movement out of the corner of his eye and turned his head to face it. “Never mind, she’s here.”

Argo walked out from where she had been listening in with a sour expression on her face. “Just ruin my fun like that, Harry.” She grumbled.

Harry smirked. “You’re getting predictable, Argo.” He replied before becoming serious again. “Now, how bad were the casualties for the last floor?” He asked.

“They were bad, Harry.” She replied. “If you count the rescue op, there were close to two hundred more names crossed off the Monument of the Living, half of them on the first day.”

Everyone sucked in a breath at that number. They all knew that the casualties were high, but they didn’t expect it to be *that* many.

“Two hundred…” One said.

“Half on the first day…” Another added.

“No fucking way…”

Harry slammed his palm onto the table to head off any panic or sense of helplessness. Once he got everyone’s attention, he fixed them all with a stare.

“We survived it,” he told them. “We know its dangers, we can pass, and have passed, that information on. Or we should have.” he said. “The next ones going through there won’t have the same problems, as they will know the dangers, and how to hopefully manage them.” He took another breath. “Now, we need to discuss how we will move forward from this. Does anyone have any suggestions?”

He saw Kirito and Asuna have a brief, if quiet, discussion before Kirito was pushed forward.

“What suggestions do you have, Kirito?” He asked.

Kirito shot Asuna a look and took a deep breath. “Well, it dawned on me that we should probably determine what would be a recommended minimum level for a floor.”
Harry raised an eyebrow. “How much of one?” He asked curiously.

Kirito shrugged. “I would say around ten levels higher than the floor number for those doing questing and fighting mobs, just to be safe. For those who want to face bosses or are going solo, it should probably be higher.” Kirito then went back to where he had been standing.

Harry nodded to Griselda and went to sit next to Silica.

Griselda gave Harry a searching look and shrugged. “All right then, noted.” She said. “Any more suggestions?”

The others in the inn started talking among themselves for a bit before Klein stood up. “We shouldn’t focus on clearing the floors as fast as possible.” He said. “It worked fine until now, but as the last floor showed us, that’s getting too risky. Also, I don’t know about you all, but we’ve been pushing pretty hard, so everyone should take a few days, at least, and rest.” He grinned. “I know I will.”

“That’s because you know I’m buying your drinks for a couple more days, Klein.” Harry shot out.

Nearly everyone present laughed and Griselda shook her head in amusement. “Ok, take some time to rest, and slow down a bit.” She said. “The drunken debauchery is optional. Now, any more suggestions?”

At that point, just about everyone present had some ideas. It would take them until well into the afternoon before they had a general idea. Further conversations among smaller groups over the next several days would refine that to several recommendations that would be passed around all the clearers and then down to lower floors.

**March 5, 2023 - Aincrad 24th Floor, Panareze**

Harry walked around the main town of the floor, looking through various stalls set up by players. While there were some player merchants in Mistleberg, most tended to be a couple of floors down from the top floor.

Not that he blamed them. Most of the merchants weren’t dedicated fighters, preferring instead to support players by offering goods and services. They could fight, he had seen many of the merchants at various times on the top floors doing just that, but that was more to keep their levels current and gather merchandise, than any active effort towards clearing on their part.

As it was, advancement on the twenty-sixth floor had slowed to a crawl as the players took Klein’s advice to take some time off and relax. While not everyone was happy with that, even the most eager to continue had realized he had a point. Furthermore, with the casualties, many had decided to go to a lower floor for where it was safer for the time being.

The added wariness and need to get their levels up that survivors of the twenty-fifth floor had was playing a role as well. After all, if they were the ones to come up with those guidelines, they would also have to follow them.

So, he and Silica had taken the opportunity to gather information on some quests on a few of the previous floors, do a few, and otherwise take it easy for a few days. Well, Silica was able to take it easy if she wanted to, Harry had to make back the money Klein drank away. While he didn’t manage to drink away all of Harry’s col, he made a good effort at it and cost Harry more than he
spent in the previous month.

While you couldn’t get drunk in SAO, as far as they knew at least, the game did keep track of how much a player had and did stop him or her from consuming more once it determined that enough was consumed. Well, except for Klein, apparently. That man seemed to have some in-game trait which gave him a hollow leg with a hole in it. *If he could do that in the real world, his liver would be trying to kill him in his sleep, he would drink Hagrid under the table, or both.* He thought with some amused exasperation.

Harry shook that thought out of his head and continued his browsing. He needed to find a replacement for his shield, which had served him well to this point, but was reaching its limit on how far it would go for him. Regular maintenance and enhancement kept it in good condition, but it was hitting the point of diminishing returns. That and the twenty-fifth floor’s mobs had managed to wear down its durability faster than he liked.

About twenty minutes later, he found himself browsing the wares of a shop being run by a large black man by the name of Agil. He blinked when he saw the man, the lack of any foreign accent in his Japanese, had initially made him think that the man was an NPC at first. After that, his curiosity had drawn him to the stall.

"Aren’t you a bit young to be up here?" He asked.

Harry shrugged. "Old enough to have gotten into SAO without lying about my age." He replied. "Besides, it’s not like I’m the only kid on the front lines. Kirito and Asuna, for example."

Agil chuckled. "Or that one pair I’ve heard about. What were their names, Hadrian and Silica? They have to be the youngest pair."

Harry grinned. "Don’t know if we are the youngest, but I wouldn’t be surprised." He gave an amused bow when the man expressed surprise. "Hadrian, at your service, my good sir."

Agil blinked. "You know, I think I was expecting someone a little taller."

"And more muscles?" Harry shot back.

"No, not the way I’ve heard you fight. Just taller."

"Always taller," Harry sighed, but he smiled. "Well then, what wares do you have in your fine shop?"

Agil pointed to what he had out, which was a fair amount, now that Harry got a good look. More than many shopkeepers, at least. "Take a look, something might catch your eye."

Harry looked around and his eyes boggled at the prices. While nothing was out of his means to afford, he had seen some of what was there being sold for much less col than Agil was asking.

"What the hell?" He asked. "I saw this same dagger being sold for less ten stalls down." He shot Agil a look. "I’m not one of those idiots who thinks expensive means good."

Agil shot him a look back, then turned thoughtful. "You likely could get it for less. Ask yourself this, though-- where is the col going?"

Harry frowned thoughtfully at him.

"Say you’re back on floor 13 behind us," Agil said, licking his lips. "Some... jerk just took your gear
and your col because he's treating this like a game."

Harry scowled at that. "Much like that tit, Lind." He said.

"What if someone from up where the drops are better came down, saw the hand you'd been dealt, and gave you col for a few nights, maybe a shield someone thinks they'd worn out but a smith could fix up a bit, a new sword, and some of Argo's info? Wouldn't that help just a bit?" Agil met his eyes. "We've got an orphanage on the first floor, Hadrian. Kids that were going to play with Mom and Dad or an older brother or sister or who just can't handle it. And that needs col. The game's economy won't be ignored. It has to come from somewhere. You think Argo's gouging you for fun? There's a PC smith two floors down I could send your shield to and do exactly what I said with it. Yes, some of it goes it my pocket. I have to survive too. But..." He shrugged.

Agil's voice had dropped in the manner of a man who knew a whisper just attracted attention.

Harry sighed. "Yeah, I see your point." He replied. He looked at a shield that Agil had for sale. "Huh, haven't seen something like that around. Do you mind if I checked the stats on that?"

Agil smiled. "Go ahead."

Harry did so and compared them to his old shield. While he lost some of the bonuses to strength, it was one of those shields which traded it for agility and dexterity, which fit his fighting style better. "Not bad, not bad at all." He looked at the price and winced.

"I don't just trade in col," Agil said helpfully.

Harry considered that. He still had a fair amount of dropped gear in his inventory that he hadn't sold or traded off yet and smiled. "Well then, why don't we discuss the particulars?"

Agil grinned. "Yes, why don't we?"

The two would then spend a good ten minutes haggling the price, negotiating what items to trade in, and finalizing the deal before reaching an agreement. Harry wasn't under any illusions that he got the better of Agil, but he did negotiate the total value of col and excess gear down a fair bit, so he was happy enough with the result.

He did make a note to check with Argo on what Agil claimed and implied, though. The phrase 'Trust, but verify,' had been drilled into him by hard experience, both in SAO and the real world.

"By the way, you mentioned a blacksmith a couple of floors down?" Harry asked. "How good is he?"

"She, actually." Agil corrected. "She's not bad. Not the best blacksmith in the game, but she does a good job with what she can do. Asuna brought her to my attention."

Harry nodded. "She's good enough, then." Asuna had an eye for such things. He didn't enquire about it, but he knew that she liked high quality goods and could tell the difference between quality goods and those that were merely expensive. That said more about her background than she probably realized.

Oh well, it wasn’t any of his business.

"So, where is this blacksmith, anyway?" He asked.

"She set up shop in Coral, using one of the blacksmith shops that can be rented." Agil replied.
Harry nodded. “I’ll make sure to check it out some time.”

March 9, 2023 - Aincrad 26th Floor, Fulsa Plain

Klein sheathed his katana as the mob shattered and nodded in satisfaction. The last several weeks since he got the ability to use a katana had been mixed with some questing, leveling and training in it to get up to par with wielding one, as it handled completely differently from the more generic curved blades he had favored at the start.

Many would think it a waste of time. Why bother learning a new weapon at this point, when the ones used from the start of the game sufficed?

He would ignore such statements. He had always wanted to be a samurai, and while it would only be here in SAO, he had a chance. When he told Kirito that, the boy only shook his head in amusement and then proceeded to teach him what he knew about handling and wielding a katana.

Besides, with everyone taking it slow right now, this was the perfect time to build his proficiency with it.

Dale walked up to him and gave a look around the field. “Looks like you’re almost there, boss.”

Klein nodded. “Almost, but not quite,” he agreed. “Anywhere else but on the front lines, it would be good enough.” He smiled grimly. “Here though, good enough isn’t going to cut it. This floor’s not as bad as the last one, but it can be bad enough.”

Dale nodded. His guild leader was right in that regard. Just because it wasn’t as bad as the previous floor did not mean it was any safer, and many players were still under the recommended ten levels higher than the floor number. From what he had gathered from Klein’s talks with Argo and others, that wouldn’t change for at least another week.

Still, that meant that a fair number of players were taking the opportunity to work on other things. They had seen the kid and Silica use the teleport gate to go and meet with a blacksmith in Coral, Asuna was coordinating with some of the smaller guilds to look at what they would all need to replace gear that was getting obsolete, and the Fuurinkazan guild was taking the opportunity to farm mobs while leveling up some of their less used skills.

Still, it did not change the fact that many players were only going through the motions, rather than put in a serious effort at this time. The casualties had taken their toll on the morale of the clearers, but it was the fallout from Lind’s stunt which had hit everyone the hardest.

The Aincrad Liberation Squad, or ALS, had basically pulled back from the front lines as Kibaou kept his word to move to a lower floor and teach players on them. A few members remained on the top floor, or nearby floors, but the ALS’ presence had become a shadow of what it was. However, the guild largely remained intact and the members who stayed in the front lines were more determined than ever to clear the game.

The Divine Dragons Alliance, or DDA, on the other hand, was shedding members after what was effectively an attempt at murder by proxy. While it retained a core of members, some of whom no one would trust to be able to jump and breathe at the same time, there were a few who actually had functioning brains.
Schivata was one, and many had a feeling that he only remained to hopefully restrain Lind from doing something else he would regret. Many had the belief that Lind, once he got his feet back under him, might start trying to go after Harry, the kid, not his guild mate. Hopefully not in a manner that would result in someone getting killed.

If that happened, it would be a shitstorm, especially since Dale had seen the clear anger on the kid’s face when Lind had arrived. Oh, he had schooled it, but the way he slapped down Lind with only a few choice sentences was interesting to watch. Harry had not once raised his voice while he verbally eviscerated Lind with a few sentences.

It was less the words, than the meaning behind them. He had accused Lind of not giving a damn about the consequences, feeling that so long as he came out on top, he should be able to get away with it.

Dale’s musings stopped when Klein sighed.

“Boss?” He asked.

“It’s nothing.” Klein replied. “Why don’t we go find the rest of the guys and head back to town? They should be done with what they are doing. I also want to see what the latest bulletins from Argo say.” He snorted. “Man, it must suck to be Lind right now with how she’s tearing him apart.”

8th Floor, Frieven

Lind balled up the copy of the latest bulletin from Argo and threw it across the room. That bitch! He thought angrily as he watched it shatter. Since the twenty-fifth floor, he had taken refuge in Frieven, using the fact that the floor was unpopular with the players.

The bare accommodations, the environment, and the ever present smell from being some kind of swamp, all served to ensure that players kept their time here to a minimum. If they even spent any time on the floor at all. It allowed him to lie low, but even after ten days, Argo was continuing her campaign against him.

While nothing she said was false, the careful use of words, the insinuations she gave, all of it served to damage his reputation. A small part of him admired how she was managing it, but she could only do so for so long.

It had seemed a simple plan at the time. Find the info, change it just enough, and bribe or blackmail an info broker to spread the bad info in a way that Kibaou would immediately buy. When he went out, gather a group of your own men, and rush in to save him, using more reliable information to do so. If the boss was killed in the process, so much the better. The DDA would cement itself as one of the primary clearing guilds, and Kibaou would have been discredited.

No one was supposed to die.

But that little shit overreacted and created a rescue group, trying to be a hero. Lind thought darkly. He grabs players, manages to get in without anyone else seeing them, and throws the entire plan out of whack. I’m responsible for seventeen deaths, you little brat? No, it was your getting involved which got those people killed, not me. Oh, the boy accepted responsibility for the five deaths within his own raid, he would give him that. But the boy dared to accuse him, Lind, of being responsible for the rest.
However, Lind had the entire thing planned carefully, but that plan failed due to someone else getting involved. When the new group charged in, his raid had arrived just in time to see it, and Lind held his people back so as to wait and see. Furthermore, having more people in a boss room at that time would have simply meant everyone getting in each other’s way and making a chaotic situation worse.

Still, this couldn’t last forever, and when it died down…

March 13, 2023 - Aincrad 26th Floor, Mistleberg

Heathcliff’s arrival on the floor had been largely unnoticed by the players on the floor, which suited him fine. While he had been working on recruiting members of the guild he had been forming, The Knights of the Blood, or KoB, the guild was still small and had not made a name for itself.

The recruiting was going fairly well, if slowly, due to his relatively high standards. He wanted players who were skilled, or showed promise, and ran them through their paces. They also had to be strong enough to be able to handle the front lines, which narrowed down the potential pool of candidates significantly, especially after the clearers agreed on a minimum standard level for safety reasons.

This was a standard he approved of, if for different reasons than the players. He wanted them to get stronger, to get better, their safety was not really a concern of his. Not that he would voice or even imply it.

Either way, he had left his guild behind in Stahlhold to gain some experience with the increased difficulty which would become the norm from here on out. Experienced gamers would know that the twenty-fifth floor was a wake-up call, and it was telling them that the easy part was done.

They would have to be more alert and careful from here on out, as while the pressure might let up at times, the difficulty and danger wouldn’t. The twenty-fifth floor would be a good place to gain the experience with the dangers, especially since the clearers had provided as much information as they could about it.

Still, he came up here for a reason, rather than leading his small guild through the twenty-fifth floor. There were four people he was interested in scouting out and, if possible, recruiting. Each of them had reputations as being skilled fighters in their own right, and two of them had shown some leadership ability.

After asking a few questions, he made his way to the Shining Blade Inn. He could meet one of them right now.
The Climb Resumes

Chapter Summary

Disclaimer: JG here again to tell you the sandboxes of SAO and Harry Potter aren’t mine and that I only play in them.

*hears a scream in the distance and sees Ed D. off to the side whistling*

Nice try Ed, though you get props for the ventriloquism.

Well, enjoy!

Mystic Knight Online

Chapter 8 - The Climb Resumes

March 13, 2023 - Aincrad 26th Floor, Mistleberg

Harry and Silica walked off the teleport platform and made their way toward the Shining Blade Inn. Asuna had sent them a message about two hours ago requesting that they come by, someone wanted to talk with them. As they had been running an errand (more like farming mats for Lisbeth, the blacksmith Agil recommended a few days ago) Harry sent a reply that they would be there as soon as they were done.

Still, the errand was a good use of their time, given that they had opportunity to knock out a couple of quests along the way. Nothing major, but multitasking has its benefits. Like getting themselves a bit over Kirito’s suggested level limit for the floor. After The Twenty-Fifth (almost every player knew by now what that meant), Harry was determined to be even better prepared, if not over prepared.

As it stood, Harry had reached level thirty-eight a few days ago, and Silica should reach it soon. Like many of the clearers, they had been taking things easy, which slowed their leveling rate a fair bit, but had the advantage of giving them an opportunity to mix and match some less utilized skills, or find some new ones.

Skills like the Martial Arts Skill, which could be found on the second floor. That had been a frustrating three days for Harry, trying to shatter a boulder with only his hands. Having the painted on whiskers which couldn’t be removed until the quest which rewarded the skill was completed just added insult to injury.

More galling for him, Silica had taken to that skill like a cat to a ball of yarn and had pulled it off within an hour. She had then spent the remaining time practicing the skill and coaching Harry on a few things, such as stance and a few other things to turn a punch into a sword skill. Eventually, he got it and completed the quest that rewarded the skill.
He would admit to himself that Silica did look cute with those whiskers that had been painted on during that quest. He once imagined her having cat ears and a tail, wearing a pink and white yukata, to complete the look during those three days and his brain temporarily shorted out from the image it provided. Bad Brain, bad! Harry thought, trying to drive the images that those recollections put in his mind. Especially the variant that-- Bad Brain! he chided again. He gave a surreptitious look for a barrel of water in case he had to dunk his head into one, just in case.

In the end, he decided that it didn’t really fit his fighting style, though he kept it in mind anyway. The idea of punching a mob’s head off had some appeal, after all. Silica had decided to practice and train with it more, to supplement her dagger skills, which made some sense to him.

Harry shook his head and drove those recollections out of his mind and looked at Silica. “Well, what do you think she asked us here for?” He asked.

Silica shrugged. “I don’t know,” she replied. “She sent us both the message, and it only said someone wanted to talk with us. I guess we’ll just have to find out.”

Harry nodded and saw that they were in front of the inn. “True, and we’re here.” He opened the door. “After you, my lady.” He said.

Silica giggled. “Why thank you, my good sir.” She replied as she walked in.

##

Asuna looked up from the local wine she was drinking and saw the two of them as they walked in. She indicated to Heathcliff that they had arrived and he turned to look at them as she waved the two over. As they got closer, she noticed that the two had changed their gear styles.

Harry had switched from a breastplate to a dark green brigandine cuirass with brass rivets, and reinforced leather pants, with his usual preference for heavy and sturdy boots. Silica favored a red vest, which from its stiffness probably had iron or steel plates sewn into it, over a linen shirt and a reinforced leather skirt, her dark brown stockings providing some cover for her legs, along with lighter, but still sturdy, boots.

The armor was clearly top tier for the area, and she suppressed a wince at how much it likely cost them, especially since she knew that Harry, at least, tended towards being frugal. On the other hand, considering the general quality of the gear, she wouldn’t be surprised if he considered it a good investment that would last a while.

Harry looked at her and nodded, gesturing that they would be over by the table shortly. He made a quick stop at the bar and ordered something. The bartender handed him a couple of bottles, Silica picked up a couple of cups. The two of them made their way to the table and Asuna indicated that they should take a seat.

As soon as they took their seats, Asuna shot Harry a mildly irritated look. “So, what took you two so long?” She asked. “If I knew it would take you two hours, I would have set a time for us to meet.”

Harry shrugged. “We were running an errand for a blacksmith who needed some more mats.” He replied as he poured a drink for himself and Silica. He looked at Asuna and Heathcliff and the two waved them off. “It took a little longer than expected to gather them for her.” He looked at Heathcliff. “Is this the person who wanted to meet us?”

Asuna nodded.

“Hadrian, at your service.” Harry said. “So, what can Silica and I do for you?”
Heathcliff nodded to the two of them. “First, let me introduce myself.” He said. “I am Heathcliff, leader of the Knights of Blood. I have been looking for promising players to recruit and I have heard of you two.”

Harry and Silica nodded. “I take it you want to recruit us both, then.” Silica said as she took a sip from her drink. She absently called a bag of peanuts from her inventory and began to feed Pina some.

Heathcliff nodded. “Indeed. The two of you have built quite the reputation for a pair so young, especially you, young man.”

“And what kind of reputation would that be?” Harry asked. “I’ve heard a few things, even a few rumors that are ridiculous.”

Heathcliff nodded. While he had a lot more knowledge about things than any other player, he still played the part of gathering information. Some of the observations made by The Rat and others were quite interesting, and sometimes amusing. “It has more to do with your leadership potential.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Leadership potential?” He asked with a note of incredulity. “I’m no leader.”

“He who participated in the previous boss fight seem to think otherwise, young man.” Heathcliff replied. “After all, you gathered a raid together and worked out a plan rather quickly. It is very likely that everything would have gone quite differently had you not been there.”

Harry nodded, his face still holding an appearance of polite interest. And it was an appearance, Asuna knew. She could tell from his posture and a slight tightening around his eyes that something was making him wary. She could also tell that Silica noticed as well, even though she gave no indication outside of a slight shifting of her posture.

To more easily reach for her dagger, she thought. I wonder if they even realize just how well attuned they are to each other. She quickly turned her attention back to the conversation going on between Harry and Heathcliff.

“That may be so, Heathcliff,” Harry said. “But I think others would have managed well enough without me there. All I did was gather the groups that were already forming so that we all could put together a plan.”

“But still, the speed with which you did…”

Harry raised a hand, interrupting him. “Even then, it wasn’t just me.” He said. “Klein had a corridor crystal, which allowed us to move with the speed we needed, all of the group leaders were in on putting together a plan, and so on. Me? Again, I just gathered people together so we could actually do it, rather than spend time arguing over it.” He shrugged. “Speed? That haste is probably why five of our people got killed, and half of Kibaou’s twelve got killed. As it was, we got lucky.”

He gave Heathcliff a careful look as he sipped his drink. “Also, your guild is an unknown up here. Oh, I don’t doubt that if I asked Argo for info, she would have plenty of information to share, but that only goes so far. I trust her to give me good information, but I also like to form my own opinion on things. And any front line player worth his or her salt would do the same.

“And I can see what you intend.” he continued. “Everyone is basically going through the motions, but not making much in the way of progress. You’re seeking to change that. Your intent is to look for solid front line players and clearers to form a core of a group to take the lead.”
Heathcliff nodded, not disputing Harry’s supposition. At the same time, he could already tell that Harry had made up his mind on this, so it was best to get it out now, rather than they all waste their time. “And your consideration?” He asked.

Harry sighed. “I can’t speak for Silica, or anyone else you’re looking at recruiting here, but for now, I must decline your offer.”

“I see,” Heathcliff replied. “I apologize for wasting your time then, though I do thank you for at least hearing me out.” He looked at Silica who simply shook her head, her own polite refusal of the offer apparent.

Harry shook his head. “It was no waste of time.” He replied. “It’s better to take care of something like this now, rather than later. Once your guild builds some reputation amongst the clearers, I wouldn’t be surprised if some of those who declined your offer reconsider.”

Heathcliff looked at the three of them, nodded and stood up. “Well then, I must get back to my guild then. It was a pleasure talking to you.” He nodded to all three of them and walked out of the inn.

Harry let out a breath and all the tension in his body left it, which got Silica to relax as well. He reached over to a bottle, poured himself another drink, and quickly gulped it down, much to Asuna’s surprise.

“That,” Harry said. “Was tense.”

Asuna blinked. “What do you mean?” She asked. “I could tell that something about him made you wary, but he seemed pleasant enough.”

“I don’t really know.” Harry replied. “Something about him tripped my instincts, as if what we were seeing wasn’t what was actually there. It was,” he frowned in thought. “It was like he was wearing a mask.” He shook his head and shrugged. “That’s about the best I can come up with.”

Asuna nodded in understanding. She wasn’t overly perceptive about such things, but having someone like him come out of nowhere like that made her wary as well. She hadn’t outright declined his offer, but she hadn’t accepted it, either. She had sent both Harry and Silica the message so she could see how they reacted, the two of them being more perceptive than they realized about people.

That the two of them were wary as well had killed any idea that she would accept the offer, at least for now. Oh, she didn’t doubt that Heathcliff’s pitch about how she could do well in such a guild had a lot of truth to it, he wouldn’t have taken the time to try and recruit her otherwise. Also, the idea of having a guild to back her was definitely a pleasant one. However, despite her own confidence in her skills, Kirito’s words from the aftermath of the first floor boss fight came back to her.

She would have to find a group of people she could trust first, rather than accept the first offer. Heathcliff might earn that trust down the line, but right now he, and his guild by extension, were too much of an unknown for her to have any trust in at this point.

March 21, 2023 - Aincrad 26th Floor, Labyrinth

Silica walked beside Harry as they marched towards the boss room with a raid that had been gathered together by the Knights of Blood. The last week had been relatively busy, with the two of them going out and scouting various areas of the floor and looking for the field boss, which had been
almost laughably easy for the over prepared group that they gathered for the purpose of killing it.

Since then, everyone had made cautious progress through the labyrinth, noting the types of mobs, their attack patterns, and the various traps set throughout the dungeon. By the time they found the floor boss, most players had passed the minimum level recommendation at the very least, with the clearers a level or two past that on average. She had reached level thirty-nine yesterday herself, so she knew she was above the curve to some degree.

She glanced over to Harry, who had that relaxed alertness that an experienced player developed if he wanted to avoid exhausting himself from the tension of being outside a safe area. Any casual observer would think that he was simply walking with the group, but they would miss the alertness in his eyes as they constantly scanned their surroundings, or that his left hand kept the arming sword at his hip loose in its sheath and ready to draw at a moment’s notice.

Then again, her own right hand never strayed far from the dagger at her hip, and her eyes were scanning the environment as well. Even in a large group, they kept to hard learned habits which had kept them both alive since they had been trapped here. She felt Pina shift restlessly on her shoulder and she calmly reached up and reassured the feathered dragon, who would rather be flying.

A few minutes more of marching and they reached the door to the floor boss. She briefly relaxed and looked around. Harry’s posture had lost the alertness as everyone made their last minute preparations, now that they had arrived. She saw Kirito and Asuna walk over, the two having partied with them, but having taken positions on the flanks of the raid during the march over.

“Well,” Harry said. “This is it. We’re finally clearing the floor. Not that I minded the break, mind you, but it almost feels good to get back to this.”

The group of four, as well as nearby players, all shared a dry chuckle at that. The three weeks that everyone had spent since the last floor boss had been needed for everyone, but the point remained. It was good to get back to what they had all set out to do all those months ago.

She saw Kirito gesture towards the front of the group and everyone turned their attention there. She noticed Heathcliff give everyone a calm look and nodded.

“Everyone,” he said. “Since the last floor, we have been hesitant, and understandably so. What we endured there left its mark on everyone, lost comrades, harsh experiences, and a sense of fear. However, we will not let this death trap beat us. We will move on. And with this next battle, we shall tell Kayaba that he will not win!”

A scattered cheer broke out amongst some players, the less experienced ones, but Silica and the rest only had a grimly determined look on their faces. The more experienced clearers had little reason to cheer before a boss fight and would instead take this moment to focus on what was to come.

Heathcliff then turned around and pushed on the doors to the boss room to open them. As soon as they finished opening, the entire raid readied their gear and marched in.

##

Heathcliff watched the boss shatter and looked around as the players relaxed, more than a few taking a knee or simply sitting down as the adrenaline from the battle began to fade. He had to admit, he was mildly impressed by how well each of the groups worked together to take down the boss with no casualties.

Even those from the guild he had formed had performed admirably, quickly getting into their
assigned roles, supporting each other and other players, with the other players returning the favor. There was a clear difference in experience there, the veteran clearers showing a far greater adaptability and flexibility in how they fought, rather than the somewhat set piece movements of his guild, but that was expected.

Veteran clearers expected things to go wrong and were alert for things not going to plan. The weeks spent not truly focusing on clearing seemingly not dulling that instinct one iota. It also gave him an opportunity to see how many of them actually fought from the perspective of battle.

It was… refreshingly different. It was one thing to watch from on high, but seeing it with his own eyes showed nuances and details that such a view couldn’t provide.

Nuances such as how Kirito could anticipate the boss’ attacks and have his longsword in place to parry them almost before the boss even began its own attacks, or how Asuna’s speed allowed her to dodge attacks and counter with precise thrusts of her rapier.

Details such as Hadrian’s ability to use his shield unconventionally to either deflect, rather than simply block, attacks, or use as an improvised weapon to knock the boss out of position. Or Silica’s acrobatic movements to attack the boss inside its reach and her creative use of her pet to deliver healing items to players in need, or have it otherwise harassing the boss. And that only revolved around those four players, there were dozens of other details and nuances there.

And then there was the pulse pounding thrill of being in battle himself. There was a distinct difference in facing a boss monster, a greater sense of immediacy and danger which he found exhilarating, despite his advantages.

It was nice in a way, and it gave him a sense of connection to the players he had trapped in this game.

He spotted Hadrian look bemusedly at a second window while several players congratulated him for obtaining the Last Attack Bonus and sending joking comments toward Kirito for his failing to steal it this time. Giving a small smile, he walked over to give his own congratulations.

March 27, 2023 - Aincrad 22nd Floor, Coral

“Welcome to Lisbeth’s Blacksmith Shop! How can I help you?” The cheerful voice of the shop’s owner called out as Harry and Silica walked in, sans armor. Pina flew around a bit before landing on a window sill and watching everything.

The shop itself wasn’t large. It had a small area for customers, a counter, and the workshop could be seen right behind it. Rather typical of a rented shop for a craftsman who wanted an actual workshop, rather than using a field variant in a stall. It was more expensive than setting up shop in a market, but Coral had some good rates in comparison to many other nearby floors.

Buying a place for a shop on the other hand, was a different story.

“Just coming by repairs, Lisbeth, nothing major.” Harry said as he approached the counter and then blinked. “Um, did you change your appearance?” He asked as Silica giggled.

Lisbeth smiled as she twirled. “You like it?”
Harry gave her a curious look. “Well, it is distinctive.” He said and shook his head. “Decided on a change?”

Lisbeth sighed. “It was Asuna’s idea, okay?” She said. “She said the still blacksmithing uniform I used to wear didn’t suit me, so she recommended this, as well as dyeing my hair. And wouldn’t she be right? I doubled my business because of this.”

Silica nodded. “It’s the youthful look,” she said. “In your older uniform, you looked like a girl playing in her father’s uniform. This, well it suits you.” She indicated the puff-sleeved dress Lisbeth was now wearing, as well as the pink hair. “I wouldn’t want to wear regular armor over it, though.”

Harry snorted. “I think it’s more that it tells the guys that yes, this is a girl they’re looking at.” He shook his head. “Go figure.”

Silica shot Harry a look. “And what does that make me?” She asked archly, her hand on her dagger’s hilt.

“Dangerous,” Harry replied, shooting a wary look at her hand. “I’ve seen how you deal with unwanted advances, Silica.”

“Oh?“ Lisbeth asked, curious.

Harry grinned. “Well, there was that one time she threw one idiot out of a tavern through the window. What was his name? You know, that fat one that just reeked of, what was that word again? Otaki, otako, ah! Otaku! You know, that one?”

“Oh, him.” Silica growled. “I don’t even want to think of that one. He was a creep. I haven’t seen him for a few weeks though.” She saw Harry shiftily look to the side. “What did you do, Hadrian?”

“Me?” Harry asked, innocently. “Nothing.”

Silica raised an eyebrow. “Nothing, you say?” she asked sweetly, which put Harry on guard.

“Well, I might have tracked him down a bit later and had a few words with him outside of town.” Harry hedged and then got a slightly panicked look as Silica’s arch look turned into a glare. “Nothing bad! It wasn’t like I threatened to cut pieces of his body off and feed them to Pina or anything.”

“You didn’t? That’s a relief.”

Harry huffed. “Of course not!” He protested “I don’t want to make Pina sick. I simply had a few words with him. I might have had my sword at his throat, though, or at least I think it was his throat. It was kind of hard to tell with how many chins he had.” He shook his head. “Anyway, I needed to make a point about how he was treating a lady, and how he should treat one. You can ask Klein, he was there.”

Silica took her hand off her weapon and walked over to Harry. He gave her a wary look, which turned pained as she slapped him upside the head.

“I can take care of myself, Hadrian.” She said simply.

Harry rubbed his head. “Well yeah, but some of those guys can’t seem to take a hint.” He then muttered something that sounded like he was going to string the next bunch that try and make Silica a mascot up by their codpieces from a church steeple.
“I’m sorry, what was that?”

“Nothing, Silica, nothing at all.”

Lisbeth laughed. “You two are like a married couple, you know that?” She asked with some amusement. Her amusement grew as she saw the two of them blush at her comment. Getting control of it she then looked at them. “Now, you said you both had some gear that needs repairs?”

Taking the opportunity the change of subject presented them, both of them nodded and brought out their gear. Lisbeth’s eyes boggled at the damage done to it as she saw several rents and tears in their armor, and how Harry’s shield was actually bent as if a mob tried to wrap it around his arm.

“What the hell did you two tangle with?!” She asked incredulously.

“A field boss.” Harry replied. “We managed to find it, or it find us, don’t really know.” He shuddered. “Not going to forget that thing any time soon.”

“We decided the rest of the clearers could have fun with that one when we escaped it, got back and told them about it.” Silica added. “It seemed a bit mad at us for escaping.”

Harry nodded. “Just a bit. It might have been due to how you-” He stopped as Silica elbowed him in the stomach.

“We’re not talking about that, Hadrian.” She said firmly. “Or do you want me to mention how you-” Harry quickly put his hand over her mouth.

“Now, now, Silica. If I can’t tell, you can’t.” Harry said and removed his hand before she decided to bite it.

Lisbeth looked at the two of them, amused. Like a married couple indeed. She thought. I wonder if Argo still has that betting pool open. “There’s a bit of a story there,” she said. “Well, why don’t you two tell me what you’re willing to while I get to fixing this up?” She gave the damaged armor an impressed look. “I didn’t think gear could get this damaged without shattering from losing all its durability, let alone a shield get bent like that. A hit like that would have shattered the bones in your arm, at the least, in the real world. Wait, did something bite a piece of it off?!?” She saw Harry look to off to the side embarrassed. She shook her head. “Well, it survived whatever it was that caused this, so it must be good armor.”

Harry smiled. “It cost us a pretty col, but it was worth it, that’s for sure.” Silica simply nodded in agreement with that statement.

About an hour later, Lisbeth finished repairing their gear and the two re-equipped it with some relief. The armor was expensive, after all and they weren’t looking forward to having to replace it this soon after getting it. As they walked out, they saw several players heading to the shop, looking like they got into a fight with an angry bear crossed with a wood chipper, and had probably teleported straight to Coral.

“Field boss?” Harry asked as he passed them.

“Field boss.” One of the players replied.

“You guys at least kill it?”

The players nodded.
“Any casualties?”

“Just our gear.”

Harry nodded waved them on their way.

“Welcome to Lisbeth’s Smi- What the hell happened to you guys?!” Came the call from the blacksmith shop.

Harry and Silica looked at each other and laughed, despite themselves. That field boss would likely become something of a legend amongst clearers. Well, that and its distinctive call of *eeya yip yip yip!*
Chapter Summary

The Disclaimers in previous chapters should explain that I am only playing in the sandbox.

Mystic Knight Online

Chapter 9 - Waking Up the Scrubs

April 2, 2023 - Aincrad 27th Floor, Ronbaru

Harry gazed at the lights of the hundreds of residences which made up the cavern town, simply enjoying the serene beauty of the sight. Unlike other towns which had a teleport plaza, Ronbaru was notably lacking in shops, having a few which carried nothing special, instead having several inns and hostels, giving the town the appearance of a place for a player to stop for the night and little else.

Then again, the quality of the accommodations were nothing to sneeze at, especially when combined with excellent food and drink. Outside of a few meat dishes which had a smell and taste resembling pork, something he had very little inclination to eat since the end of his first year at Hogwarts, he had nothing to complain about.

He was simply taking in the sights as he waited for Silica to finish changing and come out of the inn, and the peaceful atmosphere was certainly something he could appreciate.

“Well, you seem relaxed.” Silica said from behind him. “Also, I like the look.”

Harry turned around and looked at Silica as she walked up to him. She had on a simple white peasant blouse and long green skirt. She had also let her hair down from its usual twin tails and was wearing it loose. Harry had settled on wearing a simple light brown tunic that was belted at the waist and black pants which were tucked into a pair of light leather boots.

Both of them still had their weapons belted at their waists from long habit.

A flicker of movement indicated that Pina was lazily flying around them, occasionally perching on an eave or windowsill.

“And you look lovely as well,” Harry replied.

Silica smiled at him in response before coming beside him. “So, want to check out that place Asuna recommended?” She asked.

Harry looked around at the sights. “Why don’t we walk around a bit before heading there?” He asked, offering his hand.
Silica gave a small blush and a shy smile before taking it.

##

Silica found herself enjoying the walk around Ronbaru. The apparent lack of shops and many businesses might make the town less desirable for front line fighters at a first glance, but it also provided a relaxed atmosphere that was similar to, but distinct from, Coral’s. She could see why Harry seemed to like it here.

She would also admit that the cavern town had its own beauty, with the interplay of oil lamps, candles, and the internally illuminated crystals that players were calling crystalights providing an ambience of a town at night. They stuck to the main thoroughfares, handily avoiding the maze like alleys and branches, just simply walking. If she didn’t know any better, she might have been convinced that they were on a date.

They stopped in the central plaza where the teleport gate was located to listen to an NPC bard play a few songs. Most of them were fairly standard fare, but a few were actually fairly catchy and she found herself clapping at the end of the performance. She saw Harry open his menu and materialize a few col coins to give to the bard and decided to do so herself.

She had gotten into the habit of doing simple courtesies like that with NPCs based on how Harry interacted with them. Both of them knew that the NPCs weren’t real, but really, simple courtesy wasn’t that hard to demonstrate. At the same time, it did end up having some small benefits. Their service at various places had improved slightly, their rooms at inns they stayed at for more than a few days smelled fresher and the sheets were softer, the bath’s water was just a little warmer and more relaxing...

Little things that actually made living in Aincrad more bearable, and all of it due to simple courtesy.

She looked at Harry who gave her a questioning look.

“Why don’t we head to that place Asuna recommended?” She asked.

His stomach growled, which caused her to giggle. Harry gave a sheepish nod and he took her hand in his.

The two of them walked on to get a meal and continue their night.

##

Argo stepped out of the shadows after they left and grinned. She had come to the floor to meet with some contacts and spied the two of them taking a stroll afterward. She was surprised to see them fully out of armor like that, though she would admit, they had picked some nice choices in their clothing. Nothing formal, but it wasn’t the type of clothing that would be worn with or under armor.

Well, well. She thought with some amusement. *Looks like our little knight is taking his princess out on a date if they’re dressed like that, and Silica should let her hair down like that more often. She would admit that the two of them looked nice, not to mention cute together like that. Well, I should give them their privacy, but I wouldn’t be me if I did. So, let Big Sister Argo follow you two and see what you do.*

She slipped back into the shadows and discretely followed them. She watched as they walked to a restaurant and entered it. She considered looking through a window, she was good at doing those things without being noticed, when she saw the two led to one of the tables on a veranda.
Good, it saved her the trouble, since she could watch them from the shadows where she was. She settled down to watch, a small smile on her face.

*Those two are good for each other, she thought. And they look cute together.*

**April 9, 2023 - Aincrad 11th Floor, Taft**

Silica watched the inn’s patrons as she waited for Harry to arrive. He had gotten dragged off by Argo for something when they entered the town, so she had decided to wait at the inn they would be staying at. She did a quick check of his status and saw that he was fine and was actually on his way back to Taft.

She wondered what Argo had needed him for, and then shrugged. She’d just ask him when he got back. Knowing Argo, it could be anything from some interesting information, to something important. Or, she could have done all of that just to make it look that way, it was hard to tell with her.

*We might want to do it somewhere more private though, She thought. If it’s serious, Harry won’t want anyone listening in. And... I’m beginning to think of him as Harry, rather than Hadrian.*

She pushed that thought out of her mind and gave Pina a scratch between the wings and listened to the contented sounds as her pet ate a small dish of meats that she ordered and had placed on the table. While Pina seemed to positively love peanuts, the feathered dragon would basically eat anything, and being a dragon, that meant a definite preference for meat.

She brought up the inn’s menu and looked at the various drinks available. Taft’s inns had a fairly decent selection of wines and ciders, and a few palatable non-alcoholic beverages as well, to choose from. She settled on one of the sweet ciders and waved down an NPC waitress to place her order.

A few minutes later she sipped her drink as she checked on where Harry was and noticed that he was in town, meaning he should be by shortly. She heard a cheer coming from a nearby table and shook her head in amusement as she saw a bunch of teens who couldn’t be much older than her raise their cups in a toast. She was about to turn her attention back to her drink when she spied someone she did not expect to see sitting with them.

*What’s Kirito doing there? She thought to herself as Harry arrived. And how did I either miss him arriving, or not notice him when I did?#

Kirito really didn’t know what to do as the party he helped toasted him him. Frankly, it was only because he was in the area and saw that they were in trouble that he even did so. A few minutes earlier or later, and he wouldn’t have been around. He only culled some of the mobs to take the pressure off of them so that they could regroup. Once they had, they were able to handle the rest of the mobs fairly easily.

It wasn’t as if he had taken out an entire army of mobs and saved their lives. He simply helped a little.

*“Man,” one of the members said. “If it wasn’t for you, those mobs would have had us for lunch!” Kirito shrugged. “I was in the area.” he said. “You guys looked like you could use a little help, so I helped.” It was as simple as that in his mind.*
“Still,” another said, the apparent leader if he recalled. “Thanks for that. By the way, I’m Keita. The others are Tetsuo, Sasamaru, Ducker, and Sachi. We’re all in the same guild, The Moonlit Black Cats.” He said as he indicated the rest of his party.

“It was no problem,” Kirito replied with a smile. “I’m Kirito.”

Keita nodded with a smile. “Well, thanks again, Kirito.” He then seemed to think of something. “Um, this might be a little rude, but can I ask you where your level is around, or what floor you’re normally on? The way you handled those mobs was… impressive and rapid, to say the least.”

Kirito blinked at the question and scrambled mentally for an answer. He thought about hedging things, maybe underselling his level a little bit, but that option was quickly snatched from him.

“He’s a front line clearer, probably the strongest there is.” A girl’s voice said.

Kirito looked past the party and saw Harry and Silica walking up. The rest of the guild turned and saw the pair.

“What are a pair of kids doing here?” Came the question from one of them. Ducker, if Kirito remembered Keita’s introductions right.

"Helping with the clearing," Kirito found himself saying; and when he wondered why, the reason surprised him. In fact, it was how novel the reason was that surprised him.

He considered the two young frontliners friends, or at least friendly.

“Well, less helping with the clearing, at least today, and more taking a little time to work on some of our less used skills,” Harry replied. “That and farming up some fairly rare mats.”

Keita blinked. “Wait, you two are clearers, and so is Kirito?” He asked with some surprise.

Harry nodded. “I’m Hadrian, and my adorably deadly companion is Silica.” Silica elbowed him in the gut with that one, to which he merely grunted.

"He sometimes forgets the deadly part even as he mentions it," Kirito noted with a smirk.

"He's quipping again," Harry stage whispered to Silica.

"I did warn you,” she murmured back.

Harry shrugged. “Anyway, I’m actually surprised Kirito. You’re being social, and Asuna didn’t force you into it? Progress.”

Kirito dignified Harry’s comment with the only appropriate reply and flipped him off. Harry only grinned in response while Silica simply gave a sigh of amused exasperation.

“Ignore him, he thinks he’s being clever and witty.” She said to the others.

"I'm not?” Harry gasped. "Why didn't you warn me?"

“"It warns others about you," Kirito said, before taking a drink.

The lower level players didn't seem to know where to look, or want to believe their eyes. They all had this image of clearers in their minds, Kirito guessed. They probably thought that clearers were supposed to be serious, grim, and focused. Not cracking jokes at each other’s expense, spotting lame one liners to kill a bad mood, or just generally using humor like they did.
There were clearers like that, but most had long since started using humor, sometimes grim humor appropriate for walking up to the gallows, but still humor, as a coping mechanism. With them constantly risking their lives and knowing full well that their next trip out of a safe zone could be their last, they needed something to help them remain sane.

“Are… are clearers always like this?” Keita asked himself.

Harry chuckled. “Not all of us, just most.” He said drily. His expression turned serious. “So, our comments to each other aside, what’s the occasion?”

Sasamaru gathered himself. “Oh, Kirito saved us from becoming monster food when we were in the Dark Forest.”

Harry looked at Kirito, who nodded. “Where in the forest?” he asked curiously.

“Near the tower,” Tetsuo said. “We could see it, but we were ambushed by a lot of mobs.”

“It was where you, Silica and Klein’s group took on the field boss.” Kirito said helpfully.

Silica winced. “You mean where this idiot,” she pointed to Harry. “Decided that stabbing a giant snake’s brain through its mouth was a good idea.”

“Hey!” Harry protested.

“One of it’s fangs went clear through your arm.” Silica told him.

“I got better.”

“That’s not the point, Harry.”

Kirito and Harry blinked.

“I thought only Argo called you Harry, Hadrian.” Kirito said.

Harry shrugged. “Eh, I’ve told people they can call me Harry more than a few times. Besides, Argo doesn’t do formal, and Harry is used informally for quite a few names.” He looked at Silica. “I’m surprised that it took five months before you did, Silica.”

Silica tried to cover the blush that bloomed on her face and nudged Harry. "The Japanese don’t become familiar so easily."

Kirito shook his head. “You two might want to stop before you two end up convincing another group that you’re a married couple.” He shot out, amused.

The two of them blushed and Harry gave him a two finger salute.

Kirito smirked. Point to me, he thought.

“Anyway, you were saying you all got ambushed?” Harry asked, clearly trying to change the subject.

Keita blinked and gathered himself. “Yeah. We tried to get away, but we were blocked from leaving.”

“Yup, that’s the place all right.” Silica said drily. “And let me guess, you didn’t have a Teleport Crystal.”
Keita nodded.

“Word of advice: Each of you should always have at least one.” Harry said. Before Keita could protest he held up his hand. “I know they’re expensive, but those things have saved both Silica’s and my own life several times when we bit off more than we could chew ever since they became available.”

“Well, there was that one trapped room in the twenty-seventh floor labyrinth where it didn’t work.” Silica added.

Harry nodded, wincing. “Looking back, the entire thing should have screamed ‘trap’ to me. Hidden room, treasure chest, no mobs in the immediate area? That should have been a warning right there.” He admitted. “Good thing we still keep potions on hand. When the room sealed and it filled with mobs, crystals didn’t work until we killed them all. And I mean all crystals, not just teleport crystals.”

Kirito looked at Harry sharply. “You mean there’s a trap that blocks crystal use?”

Harry nodded. “I spread the word out on it, it happened a couple of days ago.”

Kirito nodded. “That explains why I haven’t heard of it then.” He said. “I’ve been down here farming some mats and some stuff to sell to Agil. Still, that’s bad news if there are more traps like that.”

Harry shrugged. “So far, that’s the only case, but better for people to know about a new kind of trap, just in case. Still, I don’t think it’s going to be a common one.”

Sachi decided to speak up. “Um, what makes you think that?” She asked.

Harry looked at everyone present. “Because it wouldn’t be fair, at least this early.” He explained. “Say what you want about Kayaba, but SAO has been fair for the most part. Most things can be handled if you’re prepared and careful, even when you don’t know what to expect. It’s those occasions where the game isn’t being fair that you have to watch out for. It’s one of the reasons why it’s now recommended that you should be at least around ten levels higher than the floor number.”

“I wondered about that,” Ducker said. “That came down shortly after the twenty-fifth floor was cleared, right? Was it really as bad as the rumors say it was?”

“It depends on what the rumors say,” Silica admitted. “But it was bad.”

“How bad was it?” Tetsuo asked.

Harry looked at everyone and sighed. “That’s where SAO stops taking easy on players, and believe me, it’s taking it easy on you down here.” He said simply. “Before then, you could get by fairly easily if you were careful, but there?”

He gave a bitter laugh. “On the Twenty-Fifth, you have to know what you’re doing. If you thought the Dark Forest was bad with traps, well it is, but those traps aren’t lethal, just annoying. On the Twenty-Fifth, we ran into a dozen lethal traps just getting to Stahlhold to activate the teleport gate. And that doesn’t even count the number of ambushes.”

“You know, I still haven’t gotten that Moshi Moshi,” Silica mused.

Harry snorted as everyone but Kirito looked confused.

“Moshi Moshi?” Keita asked, confused. “What?”
“She figured out that the Twenty-Fifth was going to be bad before we got there,” Kirito explained. “The previous few floors were, looking back on it, rather underwhelming, which any experienced gamers would normally take as a warning sign. In other words, she called it.”

“But since everyone was so focused on clearing, they didn’t think about that, just counted their lucky stars that things were looking like they were getting easier.” Harry added. “Big mistake.”

“Yeah, I’ll say.” Ducker said. “I heard that about two hundred people died on that floor.”

“Well, that’s true, Argo confirmed it.” Silica said. “Well, this is getting depressing, anyone have an idea of a change of subject?”

Keita got a thoughtful look on his face. “You know, we could probably get some tips and maybe learn a few tricks from you guys.” He said.

Harry looked at Kirito, and then back to Keita. “You mean some training, right?” He asked.

Keita nodded.

Harry looked thoughtful. “Well, outside of our usual, I don’t see a problem with it.” He looked at Silica and Kirito. “What do you two think?”

Silica shrugged. “I don’t see a problem.”

Kirito had a thoughtful look on his face. “What about floor bosses, not to mention keeping our levels current?”

“Hmm, good point.” Harry acknowledged. “I don’t mind sitting out the occasional floor boss, it’s not like Silica and I do all of them anyway. Though, considering the progress on Floor Twenty-seven, they’ll probably find the boss room and scout the boss in the next few days. I was planning on being a part of that one, but it’s no loss to me if I’m not.” Silica nodded in affirmation.

“As for levels, I know you like to do solo work, but Silica and I, while not averse to it, prefer not to do so. Not after the Twenty-Fifth at any rate. Frankly, I’m surprised that Asuna hasn’t put a leash on you about that yet.”

“I sent her a message,” Silica said helpfully. “She’s been wondering where you’ve been for the last few days.” She got a thoughtful look on her face and turned to Harry. “You know, having her along for this might help. What do you think?”

Harry nodded. “You know, she just might. God knows she needs a break from the front lines, and it means we can alternate out. We’d have to work out the details, if that’s the case. Well, we can sort that out after we know what we have to work with.” He looked at Keita. “Now, I have a few questions for you. Silica, Kirito, feel free to chime in as well.”

Keita blinked as Harry looked at him. Did they seriously work that out so quickly, and who is this Asuna they mentioned? He thought. “Oh, um, right.” He said. “Go ahead.”

Harry nodded. “What are the specialties of each of you? Weapons, basic skill layout, things like that?”

Keita took a breath. “Well, Tetsuo is our tank, while the rest of us deal damage. I was thinking of getting Sachi to pick up a shield to help him,” he caught Harry’s look. “Um, what?”

“Nothing, continue.”
“Well, outside of Ducker also being our specialist in finding and disarming traps, that’s about it in terms of specializing.”

“Yeah, I still need some practice with that,” Ducker said sheepishly.

“Well, we have a handy dungeon nearby to help with that.” Silica replied drily. “There are a few pointers we can give about spotting them as well.”

“And that’s all?” Kirito asked.

Harry shook his head. “Not everyone’s like you, Kirito. It took Silica and I weeks of research before we had an idea of how we wanted to develop.” He looked at the Moonlit Black Cats members. “What about skill layouts? And if you need to change them, do you have Crystal Bottles of Kales’Oh so you don’t lose progression on your other skills in case you need to change them?”

“Crystal Bottles of what now?” Sasamaru asked.

Harry sighed. This is going to take a while. He thought with a mental sigh. I also hope that Silica doesn’t ask me what Argo dragged me off for. I don’t want to let slip that The Rat had decided to give me The Talk.

April 14, 2023 - Aincrad 15th Floor, Fairwind Plateau

They had picked this spot to train some of the Moonlit Black Cats members because it had very few mobs and was relatively isolated, being near Aincrad’s edge. Getting here was a bit of a different story, but that was actually part of the point. The mobs were fairly weak for the floor, something the lower level players could handle, while also allowing them to see a distinct difference when they got done.

Asuna looked at the pair of Moonlit Black Cats members she was training with a neutral expression as she evaluated what she had seen. Harry was right when he said that this group had probably survived as far as they did more through luck than skill. Oh, they weren’t bad, but the simple fact was that they weren’t at the point where they should have been. The front lines would have eaten these kids alive, she thought.

She saw Harry off to the side showing Tetsuo some tricks to use with a shield, with Sachi watching as well. He showed how the shield’s position and angle affected how it blocked and deflected attacks, and how important things like stance and footwork were. Harry didn’t have the build for a tank, his smaller and lighter frame worked against him, but he at least knew the basics and regularly practiced them. They formed the core of his own style of fighting, after all.

Sachi would probably benefit from his instruction even more than Tetsuo, as she had nothing to unlearn, unlike most shield users. Harry’s style was counterintuitive to those who thought in game mechanics. Well, she would benefit once she got past the fact that she seemed to be scared of just about everything, not that it was necessarily a bad thing.

Of all of them, she’s probably the only one who really understands how dangerous it is outside the safe zones. Asuna mused to herself. Get her past the fear and give her some self-confidence, and she will do well. Ah, well, Hadrian should be good for that. And Silica as well, now that I think about it. Well, provided she’s suitable for that style.

As for her, she was working with Sasamaru and Keita on spear skills. She had picked up a spear to
use as an alternate weapon and needed practice with it anyway. Keita was doing well, but a spear didn’t seem appropriate for Sasamaru. She would have to think on that, and talk with Kirito about it.

“Ok, good work with that, you two.” She told them. “Keita, you’re doing fine as is, but you need to work a bit on your footwork, there were several times I could have knocked you off balance with a simple push. Sasamaru, remember that sword skills activate only when the weapon is in the proper position, so study up on what those positions are and practice them.”

Kirito and Silica had dragged Ducker off to the Dark Forest field dungeon on the eleventh floor to work his trap detection and disarming. *I wish them luck with that,* She thought before turning her attention back to Keita and Sasamaru.

**Aincrad 11th Floor, Dark Forest**

“So, you see what I mean by the tells for traps now?” Silica asked Ducker. “Even without the trap detection skill, a lot of traps can be spotted by simply looking around and spotting something that seems out of place. It doesn’t work for all of them, true, but it works for a lot more than people think.”

Ducker nodded. “I see what you mean. But if you can spot where a trap is most of the time without it, why have Trap Detection then?”

“Trap Detection allows you to identify the kind of trap,” Kirito said. “Not having the trap detection means that you need to trigger the trap to know what it is. Given that traps are getting progressively more lethal as you go up in floors, I think you can understand why that’s a bad idea.”

“That, and you eventually develop an instinct for things.” Silica added. “Well, if you’re alert and not tired.”

Kirito snorted. “I take it that’s why Hadrian and you didn’t spot that one trap?”

Silica shrugged. “Maybe. Looking back, it was obvious, which annoys him by the way. Secret room, off to the side of a hall with no mobs, a treasure chest, and the fact that we looked into the room later after it reset and saw that the walls weren’t right.”

Kirito nodded. “Yeah, I see what you mean.”

Ducker chuckled nervously. “You guys make it seem as if by that point everything is trying to kill you up there.” He said. “You guys are making me nervous with talk like that.”

Both Silica and Kirito looked at each other and then to Ducker.

“Good.” Both said.

**April 17, 2023 - Aincrad 8th Floor, Frieven**

Lind watched as Schivata walked in. It had been over a month since he had been disgraced on the twenty-fifth floor, and been forced to lay low in order to let the furor die down. Argo had stopped her character assassination campaign weeks ago, but he knew that it would take time before he could undo the damage.
Until then, he would have to be circumspect. While he would love nothing more than to wring her neck, she wasn’t the primary obstacle in his path.

“What have you found out about that boy’s movements, Schivata?” he asked.

“He’s been spending more time on lower floors, boss.” His second replied. “Looks like he and the girl have found a group of mid-level players that they have decided to train.”

“And this group?” Lind asked.

“They’re a small guild, called the Moonlit Black Cats. There are only five members, and it seems that they were probably friends, or at least acquaintances, in the real world.”

Lind considered that information and considered how he might be able to use it. Hadrian had a solid reputation now, and any attempt at using rumor against them would likely reach Argo. But that didn’t mean that he couldn’t use others against him.

“Oh, and boss,” Schivata interrupted his thoughts. “It also looks like they got the Beater and Asuna in on it as well.”

Lind nodded. “Thank you for the information, Schivata.” He said. “Keep an eye out for anything else. I have to think things over.”

Schivata recognized the dismissal and nodded, leaving the room.

##

While Frieven had little to offer, and the floor’s ever present smell made it unpopular with players, he had to admit that the beer was rather good. It didn’t quite make up for the smell, but it seemed to make it more bearable.

Schivata looked into his mug as he considered his guild leader. Lind’s isolation here was not doing him any favors, and it allowed him to stew in his thoughts. Now that the initial uproar died down, he thought Lind would get back to working towards clearing, or at least working to repair his reputation.

Instead, he had members going out and gathering information, keeping tabs on the movements of the one he held responsible, Hadrian. What had been anger was turning into an obsession, as if he was simply biding his time and waiting for the time to strike back at the boy.

What was worrying to him, was if Lind decided to strike back using Silica. Schivata knew that Hadrian was protective of her, and tended to be rather vicious to those who did not take the hint when the girl made it clear that she did not appreciate their advances. Nothing lethal or injurious, but word had spread about how he drove off that one guy, Aaaa.

Not that the fat bastard didn’t have it coming, from what Schivata had heard.

Still, if Lind decided to use the girl against Hadrian, and if he actually hurt her, Schivata had a feeling that the boy wouldn’t rage or go berserk. No, if Lind did that, the boy struck him as the type who would simply draw his sword and butcher him. No words, no yelling, no threats; just simply going about it. And he wouldn’t use a proxy, like using a mob to do an MPK. No, the boy was the type that if it came down to having someone killed, he would do it himself. Perhaps to take on the burden of guilt, perhaps not.

Schivata sincerely hoped it wouldn’t come to that.
Harry gave a tired and annoyed groan as the morning light hit his eyes, waking him up. He blearily opened his eyes and took a quick moment to get his bearings. Silica was on the other bed in the room, instead of sharing a room with Sachi, and Pina was using his chest as a bed, again. The time in his HUD might as well have said it was too early in the morning, as usual.

The only reason Silica was sharing the room was due to the two of them heading out to hit a unique quest on the twenty-sixth floor that could only be done at night, and was available for a short time. By the time they got back, it was one in the morning, and Silica opted to simply room with him, rather than potentially wake Sachi up.

Fortunately, Harry had gotten the room when they got dinner and it had two beds. While Harry wasn’t averse to sleeping on the couch, if available, he preferred sleeping on a bed. And there were also the times when there was only one room available, with only a bed. If they were lucky, it was large enough for two people. If not, then they still shared as Silica flatly refused to let him to sleep on the floor, and he refused to have her sleep on the floor, or in a chair for that matter.

Harry gave up on arguing that matter after the fifth time. It all worked out, especially as they agreed on some ground rules.

She wouldn’t complain about how he kicked her in his sleep, took up too much of the bed, took more than his fair share of the covers, or snored. And he wouldn’t complain about her kicking him in her sleep, taking up too much of the bed, taking more than her fair share of the covers, and he certainly didn’t complain about her making those adorably cute sounds which were most certainly not snores.

Also, blame Klein if they woke up cuddling, holding each other, or spooning. He was handy for that, and they both agreed that he was a bad influence on them. It didn’t help his case that he made it a habit to stay in the same inn as them when they were on the front lines and have his guild members take up any extra rooms. If Harry didn’t think the idea completely absurd, even for Klein, he would swear that the man was trying to set him and Silica up into a relationship.

Though he would admit, waking up cuddled next to her was nice.

*Ok, better stop right there, he thought. Otherwise I will start musing on how my hands seem to fit on her hips or waist just perfectly, or how her-- Damn it, Klein! And for good measure, damn it Argo!* He quickly shook those thoughts out of his head as he gently picked Pina up off of him and sat up. Giving the feathered dragon a gentle scratch, he placed her on his pillow and got off the bed. The little dragon opened an eye, gave a contented sound that was almost like a cross between a purr and a chirp, and quickly settled back to sleep.
Glancing at the time in his HUD again and taking a glance at the still sleeping Silica, he decided to forego taking the opportunity for a quick wash. While it was possible for Silica to simply sleep until he woke her up, it was better not to chance it. Knowing his luck, she would wake up and decide on taking a bath while he was still washing up. Or if he was especially unlucky, she would walk in right as he was getting out of the bath.

That would be likely be rather awkward, and while it wouldn’t surprise him if it happened eventually, he would like to put it off for as long as possible.

He briefly mused on whether he should wake her up or not before deciding otherwise. They had gotten back late the previous night, and it was only his long habit of being an early riser which caused him to be awake, however much he wanted otherwise. They also didn’t have anything particular planned for the day, so he might as well let her have her lie in.

He opened the menu, equipped his armor and, sparing a glance at her, walked out of the room. As he walked down the hall, he idly wondered what he would have for breakfast that morning.

Silica joined him about half an hour later as he was finishing up his meal. Briefly looking over the inn’s menu, she waved over a waitress and placed her order. Pina landed on the table, chirping what could be interpreted as a greeting to him. Well, it was either that, or the dragon was begging for food off his plate again.

“So, what’s the plan for today?” Silica asked.

Harry shrugged. “Keita and the others are doing fine, and if I remember correctly, it’s Kirito and Asuna’s turn to handle training for the next few days, so I guess we’ll head up to floor twenty-eight and work on helping with clearing it, if that is the case.” He said. “They’re in the labyrinth, and unless they did the boss fight yesterday, or are doing it today, I think we can get in on it. Our levels are still high enough. Otherwise, just explore the labyrinth and do some quests, I guess.”

Silica nodded. While neither she, nor Harry were over leveled like Kirito and Asuna were, it only meant that they were still in their mid forties, not getting close to level fifty. “And what if it’s not their turn, or Kirito and Asuna don’t arrive until later this afternoon?”

“Then we just relax for now,” he replied. “We’ve been running Keita and his guild pretty hard recently, so they can use a break. Hell, Kirito and Asuna can use a break. They’re not fooling us about going out at night to keep progress with leveling.”

Silica snorted. “Agreed. But then, we aren’t fooling them, either.”

Harry nodded at that. He and Silica did go out to grind some experience, but they limited their time out to only a couple of hours before heading back most of the time, which was the main reason the level disparity between the two pairs had increased slightly. The quest they did last night was an exception, considering that they got back after midnight.

The waitress arrived with Silica’s meal and Harry let her get to eating while he ordered another drink, which arrived a minute later. The two of them engaged in some idle talk as they waited, either for Keita and his guild to wake up and get a meal, or for Kirito and Asuna to arrive, whichever happened first.

The Moonlit Black Cats came down about twenty minutes later and sat at a nearby table to order their meals. Harry gave them a simple wave of acknowledgment as he finished his drink. There’s no way Sachi missed our absence last night. He thought.
For all of her fears and confidence issues, understandable ones, she was sharp. That she took to his training her in his style of shield usage quickly indicated as much. Oh there were differences. She used her shield as a tool to direct the enemy the way she wanted in battle and to defending herself well. She may lack the more reckless and aggressive mindset that allowed him to use it offensively, but she had adapted his style to fit her.

He noticed that Keita finished his order and was looking at him. Turning his attention him, Harry decided to explain what the general plan was, once he got confirmation from Kirito and Asuna about their plans.

##

Kirito and Asuna walked into the inn and saw Harry and Silica were waiting for them. Harry was idly exploring his menu options. Silica was just sitting there and idly stroking Pina, with a bored look on her face until she saw them. She gave them both an irritated look as she waved them over.

“What took you?” she asked as they approached. “We were expecting you both about an hour ago.”

“This idiot slept in,” Asuna replied with a gesture to Kirito. “Also, they found the boss room last night and are planning to scout it with a possibility of clearing the boss today.”

Harry looked at them both. “I take it you two intend to be there?”

Asuna and Kirito nodded. “We were thinking about asking you two to join in, if you’re up for it.” Kirito said.

Harry nodded. “I’ll let Keita know.” He replied. “We’ve all been running them pretty hard, so a day or two off won’t hurt them. If we knock the boss out today, you two should take a break as well, you two look like you can use some down time.” He saw both of them about to protest and put his hand up. “I know, I know, same here with myself and Silica. We’ve all been balancing training the Moonlit Black Cats and keeping our levels up, but you two have been taking it further than we have. When was the last time you two got a full night’s sleep?”

Kirito nodded. “Point. Taking a day off wouldn’t be a bad idea.” He admitted.

Silica gave a mock gasp. “Kirito’s actually agreeing on taking a break?”

Harry made an exaggerated look outside. “It doesn’t seem as if the world’s ending.”

“Are you feeling okay, Kirito?” Silica asked with concern, or it would be if she wasn’t obviously trying not to grin.

Asuna chuckled. “They know you too well, Kirito.”

Kirito gave them all a flat look. “Very funny.” He said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

## Aincrad 28th Floor, Boss Room

They all watched as the boss shattered into polygons after its defeat and all the players relaxed, some sinking to the ground in exhaustion. The boss, Sevaran the Solemn, had a much higher defense than usual, though little else. It still took them the better part of an hour and a half to kill it, even with several overpowered players.

Still, all in all, it was a fairly routine fight by their experiences. There were no special attacks or pattern changes, and there no major attacks to be especially on guard for. Just a high defense and a
Harry really hoped that it didn’t mean that the next one would be problematic. “So, the boss is down, and the floor’s cleared. Anyone else want to drink to that?”

“Who’s buying the first round?” He heard Klein call out.

“You are,” Kirito replied. “Thanks for offering, Klein.”

Many of the players present laughed as Klein protested, cheerfully ribbing him for walking right into that one, and even Heathcliff cracked a small smile. Klein’s protests were more for form’s sake anyway.

“Well, we can do it on the next floor, or we can do it somewhere else.” Silica said calmly. “I’m for doing it in Mistleberg or Panareze, myself.” Many of the other female players present nodded and emphasized their agreement by shooting looks at several male players who quickly agreed. That they were either in a relationship with one of the ladies, or were regular companions of them was not missed by anyone.

Harry glanced at Kirito who was glancing at him. They both then glanced at Asuna and Silica who were giving them looks that hinted that they should voice their own agreement as well if they knew what was good for them. “Panareze sounds good, don’t you think so, Kirito?” Harry asked.

“It does.” Kirito agreed.

“Right, we’ll meet in Panareze for it.” Harry called out. He glanced at the time in his HUD and nodded. “It’ll be an hour from now.”

“Man, all you guys are whipped.” One of the other players called out, only to take a startled step back when everyone looked at him.

Klein chuckled. “They might be, but consider this.” He said, placing a hand on the player’s shoulder. “Most of those guys have a girlfriend, or significant other here. The others have friends who are girls, who just happen to be here. So tell me, what do they have that the rest of us don’t?”

The player thought about it and realized at what Klein was hinting at. “Oh,” he said.

Klein patted the player on the shoulder and walked off. “Exactly.” He said cheerfully. “Well then, let’s go activate the Teleport Gate and get on with it. First round’s on me!”

The rest of the players cheered at that.

**Aincrad 24th Floor, Panareze**

The party was in full swing when the Moonlit Black Cats arrived, having been invited by Harry and Silica when Klein-- and there was a name most players had heard by now, Keita reflected-- expressed interest in meeting them. The second they opened the door, they had to duck as a patron was sent flying out of it into the wall of a shop across the street.

“Hey, you guys okay there?” Came a familiar voice.

“We’re fine!” Keita called out. “What was that?”
Harry walked to the entrance and grinned. “Some idiot decided to get fresh and grabby with Asuna and she sent him flying.” He shook his head. “You would think they’d learn, but some seem to need more percussive correction than others.” He looked at the dazed player. “Huh, she sent him flying for about fifteen meters, a new record. Well, come on in, there’s someone who wants to meet you.”

Kieta and the others followed him in and stopped briefly as they saw a large number of players drinking, engaging in gambling, and generally living it up. “What’s the occasion?” Tetsuo asked.

“Cleared the twenty-eighth floor, we’ve survived for six months, take your pick.” Harry said with a shrug. “It’s not like we really need much of an excuse, really.”

“Work hard, party hard?” Ducker asked.

“Pretty much. Anyway, come on in and let me introduce you guys to Klein.”

Harry guided them through the crowd easily, occasionally glaring down some of the more exuberant players when they hit on Sachi, which was amusing in a way, considering that he was only about one hundred and sixty centimeters tall. Then again, Keita reflected, the height thing never stopped one of the Young Knight's disappointed glares from curbing their excesses and stupidities in training.

Within a minute, Harry led them through the crowd to a semi-private area where Kirito and a few others were sitting around a table. Harry walked up to the table and got the attention of a man wearing a bandanna. From what Keita could tell, the man looked a bit on the roguish side, with his slightly unshaven face and wild hair held back by a bandanna.

It had to be Klein, the clearer sometimes simply nicknamed "Bro". That such a notable in their little community wanted to meet them was a bit intimidating.

“Klein,” Harry said, confirming Keita’s guess. “You wanted to know who Silica, Asuna, Kirito and I decided to provide training to, so let me introduce you to the Moonlit Black Cats. This is Keita, the guild leader, and with him is Tetsuo, Sasamaru, Ducker and Sachi. Guys, this is Klein, leader of the Fuurinkazan guild.”

“Yo, nice to meet you all.” Klein said. “Take a seat.”

As Keita and his guild members took the offered seats, Klein finished his drink and gestured to an NPC to get him another one. Harry, noticing that, shook his head in exasperation.

“Klein, having another beer won’t affect you any more than they already do, which is not at all,” he said, with the air of an oft repeated refrain. “Well, at least until you find a drink that will get someone drunk, which knowing you, will happen eventually.”

Klein snorted. “And what about you?” He asked. “You know which places serve the best beer on fifteen floors.”

“Yeah, the places which serve something that actually tastes like beer, not that horse piss you call lager or pale ale, though pale ale could be appropriate given its taste.”

"I take it, that it was from the horse or the cow, Hadrian?” Asuna asked.

"Mixed, for maximum insult to men and women of taste," Harry said, saluting the laughter this earned. “Also, good picking up on that, Asuna. Usually it’s one of Klein’s guys who does, but it seems that they’re busy gambling their col away somewhere, or hustling some guys for their col.”

Keita blinked. “Um, what?”
Silica patted him on the shoulder. “Ignore them, this is an argument they tend to have.” She said. “Harry’s from England, so he has his opinions on what makes a proper beer, being English and the fact that he’s apparently a connoisseur.”

Harry shot Silica a glare. “Hey, it’s kind of a tradition at my school to smuggle alcohol into the dorms. I was on one of the sports teams, so I’ve had beer and whiskey shoved down my throat every time we won a game.” He protested. “The beer was fine, but the whiskey? Not my thing.”

"Scotch?” Klein prompted.

"As our... dorm mother advised us when she caught us with it... after tossing out the 'rotten shite' we once brought in and giving us a 'properly aged bottle'," Harry said with a smirk, "I catch you getting drunk on scotch without enjoying it properly, I will expel you from this dorm regardless of what the headmaster says."

"... she sounds awesome and scary," Keita said, blinking. Which made Harry a bit more awesome and scary, but he didn't say that bit out loud..

"... yeah, that's McGonagall,” Harry admitted. “She had the mindset that if you were going to break the rules, do it properly, and if, or I should say when, you get caught, take your punishment without complaint. Just don’t embarrass her or do something particularly stupid.”

“That’s only fair.” Kirito said.

“It is. In other words, we go big, carry around a pair of solid brass ones, balls or breasts depending on your gender, or we go home. Doesn’t mean we can’t be sneaky though. My school’s biggest pranksters are in that dorm and they simply own up to their pranks after the fact, considering they only get caught about a third of the time.” Harry recalled with a smile. “Those two do know where the line is and don’t cross it. They also take their lumps when their targets get even with them. I still remember when the girls on the team dragged them off and then pulled them into the dining hall in ball gowns, makeup, the whole works and set it up so that they would have to be like that all day.”

Everyone laughed at that. "What team is this?” Keita asked, then winced. "Or is asking prying, sorry!"

Harry waved the lower leveled player off. "I brought it up. You just have to accept my 'I'd rather not say' when I answer with it. Which is my answer, sorry."

Keita nodded slightly. "Faru coppa."


Asuna nodded. "Always painful.” At his glance, she smirked. "I'd rather not say."

Harry raised his cup and saluted her. There was a story there, and Keita reminded himself it wasn't his place to pry.

“Well, all that aside, let’s get to the purpose of this meeting.” Klein said after the waitress brought his drink over. “I wanted to meet you guys, because anyone who can get Mister Broody over there to socialize is worth knowing.”

“Screw you, Klein.” Kirito grumbled.

“You’ll have to buy me dinner and take me out on a date first, Kirito.” Klein shot back.
"You come cheap," Asuna followed smoothly.

"But we knew that about him," Silica and Harry added, then clinked their cups.

Klein clutched his heart in mock pain. "Ouch, I’m hurt guys, seriously."

"Oh, sorry, I tend to forget how sensitive you are," Harry said.

"No, you don't, you take relentless advantage of it," Silica corrected. Pina chirped in apparent agreement.

"Sh, don't tip him off."

Klein gave his fellow clearers a flat look. "I hate you all." He grumbled.

"No you don’t," The four of them said.

"We've bought you too much alcohol," Kirito said. "Skipped dinner, so don't you get the wrong idea."

"If he did, Argo would be selling tickets." Silica quipped.

"Do we get a cut of the proceeds?" Harry wondered.

"... can we catch her as she tries to disappear with them?" Asuna countered.

"Right, so avoid," Harry said, raising his cup with a grin and taking a swig.

“Aww, Harry, I’m shocked you all would think so little of me,” a voice came from right behind the Young Knight. Keita barely managed to keep himself and Sachi from falling off their seats at the sudden appearance. His other guild mates weren’t so lucky.

Harry’s swallow went down a little awkwardly. "When am I," he gasped, "going to learn not to speak of a devil I don't need to appear?"

Silica patted Harry on the shoulder. “Probably when you learn not to think her name as well,” she said. “So, sometime between never and the end of time?” She looked at Keita and his guild as the majority managed to get back to their seats. “Well, the Rat’s not in the walls any more,” she said cheerfully. “Guys, this is Argo, information broker, writer of the Weekly Argo, and keeper of bets. Argo, the Moonlit Black Cats.”

“Heya!” Argo said cheerfully. “So, you’re the guys that Kii-bou, Aa-chan, Harry, and Silica have been training. Nice to meetcha.”

Keita looked at the young woman, finding himself once again having to revise his perceptions about someone. He had heard about Argo, a.k.a. The Rat, Aincrad’s primary information broker, of course, but he didn’t think that it would be a young woman with blonde hair and golden eyes. The eyes threw him off, but he figured it was probably the use of one of those cosmetic change items. Another thing, he firmly reminded himself, not to pry about.

“So, you’re the famous information broker?” Tetsuo asked.

“More like infamous, if you ask me,” Harry snarked. “What are you here for Argo?”

Argo shrugged. “Heard those kids you were training came up here and figured I would see them.” She replied. “Also, I need to borrow Silica for a bit.”
“Oh?”

“Remember that talk we had last month?” She asked with a smirk and a pat on Harry's shoulder. When Harry blushed, she smirked. “It’s Silica’s turn.”

Silica blinked. “You mean that conversation he wouldn’t say anything about?” She asked. “I’ve been wondering about it, but if he didn’t want to talk about it, I wouldn’t pry.”

“Well, you’re about to find out!” Argo said cheerfully. She shot Klein a look and nodded.

Harry saw the look and muttered something in English which had Asuna looking scandalized, amused, back to scandalized, and then back to amused.

“Do I want to know what he just said?” Argo asked.

Asuna smirked. “I think I’ll keep this one to myself,” she said. “At least until I can confirm some suspicions of mine.” She leaned over and whispered something into Argo’s ear. Argo grinned and nodded and then said something too low for Harry to make out. Asuna’s amusement increased. “I should have known you would play matchmaker like that.” She said.

Harry sighed and shook his head. He glanced at Silica, who had a look of dawning realization on her face as well. “And that confirms it,” he said. “The Rat’s playing matchmaker.” He looked at Kirito, and smirked slightly. “Pay up, Kirito.”

Kirito grumbled and transferred the col to him.

“Well, if Argo wants to talk with Silica, I might as well take some time to fetch some more drinks.” He got up and looked around. “You all might as well get them spun up on the bets, I get to tell them about the ones involving you guys, though.”

“Heh, sure thing kid.” Klein said.

Keita watched as Harry stood up and walked to the bar in some confusion and looked back toward everyone else. “Bets?” He asked with some confusion. “And what was going on? I’m kind of new to this, but it seems as if a lot of conversations happened.”

Kirito chuckled. “Yeah, sorry about that, Keita. We tend to just do that when you get us all together.”

Sasamaru shook his head, looked at Keita, and back to everyone else. “It’s like you all have multiple conversations, and well, how do you all keep up with that?”

“I followed it, I think.” Sachi said.

Everyone looked at her and she flushed. “I have three sisters, six aunts, and a lot of female cousins.” She explained. “We have a joke in our family that you get three of us together, you have nine conversations.”

“That… just about sums up this group, really.” Asuna admitted. “We’re just so used to each other than we have no problem following it all, I guess.”

May 8, 2023 - Aincrad 24th Floor, Panareze

Harry gave a contented sigh as he relaxed in the warm water of the bath. As he had thought the
previous night, Klein and Argo had managed to finagle them into the same room, with two beds, thankfully, and it was a nice one. The beds were soft, the sheets were very fine cotton, and the bath was luxurious. There was room for three or four people in the tub!

He didn’t want to think about how much this room cost, but so long as it wasn’t absurdly expensive, he might see about getting this room again, or look for other such accommodations. Not often, but every now and then would be nice.

He took a brief look at the time display and reluctantly began to get out of the bath when he heard a startled squeak that made him pause.

Oh no, he thought. Oh no, no, no, no. That isn’t Silica I just heard. She didn’t just come in, and I didn’t hear her. She did not just get an eyeful. She- oh, who am I kidding. He looked up to see Silica standing at the door, naked as the day she was born, and sporting a full body blush. He noticed that she was looking downward, eyes wide, and by the angle of her gaze...

He glanced to the side, saw a towel and grabbed it. Wrapping it around his waist, he finished getting out of the tub and tried to affect an unbothered look. A look that was spoiled by his own full body blush. Whether from being so exposed, seeing her in a similar state, or both, was hard to tell.

“Um, the bath’s yours.” He said and began to walk out, he grabbed another towel and handed it to her. “Take your time and enjoy it.”

Silica met his eyes as he passed her and nodded. “I thought you had already gone to get something to eat,” she said blankly as she wrapped the towel around herself.

Harry shrugged. “The bath’s good and I might have lost track of the time.” He replied. “As I said, take your time and enjoy it. By the way, where’s Pina.”

“Sunning herself by the window, last time I checked.” Her tone was still fairly blank, and he was a bit worried that the shock and surprise had gotten to her, but now was not an appropriate time to deal with it.

Harry nodded and walked out. After he left, he opened his menu and equipped his clothing and armor, and then let out a breath. “That went surprisingly well,” he mused. He then heard a shriek coming from the bathroom and chuckled. “And it looks like she recovered from the shock. Well, she saw me full on, and I saw her and hm…” The image of Silica standing just inside like that and ready for a bath was a rather nice one.

Also, the idea of seeing her in that state getting out of a tub, water streaming down her petite form, her hair framing her face and clinging to skin that was reddened from the warmth and… He would blame both Klein and Argo for this incident and the thoughts that were going through his head.

Though he did like what he saw. And it did offer some nice variations on the witch’s robe image he was not going to remember right now.

##

Silica sank into the water after washing herself, her face still red from what she saw. Well, from seeing Harry naked and him seeing her in the same state. She had seen his torso bare, he liked to sleep without a shirt on, after all, so she knew about the hints of athleticism in him. Looking a bit lower, though…

She fought down her blush’s attempts at getting brighter and considered filling a bucket with cold water and dousing herself a time or three in order to cool off. Her mind was already somewhat
scrambled from her discussion with Argo last night, and she didn’t need more distracting imagery in her head.

Such as how the water streamed down his body as he rose up out of the tub unaware of her presence, or the way it threw his musculature into better definition, or…

_Ah, bad thoughts, bad thoughts!_ She thought frantically. _I am not thinking about how attractive I find him. I am not thinking about how the idea of him holding me in that state is a nice one. I am not thinking about…_

##

Neither of them would be able to look the other in the eye for the rest of the day. Not without blushing and hastily looking away. It would be a week before their dreams would behave and go back to normal, or as normal as dreams could be in Aincrad.

That and getting separate rooms.

On a positive note, they wouldn’t be awakened by nightmares for a while. The NPCs responsible for cleaning might have taken issue with the results of that abeyance, though.

**May 19, 2023 - Aincrad 20th Floor, Sunshine Forest**

Keita relaxed and brought his spear to a resting, but guarded, position as the mob shattered, ending the encounter. He looked at his guild mates who were scanning the area for more mobs before they relaxed a bit. He glanced to the side where both Harry and Kirito had watched them handle the encounter, and noticed that they both had approving looks on their faces. He had been given a choice of group quests to do with his guild, with Harry and Kirito supervising and ready to jump in if something went wrong. However, they would be doing it without any assistance outside of that.

“Consider it a test of how much you’ve progressed,” Harry had told them. “While you’re not ready for a run through the Twenty-Fifth yet, you guys will be there soon enough.”

So, here they were, going through a field dungeon on a couple of quests that came well recommended in terms of risk versus reward. Dangerous enough to test them, but not so much that Harry and Kirito would have to intervene unless things went badly wrong. An intervention no one hoped was necessary, as it meant that things had gone out of control.

Harry refused to assure them that he and Kirito would be able to save them if that happened. He told them that giving those reassurances might make everyone feel better, but he wasn’t so arrogant as to believe that he could intervene in time, which would put a lie to those reassurances.

Still they were done with the quest and were now heading back. Things had gotten hairy on occasion, but his guild was shaping up nicely, especially Sachi, who had gained some much needed confidence in her own abilities. While he was aware that she probably still had doubts, she was more willing to speak up, offer her own input, and act as a restraining influence on the rest of them.

Given what Harry, Silica, Kirito and Asuna had told them all of their own adventures, that was probably a good thing. Especially after he had talked with Klein and got grilled on his guild’s training efforts. The man nodded approvingly at several parts and added his own input based on the fact that he was running a guild.

He had also asked why he was so eager to get to the front lines. Harry and the others could certainly teach them the skills necessary, and guide them in getting the appropriate experience, he had assured him of that. At the same time, he made it clear just how dangerous the front lines were.
He had also asked Keita if he was willing to risk not only his own life, but the life of his friends, because one bad call, and it might not be his life that’s ended.

“Kid,” Klein told him. “I lose more sleep than I like to think about over the possibility that I might get my friends killed, don’t think otherwise. I’m confident in their abilities, and in my own, but I’m a realist. I can make a bad call, and if one of them dies, it’s my responsibility, plain and simple. I’m the one in charge.” He looked Keita in the eyes. “If this were a normal game, you’d learn after a bit, but this isn’t a normal game. There are no second chances here, and if you die, you stay dead.

“I would also recommend talking to Kibaou, the ‘Clearer Who Retreated’ I think he’s sometimes called now, about that. If anyone knows just how costly a mistake can be, it’s him. In fact, once they think you guys are at a good point, they’ll probably bring you to see him. He’s based in Coral, on the twenty-second floor right now, and is using it as a staging area to train up and comers for the Twenty-Fifth, as well as provide an object lesson in himself.”

“What object lesson would that be?” He had asked the man.

Klein shook his head. “You’ll find out soon enough, and I won’t spoil it.”

It had given him something to think about, and he really didn’t know what to think. He would approach Harry and the others about it later to get their input, that was for sure.
May 27, 2023 - Aincrad 19th Floor, Ralberg

It’s days like this which remind me why I sometimes don’t know whether to curse my luck, or praise it. Harry dryly thought to himself as he looked at his current situation. Let’s see, we all gathered together, Klein shows up, a party starts, which was fun, and naturally Silica and I end up in the same bed. He cracked an eye open and confirmed that it was Silica he was holding on to, and he noticed that she was beginning to stir. He also felt someone stirring from behind him and furrowed his brow. **Wait, if Silica’s the one I’m holding onto, who’s the one with their back pressing to mine?**

He heard a quiet, masculine groan from behind. He recognized that groan, and a quieter, feminine one made his eyes widen. **Oh shit. Damn it Kl- no wait, this isn’t like Klein.**

Someone, and he had an idea who was responsible, had set this up. Not just him and Silica in the same bed, but the joker thought it would be funny to add Kirito and Asuna to it as well. He noticed Silica open her eyes and quickly pressed a finger to her lips. He saw her give him a confused look, it wasn’t as if they hadn’t woken up in the same bed before, despite their recent attempts to keep it from happening.

That bath incident, which they both agreed didn’t happen, made it a bit, just a bit, awkward. At least they were, thankfully, clothed.

He watched as Silica shifted and untangled herself from him and look over his form. She then looked back down to him, back to the other two occupants, and back to him. She shook her head in resignation and got off the bed. Harry did so as well and gave himself some distance from it.

“Blame Klein?” Silica murmured.

Harry snorted. **“Hell no, this has Argo written all over it.”** He murmured back. **“We might want to be off to the side though, it looks like Asuna’s waking up.”**

“Fifty col says that Asuna sends him into the wall.”

“No bet, and is Kirito snuggling into her?”

“Looks like it.”

“Wonder if she will send him flying with enough force to break it.”

“Immortal Object, Harry.”

“Which one, Kirito, or the wall?”

Harry quickly pulled Silica off to the side and the two of them watched as Asuna mumbled sleepily and cracked an eye open.

**Both Harry and Silica covered their ears as the morning calm was pierced by a scream, followed by a crash as a flying body hit the wall.**
“Owwww, damn Asuna, that’s loud!” Harry complained.

Asuna looked at him and Silica, off to the side and glared. “And what do you two have to do with this?” She asked reaching for a rapier that was, thankfully, not there.

Harry held his hands up. “Hey, we just woke up, and in this room as well.” He looked at the sprawled and dazed form of Kirito. “Glad we did.” He then winced and shook his head. “Wow, that was loud enough to actually hurt and make my ears ring.”

“Sorry,” Asuna said apologetically. She then looked around the room. “Wait, you said you two woke up in this room? There’s only one bed.” She observed, calming down.

“Trust me, we know.” Silica said. “At least it was a comfortable one.”

“But-

“Asuna, we usually blame Klein when something like this happens,” Harry interrupted. “In this case, however, I’m blaming Argo.”

“Something like this would be just like her.” Asuna agreed. “But, she wasn’t there.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Asuna, it’s Argo.”

“He’s got a point,” Silica said.

They all heard a groan from where Kirito was sent flying and looked over to see him slowly pick himself up. “Ugh, what happened?” He asked, still a bit dazed.

Harry looked at Silica and Asuna then shrugged. “You two go downstairs and I will explain.” He offered.

They all heard a groan from where Kirito was sent flying and looked over to see him slowly pick himself up. “Ugh, what happened?” He asked, still a bit dazed.

Harry looked at Silica and Asuna then shrugged. “You two go downstairs and I will explain.” He offered. I hope this doesn’t lead to a new rumor. He thought. Who knew players were such a bunch of gossips?

June 3, 2023 - Aincrad, 8th Floor, Frieven

Lind sat back and mulled over Schivata’s latest report. Hadrian and his associates were continuing their training of the Moonlit Black Cats, and the mid level guild had been making good progress. At the same time, those who had been training them had still found time to get involved in clearing and fighting floor bosses.

While concerning, due to how it indicated that their skills and strength hadn’t stagnated, it wasn’t a significant cause for concern in his mind. No group could maintain the rate they had previously been gaining levels with such commitments, which meant that their progression had to have slowed. Either way, Kirito, Asuna, and Silica were of no concern to him. So long as they didn’t get in the way, he would leave them alone.

His main interest was Hadrian. The boy might not realize it, but many players seemed to rally behind him and look to him, or at least those around him, for guidance. He should have seen it sooner, but Kibaou had occupied his attention, and he’d needed to discredit him. While it was something of a success, Kibaou no longer participated in the front lines for now, but the entire thing had distracted him from other potential rivals.

Kirito? That one was suitably marginalized for the time being. His trapping him into not starting a guild and declaring himself a solo player worked to keep him from building a support base, and he didn’t really demonstrate much in the way of leadership. Asuna? Like any proper player would listen to a gaming newbie like her. And he didn’t need to worry about Silica; she was little more than a brat.
tagging along and riding on Hadrian’s coattails.

It was Hadrian that was a threat to his position. It was him who he needed to get out of the way if he was to rebuild his guild and he had plans to do so. Now, he only needed to find an opportunity, or make one.

It wasn’t as if Aincrad lacked for those, but he needed to plan this carefully. He wouldn’t regret it if something… unfortunate… happened to Hadrian, but if there was any indication he had been involved, he would need an ironclad alibi, which was easier said than done, given Argo’s information network.

Still, with the progress of the group that Hadrian had been working with, it would only be a matter of a few weeks, at most, before they reached the Twenty-Fifth floor, which presented more than a few opportunities.

##

Schivata gave a pensive frown as he walked out of the room Lind was staying at. There had been a change he noticed when he gave his report, and he didn’t think Lind even noticed. The report that the progress of Hadrian’s little project was proceeding nicely and was to reach the Twenty-Fifth…

Oh.

He gave a look back to the room and considered trying to either divine Lind’s intentions, if he even knew them, or talking him out of it. He doubted it would do any good however, he had seen Lind’s bearing change, and it was too similar to how it got when he was about to commit to something.

When he got to that point, Lind wouldn’t change his mind. He had to get the information to Argo, if only as a possibility. If what he was afraid would happen, happened, then she would have passed the information on, and hopefully things would be prevented from escalating.

June 4, 2023 - Aincrad 22nd Floor, Coral

“Welcome to Coral,” Harry said to the Moonlit Black Cats as the light from the teleport faded. “Forests, lakes, quiet places for rest and relaxation, and arguably the calmest floor seen so far in Aincrad.” He looked around. “You can also find nice cabins to buy if you have the col, but I would think twice about that.”

“Why’s that?” Sachi asked.

“I think the cheapest runs about five million col.” Harry replied. “Without furnishings.”

Keita winced at the price. “Ouch, and that’s for a small one, right?”

Harry shrugged. “I’ve heard they’re pretty roomy, actually. I can afford it, but I can use the col for better things, like armor, weapons, and items to stay alive with, you know, the essentials.”

Silica snorted. “Essentials, he says.” She commented. “More like he doesn’t spend money unless he has to, the miser.”

Harry shrugged unapologetically. “I’m not that bad, and it’s why we haven’t gone broke yet, Silica. Not to mention being able to afford the armor we have.”

Keita snorted. And I bet he doesn’t even realize that keeping her happy falls under ‘essentials’, he thought dryly. “I’ve noticed you guys have had that armor for a while now,” he said. “Isn’t it getting
close to the time to replace it?”

Harry was about to say something when he got a thoughtful expression on his face. “Perhaps,” he admitted. “We can go up to a higher floor and farm mobs for better gear, or get one from a player shop, but the fact is, this stuff was the best you could find for the weight class at the time. Well, for us anyway.”

Keita nodded. “In other words, the stats of the armor were more effective for you.” He said.

Harry nodded. “Exactly.” He looked around. “Well, we’re here to see Kibaou, so let’s go. If Argo’s info is right, he should still be in town.”

##

Kibaou put his drink down as he saw who entered the tavern he usually operated out of. Even with training those headed upward, he found that starting and ending at a place that served food and drink tended to make those involved happier and more willing to listen. Well, he hoped they were listening and not simply humoring him.

Anyway, he was curious what would bring two clearers down here, though it looked like they were with a group of lower level players. *Interesting,* he thought. *Looks like they decided to teach some low level players themselves.* Still, wonder what got Hadrian and Silica to do that. He wondered how that happened before shrugging it off. It really wasn’t any of his business.

He looked at the two in front of the group and saw them look at him and give him a questioning look. He nodded and waved the group over.

“Didn’t expect to see you down here, unless it was heading to Lisbeth’s shop for repairs or doing one of her little mat runs.” He said as the group sat down. “And you got a group of lower level players with you. Decided to take a break from the front lines?”

Harry shrugged. “Not quite,” he replied. “Ran into them in one Taft’s inns doing toasts with Kirito a couple of months ago. We got to talking and they asked for some tips and tricks.” He grinned. “Well, they needed a little bit more than a few tips and tricks, so we got Asuna involved and started teaching them a few things.”

Keita snorted. “More like you four revamped how we did things.” He said wryly and then looked at Kibaou. “He’s underselling it. Over the last two months or so, they’ve shown us everything we’ve been doing wrong, and how to do those things right. They alternated out in pairs, but each of them has different things they could teach us.”

The rest of the lower level players nodded.

Kibaou considered that. It would explain how the higher level players could keep their levels up, and it was a good idea. Most of those who decided to join him in training others were receiving diminishing returns now, so he would have to consider using that option. On the other hand, his group had become positive experts on the Twenty-Fifth.

“Hm, good idea with alternating out. You guys do it every few days?”

Harry nodded. “We also give them a day off to rest if all four of us are handling a floor boss. We haven’t take too much time off as it is, but being on the lower floors and all…”

Kibaou nodded.
“Anyway, Klein recommended that you talk with them, and I think you can address anything we may have missed in training them.” Harry said.

Kibaou blinked. “Why do you think you missed something?” He asked.

Harry frowned. “Because neither myself nor Silica, let alone Kirito and Asuna, know everything. We’ve been focusing more on getting their skills up to par, and teaching them little things that help, but getting a second opinion might do some good.” He explained. “There may have been some group tactics worked on, but the four of us work better as pairs. You have more experience in some things that we don’t, and I think you have an important lesson or two to impart.”

Silica stood up. “Well, if that’s going to be the case, I’m going to head to Lisbeth’s Shop and hand over some mats. I got some good drops on floor thirty and want to see what she can make.” She said.

Harry nodded to her and she walked off. His eyes flicked to the side, or more like the corner of his HUD, and noticed a message. “Huh, it looks like Argo wants to talk with me as well.” He said. He looked at Keita and his guild mates. “You guys good with listening to him for a bit?”

Keita nodded.

“Good, I better handle this, before she gets any ideas.” With that said, Harry stood up, nodded to Kibaou, and left the tavern.

Kibaou looked at the Moonlit Black Cats. “Well, you might want to order a drink, while I talk.” He said.

##

“You all may have heard what I am called, at least by those who don’t know better. ‘The Clearer Who Retreated’ and all that. It’s bullshit, but that’s how it is.” He stopped and took a sip from his cup. “After my stupidity getting so many of my men killed, stepping back from the front lines only made sense.

“Admittedly, I was set up, and I walked right into it. Looking back, I should have seen it for what it was, but that’s hindsight for you. Still, even without that, the Twenty-Fifth was a brutal experience which pushed us to our limit. With the strong mobs, the traps, the ambushes, the first day killed one in five on average, mostly from those who didn’t listen to the warnings, but even those who did suffered high casualties.

“You may have heard about how Hadrian and Silica realized what we were walking into on that floor. I don’t know how they saw it coming. Maybe it was because they know how games work, maybe it was simply them taking a break and suddenly having the time to think about it. I don’t know, but the fact is, they got a few players that they knew and talked it over. I do know that Klein and The Rat passed the info on, but that’s it.”

“Why didn’t they?” Keita asked.

Kibaou snorted. “They didn’t have the reputation then that they do now.” He said. “Everyone still saw them as kids playing at being adventurers, even though they had proven their skill on boss fights. You hear about the eleventh floor field boss?”

“We heard that Hadrian had his arm bitten through by it, but that he killed it.” Ducker said.

Kibaou barked a laugh. “Well, he, Silica and Klein’s guild, were the only ones to fight it. Eight people, taking on a field boss, and they won. It may have nearly killed them, but they won. That’s
what got everyone’s attention. We knew about them before that, a pair of kids on the front line does get noticed, especially since they were the youngest ones there, but outside of that, no one really knew how good they were.

“Well, to make a long story short, they took on their first floor boss on the fifteenth floor and have been regulars since. Not every boss fight, but enough that everyone who was working on clearing knew who they were. Even so, everyone still saw them as kids, and they knew it, so they let Klein and Argo pass the info on.”

“What about Kirito and Asuna?” Sachi asked.

“No one would have listened to them, if for different reasons.” Kibaou explained. “It took me a bit of digging, but Lind had started some nasty rumors on them, not that they cared. In a fight, everyone wanted them there, but otherwise they did their own thing.”

“What?!” Keita explained. “Why would he do that?”

“Because he saw them as a threat.” Kibaou said. “It’s as simple as that. He had been working on isolating Kirito since the first floor, when that whole Beater fiasco started.” He chuckled bitterly. “Heh, he played us well there. With Diabel dead, and Kirito having outed himself as a beta tester to get us to listen before the boss killed us because some of the info had changed, we weren’t thinking right. We called him a Beater and he gave us this whole speech basically saying that he accepts the term.”

“Wait, Kirito’s a Beater?” Keita asked in surprise.

Kibaou shook his head. “No, which is why I feel stupid about it now. I ran into a few actual Beaters since then, I should tell you about Morte and his ilk some time. He only accepted the title to keep us from going on a witch hunt for other beta testers. We weren’t exactly being rational at the time.” He snorted. “One thing I’ve learned here, no one who's functioning and human is fully rational. But we were hard on the emotional, mob mentality side at that moment.

“Anyway, rather than take him as someone to hate, I looked at him as someone to surpass, to prove I was better than. Lind, on the other hand, saw a convenient scapegoat and someone to use for his own ends. He trapped him into not starting a guild and declaring himself a solo player, not that Asuna was going to have that.” He chuckled. “Someone once joked that despite what she was wearing, she was the one wearing the pants in that relationship and they should change their outfits to reflect that.” He watched and waited as his audience laughed. “Still, it would take a few months, but by the time we reached the Twenty-Fifth, most of that died down, with only Lind really keeping it alive.

“Well, either way, that’s neither here, nor there. Lind also saw me as a threat, as I would clash with him quite a bit. Mostly arguments, but apparently he was beginning to take it far more personally than he should have. He saw himself as top dog and anyone not under his command was either a threat, a rival, or not worth considering.

“So, anyway, he somehow managed to compromise one of Argo’s informants and got him to spread bad info. Nothing false, but there were key bits of information that were left out. Lind, by that time, had gotten to know me well enough to know how to manipulate things. So, that info was given to me, and I bought it. Should have known better, but the guy was someone who had been reliable in the past.
“And naturally, I saw an opportunity to get one on Lind, and to get some serious credit and glory for myself, not to mention being a hero, and leapt right on it. To make a long story short, I gathered a raid of my guild members, and we went to the boss. The end result was twelve of my own men killed, and five from the raid that Hadrian gathered to get us out of it. We killed the boss, but losing nearly twenty percent of our numbers made it a bit hollow.

“So there you have it. My mistake, my sin. It could have all been avoided, and I knew better even back then. I allowed myself to be a glory hound, to be reckless, and it got better people than I am killed. I may have been baited into it, but I still made a bad call, and I have to take responsibility for that.” Kibaou stopped talking and looked at his audience, but he focused on the guild leader, Keita.

Keita’s expressions was interesting. There was shock that someone would tell them about a costly mistake so matter-of-factly. The fact that it got so many people killed. And all of it due to one man’s recklessness and pride, and another’s disregard for what his machinations could do. The kid also looked like he didn’t know whether to look at him with pity, disgust, or something else.

The disgust he could understand, even accept. His actions got a lot of people killed while he survived, after all. The pity, on the other hand, he wanted nothing of. He would accept responsibility for what he did, and it would haunt him, but he didn’t need something like pity being directed toward him.

“Well,” he said to them. “If you have any questions, feel free to ask. Otherwise, why don’t we talk about what you guys have learned from those four?”

##

Harry walked into a nearby tavern that was a little out of the way and looked around. He didn’t outright see Argo, but that was no surprise. She was either using her ability to hide, or hadn’t arrived yet. He shrugged and took a seat at a table in a corner and made an order while he waited. He doubted it would be long.

As his drink was set down, he gave a discrete look around and took the cup in hand and made to take a sip.

“I see you made it here pretty quick, Harry.” Argo said from right behind him.

Harry barely kept his drink from spilling all over himself and sighed. “Do you always have to do this Argo?”

“Yes, I do need to do that.” Argo said as she walked around him and sat down with a grin.

“I heard there are some plant monsters with tentacle limbs, why don’t you go startle them in an attempt to get friendly?”

Argo made a show of thinking about it and shrugged it off. “Nah, my hands are good enough for that.”

Harry stopped and gave her a look. “There’s no need to be vulgar, Argo.” He said. “What you do in your alone time is up to you, including attempts at flying solo. And before you say it, yes, I walked into that one when I brought up the bloody tentacles.”

“Not that you’re one to talk, I bet.” Argo said with a chuckle as Harry grumbled imprecations in English. Shortly her expression grew serious. “Anyway, joking aside, I called you here because it seems that Lind is up to something.”
Harry raised an eyebrow. “Lind plotting, count me surprised.” He replied dryly.

Argo gave him a level look. “Considering that my info indicates that he’s plotting against you, you might want to take this a bit more seriously.” She said.

Harry blinked. “Why would he be plotting against me?” He asked.

“I can’t confirm that he’s plotting against you, specifically, but my sources have told me that he’s been taking an unhealthy interest in you.” Argo corrected. “It’s not completely reliable info, but it’s enough that I thought you might like to know.”

Harry nodded. She was right. Even if it was nothing, it’s better to be warned and not need the warning, than not be warned and surprised. Even so…

“That still doesn’t answer my question.” Harry said. “Why would he be plotting against me?”

“You verbally slapped him down pretty hard on the Twenty-Fifth.” Argo responded. “He might have taken that personally.”

“True,” Harry admitted. “Now, why would he focus on me, considering how you treated him in the Weekly Argo?”

“Well, it might be because you called him out on his bullshit publically and in front of a lot of people,” Argo said. “The fact that you did so, and from what I heard, managed to distill how much of piece of shit he was in such a concise manner might have had an effect.” She smirked. “You also told him things would boil down, including how I would do my best to ruin him. I would have done it anyway, but the fact that you called it might have persuaded him that you were either complicit in it, or knew what I was going to do.”

Harry sighed. “And why we are finding out about this now?” He asked.

Argo shrugged. “He actually did a fairly good job at laying low, I still don’t know with complete certainty where exactly he is, only that he’s somewhere on the eighth floor. His people also didn’t go about getting information by asking people directly. If anything, they simply listened in on conversations, maybe buying a drink or two.”

“And even though alcohol doesn’t affect us, you buy a guy a drink and he gets a lot friendlier.” Harry said. “In other words, they did it the old fashioned way and slipped your notice.”

Argo nodded.

Harry considered that. It was actually pretty clever, for how basic it was. While he wasn’t an expert on information gathering, he knew that you could hear a lot of interesting things if you just listened, and people often didn’t pay attention to who was listening. That went double if they were drinking or someone was being friendly. Listening and buying someone a drink or two was about as basic as it got, but those methods were very effective.

“Still,” he continued. “How do you know he’s focusing on me?”

She sighed. “Someone in the DDA passed the info on indirectly, to my network.” She replied. “I have my suspicions who it was, but apparently, Lind’s become obsessed and it’s making people in that guild uncomfortable.” She gave Harry a look. “I can’t confirm how reliable it is, but given its nature…”

Harry nodded. “It’s serious enough that it’s better to be warned.” He frowned thoughtfully. “I
wonder who would have passed it on, though.”

“Probably Schivata,” she replied. “He’s always been the sensible one, even if he is loyal to Lind. At the same time, if this is as serious as my info indicates, he might have passed it on to do some damage control, or at least keeping the situation from getting worse, if things go down.”

Harry considered that. “If he’s loyal, then why send out the warning?”

Argo frowned. “I don’t know, and that’s what scares me. I’ll keep digging to find out as much as I can, even if it means hanging Schivata from the Edge and threatening to have him walk home.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.” Harry said in response to her statement. “Accidents might happen, but accidentally having someone “walk home?” He shook his head. “Well, it’s a better euphemism for an assisted suicide than some I’ve heard.”

“Oh?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

**June 19, 2023 - Aincrad 25th Floor, Stahlhold**

“I never thought I would come back to this place,” Silica said as she looked around. “Are you sure this is necessary, Harry?”

Harry nodded. “Argo was able to confirm the information after she gave me that warning. Lind’s up to something, and it involves me.”

“So why are we here?” She asked.

“I’m here because Lind is likely waiting, or will be in a couple of days.” Harry said as he looked around and noticed several people taking notice of him, people he recognized. Looks like Lind will find out soon enough. “I don’t want Keita and the others to get caught up in this.” He then glanced at her. “And I really wish you hadn’t insisted on coming with me into this.”

Silica shot him a look. “We already talked about this Harry,” she said. “We are a team, and we have each other’s backs. Especially when you know that you might be walking into a trap.” She gave him a smirk. “And you, with how many times you’ve managed to step in it, need someone at your back.”

He sighed and conceded the point. After the fight they had about this last night, where she had responded to his arguments quite vocally and at length, he had been forced to simply accept that she wouldn’t be left behind. He could have tried to sneak out, but despite her tendency to sleep in whenever possible, and was usually the last one to wake up even when she wasn’t, she could be a surprisingly light sleeper when she wanted to be.

Or she could just use him as a giant, breathing, body pillow or teddy bear, in which case he wouldn’t be able to get out of bed without waking her up anyway. He had a feeling that if he had any intent of doing so the previous night, and gave any indication of it, she would have done just that.

And he had a bad poker face, if the number of times Klein and his friends managed to win whatever col he brought to the table on their occasional card games were any indication. Then again, he cleared them out whenever the dice were brought out.

So, he had to accept that she wouldn’t allow him to do this alone. Given his experiences in things coming to a head, it was comforting that he would have some backup this time. Hopefully this wouldn’t turn out as badly for anyone as those had.
He could only hope.
Mystic Knight Online
Chapter 12 - Stormfall

June 20, 2023 - Aincrad 8th Floor, Frieven

Lind looked at the men he had gathered for this meeting and looked each one in the eye. He had gathered those he considered the most trustworthy in the guild for this, his plan to put Hadrian in his place. He didn’t have Schivata involved with this, as he knew that while the man was loyal, he had limits and he certainly wouldn’t approve of this.

The boy had decided to go ahead to the twenty-fifth floor for the apparent reason of scouting out places to take that guild he had been training according to some overheard conversations. That he had Silica with him lent credence to that possibility. If so, that would work out just fine, as it not only meant fewer people that would get in the way, but also fewer things that could go wrong. For his plan, at least.

It may have meant that several of the possible plans he had come up with were no longer useful, but he wouldn’t complain. The boy was now being watched, and he didn’t seem to be aware of it at all.

Perfect.

He cut his musings off and once again looked at those he gathered. “Well men, it seems as if our target is on the twenty-fifth floor.” He said. “All of you have experience with that floor, so it shouldn’t be too dangerous for you. The boy, Hadrian discredited us there, and it is somehow fitting that it will be on that floor that we deal with him.”

“Deal with him?” One of them asked. “Boss, by deal with him, do you mean…”

Lind shook his head. “No, we’re not going to kill him. Merely humiliate him, and make him realize that he isn’t as good as he thinks he is.”

“So, what’s the plan then?” Another asked.

“Our people have confirmed that he and his little tagalong are scouting the floor to set up something of an... exam... for a guild of lower level players that he decided to, heh, train.” His tone made it clear what he thought of that. “They have confirmed that he intends to be on the path to Feldin this afternoon to scout it, and that’s where we will find him, as the Rosan Gorge, where he’s at right now, would take too long for us to get to, and is crawling with mobs waiting to ambush anyone.” He brought up a map of the floor. “Now, we have several places where we could do this, so let’s go over them…”

Aincrad, Floor 25 - Rosan Gorge

“So, you think it will be today?” Silica asked Harry as she looked around, keeping an eye out for mob ambushes.

Harry nodded. “I do,” he replied. “He would want to get this over with, and we haven’t been subtle about what our plans were for the day so that his people could overhear us. He can be patient, but this is too good an opportunity for him.”
“Ah, giving him a blatant opportunity then.” She said. “I don’t think I need to tell you how risky that is, Harry.”

Harry shrugged. “Better to do what we can to make it on our terms, and keep as many people out of the crossfire as we can.” he said. “We’ve seen how little Lind thinks of the potential negative consequences of things. He might not intend them, but…” He trailed off.

Silica sighed and nodded. “Just because he doesn’t intend them doesn’t mean that they can’t happen.” She finished. “That applies to us as well, you know.”

Harry had to admit she was right about that, which was why he was uncomfortable with having her along, despite the fact that having someone he trusted implicitly to watch his back was comforting. However, all of his experiences before being trapped in SAO made him very aware of how things could go wrong, and badly so.

Of course, in those cases, he had tools he could use that he could not here. He might be a complete novice at magic, but some of those spells would have been very useful, provided he had a wand. He shook that thought out of his head and put it back where he shoved the rest of the things about the real world he could do nothing about. His wand was stuck in the real world, and it’s not like he could count on himself accidentally using magic, so his sword, shield, and wits would have to suffice.

No point thinking of what you don’t have and can’t do when you are in no place to do something about it. Better to concentrate on what you do have and can do.

“Any idea where it will be?” Silica asked, interrupting his train of thought.

“Here would have been a good place, if risky, so probably on the way to Feldin.” He opened his map. “There are a few places good for such, and it would give him more time to set up.”

Silica nodded. “And if it’s not there, or doesn’t happen today?”

Harry shrugged. “Then he’s more patient than I’m giving him credit for.” He saw Silica’s expression. “Yes, I know he can be patient, but he also takes opportunities that present themselves. And I'm giving him one, Silica. He’s been stewing on this for months now, and hasn’t been doing anything else, so…”

##

Harry’s words felt so true, when Silica considered they felt like a familiar bento box filled by her mother. She nodded. “Makes sense. Choosing our battleground...”

Then she realized why they felt so familiar, and she chuckled. It was a bit bitter and sad, but at the same time, the realization just felt right.

"What?" Harry asked.

"You're just... reminding me of..." She trailed off.

He smiled, and she gladly took the understanding it offered before things got awkward.

Again.

Neither of them were comfortable with mentioning the real world, but they were not unique in that, so it was a mutual understanding in that regard.
For all that they didn’t know about the other, they understood each other rather well.

*No wonder people sometimes think we’re a married couple,* Silica thought. *Well, joke about it, at least.* She giggled.

Harry gave her a confused look, and her giggles almost became laughter. “I’ll explain later.” she said. “Now, let’s just head back to Stahlhold and get something to eat. If you’re right, we have someone to meet on the way to Feldin.”

**Aincrad, Floor 25 - Path to Feldin**

They had been on the path to Feldin for the better part of an hour already and Lind had not yet shown himself. While there were numerous good spots that they had passed, Harry wasn’t surprised. Despite the relatively short straight line distance, the terrain and regular mob ambushes could easily cause the trip to take hours with all the mob ambushes and being on the lookout for traps. It was a good way to stretch the relatively short distances on each floor, and make what would otherwise be a trip of maybe an hour take longer.

As it was, they were nearing the halfway point, which held another good location for Lind to spring whatever surprise he wanted to, and of all the locations, it was probably the best.

He wouldn’t bet his life on it. However, from experience he did know that sometimes locations just lent themselves to such things…

He spied a flicker of movement in his peripheral vision and nodded.

“Harry.” Silica said quietly.

“I know.” He responded just as quietly. “Three of them, and that’s not counting the four that decided to follow us from town. You get a good look?”

Silica slowly shook her head. “No, but it’s not mobs, so… DDA?”

“Probably.” Harry replied with a nod and a smirk at odds with his words. “We’re getting close to…” at her nod and puzzled look, he went on. “…so I expect them to close in.”

What he was doing seemed to sink in, as she gave him a look many a long suffering member of a guild or partnership gave another. Looked rather like one of Asuna’s, actually. “I wonder if they even realize that we spotted them.”

“Let’s assume they have.” Harry said with a shrug, smiling as if they were having a happy little chat. She smiled back and slapped his shoulder and he gave his ’oh no, I’ve annoyed Silica’ look. “We’ll know soon enough, so be ready.” He said quietly as he leaned in close.

They both heard a quiet snort and covered up any instinctive flinch with Harry dodging a swat. No one could cover a startle as well as they thought; a bit of wisdom Argo had let slip once.

“Hey!” he said in a louder voice. “I was only removing something that was on your face.”

Silica shot him a look. “Like that?” She asked archly. “What was it? Food?”

Harry nodded. “Of course. We did stop for lunch at that one place that you liked. It was in no way a silly confused look of cuteness I was trying to clear up.”

She gasped. "I've told you a thousand times--"
"I don't do kawaii,' so you've said," he shot back. “What's with that anyway?"

Silica shrugged. “Family tradition.” She replied.

"Oh, so you skip right to adorable-- no knives! We agreed! No blades!"

Her hand lowered from her dagger as she sighed and nodded. "Yeah, you’re right." She then reached over and swatted him upside the head. “We didn’t say anything about me swatting you though.”

"...Curse my lack of foresight. The adorable ones always swat. OUCH! Pax! Ow! Truce! Eep! No aiming that low! White flag!" Harry darted away, only for Silica to chase after him.

A couple of minutes later, they stopped and looked around. “Looks like we lost the tails for a bit.” Silica said.

“And look, the spot is over there.” Harry replied dryly. “So, should we continue to ham it up like a Benny Hill skit, or just walk in without a care in the world?”

“Who?”

Harry blinked and shook his head. “I’ll explain later.” He began to move forward. “So, shall we?”

Silica nodded and matched his pace.

##

Lind watched as the two walked into the open area he had chosen for this. Look at those two kids, he thought. Not a care in the world. He watched as they made it to the center of it, or a close approximation of it before the two of them stopped and looked around. He saw them both seem to let out a sigh and was shocked when Hadrian looked straight at his position.

“So Lind,” the boy said conversationally. “You going to stay there, or are you going to 'come out and play?'”

Silica gasped. "Warriors, right?"

"Hey, you got one," Hadrian replied, and the two high fived as if the boy hadn't just noted Lind's cunning trap like it was--

Luck. Just luck. It had to be luck.

Lind quickly pushed his surprise down and walked from where he had been concealing himself with a confident smirk. “You’re sharper than I gave you credit for, Hadrian.” He said.

The boy shrugged. “It wasn’t hard to figure out, considering that you didn’t come and meet us in the Rosan Gorge.” he replied.

Silica nodded. “Or the Valren Canyon.”

"Or the Soldien Pass."

"I was thinking The Rockfall would have been nice..."

"No, too out of the way for him."
Lind looked at the two and felt his teeth grind as they often had when thinking of the boy. “Are you two done?” He asked.

Hadrian looked at him. “Oh no, it’s Lind, and he has us surrounded.” He said dully. “Gasp, what shall we do, Silica?”

“He has ten others with him, we are outnumbered, Hadrian.” Silica observed. “Well he would, if they were any good.” She looked around. “Where’s Schivata? He’s worth three of any of these.” She gave a sharp whistle and Pina came flying down and landed in her arms. Giving the flying dragon a gentle scratch, she looked to where Lind’s other men were, unconcerned.

Lind’s teeth ground even more as he glared at the two of them.

Hadrian noticed that and smirked. “You really underestimate Argo, Lind.” He said casually. “We knew you were plotting something weeks ago. We just needed to figure out where you would carry out such a plan.” He gave a look around. “And wouldn’t it be fitting for this to happen on this floor? The same floor I called you out on after we fought the floor boss? After you set Kibaou on that fool’s errand which got twelve of his people killed? You remember that, right?”

"That wasn’t--" Lind began, but Hadrian interrupted him.

"Fuck," the word was like a knife. "You really-- you’re acting like I’m not taking this seriously, but you’re the one that acts like you can just ignore the fact people die here!" Hadrian’s expression changed and grew harder.

“That wasn’t a part of your plan?” He asked. “It doesn’t fucking matter. People died there. I only said twelve, because those were in Kibaou’s group. You count the five from the raid that I gathered, that’s seventeen.”

“And they would still be alive if you hadn’t interfered.” Lind said coolly.

Hadrian nodded. “And I accept my responsibility in their deaths, if only because I got them together. And that is the thing, I accept my responsibility. But what about you, Lind?”

“You knew the information was wrong, you knew that wrong information gets people killed, you were there when you all fought the First Floor boss, so you saw that first hand, and that was no one else’s fault but Kayaba’s, because he changed things there. But that is neither here, nor there. What is all of this about Lind?”

Lind gave him a hard look. “What is this about? This is about how you humiliated me in front of my guild and a hundred other players. This is about how you made it so that I can’t have the glory that’s rightfully mine. This is about how you, you little shit, ruined everything!”

Hadrian snorted. “I ruined everything?” He asked incredulously. “Me?” He barked a harsh laugh. “You honestly think I--” He laughed again. “Oh, this is just great. You not only don’t consider the consequences, but you--” His laughter faded and he shook his head.

“You find it funny?” Lind asked angrily.

“Not really,” the boy admitted. “It’s just that I find it so pathetic, I can’t help but laugh.”

trying to get me angry so that I don’t think clearly. So I don’t consider the consequences.”

“You mean you were?” Hadrian asked in sarcastic surprise. “That’s a nice change.”

Lind gritted his teeth and fought his anger down again. He wouldn’t fall into that trap, but it gave him an idea which caused him to smirk. “You know, I had this entire thing worked out. I would humiliate you and make you give a public apology for what you did. I would make you too embarrassed to show your face in public. But now, I will settle things differently.” He opened his menu and went through the options. He found what he wanted and selected it.

He watched as Hadrian saw a window appear in front of him. The boy gave it a confused look for a second before his eyes widened.

“A duel?” He asked. “Are you really sure you want to go through with this?”

“Oh, afraid of a little duel?” Lind asked mockingly.

“More like afraid I’ll hurt more than your feelings this time,” Hadrian countered. He looked at the request and shook his head. “Half health? You must like taking risks more than I thought, Lind.” He looked back at him. “Again, are you sure of this?”

Lind nodded sharply, and he sighed.

“I see, and you won’t stop if I don’t, calling me a coward and other things.” Hadrian shook his head. “I could care less about that, but you also have your original plan, and that could go just as wrong as this. Very well then.”

##

Harry turned to Silica, who was giving him a worried look. “Silica, step back and keep an eye out.” He told her.

“Wait, you’re not serious about this, are you?” She asked.

Harry shook his head. “He is, and we don’t know what he intended in the first place.” He looked around. “See those rocks there? Near that canyon wall?” She nodded. “Head there and have your back to it, so someone can’t just come up behind you. I don’t trust Lind, but I doubt he would try and take you hostage. Some of his men though…”

Silica nodded. “I don’t like this, Harry.” She said quietly. She then continued in a louder voice. “After this, we’re going to have a talk, Hadrian.” She then said something to Pina and the feathered dragon flew off.

Harry nodded, and gave her shoulder a squeeze. “Yes, a talk.” He replied. “After this, I think it would be time for one.” As Silica walked to the spot he indicated, he took one more look at the duel request and sighed. “This is going to go wrong, I just know it.” He muttered.

He looked back to Lind and pressed the button accepting the request. He saw the timer appear with their names on either side, drew his sword from the sheath, readied his shield, and got into the stance he preferred. It might take a minute for the countdown to finish, but he kept his attention on Lind, who had readied himself as well.

He saw no need for any pre-fight banter or trash talking. If SAO had still been just a game, he would have been more than happy to engage in such, but not in this situation. The countdown continued its inexorable march to zero, and he tensed his legs as soon as the countdown reached ten.
As soon as it reached zero, and the chime to start sounded, he pushed off with his legs and closed the distance between them. He noticed Lind had decided for a high slash that, if it were a real sword, would open him up from shoulder to hip.

Rather than block it with his shield, he quickly changed his direction of movement and sidestepped the slash. Rather than counter with his own blade, he darted forward and slammed Lind’s body with his shield, disrupting the older player’s balance. His arming sword quickly flicked out and scored a red line across Lind’s thigh and he stepped back.

He had gotten the first strike in, and while the attack was a weak one, it still caused a small, but noticeable reduction in Lind’s health.

##

Lind bit back an urge to growl as Hadrian once again used his shield as an improvised weapon in an attempt to knock him off balance. Even when that failed, the boy used his momentum to change position, never stopping and simply stepping back and parrying his attempt at a counter.

Damn, but the boy was fast, and the rumors about how he fought were true as well. Rather than simply use his shield to block with, he had found his attacks batted away, been swatted with the shield, and more. And all of that was when the boy didn’t use his smaller frame to his advantage and simply maneuver out of the way, or get inside his guard.

As the duel continued its pattern of attack, block, step, counter, avoid Hadrian’s counter if possible, and so on, he noticed one thing.

The boy hadn’t used a sword skill once during the entire fight. In fact, none of his attacks had been the type to do any serious damage anyway. It was as if he wasn’t taking this seriously at all, and yet, if things continued like this, the boy would simply win through attrition.

He watched in confusion as the boy simply leapt back and stood there.

“This is pointless, Lind.” Hadrian said, not getting out of a guarded stance. “We’ve been going at this for five minutes and you haven’t landed any good hits on me. While I have already whittled your health down to the point that it won’t take me long to get you to half...”

“What are you going on about?” Lind demanded.

“Look at your health, Lind.” The boy countered.

Lind glanced up and his eyes widened. That couldn’t be right, it just couldn’t. None of the boy’s attacks were that powerful, and yet he had managed to get his health down to just over sixty percent!

What? Just how did he--

“You must be wondering how, considering how my attacks have been so weak, aren’t you, Lind?” The boy asked.

Lind looked back at him and flinched from the cold look in the boy’s eyes.

“I’ve been on the front lines and getting stronger, it’s that simple.” The boy replied conversationally. “Even with training a guild of lower levelled players, that doesn’t change the fact that in the last four months, I’ve been out and working on clearing SAO. My level is approaching fifty now.”

Lind’s eyes bugged out. He was almost level fifty? The boy had gotten that strong?
“How?” He asked. The recommended level was only ten levels higher, not close to twenty!

Harry sighed and lowered his sword. “How?” He asked. “It’s not like I’ve been resting on my laurels here Lind. I go out, I fight mobs, kill them, do quests, and gather experience that way. Gather enough, and you gain a level. It might take longer for me now, I’m a little too powerful for the floors I grind on, but you still gain some experience. Instead of it taking a few days, it takes a week or so to gain a level right now, and most of the time, I need to take on a field or floor boss to let it go that quickly.

“And I am not unique in that regard, Lind. Every player who fights a floor boss regularly averages about fifteen levels higher than the floor number right now.”

Lind took a step back in shock and Hadrian shook his head.

“But you? You’re still the same level as you were back then, aren’t you?” He sheathed his sword.

“As I said, this is pointless.”

“They both heard Silica call out. They turned their attention to where Silica had gone.

“Oh do shut up, you little bitch,” a man’s voice said harshly and they heard the sound of flesh being hit. “I was hoping to see some blood, but it’s been disappointing, really. Ah well, they’re too far to help you, I have you paralyzed, so I might as well have some… fun.” The owner of the voice was wearing a sack over his head with holes cut out for his eyes, hiding his features. He was accompanied by a man who hid his face’s features with a skull mask with red eyes who held a thin bladed sword in his right hand.

Both of their cursors were orange.

“Head’s up,” the other man said. “It looks like you got their attention.”

“Aw, and I was hoping to have some fun, XaXa. After that Rain bitch escaped, we’ve had to lay low for the last few days.” The man complained. “Her friend though, heh, oh her screams were exquisite as I played with her. Oh well, I can find some other whore to play with later.” He raised his dagger in preparation to strike, only to scream in shock as it was removed from his shoulder by Hadrian, the crack of displaced air filling a void sounding from where he had been standing.

That shocked scream was all he had the time for before Hadrian removed his head from his shoulders, and the last thing that would go through Johnny Black’s mind was how the boy’s eyes seemed to have an eldritch green glow from within.

##

Harry didn’t think about how it should have been impossible to cover the distance to where Silica was. He didn’t think when his sword left its sheath. And he didn’t think when he removed the player’s arm, or head for that matter, and kicked the corpse away from Silica. He simply acted.

Someone had attacked Silica, and was making a move to kill her. He then shot a cold look to the man’s companion, this… XaXa, who was staring in shock at how fast he had moved, and how he had killed his companion so quickly.

The sound of a body shattering forced them all into moving. Harry pulled an antidote crystal from his belt and dropped it into Silica’s hand as parried a strike from her other attacker. He kicked the player away and hovered defensively over Silica as she used the crystal to break the paralysis.

The sound of several more bodies shattering got his attention and he noticed several more of the
masked players come out of hiding, all of them having the orange cursors which indicated a criminal player. Lind was frozen in place from shock, whether from Harry’s suddenly violent rescue of Silica, or the probability that several of his guild members had been murdered, or that someone was moving to attack him. Well, the latter he could do something about, at least.

“Lind, move!” he called out, forcing him out of his stupor. He would give the older player credit, he dodged the attack and came to them.

“What’s going on?” He asked.

Harry shook his head. “I take it these aren’t friends of yours?”

“I don’t even know who they are.” Lind replied.

“Ah, then this wasn’t a part of your plan then. Good to know.” He looked at him. “Might want to heal up, though, and our duel will have to wait.” He looked back to the group of orange players. “We have other things to worry about. Silica, you think you can teleport out?”

“Not before they close in.” She replied, her mind getting ready for battle.

“Then have my back.”

“Always, Harry. Just as you will have mine.”

They barely had time to set themselves before they were fighting for their lives and the area was filled with the sounds of clashing weapons, swearing, and screaming.

##

Klein swore as he killed another mob that had gotten in the way of his group. He had called on his guildmates as soon as he had heard Lind was on the move so that he could back Harry up if necessary. Argo had made sure to inform more than just Harry about what Lind was up to, just in case, and the second she had word on Lind’s movements, she had notified those she had told.

*And a good thing she had,* Klein thought. His group had run into a wounded DDA member ten minutes ago who had told him of how they had been ambushed by PKers. The description given had made Klein’s blood run cold.

Masked players who made a sport of killing other players, amongst other things.

He had heard of them, though he doubted that Harry and Silica had, so they didn’t know just how much danger they were in, considering that the word about them had only come out recently, and only because one player had been lucky enough to escape them.

He had Issin teleport with the wounded player to Stahlhold and send word out. Since then, he, Dynamm, Dale, Harry One, and Kunimitsz had been making their way to where they were likely confronting Lind.

He only hoped he made it in time.

##

Silica dodged another attack as she stabbed out with her dagger as her attacker overextended. Moving with her attack, she kicked out and sent him into one of his companions, throwing them into a tangle of limbs.
She noticed Harry dispatch another attacker with brutal efficiency, and slam his shield into another, throwing him off balance and keeping him from attacking Lind from behind. She should be shocked, and probably would be after all of this, but this was a side of Harry she had never seen.

This Harry reacted to the threat to her life quickly and lethally. His approach to someone trying to kill him was to do unto them before they did unto him. And his fighting? Horribly beautiful in its efficiency.

Every movement flowed into another, or was to prepare for a sword skill, and he didn’t strike to disable, unless you counted severed limbs disabling strikes. No, all of them were designed to take his opponent down, and make it so that they were in no condition to fight. Some of them survived, some didn’t, but he was not hesitating.

*And I can’t hesitate either,* she thought as she dodged a strike from another attacker.

##

Kirito heard the clashing of weapons and forced himself to move faster as they neared where the information Argo supplied said Lind would most likely be confronting Harry. He had caught up to Klein several minutes ago and easily joined up with the man’s party as they were all here for the same purpose. Or at least, he thought so until Klein filled him in on what he had found out shortly before.

The information that PKers were in the area was worrisome, especially since they were apparently headed to the same place.

Not good, not good at all.

Though from the sounds of fighting, they weren’t having an easy time of it.

He reached up and grabbed the hilt of his longsword as they got into sight of where the fighting was. He stopped in surprise as he saw over a dozen orange cursors surrounding three green ones. While he couldn’t get a clear look at who was fighting, he assumed that two of them belonged to Harry and Silica. Who the third one was, he didn’t know, but it was probably someone from the DDA, if not Lind himself.

He watched as one of the PKers shattered and quickly saw Harry move to the next attacker and blinked in shock.


Kirito shook his shock off and nodded. “Well, someone is trying to kill him. I don’t think he can afford to.” His expression darkened. “Still, I don’t like those odds and they need backup.” He looked at Klein.

Klein nodded. “I am getting drunk tonight, somehow. I will find something that can do that, just you wait.”

“Only if I don’t first,” Kirito responded. He drew his sword and readied himself. “Well, let’s go.” He said grimly.

Klein drew his katana, as the rest of his guildmates drew their weapons.

“Now!” Kirito ordered.
The six players charged in.

##

The first indication Lind had that things had shifted in favor of him and his unexpected allies was seeing one of the PKers get cut in half. Since that same player had managed to get to his side and was about to hit him before he could guard, he wasn’t complaining. It also gave him breathing room and he eagerly took the opportunity to assess what was going on.

It seems that a group of players had heard the commotion and decided to jump in, and were now routing their attackers. He spared a glance to the one who had come to his assistance and blinked. He recognized the heavyset player who had saved his life, even if he couldn’t recall his name.

He looked around and realized that all of the players were ones he recognized.

He briefly thought that the boy had arranged this before dismissing it. For all of his issues with the boy, it was unlike him, and it led credence to the idea that Argo found it out. If she knew what he was planning, she probably knew what Hadrian was up to and simply called in some marks to ensure things didn’t get out of hand.

For all that it meant that she was interfering, the fact that her interference saved his life made him want to kiss her, rather than wring her neck. The thought of that made him snort.

“What’s so funny?” Hadrian asked him as he sent an attacker sprawling with a well-executed shield bash.

“I have a feeling that our help is courtesy of Argo,” Lind replied. “Instead of wringing her neck for interfering, I think I will kiss her for it instead.”

Harry snorted. “Just let me get an image crystal so I can take a picture of the expression on her face.” He dodged an attack and removed his attacker’s arm at the elbow. Grabbing the attacker, he threw him into another pair and sent them sprawling. “It will be worth the laugh, and might offset the nightmares I’m going to have about this day for the next few weeks.”

Lind took a look around. “Looks like the rest are retreating,” he observed.

He saw Hadrian turn his head to take a look at Silica. “Silica, behind you!” He shouted.

Lind turned and watched as a warned Silica dodged an attack and lashed out with her dagger, the familiar glow of a sword skill activating. She then attacked, stabbing the PKer three times, and he saw her eyes widen in horror as the player slumped and shattered.

##

PoH observed from his vantage point as those he had talked into becoming killers were routed with a neutral expression on his face. He had intended for this to be an opportunity for those he had gathered to make an impact, and while they did, it was not in a manner he had intended.

Instead of them slaughtering a guild leader and his companions, he had lost several recruits, including some who would have proven useful for him.

Oh well, they could be replaced.

He had lured them in with rhetoric about making SAO a world for the strong, and they had bought into it. He was sure there would be others who listened to his words, never realizing that he was
doing this so that they could kill others, or die trying, for his own amusement.

He had to give those three credit, though. Even when caught by surprise, they had managed quite well before reinforcements arrived. True, the girl had been sticking to disabling, at least until that last bit, but they had managed to hold off their attackers.

The reinforcements had turned it into a rout, but he could not have predicted that, not that he would have cared.

If those he called under his banner died, so be it. Their deaths were amusing to him either way.

Still, this did mean that he would have to hold off on going public with his group in a big way for now. Of the twenty-five he had brought, nine of them had died, which meant he would need to recruit more.

Either way, they would return and all the players of SAO would learn to fear the name he had chosen for his group.

Laughing Coffin.
Harry looked at his surroundings one last time before he tiredly sheathed his sword. A glance at his HUD had shown that the amount of time, since he first confronted Lind, to finishing a pitched battle with a number of criminal players out to kill him had taken less than thirty minutes. Funny, with how tired he felt, it seemed like it should have taken hours.

He saw a flicker of movement from above and saw Pina circling over everyone now that the fighting had ceased. A part of him was glad for that, as he had lost track of the feathered dragon since the start of this latest… unpleasantness was the most polite way he could think of it. That she was okay was reassuring, especially since he doubted that Silica would be able to handle losing her on top of what had already happened.

And speaking of Silica…

He turned his attention back to his companion, who had lowered her dagger, but was staring blankly at where the player she killed had shattered. He saw her hand relax and the sound of the dagger hitting the ground sounded louder than it probably was. “What, what have I…” She started to say, but couldn’t finish saying it. “I, I didn’t mean… Why?” She sank to her knees as the reality of what had happened started to sink in.

Harry gave a sad sigh as he slowly walked to her. He knew what she was feeling, he had a similar reaction two years ago. She was trying to process the fact that she had killed another human being, and it was clashing with the values and respect for life that had been instilled in her, which was making it difficult for her to process.

He knew full well how that felt, no matter how much he wished otherwise.

Stopping just shy of her, he slowly kneeled down and placed a hand on her shoulder. She flinched at the touch, but didn’t shy away. “Silica,” he said softly.

She slowly looked up. “H-harry?” She asked.

He gave her a sad smile. “You don’t need to hold it in.” He told her. “Just let it out.” He let out a grunt as she basically threw herself at him and buried her face into his chest. He slowly wrapped an arm around her shoulders to steady her as her body was wracked by sobs. He felt a weight land on his shoulder, along with a confused chirp, as Pina came to inspect what was going on. The feathered dragon seemed to sense Silica’s distress and worked her way to Silica and began to nuzzle the girl, giving soft chirps and coos.

Harry used his free arm to softly rub her back, but he didn’t say anything. What could he say? That it would be all right? That would be a lie and he knew it. She would have to live with this for the rest of her life. The impact of it would fade given time, he knew, but what had happened could not be undone. No matter how hard they tried.

And a part of him raged at the loss of her innocence, it raged at the dimming of one of the few true bright spots he had found in being trapped here. It raged at him, for his own failure in protecting it, at
protecting her. And as quickly as it came, and as hotly as it burned, it left. What followed was a certainty backed by cold fury.

He will find who was responsible for this, be it Kayaba, or whomever had sent those psychopaths, and there will be hell to pay.

##

Klein had quickly gotten everyone else to give the two some space. It was not something they should all be an audience for, and to be honest, he was surprised that Harry was able to keep it together. Or perhaps not.

The boy had always struck him as an adult in a kid’s body, despite how he sometimes acted. It was as if he had been through things someone twice his age would have had a hard time dealing with. And now this…

Looking back, he could see it. The kid had kept his head when everyone else, even Kirito in his own way, was panicking as they all found out that they were trapped here, as if this wasn’t the first crisis he had been in. How the kid had easily adapted to the rules of Aincrad, as if it wasn’t the first time he had to adapt to something completely different. Of how he was a natural in combat, as if he’s had to fight for his life beforehand…

What had the kid been through before ending up here?

He looked to the side and saw Dale staring at his hands in a sort of shocked horror and remembered that his friend and guild mate had killed one of those guys. He would have to help him through that.

If they could actually get drunk, he would have started with buying enough booze to float a boat on and get shitfaced with him, but for now, he would simply be there for his friend. A few drinks or ten would not be a bad idea though. He noticed the rest of his guildmates coming over as well, all of them closing in to help.

What a fucked up day it had been.

##

Lind’s hands wouldn’t stop shaking as the events of the last half hour sunk in. Everything had gone wrong, though he couldn’t blame anyone for it. How could he? It wasn’t as if having PKers come out of the woodwork like that and attack him, his guild, and even Hadrian and Silica like that was something you could anticipate.

Suddenly fighting for his life, and watching as the kid had torn through those killers like a rampaging oni also put the earlier duel into perspective.

He really had no chance there, it was clear now. Oh, he had gotten some hits in, but none of them solid or clean hits. The boy had been dominating the fight, controlling it, letting him vent his anger and frustration out, but always in control of it. When he had said that it was pointless, he was right. And it hadn’t just been the duel that had been pointless, the entire confrontation had been pointless.

Lind had allowed his own pride to blind him.

And seeing how the boy reacted when Silica had been threatened, it also put Schivata’s reservations into a whole new light. His second in command had obviously seen something in that boy, something that had made him wary.
But that wasn’t why his hands were shaking. He had been forced to face people who wanted to kill him, who had killed his guild members. He had been forced to kill, and by his actions in battle, he knew of two who had died at his hands.

And that didn’t even take into account the guild members who had died. Killed by those who had tried to kill him. And while he wouldn’t say they were friends, those guild members had trusted him to get them out of this alive, and had stayed with him through the fallout of what had happened when his plan to discredit Kibaou had gone wrong. They had stuck with him and he failed them.

And once he could get his hands to stop shaking, he would talk with Hadrian, actually talk, and then he would return to Frieven and figure out where to go from there.

##

Kirito ran a hand through his hair as the post-combat rush faded in an attempt to keep at least one of his hands from shaking. That had been too close, and two people he considered friends had to fight for their lives.

That he, Klein, and the rest had arrived in time to rout the attackers and get them to flee was good. That they had to do so violently, and in some cases lethally, was going to give him nightmares.

A part of him had thought he had been prepared for this possibility. Some players had tried to kill him before, either directly or indirectly, so the possibility was there that circumstances might force him to, no matter how much he tried to avoid it. And so, he had thought he had at least prepared himself a little bit for this.

How wrong he had been.

It had happened so quickly, that he didn’t even have time to register that the strike he was giving was a lethal one when he cut through one of the attacking players from hip to shoulder, and he didn’t have time to stop in shock before he was blocking another strike and taking another attacker’s arm off.

He had reacted on instinct, and it wasn’t until after the fighting had ended that he even processed what he had done.

That he had taken someone’s life.

A part of him had begun to enjoy SAO to a degree, to see the bright spots and enjoy the good times that could be found here. But now…

But now it was tainted with what had happened today.

##

Silica slowly got her sobs under control as Pina’s nuzzling and Harry’s gentle embrace served to steady her. She looked up into his eyes and saw a sad understanding in them, and it didn’t require any hard leaps of logic to know why.

He knew. He knew what she was feeling. The feeling of horror at what she had done. He knew, because he had been there. And some things she had seen in him finally made sense.

How the more dangerous fights were confronted with the cooler mien of a veteran. His cold fury towards Lind a few months ago and earlier today. His wariness around certain people because some part of him saw through the public mask they wore.
It also explained why he reacted so violently when that one PKer made a move to kill her.

And she now understood why he dodged questions about his past for the most part, and why he didn’t ask anyone else any questions about theirs. It wasn’t just one of SAO’s unwritten rules, it wasn’t because he was a naturally private person.

It was because he didn’t like talking about it because no one would really understand what he had been through, and they had left their scars on him.

He gently let her go and stood up before helping her to her feet. He gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze and walked towards where the others were. She reached up to take Pina off of her shoulder, clutching the feathered dragon to her chest, and followed him.

She wasn’t fine, far from it. The last vestiges of any childhood innocence left since being trapped here were gone.

Regardless of what her age was, her childhood ended this day.

##

“How’s he holding up?” Harry asked Klein as soon as he came alongside him.


Harry shrugged. “Well enough, I guess.” He replied. “I’ll be having nightmares about this, and that’s if I even manage to sleep for the next couple of days. As for Silica…” He looked back and saw her making her way to him, her expression clearly showing that she was trying to hold it together. “She’s managing for now. It’s not going to last, but hopefully we can get somewhere with some privacy before that.”

Klein gave him a curious look but Harry didn’t bother to explain. He only approached his other guild members and gave Dale’s shoulder a squeeze. He looked back at Klein. “Just be there for him, Klein.”

“He’s my friend, I’ll be there for him.”

Harry nodded and walked towards Kirito, who was looking at the surrounding area without really seeing anything, his mind clearly preoccupied. He turned towards Harry as the sounds of his footfalls broke through whatever was going through his mind.

“How’s Silica doing?” He asked.

“She’s gotten herself together for now.” Harry replied.

Kirito nodded and turned his attention back to the surrounding area. “This has been a fucked up day.” He said simply.

“Yeah, it has.” Harry replied.

“Does it get any easier?” A voice asked.

Harry and Kirito turned and saw Lind walking up to them.

“Why do you ask?” Harry asked.

Lind looked at him. “You said something while we were fighting those… bastards… off,” he
replied. “Something about needing something to laugh about to offset the nightmares you were going to have.”

“You mean when you said that instead of wanting to strangle Argo for interfering, you were going to kiss her instead?” Harry asked.

Lind gave an embarrassed flush. “Well, if she didn’t, I don’t think we would have gotten backup, but yes.” He said. “Still, your reply was as if you were speaking from experience.”

Harry sighed. “If you mean dealing with fucked up days like the one we’ve already had… it hasn’t gotten any easier for me, and I hope it never does.”

Lind nodded and closed his eyes. “I see.” He opened his eyes and looked Harry in the eyes. “I don’t think I’ll ever like you, but after this… well, it’s pointless to hold a grudge over what happened. I let my pride get in the way, and people died, so… I need to apologize.”

Harry nodded. “You do,” he replied. “But not to me.”

Lind nodded, and turned to walk off.


Lind turned back and nodded, before walking off.

Harry watched him go and nodded to himself. Lind was right, the two of them would probably never like each other, the older player reminded him too much of people like Dudley and Draco. But after this, he was willing to simply let it go and move on.

He doubted the other two would have.

He turned his attention back to everyone else and looked at them. Silica was still holding it together, though the way she was clutching Pina like a lifeline indicated that he really needed to get her somewhere private so she could have a proper breakdown. Klein and his guild mates were still next to Dale, who was starting to gather himself, and he knew that they would be there for him.

As for Kirito…

He looked at Kirito, who looked as if the events that had happened were starting to hit him in full.

If he was ever important enough for a biography, part of him figured that Dumbledore's talk with him after Quirrell would be summed up as a pat on the shoulder and an enigmatic chat foreshadowing of the future. He and the Headmaster had talked about a great deal more than that children’s book picture, of course-- of how the world they both wished it was, was a much better place than the world they had, about how in dealing with the world before them sometimes they had to do things that felt like a betrayal to that dream...

He admitted not fully understanding certain things-- and if Albus Dumbledore could admit that, then Harry could accept how confused the ending of his first year still made him feel sometimes.

But it had started, indeed, with simple comfort, one human treating another like a human. It had grounded him so they could talk about the rest. That included why he was left with the Dursleys, to be raised in a loveless environment because it was safer than the available alternatives at the time, of how things came to be the way they were. Oh, he knew that he wasn’t told everything; the Headmaster had admitted that there were things he couldn’t, or wouldn’t talk about yet. Some of them, he needed to tell him other things first. And to tell him those things...
But Dumbledore had assured him-- the nightmares, the doubt, the oddly conflicted feelings about his living family-- it was all human. A good sign.

And it had started with simple comfort and contact.

He reached out and gave Kirito’s shoulder a squeeze. He was reassured when Kirito acknowledged it with a nod.

“If any of you need to talk, I’ll be there to listen,” he said. “Still, let’s get out of here and find somewhere else to be.” He looked around. “I’ve had enough of this fucking floor.”

Everyone could agree with that sentiment.

**Aincrad, Floor 24, Panareze**

Asuna found herself impatiently waiting for word from Kirito on how things went. Argo had sent word on Lind’s movements, and his probable location hours ago, and Kirito had left to go back Hadrian and Silica up. They had argued over who would go and who would stay, as they couldn’t discount that Lind wouldn’t use the Moonlit Black Cats against them, but it seems that concern was unfounded.

So now, she was waiting near the teleport gate, on the off chance that Kirito had already met up with them and they simply decided to come straight here, rather than let her know with a message. It would be just like Kirito…

Her attention was grabbed by the light of someone teleporting in and she noticed Kirito, Hadrian and Silica, accompanied by Klein and his guild step off the platform. She walked up to them, mostly to give Kirito a piece of her mind, when she saw the subdued expressions on their faces, and she knew what that meant.

Something had gone wrong.

It was like a different part of her came forward, a different set of tools. She knew she could be the cool tactician, and the raging... yes, Hadrian's word fit in the English sense, bitch. She could be a bitch.

Neither were needed now. Well, some cool tact maybe--

Even that was pushed aside when Kirito’s eyes met hers.

"What... was it that bad?"

"Not Lind," Hadrian said, and Asuna was caught again by how old his eyes could look, in a way no cosmetic option allowed. "Some PKers got involved."

Asuna’s hand flew to her mouth in shock. “PKers? You ran into some… is everyone alright?”

"We had to... defend ourselves," Kirito finally managed, his speech broken and not as.... composed as he usually was. The cool facade most saw was gone. "We had to-- Dale was-- and I-- Asuna, I've killed now. I can't-- I've killed. For real."

She saw Hadrian reach out and give Kirito’s shoulder a squeeze. “If it was easy, I wouldn't be able to be your friend, Kirito.” He gave Asuna a look. “Let’s get inside, this is not the appropriate place for this discussion.”
Asuna could only nod.

The others in the tavern seemed to pick up on their mood and gave them room. Meeting Keita's eyes, Asuna shook her head once. Keita nodded, understanding that what was about to be discussed was going to be private, and ushered his guild outside. He had spent enough time around all four of them to begin picking up the tells.

Whatever it was they were going to talk about, it didn’t involve his guild, and judging by the expressions on everyone else’s face, it was something serious. She was glad that he picked up on it.

She watched as everyone quietly took a seat. She absently noted Argo’s presence in the shadows, but before she could move over and shoo her out, Hadrian looked at The Rat.

“You might as well sit down, Argo.” He said. “Some shit happened, and you might as well learn now. I trust you enough to know what’s... off market.”

Argo stepped out in the open and gave him a serious look. “That bad, Harry?” She asked.

He nodded. “That bad.”

She nodded, opened her inventory and materialized something that Asuna had never seen before. “This’ll ensure we have privacy, something I accidentally made a couple of weeks ago.” She said. “You guys want a drink or something to eat, order it now.”

Everyone did so, and Asuna’s eyes boggled at the fact that everyone in the group had ordered the most potent drinks on the menu, and in large quantities. They might not be able to get drunk, but it was clear they were certainly going to try.

Given what she had already heard, she was probably going to want to do the same thing.

When their ordered arrived, Argo tapped the object and everything beyond their table became muted.

“Huh, nice.” Hadrian remarked. “And you made it accidentally? Didn’t take you for a craftswoman.”

“I’m a girl of many talents.”

He nodded and then sighed.

“Well Argo,” he said. “You were right on the money about Lind planning something. We ran into him on the path that’s between Stahlhold and Feldin. We talked, argued, and I baited him with a few choice remarks. He didn’t buy into it, but it got him to change his plans from... whatever he was planning.” He took a deep pull from one of the cups in front of him.

“Anyway, he decided to duel me, half health rules, and we danced around for five minutes before I told him he was wasting his, and my time.” He sighed. “And then, things started going to hell.” He looked at Silica and then to everyone else. “A couple of PKs got the drop on Silica, had her paralyzed and at their mercy. One of them was complaining about wanting to see someone die, and made some statement about not having had any fun since another player named Rain, you might want to find her, escaped. Considering what he said about what he did to her friend I can guess what his idea of fun was. He made to kill Silica, and... well, let’s just say he didn’t have time to do anything before I removed his head.”

As he talked, Asuna noticed that as his voice got colder, his eyes seemed to gain a glow from within, reflecting the fury that the memory seemed to give him before it calmed down. She wondered if it was some trick of the light, and the words he said finally registered and her thoughts briefly shut
down from the shock.

Hadrian had killed someone to save Silica. The polite, somewhat friendly boy with an occasionally biting wit, had killed someone.

The implications of what the one he killed had a penchant for doing though…

*I can’t really blame him*, she thought. *I don’t like it, hate it actually, but I can’t blame him. And what does that say about how I’ve changed?* And that was an interesting personal question she would have to ask herself later, not now.

She noticed Argo had an equally shocked expression on her face, which didn’t surprise her. What did surprise her is how it hardened as she brought up a list and started scrolling through it. She stopped at a point and selected it. A few pictures, more like drawings, materialized and she held them up.

“Any of these look familiar?” She asked.

Hadrian took a look at them and pointed at two. “Those two,” he said. “I recognize those two. Not quite what they actually look like, but the sack with holes on the one on the left, and that mask on the right… that’s them.”

“Fuck.” Argo swore. “I was afraid of that.” She put the other pictures away and left them out. “Johnny Black and Red-eyed XaXa.” She said, pointing at both. “I only heard about them recently, but they’re nasty pieces of work. Which one did you kill?”

“Johnny Black.” Harry replied.

“Good.”

Harry and the others blinked.

“Your guess about his definition of fun isn’t far off.” Argo said. “He apparently has, well had, a thing for torture and rape, and gender doesn’t matter. The one player, Rain? Her friend wasn’t his only known victim. It actually explained a few deaths I found out about. Don’t know about XaXa, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s much better. What about XaXa?”

Harry shrugged. “Don’t know, he made to attack, I blocked it, and kicked him away. Things got confusing after that as their friends came out of hiding. Whoever Lind had with him there…” He shook his head.

“You sure they weren’t brought there by him?”

“He was too surprised for it to be anything else, Argo.” Harry said. “He’s still alive, and killed two of them that I know of.” He grew thoughtful. “I killed three others, and…” He trailed off, looked at Silica and the others, and then shook his head. “Anyway, Klein and the others got there, and forced them to retreat.”

Argo nodded, keeping her thoughts to herself. She then looked at the rest of the group, saw the expressions of the faces of Dale, Kirito and Silica and winced. “Well,” she said. “It sounds like you had a fucked up day.”

Harry gave a bitter snort. “That’s putting it mildly.” He replied and then took another drink.

“How-- how are you holding yourself together?” Asuna asked.
Harry sighed and put his cup down. “About as well as can be expected, really.” He said. “Which is to say, barely.” He looked at Asuna. “And I see that expression on your face. Don’t.”

Asuna blinked. “What?” She asked in confusion.

“Don’t give me pity. I don’t need it, and I don’t want it.” He said harshly.

“That’s not—” She started when he held up a hand.

“That’s not what you intended.” He said. “I know that Asuna, but I’ve had to deal with shit like this before, and I recognize pity when I see it. The last thing I need, that any of us need, is that. Trust me.” He rubbed his face and then looked at his empty cup. “And fuck, there’s another nightmare added to the fucking list.”

It was that which told her just how off balance he actually was. When he said he was barely holding himself together, he was telling the truth. She looked at Silica, and realized why he was trying to hold himself together.

“Oh shit.” She breathed out. “Silica, she had to...”

Harry nodded as he reached over and gave the girl who had been his companion for so long a squeeze on the shoulder. He then looked at everyone and sighed.

“Well, if you’ve been paying attention, and Kirito was there when Lind figured it out, so I might as well tell you.” He took a deep breath. “Today… it was not the first time I’ve killed someone. Self-defense, defense of others, it doesn’t really matter why, but it was about two years ago.”

And so he told them about Quirrell, and how he had to kill another human being. He edited out the magic, coming up with a mundane explanation for it, but he told them. He told them about the man’s connection to Voldemort, who he just called a criminal that had murdered his parents. He told them about how the man had acted in a way which was threatening the lives of his fellow students. He told them about how he found himself alone with the man when he revealed his true colors, and the altercation that followed.

He told them about how the man died, how he could remember the man’s screams, and the smell of burning flesh.

He then told them how his school’s headmaster had helped him through the worst of it. He told them of the nightmares, the doubts, the feelings that he had betrayed something, and how they affected him over the next several months. He told them how even with it all fading, it never went away.

They all noticed the tears. While he told his story, his voice never broke, but tears flowed down his face. They watched as he wept silently.

As he wept for the life taken that day, and the lives taken this day.

For the childhood, what had passed for it, that had ended and could never be gotten back.

##

It was later that night, or early morning, when he felt Silica jolt from what had been a restless sleep. While they had often tried to sleep in separate rooms when possible, separate beds when not, they had not done so this night. Not because of any change in their feelings, nor because of things moving forward in a different way.
No, it was because, right now, both needed something, someone to hold on to.

Not that Harry slept. He hadn’t expected to, and had given up any hope of it hours ago. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw the accusing eyes of those he killed. Every time he closed his eyes, he heard the screams of a man burning to death. No, he hadn’t expected to get any sleep this night, but the contact with Silica kept the worst of it at bay.

And he hoped it did the same for her, even if her sleep had been restless.

It would not be an easy time, for any of them, but they would get through this. Eventually, the horror they experienced would fade, though not go away. He knew this.

Even if it didn’t make him feel any better about it.

He heard Silica give a sad sigh, and felt her sit up.

“I know you’re awake, Harry.” She said, not needing to look at him.

Harry shifted himself and sat up as well. “I couldn’t sleep, not that I expected to.” He replied.

“If it’s always like this, I understand.” She said. “I wish I didn’t, but…”

“Yeah, I know.”

The two of them sat there for several minutes before Silica shifted her position so she could look him in the eye.

“I realized something about earlier.” She said. “Something that doesn’t make any sense. When you saved me, you were too far away to close the distance like you did, but you did anyway.” She took a breath. “There’s only one way I can think of that could pull something like that off, if we were in the real world at least. And if it was that, I can understand why you haven’t mentioned it, if you even thought about it since all of this started.”

Harry blinked in confusion. “And what would that be?” He asked.

She leaned in until her mouth was next to his ear, the rest of her body pressing in uncomfortably, but not unpleasantly, close. What she quietly said shocked him.

“Magic.”

Aincrad, GM Administration Area

Kayaba reviewed the data that Cardinal had flagged for him. Something had happened that the system couldn’t make sense of, something completely outside expectations.

He pulled up the recording of the incident and watched through it in its entirety again. From how Hadrian had confronted Lind, to when Red-eyed XaXa and Johnny Black had Silica at their mercy. He needed the context of everything that had happened there.

He watched as Johnny Black raised his dagger to stab Silica and was stopped. He paused the recording and reviewed the data again, paying attention to what happened in that specific time frame.

It seemed as if between one instant and the next, the player known as Hadrian was in one place, and was in another, taking Johnny Black’s arm off, followed by his head. He checked to see if there was an unknown glitch, which was certainly possible, in the area around that incident or involving the
players, and found no instance of one.

So how had he moved from one place to another in an instant?

He didn’t know how the boy had done it. Was it an exploit? Was it a glitch that he couldn’t find? Was it something else? He didn’t know.

What he did know, was that it was something new, and therefore interesting.

He made a note to keep an eye on the boy. He was turning out to be just as interesting as another player.
June 21, 2023 - Aincrad 24th Floor, Panareze

Harry didn’t even try and hide his exhaustion as he sat down at the table. He had not expected to get
any sleep the previous night, and he hadn’t, though not entirely because of the incident the previous
day. No, it had been because of the boiling over cauldron that Silica had decided to drop into his lap
after she had woken up from a nightmare, or maybe just the memory of the incident. Either would
have worked, and the latter almost certainly would have been similar enough to the former as to not
make a difference.

Of all the things he could have possibly expected of her, her knowing of the existence of magic, and
telling him of it, was low on the list. He had tried to play it off, but his surprise had been too genuine
when she had theorized that he had used magic to get to her, and she had pounced on that like a cat.
Add in the fact that she had pressed her own body to his, his own exhaustion, and his brain shut
down before he could rally. It made it easier for her to worm the truth out of him, and get him to
admit he knew what she was talking about.

She was a clever little bitch in doing that, he thought with some admiration. I mentally thought of her
as pure Hufflepuff, but damn it if she didn’t show a bit of Slytherin there. And damn the fact that
being a teenager carried over so thoroughly here.

She had told him about how she knew about magic, thankfully. About how her grandfather and
great-grandfather had been exposed to a very… unique… curse, as well as the artifacts, the potions,
and just general chaos that would not have been out of place in Hogwarts when the Weasley Twins
decided to liven the place up.

Well, maybe a bit out of place, if the stories were to be believed. But if even half of those stories
were true, Fred and George would have fit right in there.

Now that he knew that she had been aware of magic, he felt a little guilty about keeping it a secret,
though she didn’t raise an issue over it. She knew about the secrecy involved, and it was the fact that
her own family was somewhat involved that she knew. Well, that and she was from the Nerima
ward.

Apparently some strange things happened there.

Anyway, after that little reveal, neither of them were going to be able to sleep, or go back to sleep in
Silica’s case, restless as it would be. So they talked.

They talked about the previous day, now that the immediate shock had lessened. They talked about
how unfair the world could be and how they wished it wasn’t. They talked about many things until
the morning light arrived, and at some point, they found themselves leaning into each other, their
hands gently clasped together.

It didn’t go any further than that, but they both took the comfort that the physical contact gave.

Silica eventually drifted off to sleep, far more restful than previously, and he gently laid her down
before putting on some proper clothing and coming down for a quick meal. He doubted that Silica’s
restful state would last, and he would go back and check on her within an hour.

But first, he wanted to check how the others were doing. He was fairly sure that Klein would be able to help Dale, and the rest of the Fuurinkazan guild would be there as well. Asuna had agreed to be there for Kirito.

Even then, he doubted that any of them had a restful night.

##

Asuna did not get that much sleep over the course of the night, and it showed. Her normally elegant appearance was disheveled, her clothes were rumpled, and there were clear signs that she was tired. Not that she regretted the missed sleep. Kirito needed her, he needed someone to be a rock he could cling to while his emotions churned like a stormy sea, he needed the reassurance that things would get better. He needed someone to be there for him.

It had been heartbreaking to see someone who was normally so composed in public, if socially awkward in private, just crack like that. To see that the calm indifference and dry attitude he presented to everyone else break down in the face of what had happened. To see that even the strongest of them had things that could potentially break them.

She would have done what she could to help him anyway, even if Harry hadn’t asked her to. She wouldn’t have known how to approach it, and would have to learn, but she would have done it. Fortunately, Harry had told her that all she needed was to be there for him. To talk with him, to hold him if he needed it, and simply be present so that he knows that he is not alone.

It wouldn’t make things immediately get better. Doing that would require magic, and magic simply didn’t exist. Even if it did, she doubted that it would be able to, anyway.

So no, there wasn’t a magic wand she could simply wave and ease Kirito’s pain, but simply being there, holding him when he cried, and putting a hand on his shoulder to calm him when his nightmares woke her up.

She could, and did, do that. The second she spied Hadrian, picking at the food in front of him, she could tell that he did so with Silica, and that was while dealing with demons of his own. She wondered if the only reason he was holding himself together was because someone needed him. He might have been there before, but that didn’t mean that it was any easier or less traumatic for him.

Actually, she might want to talk with him about that. If he’s keeping it in for Silica’s sake, it can’t be healthy for him mentally in the long run. And in Aincrad, that could be every bit as deadly as the mobs.

None of them are fit to be on the front lines right now, she thought. They need some time away from it all. With that in mind, she walked over to his table and sat down.

“Morning Asuna,” Harry said with a yawn. “How’s Kirito?”

“He was asleep when I left the room,” she replied tiredly. “I came down here to get some tea and I saw you sitting here. You look like shit, by the way. Did you get any sleep?”

Harry raised an eyebrow at Asuna’s language. “Never thought I would hear you swear, and no, I didn’t.” He shrugged. “Didn’t expect to anyway. I’ll crash later, but for now, I’m down here because lying in a bed doesn’t have much appeal right now.”

“How is she?”
“Silica? Hopefully she’s still sleeping.” He yawned. “It was a rough night, and well…” He trailed off.

Asuna nodded in understanding. She gathered herself and looked at him. “I think you three should take some time away from the front lines. I would say you should retire from it, but I know you and Kirito would go stir crazy, and where you go, Silica’s not far behind you.” She shook her head. “I would try to talk Silica out of it, but…”

“She’s stronger than you think, Asuna.” Harry replied. “Stronger than I am in some ways.” He looked at the food in front of him and sighed. “I agree that we could use some time away from it all, though. What about you? Going back to the front lines once you know we’re settled?”

Asuna shook her head. “No,” she said. “I’ll go with you three.”

**June 23, 2023 - Aincrad 22nd Floor, Coral**

“So,” Harry said, looking at the moderate sized house, fingering the keys in his hand. “This is where we’ll stay for the time being. Not a bad place from the look of it.”

He had looked for a place to stay, somewhere more private than an inn. A quick look at the *Weekly Argo*, Aincrad’s newspaper, had pointed him in this direction, so he decided to check it out and see if it was available to rent. A couple of hours later, he had returned to the main town, a set of keys in his hands, and had taken everyone with him.

“Do I want to know how much you paid for this place?” Asuna asked.

Harry shrugged. “I didn’t buy it, just rented it.” He replied. “Buying it would have cost me… more than I like to think about. Renting it for a few weeks though only cost a hundred thousand col, and we’ve all sunk more than that on things before.”

Asuna and Kirito nodded.

“You didn’t have to do this,” Silica said quietly.

Harry looked at her. She had been quiet and subdued for the last few days, but he could understand. He gently put his hand on her shoulder and gave it a squeeze.

“We all need this.” He said simply. “Anyway, the place is furnished and has five rooms, let’s go and pick ours out.”

The group of four then entered.

**July 3, 2023**

Silica groggily opened her eyes as the morning light hit them and considered just burrowing deeper into the covers. After two weeks, she had finally had a night without nightmares, though those were having less impact when they did happen, and wanted to savor that fact by getting more sleep.

Especially since she was warm, comfortable, and could clearly hear Harry’s steady breathing, showing he was still asleep. Well, probably, possibly… maybe? Whatever. She was comfortable, her pillow was firm and warm, and she…

Her pillow shifted a bit and she felt a hand rest on her hip.

“Silica,” she heard Harry say. “I know you’re awake. Time to get out of bed.”
“D’nwnna.” She mumbled.

The hand moved towards her waist.

“T’ckl m’ n’l sb’oo” She mumbled firmly. “L’ t m’ s’lp.”

She heard and felt Harry’s chuckle as his hand stopped moving.

She knew he would do it again in a few minutes. It had become a familiar routine over the last two weeks. She would try to stay asleep, using Harry as a pillow, and he would try to wake her up. She would respond to his attempts with threats of violence, and he would-

“And here I thought I was supposed to do the penetrating.” Harry mused, the smirk clear in his voice.

And he would come up with something that was blatant innuendo.

Damn it, Harry!

She thought as her mind registered what he said, and the images it provided made her face heat up. She moved her head from his chest to shoot him a glare, but there wasn’t any heat behind it. They both knew this game, and they had done this song and dance before.

She shifted herself a little and then sat up. Giving herself a stretch, she looked down at him. He simply looked up and met her eyes, the green orbs showing his slight amusement. She huffed and gave him a light shove with her hip. Harry took the cue and gave a squawk as he fell off the bed, making it seem as if her shove had been forceful, rather than the light one it was.

Their usual morning routine for waking up done with, the two then busied themselves with getting ready for the day.

##

Asuna and Kirito heard the thump of a body, Harry’s by the sound of it, hitting the floor and shook their heads in exasperation. Looks like Harry and Silica didn’t sleep in separate rooms again, though they weren’t in any place to complain about it.

They were sharing the same room as well, though they at least slept in separate beds. How those two could share a bed when anyone with eyes could see how they saw each other was beyond them, but it was also completely in character for them. Only those two could make something between two people who were clearly attracted to each other seem so innocent.

No one in the rented house mentioned that. Even as the nightmares lessened and Silica and Kirito weren’t needing someone to be there constantly for them, they had all fallen into a habit. And if Harry and Silica slept better when the other was in physical contact, or Asuna and Kirito were more relaxed when the other was present, it was just one of those things they accepted.

July 12, 2023

Asuna looked at the recipe again and nodded. She had taken up cooking as one of her skills, and the downtime was giving her a lot of opportunity to practice. She still wasn’t as good as she wanted to be, but then she could probably max it out and not necessarily be satisfied.

It wasn’t as if cooking in SAO was like cooking in the real world. In SAO, all you needed to do was get the ingredients, do some quick preparation of them with specific tools and a menu interface, and then put them in the appropriate receptacle to cook, be it a pot, on a stove, or in the oven. It was also a lot faster.
It seemed like cheating to her. Still, she accepted the way it was as it was, and was determined to master the skill.

That and she missed actual Japanese food, or at least the flavors. She figured that as she got better in the skill, the recipes would become available, or she would experiment until she could duplicate them.

So she took it up. The others seemed to appreciate it, and they all agreed that food prepared by a player just seemed to taste better.

That and Kirito decided to take up fishing, sometimes dragging Harry out there so the two could have some guy time, and they needed to do something with what he brought in. They could feed the fish to Pina, and often did, but why waste a perfectly edible fish?

It also helped to center her. She hadn’t realized it until a week ago, but she had been changing, had already changed. The months of going out and fighting on a nearly daily basis had taken their own toll on her. She didn’t have the shock of killing someone to deal with, but she had taken a look at herself in the process of helping Kirito and the others.

What she saw showed that she had changed in a way that would have made her unrecognizable in the mirror before this all started. The face might have been the same, but the expression and eyes told a very different story.

Where she had been poised, the perfect corporate daughter, she now didn’t bother hiding her feelings. Where she had been unsure, she was now determined. Where she had been soft, she had hardened. Where she had done what others wanted of her without complaint, she now spoke up and voiced her own opinion.

She could be a calm tactician, a raging bitch, and one who joked with the rest of them, all at the same time, or as the situation called for it. Somewhere, somehow, she had stopped being merely Asuna Yuuki, a corporate daughter expected to get high grades, follow her parent’s direction, and marry well. She had become simply Asuna.

She told Harry as much during their own conversations. He told her that their experiences here would change them, and simply going back to their previous lives wouldn’t be easy, if it was even possible. They had all changed too much.

She had to accept that, even if she didn’t know if it was a good thing, or a bad thing.

July 19, 2023

Harry stretched as he looked over the lake. Things had been peaceful for the last several weeks and he had enjoyed the opportunity to relax. Silica was laying on the grass next to him, with her eyes closed and absently petting a curled up Pina on her chest. She was still awake, he knew, but it wouldn’t surprise him if it changed to her napping right there.

The nightmares which had bothered Silica and Kirito had largely subsided after two weeks. The two of them still had them every now and then, but they had lost their intensity and the restless nights could almost be considered a thing of the past.

Harry knew better, but the worst of it was over.

His mind went to something else after that thought, towards his magic and that fact that he might or might not have used it when Silica was in danger. If that was the case, then it opened up some possibilities, provided he could control it. He didn’t have a wand, and what he did sounded like
accidental magic.

And that was if it was magic. There were perfectly good explanations which were just as, if not more, likely to have been the cause of him teleporting that distance. Like a glitch, or Kayaba deciding that those PKers needed to be cut down to size, to a lot of other things really.

Still, if it was magic, then he would need to see if he could control it. He didn’t have a wand, but he did have a sword, and SAO was a world of swords. Perhaps if he were to do it within SAO’s rules…

“What are you thinking about?” Silica’s voice interrupted his thoughts.

Harry looked down to Silica, who now had her eyes open.

“Just wondering if what I did last month was that one thing we discussed.” He replied.

“Why?” She asked. “Even if it was, it’s not like you have the tools to do anything with it. Not properly at least. I know that much about it, at least.”

Harry smiled. “True, but I do have a sword. That might suffice.”

Silica carefully clutched Pina and sat up, placing the feathered dragon into her lap. She gave him a curious look. “But how?” She asked.

Harry shrugged. “No idea.” He admitted. “Anyway, it might work, it might not. I won’t know until I actually try.”

“And if you fail?”

“Then I lose nothing but the time I wasted on it.” He shrugged again. “I’m not going to try it in a combat situation.” He stood up. “Well, might as well try.” He looked at her. “Want to see if I pull this off?”

Silica considered it and shrugged. She nudged Pina to wake her up and then stood. “Why not?”

In the end, Harry didn’t manage to accomplish any magic. He did feel something a few times, but every time he focused on it, or what brought it out, it slipped away.

July 27, 2023

Kirito sat on the pier at the edge of the lake and cast the line with a well-practiced motion. As they had settled into the house, he considered what he would do with his free time, knowing that he needed something to keep him occupied. He could practice with his sword, shaking the rust off of the kendo training he had abandoned a few years ago, but that thought had been less than appealing in the initial aftermath.

It had taken him a week before he was willing to touch his longsword with anything but reluctance, and two more before he could draw it for more than simply cleaning and maintaining it.

He had been tempted to simply throw it away, destroy it, or sell it. It was the sword he killed a man with, after all, and the thought of keeping it had been… uncomfortable. Even now, he was uncomfortable with it, but at the same time, a part of him refused to simply dispose of it. When he mentioned it to Harry, during their occasional talks, the boy nodded in understanding.

He materialized his own sword from his inventory and simply held it. He then looked at Kirito and
asked him if his own weapon felt heavier. It was a surprising question to Kirito, who didn’t think of it that way, and was thinking of it more along the lines that the weapon had been used to kill.

When he told Harry that, he simply shrugged and said people feel things differently. For him, the act made the sword feel heavier in his hands, as if the burden of what he did with it was translated to the weapon, making the effort to simply hold it just that much greater.

“That is my albatross, Kirito, my burden to bear for what I have done.” He said. “Much like how my hands sometimes smell like ash and burnt pork to me.”

It certainly gave him something to consider. What did the sword feel like when he held it? It would be a week before he found an answer, and it didn’t really surprise him.

The sword felt like regret.

A tug on the fishing rod brought him out of his musings and he gave it a quick pull, making sure to not jerk it too hard, to bring the fish in. He checked the time in his HUD and noted that it was about time for him to head back to the house.

Weighty thoughts on his mind or not, Asuna’s cooking had reached the point that he wouldn’t miss it if at all possible.

August 1, 2023

It was the start of a new month, and they all realized that they were getting restless and bored with staying in one place. While the time in that rented house was needed for them, all four of them admitted that they missed heading out. They missed the excitement, the danger, and simply missed working to get everyone out of SAO.

“Well,” Asuna said. “It was nice staying here, but I don’t think we’d be happy remaining here for much longer.” She gave a wry smile. “We’re all too used to going out and doing something, so I think we should head out tomorrow and ease back into the swing of things.”

Harry nodded, knowing what she meant. “It’ll knock the rust off, at least.” He said. He then idly noticed the date and blinked. “Huh, I didn’t realize that my birthday was yesterday.” He said.

Asuna blinked. “It was?” She asked. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

Harry shrugged. “It’s not that important to me.” He replied. “So I’m fourteen now.”

Silica looked at him. “We could have done something though.” She said. “Or even a small gift.”

“And being with friends and spending time with them is enough of one for me.” He said simply. “And all four of us did exactly that.”

“But-” She was silenced when he put a finger over her lips, a small smile on his face.

Asuna gave a pensive frown, and she noticed that Kirito did as well. They wouldn’t pry, but it was clear that Harry’s life before SAO wasn’t what anyone would call good. His comment on his birthday not being important to him personally, and that he considered being with them enough of a gift also said a great deal that he probably didn’t intend to.

“Don’t worry about it.” He told them. “I didn’t bring it up, and it’s past now.” He looked around. “Still, that does bring up a small point. When are your birthdays, if you don’t mind me asking.”
They told him and he nodded. He brought up his menu and made a note of the dates to remind him.

Asuna looked at Kirito and Silica as Harry was busy with that and all three of them nodded. They would have to make it up as they went, but they would at least do something for him. When Harry was done he looked at them and got a wary look on his face.

“Should I be worried?” He asked. “You all have this look on your faces as if you’re plotting.”

Silica moved next to Harry and grabbed his arm, while Asuna grabbed his other arm.

“Plotting?” Silica asked. “Us?”

“Whatsoever do you mean?” Asuna added.

Kirito put a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “We’re all your friends, Harry.” He told him. “Allow us to do something for your birthday, even if it’s a day late.”

Harry gave all three of them a flat look and sighed. “Well, if you must.” He said with apparent resignation, though the smile on his face belied the tone. It wasn’t as if the idea bothered him after all.

He was with friends and that was all that mattered to him.
More Perspectives from the Outside World

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mystic Knight Online

Interlude II - More Perspectives from the Outside World

March 3, 2023 - Hogwarts, Astronomy Tower

Fred and George were busy with preparing a prank when a quick glance at the map showed them something odd. Odd as in unexpected, not as in unusual, though that could apply as well to this situation. Having been attending Hogwarts for five years, they had seen their fair share of strange things, some of which they had been responsible for.

Still, it wasn’t every day when someone who was supposed to be dead showed up on the map. It could have been a ghost, but they had never seen one show up once since they had… liberated it from Filch’s office.

Definitely odd, and something that needed investigating.

“Gentlemen,” a voice sounded from behind them. “What would you two happen to be doing out here?”

Fred bit back a curse and turned to see an amused Professor Lupin, as George tried to surreptitiously hide the map. From the man’s continued amusement, they weren’t fooling him.

“Professor, what brings you here?” Fred asked, not showing any sign that he felt as if he had gotten caught at anything.

Remus smiled, as it brought back memories of a happier time for him. “Oh, I was just taking a stroll and noticed you two here.” He said amicably. “I was just checking that you weren’t solemnly being up to no good. If you were, I pray that you didn’t leave anything that would prevent the mischief from being managed.” He gave them a severe look. “As a professor, I cannot condone it, and it would be a shame if I had to discipline such bright young lads.

Fred’s eyes widened a fraction as the phrases parsed in his head and he realized what it meant. Professor Lupin was a Marauder, and judging by some of the things noted over the course of the year, he had a good idea which one.

Which meant…

He stole a glance to George, who nodded and pulled out the map.

“Professor, I think you might want to take a look at this.” George said seriously.

It meant the exposure of what had been an effective tool for their pranks, but they really had no need of it anymore. At the same time, something was odd, and the last couple of years had demonstrated that “odd” could easily mean “bad.”

They nearly lost their sister last year, and their little brother had been endangered the year before that.

There was a time for pranks, and a time to be serious.
March 6, 2023 - Hogwarts, Unused Classroom

Sirius Black did not expect to find anything when he entered the classroom in order to avoid another patrol by the professors. He should have picked a later time to enter Hogwarts proper, but his nose had caught the scent of his prey, Wormtail, he would no longer think of that traitor as Peter, and his own impatience had forced him to try and track it down.

He wasn’t surprised that he had failed, the rat animagus; despite all his faults, was good at avoiding people when he did not want to be seen or found. It wouldn’t surprise him if his target had managed to lay false trails, considering that the two of them had been doing this for months.

Still, he knew that this classroom was unused and that it had plenty of places to hide in the shadows, since he had used it before. Not in the last few weeks, though. So he was surprised to find something new here, which alarmed him.

Something new meant that this classroom had been used recently, and may be in more regular use now. Something new meant that he was more likely to be found, as one of the places he had used to avoid being seen was now useless to him.

Something new also meant that he had something to investigate.

It might help him find Wormtail, it might not, but it wouldn’t hurt to see what it was.

And that is how he found himself looking over the instructions for a strange device, carefully reading them. He might be the type who would otherwise simply jump right in, but a dozen years in Azkaban had shown him the price of simply rushing ahead.

And besides, he had been stalking Wormtail for months and he would continue doing so until that traitor was dead. But for now, he had a device to play with and see what it was doing here.

Roughly ten minutes later, he stared transfixed at what he was seeing, and who was being shown.

Harry…

So that’s what those articles in the Daily Prophet meant. He didn’t understand the mechanics of it, but there was a good side to these circumstances, despite the likely dangers of them.

Harry wasn’t here while a traitor was being hunted down. He wasn’t here where Wormtail could use him.

And was that a girl he was with?

Yes, yes it was.

James would be proud, he thought with a sad smile.

He continued to watch, not really paying attention to anything else until a quiet noise got his attention. It was then that a couple of familiar smells reached his nose. He let out a sigh and turned around to meet the gazes of Albus Dumbledore and Remus Lupin.

“It’s been a long time, Professor, Remus.” He said, holding his hands out to his side.

“Indeed it has, Sirius.” Albus replied. “I wish this were under better circumstances.”
Sirius nodded. “I just want to know something.” He said. “Is Harry okay?”

“About as well as his situation allows.” Albus said.

Sirius gave a relieved sigh. “Good. Now, let’s get this over with.” He said with the tone of voice of a man walking to the gallows, and resigned to his fate.

##

Peter was cornered, and he knew it. There was no place to hide in the room he had been subtly herded to, and he hadn’t realized it until he was already there and the door was slammed shut and sealed. He frantically considered any options that came to him, and dismissed every one of them from his mind as the reality began to sink in.

He had been found out.

March 9, 2023 - Ministry of Magic, Minister’s Office

Lucius watched as Cornelius paced around the luxurious office and looked at the report that he had been handed by the man. It was a foolish tendency of the man, but useful at times. There was nothing in it that he didn’t already know from his contacts, but there were often little details that could be picked up.

So, Black is innocent, he thought to himself. He wasn’t surprised by that revelation, Sirius Black and James Potter had been like brothers, so for him to betray his friend like that was severely out of character. Not impossible, betrayals had happened between people closer than those two were after all, but unlikely.

The surprises came from the revelation that Peter Pettigrew had a Dark Mark, and that Black had been thrown in prison and left there without a trial. The former was understandable. Peter Pettigrew was known to be a coward, and no one but the Dark Lord knew who all the Death Eaters were. Still, it was surprising that he had been willing to go through with it.

Lucius knew all too well what was required to get a Dark Mark. Oh, not that there was one set ritual to get one-- despite the short sightedness the Dark Lord's sociopathic tendencies saddled him with, the man had been a masterful manipulator. For some, he had required an investment that was just too high; others were given license to work out their own madness. Both the elder Nott and Bella had killed for theirs. Theo Snr. had been racked with guilt-- he had the same superiority streak most in the Pure-Blood, Old Ways crowd had, that didn't automatically give him a head for murder. Bella had taken it as her new master asking to be shown her value-- and given how the Dark Lord had reacted to what she did to that family, and how she had reacted to his praise... that had almost made Lucius sicker than the act itself.

As for his own Mark? Being convinced to act counter to all his father had taught him, and made to bow to the Dark Lord in front of his peers in their Lord's graces... well, after the fact, the Malfoy training made clear what had happened. If he, a Malfoy, had decided the Dark Lord was worth bowing to, despite his family's ways... he must be loyal. Make someone do something as a choice, and let their own mind sort out how it justifies binding themselves to your side.

In Pettigrew's case? The man’s fear of the Dark Lord must have been great indeed, for him to go through with it. That, or-- yes, Peter had been the coward of Potter's group. Perhaps a demonstration of how only the Dark Lord could keep him safe? And once that weak link was seized, and the rumors that the werewolves were all too controllable by the Dark Lord (when really, only one or two small packs and the Child Turner had flocked to him), and Pettigrew had delivered himself to the
Dark Lord.

That Black had been in prison for twelve years during the aftermath of Pettigrew’s treachery without a trial didn’t bother him, but it did set a bad precedent. One that could potentially be used against him if some of his indiscretions ever came to light. That revelation did have some use, though.

Bartemius Crouch was done for, and good riddance.

“This is a disaster, Lucius!” Cornelius railed. “If this gets out, the public will riot and blame me for all of this.”

And then there was Cornelius to deal with. Lucius bit down a sigh with long practice and began to formulate how he could steer the man in a direction he wanted him to go. While some aspects of the situation were not immediately desirable, Black would most likely go free due to this, the benefits outweighed that.

He didn’t like Black, and wouldn’t shed a tear if the man up and died after lingering for days, but trying to stop this and go back to what Cornelius wanted could explode in his face. It would also reduce the likelihood of what happened to Black from happening to him, or anyone else in his family.

March 13, 2023 - Suginami, Nakano General Hospital

Sumire Ayano had replaced the water in the vase which held the flowers that had been brought in by family members and friends to liven up the otherwise sterile room where her daughter was being kept. It had been five months, five long and heartbreaking months since her little Keiko had been taken from her and trapped in that Death Game.

It was hard for her to watch what Keiko was doing, either via the web site that had been set up to get a look in, or on the screen of the computer that those, who were apparently the bodyguards to the boy she was accompanying in SAO, had helped her family set up. It was hard for her to see her kind and gentle daughter go out and fight for her life.

And yet, she was proud of her daughter. She was proud that Keiko had made a good friend who accompanied her, and who was so protective of her. Tetsuhiko might mutter darkly about what he would do to the boy, Harry Potter, if he made any moves that were less than innocent toward her, but that was a father’s prerogative.

Oh, the boy didn’t shy from danger, and Keiko was in the thick of it with him, but Sumire knew that it was in her blood. Gentle and kind her daughter might be, but she had Saotome and Tendo blood running through her veins, and they never shied from a fight or challenge. Keiko might not have it as bad as her mother, let alone her grandparents, but it was there.

It just needed to be brought out.

She placed the full vase of flowers down on the bedside table and took a seat next to her daughter’s hospital bed. She looked down on the peaceful face, and could almost think that Keiko was simply sleeping. It was right in a physical sense, but one glance to the computer screen put a lie to the illusion.

Though what she was seeing right now was certainly peaceful enough.

She watched as her daughter and companion sat down at a table with an unknown player and, well now, that was a familiar face. The girl was younger, so it couldn’t be who the face reminded her of, but she certainly resembled her senior, friend, and mentor from University. In a loose sense, true, but
those were the eyes and cheekbones of Kyouko Tachibana, well Kyouko Yuuki now.

Small world, Sumire thought as she watched the conversation. I had heard that Kyouko had a daughter, but... It was a shame that the two moved along different paths, Kyouko was ambitious and had gotten married to an up and coming businessman shortly before getting her PhD and settling down as a professor, while Sumire had returned to Nerima and later married a scientist, but such was life. Still, she should get in contact with her. It would be nice to talk to her old friend after all these years.

She pushed that to the back of her mind and turned her attention back to the conversation.

As the conversation went on, her eyes narrowed. Something wasn’t right. She noticed Harry’s wariness and how her daughter picked up on it, and she focused on the man that it involved. There was nothing wrong on the surface, but something seemed... off about the man. She watched as Harry politely, but firmly, rebuffed the offer that was presented, and watched as the man left.

She made a note of his name, and then listened to the conversation that followed. Her estimation of young Mister Potter went up as she listened. He had spotted it, not just some sense of something wrong, but had accurately noticed that there was something deceptive about the man.

She made a note of the man’s name and resolved to give it to her aunt, Nabiki. Perhaps she could dig something up about him.

March 26, 2023 - Hogwarts, Headmaster’s Office

Albus watched as Sirius impatiently paced around his office as they both waited for the students he summoned to arrive. It had been nearly three weeks since Pettigrew had been caught, two weeks since the man had confessed to his crimes and been sent to Azkaban with special manacles to keep him from transforming into a rat and making the accommodations... somewhat bearable.

He sighed as Sirius continued his pacing and was tempted to shove a shot of firewhiskey down the man’s throat to get him to relax a little, but considering he was still recovering, that would be unwise. Poppy could be vindictive when medical orders were ignored, after all.

“Just sit down, Sirius.” He said a little waspishly. “I sent the request for them ten minutes ago, and it will take them another ten before they arrive, at the least.”

Sirius stopped pacing and looked at him. He then walked over to an available seat and sat down with a slight sulk.

“I hate the waiting.” He grumbled.

Albus shrugged in response. Sirius had always been the impatient one amongst the group of four friends from his school days, something that made it easier to catch them in the act. On the other hand, it was those times he was being patient that one had to watch out for.

However, hotheaded, reckless and impatient as he was, it was when he was being calm and patient that anyone who knew him took as a warning sign. It meant that Sirius Black the prankster, wasn’t present. It meant that Sirius Black, the scion of the House of Black, was at the forefront.

That Sirius could be patient, cold, and calculating. That Sirius was the one who had fooled Severus Snape into walking into a trap that would have put him at the mercy of a transformed Remus. That Sirius was the one who had managed to escape Azkaban, avoid pursuit, and make his way to Hogwarts for the sole purpose of killing the man who betrayed him and his friends.
So while Albus found Sirius’ impatience somewhat irritating, if understandable, he also found it somewhat reassuring. Still, better to find a way to distract him before the man’s impatience forced him back out of that chair. He looked at a small stack of parchment and had an idea.

It would keep Sirius seated, and it would at least give the man some information about Harry while they waited for Miss Granger and Mister Weasley to arrive. He would show him some of the more pertinent events from the viewer that the Wainwrights provided later, especially since the latest bundle had arrived and he wanted to go over them again to make his recommendations for viewing to Miss Granger’s group.

His initial viewing of the events in that had proven quite interesting. Harry was certainly shaping up into a fine young man. And while it was too early to tell, he might find that special someone in young Miss Ayano.

And considering one particular event, he wanted to be present during their viewing, so that he could provide guidance to his students. At the same time, he should get Severus to watch it as well. Mr. Potter’s remarks there were not just related to his time with the Dursleys, after all.

April 2, 2023 - Suginami, Nakano General Hospital

Selene took a glance at the time and saw that she would have to leave within the next hour or so, and turn the responsibility for Harry over to the night security team. A shame in a way, as Harry seemed to be going on a date with Silica, though she doubted he saw it that way.

It was something that she admitted that she wanted to watch, especially since the two of them were so cute together.

Ah well. She did make a note on this and set the system to record the events though. She could always watch it later. And she wouldn’t be surprised if the betting amongst the team became more furious after this.

She felt the ward at the entrance to the hospital room ping, it having been put in place after Grandmaster Saotome had surprised all of them with his arrival, and turned to see Richard walk in.

“Evening boss,” she said to the man.

“Good evening, Ms. Carlisle,” he replied. “And how is Mr. Potter doing?”

“He’s doing good.” She replied. “He and Silica did a fairly light day today and were finished with their activities on the twenty-seventh floor by 1500. They are staying in Ronbaru, the main town on the floor for the rest of the afternoon and are currently seeing the sights and planning on dinner later.” She indicated the computer monitor. “Feel free to take a look.”

“Perhaps later, Ms. Carlisle, I can tell from here that you have it being recorded.” Richard replied easily. “Though it seems as if Mr. Potter and Ms. Ayano are doing fine. Anyway, did you manage to get that information I asked for? On this… Lind?”

Selene nodded. “His real name’s Minato Tamiguchi, sixteen years old, currently staying at Yokohama General Hospital’s SAO Victim’s Ward. Nothing turned up about any behavioral problems, no criminal history, nothing that would indicate that he had any predisposition to such. It’s possible they were missed, but our principal, Mr. Potter, probably hit the nail on the head.”

Richard raised an eyebrow. “You mean when he accused him of treating their situation as a game?”

“Exactly, boss.” Selene replied.
“From what you’ve gathered, and I am aware that this will be the Cliff’s Notes version, what can you surmise of his reasons?” He asked.

“With regards to Lind, his treating it as just a game was probably a defense mechanism to shield himself from the reality of the situation. He used the fact that SAO was marketed as a game, and shaped his actions around it, which is understandable, if inconvenient for us.”

“Do you perceive his previous actions as outright malicious?”

“No boss. From everything I can gather, and a few observations using the connection that Kayaba opened, probably in response to the method I made available, I don’t believe his actions were out of malice. Willful blindness to the consequences are more likely.”

Richard listened to the information and sighed. “Too young to act against, unfortunately. We will keep an eye on him, but it will come down to Mr. Potter.”

Selene nodded. “If it’s any consolation, Harry is likely to be more than he can handle.”

“We can only hope, Ms. Carlisle. We can only hope.”

April 8, 2023 - Akihabara, Tokyo

Kyouko sat down at the available chair in the cafe and looked at the woman on the other side of the table. A woman in her late-fifties, wearing a business suit and her hair slightly streaked with grey, was sipping a cup of tea with a calm control that bespoke years of practice. A woman she had met a few times during her University years, and someone whom her husband had a healthy professional respect for.

Nabiki Tendo, a corporate shark who had risen in the male dominated business world through her wits, ruthlessness, and ability find completely legal ways to eliminate all of her competition. A woman who seemed to know every dark secret in Japan’s business world and used that knowledge to terrifying effect. And also a woman whose professional integrity was above reproach.

Corporate shark she may be. A woman who knew things others would want buried as well. But at the same time, she only brought those aspects out as a last resort. You dealt with her honestly, and she would deal with you honestly.

The woman finished her tea and set the cup down. She met Kyouko’s gaze and nodded to herself.

“I’m glad that you were able to take the time out of your busy schedule to come out and meet me, Professor Yuuki.” She said.

Kyouko nodded. “It was no trouble, Miss Tendo.” She replied with ease. She had married into wealth, and had learned quickly how to, as the Americans would say, walk the walk. “I still remember when Sumire introduced me to you back when she was my kohai in university.”

Nabiki chuckled. “Ah yes,” She replied. “You were so shocked to meet with a rising star in the business world, a woman no less, that you didn’t know how to act. I knew that you would do well, and you’ve proven me right. A good and successful marriage and a successful academic career. Not what I would have done with your talents, but we’re different people.”

Kyouko nodded at the compliment, despite its dry delivery. It was true, after all. Still…

“I am curious, Miss Tendo.” She asked. “Why did you contact me?”
“My niece, Sumire, noticed a player that had features reminiscent of yours when she was watching her own daughter’s progress in SAO.” Nabiki said. “A girl by the name of Asuna. She had approached me about another matter, but I decided to look into it as well.”

Kyouko’s eyes widened. While it was no secret that her daughter was trapped in SAO, it was kept quiet, if only to avoid listening to the false sympathies of many in Japan’s upper class. But to hear that someone made the connection and… wait a moment.

“When you say Sumire, you do mean Sumire Saotome, correct?” She asked to get some confirmation.

“She got married about fifteen years ago, so it’s Ayano now,” Nabiki replied. “Apparently Keiko, her daughter and my grand-niece, regularly associates with your daughter, Asuna, in SAO.” She gave her a searching look. “As much as I would rather she had remained where it is relatively safe, it seems that my grand-niece inherited my family’s tendency to face trouble head on, rather than stay out of its way.”

“And you’re fine with that?” Kyouko asked.

Nabiki shrugged. “Fine? I wouldn’t say that I’m fine with her decision there, but I am in no position to stop her.” She admitted.

Kyouko nodded in understanding. “Still, this isn’t the real reason you requested to meet me, isn’t it?”

Nabiki smiled. “Indeed it isn’t.” She replied. Her gaze sharpened. “I’ve been keeping track of what I can, both inside SAO and outside here. I know that your husband’s company, RECT, has taken responsibility for maintaining the SAO servers. At the same time, I’ve also kept an eye on who is involved with it, as well as creating up and coming products.”

“Shouldn’t you take this up with my husband, Miss Tendo?” Kyouko asked.

Nabiki smirked. “I have, and he’s told me that he will take it under advisement, but I do think you should know.”

“Know what?”

“Know that the project lead for both, Noboyuki Sugou, was a colleague, well more of a rival, of Kayaba’s. And that despite being cleared in the subsequent investigations, he shouldn’t be trusted. It’s nothing concrete, for now at least, but I have met him before, as I was interviewing him for a position in my own company. It fell through, obviously, but it allowed me to get a feel for him.”

Kyouko raised an eyebrow. “That’s all?” She asked. “I would have thought you would have learned his deepest and darkest secrets by now. You do have that reputation.”

Nabiki chuckled. “Things like this take time. I am keeping an eye on every one of Kayaba’s former colleagues, particularly those who were part of the Shigemura lab at Touto University alongside him.”

Kyouko’s eyes narrowed at that. Things started making some sense now, though the woman’s motives could still be questioned. “This is interesting, but how do I know that you’re not simply using this to undermine my husband’s company? You did compete with him to gain the contract to maintain the SAO servers, after all.”

Nabiki nodded. “Fair point. Still, it isn’t the first contract I’ve been beaten at in getting, and it won’t
be the last. There’s no reason for me to take offense at that. Besides, Shouzou is a good man, and I have confidence in him to run, or at least direct those running, such a contract. It’s more just letting you know, just in case my feeling on Sugou proves accurate.”

Kyouko found that she could accept that. She knew Nabiki’s reputation, both the good and the bad parts of it.

April 15, 2023 - Hogwarts, Viewing Room

Hermione placed the disk into the tray and watched as The Viewer, as they had all agreed to simply call it, began to work automatically. They had received a new shipment of disks a couple of days ago from Harry’s watchers in Japan, and she was interested in seeing what he had managed to get himself into this time.

They were still close to two months behind, timeline wise, but they were slowly catching up due to the Headmaster’s own efforts in highlighting some of the more interesting bits. They often made her heart leap into her throat, but they showed that Harry, at least as far as the latest timestamp showed, was alive, well, and doing what he could to get out.

Whoever was sending the bundles of disks was thorough, and the Headmaster himself said that they only covered a fraction of Harry’s activities. While those who were compiling these preferred to go for the interesting material, they also covered Harry’s day-to-day activities.

And thinking on the day-to-day, she had finally gotten what McGonagall had subtly been trying to hint since the beginning of the year, and backed off from her chosen course load. Divination was easy for her to drop, Trelawney was either as fraudulent as they came, or the skill required an inherent gift that she didn’t have, and she doubted Trelawney had as well. She hadn’t wanted to drop any others, but looking at her schedule, and then this, she had reluctantly chosen to drop Care of Magical creatures.

Unlike with Divination, she had personally gone to Hagrid and explained her reasoning. He had accepted it, especially since he was apparently aware that the class was not her type. He did direct her to several books she could read in her free time if she was still interested in studying it. The inherent dangers of the class had also not appealed to her, though she had been one of those to work with the newly appointed professor and others to stop Draco’s foolishness from causing more trouble.

It had been rather satisfying to derail what he had been attempting. They did so by providing hard to refute evidence, from multiple sources, that the only one responsible for his rather minor injuries, was he, himself and his ignoring the explicit safety instructions. It ended up costing Slytherin a hundred points and Draco being censured. Twice. He’d been disciplined for the incident with Buckbeak itself, and also for escalating it beyond a matter that should really have remained at school.

Several Slytherins who had found themselves as part of the group looking very smug about something had clued in the rest that something had happened. While they didn’t give any details, Slytherin kept things private, they mentioned that Draco’s antics had cost him. And there was a muttering that when his father had heard of it in full, he had not been pleased with his son’s handling of the matter.

She pushed those thoughts to the back of her mind as she began the task of comparing the progress notes she and her small group had compiled, the Headmaster’s recommendations, and what they were looking at now.

Despite being what were probably just the highlights of Harry’s activities, the sheer amount of data
meant that what had been collected so far could keep someone busy all day, every day, for weeks. And more kept coming in.

After doing the comparisons, she pulled up the menu, very similar to a Blu-Ray player’s chapter selection options, and looked to those in the room with her.

“All right, we’re soon to reach the end of February, and the Headmaster has briefed us on the events on the twenty-seventh.” She said. “We’re now at the point in our progress to watch it, so if anyone has any reservations, let me know now.”

Justin raised his hand and Hermione acknowledged him with a nod. “Not a reservation per se, Hermione,” he said. “But we were told that people died during the events of this day. I think we need to consider this less entertainment, and more fact finding than we would normally, considering that there is a high likelihood that we will see that.”

“You are quite correct, Mr. Finch-Fletchley,” came the Headmaster’s voice from the room’s entrance. All of the students in the group turned to see him enter into the room, followed by the Heads of Houses and Sirius Black. “The events of that particular day are quite serious. I have brought the Heads of Houses, as well as Mr. Black, with me to watch this as well.”

Hermione considered that and nodded. While Professor Snape’s presence was an unwanted addition, the small handful of Slytherins in the group warranted him here in an official capacity. Their addition to it, at the Headmaster’s polite request, more oblique order, was accepted reluctantly, but their presence had proven useful.

After all, those from some of the more traditionally aligned families had basically confirmed what Justin had surmised when they first saw the device. That their interest continued was also promising.

After all, the traditionalists held a lot of clout right now, and that was unlikely to change any time soon. If they could get the more neutrally aligned traditionalists to have a favorable impression, it would be helpful.

She stole a glance to those from Slytherin House: Daphne Greengrass, Blaise Zabini and Tracey Davis were regulars and most certainly not a part of Malfoy’s clique, but Marcus Flint was a surprise. Flint was considered a part of Malfoy’s clique, at least until he disabused them of that notion.

“He’s on the Quidditch team, and you know why.” He told them. “He’s at least competent enough on a broom to not be an embarrassment, at least, so he’s not all talk, and that’s all I’ll say in the matter.”

Others from Slytherin came and went as they felt like it, and were not insulted to not be considered a part of the main group. They were curious, and left once they had been satisfied. And that could be considered just as true for the rest of the houses. Curiosity brought them in, and they went on their own business once it was satisfied, no more, no less.

It was a shame that Ronald didn’t stay with the group, but he did pop in on occasion to see what was going on. There were a lot of things about what they were doing that weren’t his thing, and he knew it. He had backed off to avoid getting in the way, though he did ask for updates.

“Well then, Miss Granger,” The Headmaster said. “Would you like to begin?”

Hermione nodded. “Of course, Headmaster.” She replied and turned to The Viewer, and they really needed to come up with something better than that informal name, and brought out her wand.

“We’re starting the viewing of Harry’s activities on the twenty-seventh of February, two thousand
twenty-three.” She said as she began the playback. “For those who may not be informed, we are watching the actions of Harry James Potter, under the alias of Hadrian, as he travels through the virtual environment of Aincrad. Please hold your questions until after the events are viewed.”

##

When the recording finished, several of the students also took careful glances back to the professors to gauge their reactions. Hermione noted that Professor Snape looked like he wanted to say something fairly acidic about Harry, but sharp looks from the Headmaster, the rest of the staff, and Mr. Black stilled his tongue.

Professor McGonagall kept her face fairly neutral, but the Gryffindors could see the pride in her eyes at Harry’s actions. Professors Flitwick and Sprout also kept their expressions neutral, but both also seemed to have a favorable impression of what had happened.

Harry had taken charge, and while he certainly listened to people, he had lead fifty people in a successful operation. They couldn’t save everyone, and they lost five of their own in the process, but it had accomplished the mission. The fact that they saw people die was a little shocking, less because of the knowledge, but the fact that watching people die was different than knowing intellectually.

It also highlighted the dangers Harry regularly courted, and how he was risking his life on an almost daily basis. It showed them that anyone could die there, and that death could come suddenly. It also showed how so many people were willing to risk it, to get not only themselves, but others, out of their prison.

Hermione took a breath and turned her attention back to her fellow students. “That concludes the events recorded for the twenty-seventh of February, two thousand twenty-three. Now, everyone, what is your analysis?”

That broke the assembled students out of their silence and they all began discussing the events. None of them noticed when the adults left.

May 7, 2023 - Nerima, Saotome-Tendo Residence

Ranma sat down at the dinner table and looked at his wife of thirty-seven years as she finished placing the cooked meal on it. Off to the side, he saw Sumire, his eldest with her husband talking quietly about something, probably Keiko’s adventures in SAO.

While he would like to have the rest of the family present, his son and heir was busy with a training trip to China to not only improve his skills, but to reaffirm his family’s alliances there. His other son was busy running the Nekohanten under the watchful eye of his "nee-san" Shampoo (the actual relationship was more complex than it should have been, but that's what Ko called his biological mother). His youngest, Ayane, was busy with her residency at Yokohama General Hospital and wasn’t available. Tales of how they had restrained her from trying to transfer/defect to Nakano General had become a local legend already, and was growing with every retelling.

Their was a close knit family, all extensions due to his father's insanity included.

Nerima's Happy Crossdressing Clan had been by earlier, with Ukyo and Konatsu bringing enough food to... well, he supposed in a normal family it'd last a while. With his and his daughter's appetites, it was a nice addition.

They'd gotten past not eating at least.

Ukyo, Konatsu, and their youngest daughter had been dressed unisexually. Everyone in the ward...
knew that meant it was not the time for playful joking about ambiguous genders.

Not everyone knew the details of this SAO thing, but they knew Keiko was in it. The respect being given was a far cry from their madcap youth.

The doorbell sounded and he rose, waving Akane to remain seated. She wasn't her older sister, but she could run herself ragged to avoid things in her own way. So could Nabiki.

Ranma blinked when he opened the door.

"I came straight here when I heard," Ryoga said simply.

None of their usual, now joking vows to defeat the other/avoid the fight. No mention of the fact that 'straight here' had likely required a stopover in Mandipor or some other, more exotic place-- like, say, Toronto, or that one time he ended up on a different planet.

They wouldn’t have believed that, had he not had the aliens drop him off at their front door, along with souvenirs and pictures. That Gordon fellow (who insisted they could call him 'Alf') and his wife Rhonda seemed nice enough, though. They spoke some weird Americanisms at times, but this was Nerima, and they just smiled, nodded, and rolled with it. The only place that got anywhere nearly as much weird shit was Minato. Oh, and that one town near that shrine in Okayama.

His friend Ryoga inclined his head slightly and took him in. "You look less like a corpse than I expected, Saotome."

Ranma smirked back. "I've had a few months to process it," he shot back.

"Just tearing her out of there...?"

"Really isn't an option, or we'd have done it." Ranma stood to one side. "I think seeing her P-oyajii would do Sumire good, though."

Ryoga placed a hand on Ranma's shoulder. "Sounds about right."

The two said nothing else on the way to the kitchen.

For Ryoga, getting there as soon as he had said it all.

May 9, 2023 - Suginami, Nakano General Hospital

The laughter coming out of the room that Harry Potter was being cared for in brought Kasumi over, curious to see what was going on. As soon as she entered, she saw Selene, the woman who regularly watched over him during the day, she wasn’t going to be so crass as to call her his bodyguard, chortling at the screen of the computer monitor.

She saw Harry standing just outside a door, wearing nothing but a towel and every inch of his exposed skin was flushed. She heard a muted shriek from the speakers and it was relatively clear what had happened.

Either he had walked in on Keiko while she was taking a bath, or she walked in on him as he was leaving. Given what she knew about Keiko’s habits, especially when she was still groggy from waking up, the boy would have gotten an eye full if it was the latter.

“So, did he walk in on my grandniece, or was it the other way around?” She asked conversationally, startling the other woman. She kept her expression polite, rather than the smirk she wanted to give,
easily. She had a lot of practice, even before she entered the medical field.

Selene gathered herself and turned back to the screen. She smothered another chortle at Harry’s attempts to just move on as if nothing happened were shown. “The latter,” she replied. “I saw him enter the bathroom forty-five minutes or so ago, and she was still asleep, we don’t see what goes on in bathrooms, or if they’re too undressed, even with these systems.”

“So they slept in the same bed again?” Kasumi asked.

Selene nodded. “Only those two could possibly keep it that innocent when they are so clearly attracted to each other.” She replied, amused. “Even more, I wouldn’t be surprised if they’re aware of it.” Her expression became slightly serious. “But I doubt Harry will make any move in that regard.”

“He is a teenage boy,” The nurse countered.

“True, but it doesn’t fit his character.” Selene replied. “I know him well enough to know that he sees Silica as a friend, and he values that too much to risk it. Keiko might have to make the first move in that regard.”

Kasumi nodded. “And she won’t rush it, either.” She admitted. “I wouldn’t call her traditional in any sense, not with our family, but she knows better than that.”

Selene gave her a curious look.

Kasumi smiled. “She’s heard the stories of her grandparent’s generation.” She replied as if that explained everything.

She noted Selene’s answering nod was more for the sake of politeness, rather than understanding. That didn’t bother her, considering that most of the meaning was something you had to have to proper context for, and for all that they could use magic, young Mr. Potter’s bodyguards didn’t have that. They were fairly normal, though.

Well, normal for someone who grew up with the insanity of Nerima, at any rate.

**May 21, 2023 - Kawagoe, Kirigaya Residence**

Midori watched as her daughter, Suguha went up to her room, the bag containing the purchases they made earlier in her hands. To think that her daughter, who had about as much interest in computers as your average athlete normally, admitted her own curiosity about what all the hype was, both for when the Nerve Gear and SAO had been released, but also when RECT had advertised the AmuSphere and Alfheim Online. That she wanted to see what Kazuto saw in all of that was left unsaid, but understood. Suguha might be less tech inclined, but she was still Midori’s daughter.

It was understandable, considering that Kazuto was trapped in SAO, though he was making the best of his situation, from everything they saw. Dangerous, yes, but he had adapted to it, and to everyone’s surprise, had actually begun socializing with others. Or was it others forcing him to socialize?

Midori didn’t know, but considering the banter between him and several players he regularly associated with, she was betting on the latter being what started it. She was particularly interested in how he seemed to be in regular contact with a girl, and that pair of younger players, who were a constant source of teasing were also amusing to watch.

She shrugged it off and took her own bag up. She had an AmuSphere for herself, mostly so she
could watch Kazuto in action. The streamed recordings were compatible with Full Dive systems, after all. She hoped she could get a better viewpoint of what was going on this way.

She would find out later tonight, after dinner. She idly wondered if Suguha would do so as well, or experiment with Alfheim Online first, and shrugged.

She would have gotten an extra one for her husband, Minetaka, but he had thrown himself into his work and was out of the country right now. She knew that he was troubled by Kazuto’s situation, even if he couldn’t really voice it. Too many things had been said, too many harsh words that cannot be taken back were exchanged, between them for them to mend the rift they had between them easily. Children don’t take well to finding out they were adopted, even when told by their parents, and Kazuto found out from the National Registry.

Kazuto had considered what he had been told a lie, and Minetaka thought he was being ungrateful. Both were right, and they both knew that. It didn’t stop the emotions from affecting how they thought of the matter, though. They had been calmly, even coldly, polite to each other since, but they had neither forgiven, nor forgotten what was said.

She shook her head free of that thought. The boys in her life were, for all their intelligence, stubborn idiots when they got an idea into their heads. But then, they wouldn’t be the people they were if they weren’t like that.

Still, she was pleased that her adopted son was opening up to others and making friends. She knew her late sister, Aoi, Kazuto’s mother, would have approved of that. Perhaps, after he got out of SAO, he would finally reconnect with his family.

**June 4, 2023 - Setagaya, Wainwright Safehouse**

“Report, Ms. Carlisle.” Richard ordered calmly the second she stepped into the room that doubled as his office.

Selene nodded. “Argo has found out that Lind is up to something, and she has passed the information to Harry.” She told him. “He has taken it under advisement, and Argo has promised to look deeper, up to tracking down members of Lind’s guild and using more… forceful techniques.”

Richard blinked. “Forceful?” He asked.

“It’s about as polite a way to describe “holding someone off the edge of Aincrad and threatening to have the walk home,” that I can come up with.” She replied with a shrug. “Harry called it accidentally participating in an assisted suicide if something went wrong.”

Richard nodded. “Interesting.” He said.

“Boss?” Selene asked with a little confusion.

“How concerned was he over Miss Argo’s words?” He asked.

Selene frowned. “He didn’t sound overly concerned, but that’s probably because they didn’t have anything more concrete.” She said. “I know he’s taking it seriously, but he’s aware that without more information, the only thing he can do is be a little more careful than normal.”

Richard became thoughtful. “We will need to notify Grandmaster Saotome and the rest of Miss Ayano’s family.” He said. “This development may end up affecting her, and I am fairly certain that they will want to be there.” He looked at her. “Until this ends, we are doubling our watch on Mr. Potter.”
“Understood, Boss.”

“By the way, Ms. Carlisle,” Richard added. “Do you have any ideas as to where or when Lind will act?”

Selene frowned. “Nothing concrete, but if I were to make a guess, he would do it on the twenty-fifth floor if possible.” She replied. “That’s where Harry called him out and the whole mess with him started. About two weeks or so is my best guess.”

Richard nodded. “Then we best get to work.” He said. “The option of terminating Lind is still off the table. I notified the Patriarch and he did not grant any exemption in this matter, not that I expected him to. It’s all up to Mr. Potter.” He shook his head. “Still, we must be ready to run damage control.”

June 15, 2023 - Kyoto, Undisclosed Location

She looked down on the girl lying on the futon, her expression sad. For seven months, nothing had changed, and there was nothing she could do about it. She peered off to the side to the device that had been hooked up to it so she could see what the girl did, a favor given for a likely favor to repay at a later date.

She had an idea what they would likely want. The Wainwrights had a magical youth under their charge who was in the same situation, so the future favor would likely be to aid his recovery. Or it might be something else, but nothing she wouldn’t be unwilling to do. They rarely asked anything of her, but her knowledge and ability with healing magic was exceeded by few.

A small favor given, for a small favor in return.

And as she looked down on her youngest daughter, her tails were limp and her ears drooped as she cursed the name of Akihiko Kayaba. He was the architect of this, and when she found him, he would feel her wrath.

For Sachiko Yasaka, the last remaining Kyuubi no Kitsune alive for at least the next century, nothing else would suffice. The man had made her daughter, Mizore, a prisoner in his mockery of a world.

And while her mother silently watched her daughter and raged at a man who was still out of her reach, Mizore Yasaka, known in Sword Art Online as Argo, continued her journey.

June 20, 2023 - Suginami, Nakano General Hospital

Ranma sat down next to his granddaughter’s hospital bed and took her thin hand in his. Despite the best attempts by hospital staff and medical technology they could only slow the muscular atrophy, not prevent it. He could ask his brother-in-law, Tofu to do something about it, but that would likely have to wait until SAO was cleared. It would raise too many questions.

As it was, she only looked like she had been confined to a bed and in a coma for a month, not the nearly eight it had been. Her inherited resilience, along with the slight electric currents running into her muscles, keeping the worst at bay. Most other patients were farther gone, but it was still slowed considerably.

He shook his head free of those thoughts and turned his attention to the monitor of the computer that was networked to her Nerve Gear.

Sumire and Tetsuhiko would be here later, if possible, but they had commitments they couldn’t simply get out of, so he volunteered to be here. Akane was just outside the room talking with Kasumi, the two sisters using the opportunity to share family news and exchange information on
Keiko’s activities. He had simply gone in and began his vigil, knowing that if anything important happened, Kasumi would have already informed the family, or would tell his wife.

Even so, he was here for a reason, outside of a grandfather checking in on his granddaughter.

Those who were body guarding that boy, Harry, had notified them that some things in the background were coming to a head and there was a possibility that Keiko could get swept up in them. It had taken them a bit to give them all of the context, but it simply boiled down to some kid having his ego bruised and wanting some payback.

They were monitoring the situation, but they notified him and his family as a courtesy, and the fact that if things went wrong, it would be better for them to be present, rather than get a clinical notification from one of the doctors on staff.

They had assured him and his family that they doubted that it would get to that point, but they didn’t outright dismiss the possibility. He had noted their professionalism, and understood the courtesy, as much as he didn’t appreciate it in some ways.

He didn’t want to know that his granddaughter was knowingly walking into a situation that could easily spiral out of control. He didn’t want to know that if things went terribly wrong, her life would be tragically cut short. He didn’t want to know that some family traits bred all too true for a kind, friendly, and gentle girl. He was already unhappy with how SAO was turning her into someone who would have fit in all too well with his generation.

He was absolutely and coldly furious that he couldn’t do anything about it.

And at the same time, he was proud of her. Proud of the fact that she was rising to the occasion. Proud of the fact that she was facing her situation head on.

He was both worried for her and proud of her, and if something happened to her, he would personally track down whomever was responsible.

He began to watch the monitor, watching what Keiko was doing. Worried, proud, furious at his inability to do anything more than this he might be, but he would watch this through to the end.

##

“They’re approaching the next area that Harry has pegged as one of the ones where Lind might either meet with them, or ambush them.” Selene said in a voice that radiated forced calm. “It seems as if they’ve noticed some watchers and… what are they doing?”

Richard looked at the monitor and snorted. “It seems as if they’re putting on a show for their watchers.” He commented idly. “Their interactions with each other are well known, as well as Miss Ayano’s occasional… what was that word you once used Ms. Carlisle? Ah, tsundere. Ms. Ayano’s occasional actions in line with a tsundere from an anime with regard to Mr. Potter are well known. And what does she mean about her family not doing kawaii? What does… ah, never mind.”

Selene nodded and watched, snorting at their antics. “They’re playing it up now.” She said drily. “And oh, look, she’s now chasing him.” She shook her head in amused exasperation.

“Pay attention, Ms. Carlisle,” Richard said firmly. “It seems as if they have arrived.” He focused on the screen in front of them both.

“Did he just quote Warriors?” Selene asked and then watched as Silica and he high-fived. “I guess he did.” She shook her head. “And now they’re… oh,” she barely restrained a laugh. “They’re
acting as if he’s unimportant, and… ouch, nice burn, Silica.”

Richard nodded and continued watching.

##

“That guy is rather full of himself, isn’t he?” Akane asked as Lind finished listing what he blamed Harry for.

“Almost as bad as Kuno,” Ranma replied. “Not quite as bad, and smarter to boot. He’s not rising to the bait, which Kuno would have.”

“Point.” Akane admitted. She watched as Lind challenged Harry to a duel. “He does seem to like playing with fire, though.”

“Some people need to get burned a few times more than others.” Ranma replied. “Keiko’s not happy about it, though.”

“Can you blame her?”

“Not one bit, and it looks like it’s starting.”

The two of them watched as the duel commenced. For experienced martial artists who had been in as many fights as they had, it was rather underwhelming. It was clear to them that Harry was holding back and in complete control of the fight. It wasn’t that Lind was bad, they had seen how more than a few other players, high level ones at that, were lacking, but the difference in level and simple ability was readily apparent to them.

Despite how dangerous and how real it was, SAO was still a video game, and video games were unfair like that. Even so, it wouldn’t have mattered. Harry wasn’t a master swordsman by any stretch, but he wielded his sword like an extension of his body, his movements were more natural, and far smoother.

Lind had left several openings Harry could have used to end the fight, openings that they knew that the boy saw, and ignored. Instead, the boy made light attacks which whittled down Lind’s health.

And then, things began to go wrong.

##

“What the hell?” Selene asked in shock. “Where did they come from?”

Richard’s gaze sharpened as he thought about it. “It may be that the ones they saw following them at a distance might have been them.” He replied. “And that one, the one with the knife making those threatening moves toward Ms. Ayano…”

“He’s going to…” Selene stopped as the view simply shifted as Harry acted. “Whoa! That was… holy shit!”

“Two strikes, one to disarm, and the other to behead.” Richard said clinically. “And how he got there… it can’t be…”

“Boss, our wards just pinged.” Selene said. “Someone used magic, and… oh, oh.”

“Remind me never to piss that kid off, dear.” Ranma said with a calm he did not feel as both he and Akane were shocked by Harry seemingly teleporting and killing the player who was making a move to kill Keiko. “Also, I think we can now accept that he cares for Keiko, probably more than he thinks.” He added with a note of grim approval in his voice.

“Right,” his wife replied weakly. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone act with that much cold fury, or so lethally.”

“I have, or I would have if I had a mirror to look in back then.” Ranma replied. He noticed his wife’s curious look and smiled sadly. “Phoenix Mountain,” he clarified as if that said it all.

Akane nodded, a look of sad understanding in her eyes. She turned her attention back to the monitor, and began to push down her emotions. “And more of them are now coming out of hiding.” She said with a false calm.

Ranma nodded. “And Keiko’s moving to back him up.” He replied just as much false calm.

To anyone who knew them, that calm was a warning. It meant that they were now past anger and fury, and were a hair’s breadth from a killing rage.

“Ms. Carlisle, this is being recorded, correct?” Richard asked as he watched.

“Yes, Boss,” she replied, not turning her attention from the screen.

“When this is done, we will need to make a copy of this, just in case.” He said.

“Right.” She replied. “Damage control?” She asked.

Richard nodded. “If necessary.” He replied. “After all of this is done, we’re moving our scheduled delivery up, and I will deliver this personally to Albus Dumbledore.”

The two groups watched the ensuing battle. They watched as three people fought for their lives against superior odds and held their own. Even so, the battle was not going in their favor. The near misses were getting more frequent, and shallow wounds appeared on them as they began to tire.

However, even though the battle was not going in their favor, they held their own long enough for backup to arrive. It was only six people, but they hit the attackers like a sledgehammer. The numbers were still in the attacker’s favor, but the sudden attack from the flank changed the tide of the battle. It was a matter of a few short minutes to route them.

All for one. They all watched as Harry screamed a warning in time for Keiko to dodge the attack from behind. And they watched as instincts honed in the death game kicked in and her lethal counterattack hit.

Richard and Selene saw the look of shocked horror on the girl’s face as she realized what she did. They watched as a girl’s innocence ended, even as Harry moved to comfort her.

Akane had her hand over her mouth in shock. Ranma simply looked on sadly, understanding exactly what happened. He looked at his wife and saw the tears in her eyes. He pulled her into an embrace.
and simply held her as she cried.

Cried for what her granddaughter had to do to stay alive.

As his wife cried in his arms, he continued to watch, nodding in approval at Harry doing the same for Keiko. He saw the sad understanding in the boy- no, the young man’s eyes. He saw him look off into space and that sad understanding turn, briefly into a cold fury that was directed at himself, and then that fury harden into resolve. And he saw how Harry’s expression softened when he looked back down to Keiko, how the young man didn’t offer words, but just a simple and comforting presence.

He had no idea what they boy had been through, or had done in the past, but he didn’t need to. He could recognize a warrior when he saw one, and he was grimly approving of the young man. He could see it, and he wouldn’t be surprised if everyone else in the family would the second he pointed it out.

Other players joked that those two were like a married couple, but Ranma could tell that they were wrong. They weren’t like a married couple, they were one. The absence of a wedding or a ring didn’t change that fact, and he idly wondered when those two would realize it.

But that was for later. For now, he comforted his wife, and made a mental note to talk with Harry’s bodyguards. He wanted to know the kind of person that he was.

**Hogwarts, Great Hall**

The man’s entrance into the Great Hall as the students were having breakfast caused a minor stir, but nothing major. While visitors were relatively rare, they weren’t unheard of. That the man walked straight to the Staff Table and conversed with the Headmaster was worthy of mild curiosity, but nothing else. The Headmaster had many duties, after all.

Hermione, though, paid attention to it. While she couldn’t hear the words being spoken, she could see the Headmaster’s expression change to one of cold politeness, to one that held both sadness and regret. She noticed that the man handed the Headmaster a small parcel, which the older man easily stashed in his robes, and walk out of the Great Hall.

She then watched as Albus Dumbledore stood up and waved his wand to send out sparks, grabbing the attention of the students.

“Students,” he began. “As you are all aware, Mr. Harry Potter has not been with us this year, but in Japan. You are also aware that he is to remain there for the foreseeable future, due to circumstances beyond anyone’s control.

“Since November of last year, Mr. Potter has been trapped in something called Sword Art Online, the creation of a genius madman by the name of Akihiko Kayaba. He will continue to be so until someone manages to clear it and free everyone. Even after that, Mr. Potter is unlikely to return here immediately. He will need time to recover from his ordeal, as well as get himself back to an acceptable standard academically. But that is something to worry about at a later date. Today, I have received news that while he is fine, he just underwent an ordeal which highlights the dangers he is in, and that not all of the dangers he faces are the work of one man.

“Earlier this day, by Japan’s time, he and his companion, Keiko Ayano, were attacked by others trapped there. They were attacked by people intending to cause harm, even kill, and were forced to defend themselves.”
Hermione’s breath caught in her throat. Defend himself? From people who were trying to kill him?

“For those students that have been involved in the project that has been viewing Mr. Potter’s activities and compiling them, we will be having one last viewing of those events in an hour’s time. Given the serious nature of them, and what happened, participation is strictly voluntary, and must be cleared by your Head of House.”

Hermione considered that. The fact that their presence had to be cleared by the Head of House indicated the worst. But Harry was still alive, so what…? A cold weight settled in her stomach as what was being implied sank in.

She would talk to Professor McGonagall and seek permission. She might regret it later, but she had to know. She looked at Ron and saw him nod in understanding. He might not be a part of the project, but he knew what was being left unsaid, and understood why those who would watch would need the approval of the Head of House.

He had seen Harry walk toward the Chamber of Secrets to rescue Ginny. He had seen Harry come out holding a bloody sword, a healed wound on his arm, the Headmaster’s phoenix companion, and his sister, still alive.

He knew that Harry could be deadly.

##

Albus sat down in his chair with a weary sigh, feeling every one of his one hundred and forty-three years. It had been against his best judgment, but enough of those in the project were muggleborns that they would have found out anyway. It was better to show them the full facts, rather than whatever they could find on their own.

Minerva and Pomona had protested, they were being asked to use their best judgment to give permission to their students to watch people fight to the death, after all. That didn’t sit with them well, and he fully agreed, but he had remained firm in his decision.

Miss Granger had spent many patient minutes explaining the internet to him and how it could be used to find almost anything. She also explained that the information can be painted in whatever light the person who put it there wanted to, and they often didn’t bother with things like validating their facts, or even care if what they were putting there were even true.

So he was aware that even keeping this from the students would only delay their finding out. He had explained it, and Miss Granger’s presence meant that she had probably reiterated it to Minerva, and likely more thoroughly.

At least this way, they would see what happened from Harry’s perspective, and he and the Heads of House were present in case any of them needed someone to talk to. It also allowed him to run any potential damage control, and to reiterate the gravity of what they had seen.

He would have to do the same at the Ministry, but that could wait for now.

As it was, Harry had been forced to kill, and he couldn’t be there to help him through it. He had not hidden the gravity of what had been done to Quirrell, had not told Harry to not blame himself, and instead helped him through it.

His door remained open, even during the events of last year, as Harry understood the difference between Albus Dumbledore, a man with more burdens than anyone would want, and Albus Dumbledore, the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Even with the
disciplinary actions taken due to his foolishness at the start of the year, Harry had not been afraid to approach him when he needed advice, or just someone to talk to. Someone who understood his turmoil.

And he now saw that Harry was going to do the same for at least two people, his constant companion Silica, and the friend he made in Kirito. He would do the same for them. He wouldn’t accuse, wouldn’t blame, and wouldn’t hide the gravity of what happened. But he would be there for them. He would be there to talk, to provide a shoulder to cry on, someone to yell at, and so on.

So, while this latest incident made him feel his age, he couldn’t help but feel a small bit of pride for his wayward student.

And part of him, Albus the Leader in War, the Planner, mused and made note: one could be another's equal and their opposite. For years, he had been doing his best to prepare Harry should another wayward student truly come back.

Now? For the first time he wondered if Tom had any idea what he'd unleashed when he'd indulged the prophecy.

Chapter End Notes

And this brings another arc to a close. It was written fairly quickly, once it gained momentum, but what a ride!

For those of you still following, thank you! For those who may have let this go and move on to other things, thank you for giving it a shot.

Anyway, I'm going to take a brief break as I get my last bits of classwork for my college classes done, but when we come back, some time will have passed for the characters, but things from Harry's past are coming back to haunt him. Stay tuned for the next arc of the story!
Chapter Summary

And now, the third arc of this series begins.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mystic Knight Online

Chapter 15 - Those That Chase Dragons

September 30, 2023 - Aincrad 35th Floor, Mishe

Harry shook his head as he watched Kirito pace up and down the hall and wondered what others would think if they saw him right now. Kirito, who wore calm and indifference like a comfortable coat, was nervous.

It would be funny, if it wasn't so irritating.

"Kirito, quit pacing like that," he said with more than a little exasperation.

Kirito stopped and looked at him. "They're taking too long." He replied.

"They're girls," Harry said with a shrug. "I'm pretty sure they're supposed to. Or, at least that's what I've been told whenever some of the guys at my school were waiting for their girlfriends so they could take them on a date."

"A date?!" Kirito squeaked.

Harry blinked. "Did- did you just squeak?" He asked incredulously and then shook his head. "Calm down, it's not a date. We're all just getting together, going out for a meal, and wishing Asuna a 'Happy Birthday."

Kirito sighed in relief and Harry bit back a snort and idly wondered if Silica was dealing with the same thing.

##

Silica restrained another sigh as Asuna frantically went through her inventory to look for an outfit that was just right. She wondered what all the fuss was, since she had little challenge picking out an outfit for herself.

Then again, she had experience from her occasional outings with Harry, which certainly weren't dates. They repeated that fact often enough, she wondered if others thought they were in denial.

*Of course they think that we are,* she thought with some amusement. *Even Harry and I joke about it.*

"What about this-"
"Fine, just like the other three times you showed me it," Silica interrupted Asuna's question. She didn't bother trying to remind her friend it was just a little get together for the older girl's birthday. It failed the first two times, and she was now tempted to simply tie Asuna down and stuff her into something to get it over with. While the stuffing part wasn't really needed, SAO allowed it. Probably the designers figuring it would be therapeutic for the stuffer in situations like this.

_I wonder if my family's speed changing techniques would work here, _she idly thought.

##

It took about another thirty minutes for Silica to get Asuna to settle on something and they finally left the room. They saw Harry, who was staring at Kirito in a way that made it look like he was contemplating getting either a rope to tie him down with, or a club to beat him unconscious. When he spied them, he sighed in relief. After giving Kirito a nudge to get his attention, he walked over to Silica.

"How badly was she panicking?" He asked quietly, giving her a quick look. Nothing outlandish, the simple combination of a peasant blouse and long skirt she tended to prefer when they occasionally went out lent itself well to a fairly casual evening.

"Probably as bad as Kirito, if the looks you were shooting him are anything to go by." She replied.

Harry snorted. "And we're the calm ones here." He replied drily.

Silica shrugged and looked over. "And now those two are... hey, you two!" She called out. "You want us to give you some privacy?"

Harry looked back at them and snorted. Kirito and Asuna were blushing furiously, and he could fill in the blanks. "So, were they dancing around each other like a pair of love-struck kids again?"

Kirito shot Harry an irritated look. "And you two aren't dancing around anything?" He asked. "Despite your denial about your dates, the only thing separating you two from a married couple is an actual wedding and the rings, or are you two going for a... what was it again?"

"I think you mean a common law marriage, Kirito." Asuna added. She then gave the two of them a speculative look. "That would actually make sense." She mused. "They share a room often enough, and occasionally a bed for that matter. So, anything you two want to tell us?"

Harry and Silica both flushed and raised their hands in surrender.

"Point to us." Kirito said smugly and they all shared a laugh.

"Ok, now that we're done teasing each other," Harry said with a sigh. "We have a reservation at the Wandering Pony to keep."

##

The Wandering Pony was packed, and from what they heard, it was like this most nights. The restaurant and attached tavern was popular with all the players who had made Mishe their base of operations, and even players passing through had heard of the establishment. The place's food was highly varied and everyone would admit that about half of the dishes almost tasted like they had come from the real world. Even those which didn't, had unique flavors that ranged across the whole flavor spectrum.

Due to that, as well as its high variety of drinks, the place was packed to the rafters and had a line
going out the door. And that's on a slow night. On a busy night, it wasn't unheard of for the line to go to the teleport plaza.

It was for that reason that Harry had secured a reservation, actually ensuring that a table would be free for them. The time it would take for an order to be made wouldn't be much shorter than if they had walked in, the NPC staff was very efficient at what it did, but they wouldn't have to potentially wait for an hour or more to get in.

"Do you have a reservation?" The NPC manning the podium near the entrance asked. And it was in the pleasant, welcoming tone of someone who wanted your business and wanted you to enjoy giving them your col.

"Yes, a reservation for Hadrian, party of four." Harry replied, holding out a slip of paper confirming it.

The NPC checked the paper Harry handed him and consulted a list before nodded. "Very well, sir." He said. "If you and your companions will follow me, I will escort you to your table."

The four of them followed the NPC to an empty table that was off to the side of the main area, giving it a semi-private atmosphere. Harry and Kirito both moved to pull out chairs for Asuna and Silica and then took their seats after their companions were seated. As soon as they were seated, a waitress walked up and handed them menus, actual physical menus, rather than the interface for ordering they had long since gotten used to.

That was certainly new, and they all briefly marveled at the novelty of it before opening them and browsing through.

"Are there any drinks that you can recommend?" Harry asked.

The waitress looked to him and nodded. "Yes sir, the Bacchus' Wine has proven to be very popular amongst adventurers like yourself." She said. "If you prefer beer, our establishment makes its own and it is popular as well. For spirits, the Lost Fruit Rum, distilled from fruits found in the nearby Forest of Wandering is preferred by many. If you wish for something else, we also have a nice selection of teas and ciders."

Harry looked at his companions who all browsed their menus and found a drink that they wanted. Asuna and Silica chose the Bacchus' Wine, while Kirito and Harry settled on the beer. As the waitress left to get their drinks, the four then looked over the menus.

"I can see why this place is so popular," Harry said. "It's almost like being in the real world."

Asuna nodded. "The maitre'd and waitress were more expressive," she added, still looking through her menu. "Almost acting like you would see from the staff at a moderately high class restaurant. If the food is as good as we've heard…"

Kirito chimed in. "At least the dress code is more relaxed," he said. "Can you imagine me in a suit?"

Silica snorted. "I don't know Kirito, I think you and Harry would look good in suits," she chimed in and shot both Harry and Kirito speculative looks.

"In that case, you and Asuna would each have to wear an appropriate dress." Harry said and considered that idea. "Maybe we can do something like that for Christmas..." He paused as he saw all three of his companions blush at that. "Was it something I said?"

Asuna shook off her blush. "It's easy to forget that there's a lot you don't know about Japan,
Hadrian.” She said. "Since Christmas and the New Year are so close together, Christmas isn't treated the same way. You do have the gift giving, but it's a much more about spreading happiness, rather than religious observances and spending time with family. It's also got a romantic connotation, so a lot of couples go out on dates for Christmas Eve. Think of it as how Valentine's Day is celebrated in the West. The New Year is celebrated more like how you're probably familiar to Christmas being celebrated."

Harry considered that, flushed, and then shook it off. "Huh, I didn't know that." He then went back to browsing his menu.

The waitress arrived with their drinks and they placed their orders. The waitress took their menus and bowed before leaving.

Harry cleared his throat to get everyone's attention. "While we wait for our food, I propose a toast." He said. "A toast to Asuna, wishing her a happy sixteenth birthday, and to her continued good health for the next year. So, without further ado… To Asuna." He raised his flagon and took a drink, with Kirito and Silica following suit. Asuna flushed in mild embarrassment before raising her glass and taking a sip of her wine.

Asuna's eyes widened in appreciation at the wine's taste. "I can see why this wine is popular," she said approvingly. "It's very good. And served in an actual wine glass, rather than the cups we've gotten used to." Silica nodded in appreciation as well.

Harry took a long pull from his beer and nodded. "The beer is very good as well." He said. "It tastes almost like the beer a local pub near my school brewed on site." He gave a small smile. "I remember some of my dorm mates who had permission to leave the school grounds one weekend purchased a keg and brought it in."

Kirito snorted. "Smuggled in accordance with your school's traditions no doubt."

Harry nodded. "It's an important tradition." He replied with a grin. "You know it was, because my Head of House once chided our best for using the route she did as a student twice."

"I still don't know whether I should say your school was cool, an asylum, or some part of Nerima that got transplanted to where it is now, given some of your stories." Silica said with some amusement.

"Well," Harry said. "To decide whether any such comparisons apply, the answer would have to be… yes."

All of them shared a laugh. They continued to make small talk until their food arrived and then began to dine in earnest.

##

It was on the way back that Kirito noticed that something was up with Asuna and Silica. Both of their faces were slightly flushed and it seemed as if their eyes were also slightly unfocused. Despite that, they were still steady on their feet, but…

"Silica?!" Harry said in shock. "Hey! Watch the hands!" The girl was now hanging off of him in a way that certainly didn't mesh with her nearly fourteen years of age. And judging by what Kirito was seeing, she was getting… grabby, affectionate, overly amorous, or a combination of all three. "Guys, I could use a little help here."

"Mmmm, no wonder we keep saying they're a married couple." Asuna murmured. She gave a sad
sigh. "If only I could be that lucky." She said morosely.

Kirito blinked and looked at Asuna, who was giving Harry and Silica a wistful, and slightly sad look. "What do you mean?" He asked curiously.

Asuna looked at him. "Well, I just… I just wish I could have someone like the two of them have with each other." She replied slightly hoarsely. "I mean, those two… they're so perfect for each other. What are the chances I could find something like that? My parents- ah damn it all."

Kirito glanced back and saw Harry trying to pry Silica off of him, with no success. He watched as Silica whispered something into the boy's ear and his face immediately turned red. Harry's attempts to pry Silica off of him redoubled, with about as much success as the previous ones.

Turning back to Asuna, he carefully ignored Harry and Silica, glad that there weren't any players around them at that moment. Argo's going to have a field day with this when she finds out, he thought idly before focusing his attention back on Asuna.

Asuna sighed and shook her head. "I'm not no-normally like this…" She trailed off for a bit and got thoughtful.

"What do you mean, Asuna?" Kirito asked.

"All this…" She replied, waving her hand in the air as if it meant something. "Seeing Harry and Silica together, knowing that with my family I can't have that… damn it. Corporate daughter? Wealth? It's a cage, a fucking gilded cage." Her words came out as a snarl. "Being rich, having it all? Bah! More like having to meet everyone's expectations. Do this, do that, don't do these things, all because it is expected of you. You have an image to maintain after all." She all but growled.

"Asuna, I'm sure that your family-" Kirito began before Asuna cut him off.

"I know they care." She said. "I know that they love me. It's just, again, being up there? It's all about the image you present. It's not about the person. It's all about a damn lie that you show the public."

"Umm, guys?" Harry called out. "Can you help me a bit he- Silica?" He finished with a squeak. "Outside the belt!"

"You two, you two have each other, so cute together, so perfect." Asuna grumbled. "Do you even know what you have?!"

"Kirito, what's gotten into her?" Harry asked. "Damn it, Silica! Stop that!"

"Mm, but Harry…” Silica trailed off as her hands continued their wandering.

Kirito coughed. "I think they're drunk." He said.

"What." Harry said flatly. "Drunk? But you can't get… oh bloody hell." Those last words were in English, but the sentiment was clear.

Kirito gave him a questioning look.

"Bacchus' Wine." Harry said. "Bacchus, as in the Roman God of Wine. Of course it would be able to get players drunk." He absently grabbed one of Silica's wandering hands and moved it in the opposite direction it had been moving. "So, this is what they're like when drunk."

Kirito raised an eyebrow.
"Just look after Asuna." Harry said. "Sit somewhere private, talk to her, and let her get it out of her system until the effects wear off." He gave a sigh of relief when Silica seemed to give up with the wandering hands, only to stiffen when she climbed up his back enough to make her head level with his. The fact that she nipped his ear might have had something to do with it.

Kirito looked at Asuna, who was watching the two with a somewhat melancholy look that was somehow tinged with amusement, and nodded to himself. "And you?" He asked with some amusement.

Harry gave Kirito a flat look. "I'm taking her to the inn, filling a bucket from the bath with cold water, and dousing her with it." He replied. "It should hopefully cool her off a lit- urk!"

"A bath sounds great!" Silica cheered, grabbing Harry by the collar. "I'll wash your back, and you'll wash mine!" She then looked at Kirito and Asuna, nodded to them, and proceeded to drag Harry off by the collar of his shirt.

"Hey Silica, leggo!" Harry protested.

Kirito chuckled at the sight and turned to Asuna, who was staring in the direction they went somewhat wistfully. "So, Asuna, want to go somewhere and talk?" He asked.

Asuna looked at him, her eyes still somewhat unfocused, but slightly clearer, and nodded.

"Well then, I think I saw a place that's not too far from here that's private that we can go to." He said as he offered his arm. "Shall we?"

Asuna gave a small smile, linked her arm with his, and followed him.

##

Silica was mortified about it the next morning, while Asuna was simply embarrassed, much to the amusement of Harry and Kirito. They wouldn't say anything. There was no teasing or even the most joking of blackmail; they'd grown too close not to see when such privileges should not be pressed.

This became doubly true after Klein got the boys drunk a week later, during Kirito's birthday. Both of them vowed vengeance against him for that, especially since Argo got pictures of the two of them bare chested and dancing in front of a flustered Asuna and Silica. They also resolved to never touch Bacchus' Wine, or any drinks known to intoxicate a player again without a very good reason.

Of course, being in Aincrad, it would only be a matter of time before they were given one.

October 14, 2023 - Aincrad 43rd Floor, Glorin

It had taken her two months to track down the four. Two long, frustrating months since the word had spread that they had crawled out of wherever they had sequestered themselves in the aftermath of a pitched battle with PKers.

It would have probably been easier had they simply returned to their old habits of working heavily toward clearing SAO, rather than their wandering around the upper floors killing mobs and aggressively working on increasing their own levels and getting stronger. They still were there for boss fights, to the point where their presence was starting to be considered a key component, rather than a helpful addition.

Add in that she needed to get her level sufficiently high enough to be able to navigate the upper
floors with some pretense of safety, and it certainly took time.

"Rain, are you sure that they're here?" Her companion, Lux, asked. "I understand you want to meet them, a lot of players who lost someone to those bastards do, but you're actually trying to track them down. It's drawing attention."

Rain sighed as her companion raised that point again. Not that she could blame her, really. Despite seeing her own friend killed in front of her before she had been able to escape from the same PKers, Lux was more interested in simply laying low. Then again, she had reason to want to, she was one of the few players who was not a PK, or Red Player as the term was starting to be, who had seen the leader of that group.

"Lux," she said. "Argo's information said they were here. If not in the town, then they would arrive back in town later."

"How do you know that they would arrive later?" Her companion asked.

"Because Argo told us that someone was looking for us, and we set this up." A boy's voice said from behind them.

Both Rain and Lux stiffened and warily turned around to see two players looking at them expressionlessly. Considering their youth in comparison to the majority of players, it was likely Hadrian and Silica, rather than Kirito and Asuna. The presence of a feathered dragon certainly increased the likelihood that the girl was at least Silica.

"Are you Hadrian and Silica?" Rain asked carefully.

The boy shrugged. "We might be, who wants to know?" He asked, still keeping his expression neutral.

Rain stepped forward. "My name's Rain," she said, introducing herself. "My friend here is Lux."

The boy nodded. "And your reason for trying to find us?" He asked.

Rain shot him a flat look. "And how do I know that you're who we're looking for?" She asked. "You could be any otrod'ye up here for all we know."

"What was that?" The girl asked.

Lux sighed and put a hand on Rain's shoulder. "Rain, calm down." She looked at the pair. "Don't mind the Russian she sometimes uses, she tends to do that when she starts getting frustrated or annoyed." She put her finger on her chin. "And when she wants to curse some idiot out."

"Lux!" Rain protested.

Lux gave her a flat look. "It's true, Rain, don't deny it." She shook her head as Rain huffed and pouted. "And people wonder which of us is the older one."

The boy snorted and turned to the side. "Silica, find Argo." He said. "Get her here to confirm this and- never mind." He looked to the side. "Come on out, Argo." He called.


"We know you, Argo." Silica said with a giggle. "You've snuck up on us too often, I'm beginning to think you're stalking us."
Argo shrugged. "Stalking, sneaking, spying, gathering info, getting blackmail on you guys….

"Same difference, right," Harry sighed. "Is this...?"

"Yup," Argo replied cheerfully. "These are the two who were looking for you guys." She peered at Harry. "Though, you were the one who pointed me in Rain's direction, Harry."

Harry got a confused look on his face. "I did?" He asked.

Argo nodded. "She was the one who escaped Johnny Black that you heard of from him before you… cut him off." She replied.

Harry winced. "Ah yes, him." He growled, his eyes hardening and seeming to glow.

Rain and Lux backed up a step and Argo's look sharpened at that. Silica put a hand on Harry's shoulder and his posture relaxed. "Sorry." He said. "That incident still tends to get my blood to boil. I'm not proud of what I did, but I don't regret it." He then looked at Rain and Lux. "So, why are you two so interested in meeting us?"

Rain took a breath and looked directly at him. "I want to thank you." She said. "Because of you, that… that sukín syn won't hurt anyone else."

Harry took a step back, and Rain was rather stunned. Between the blush, the momentary wince, and then the... humble? No, not humble. The restrained smile he gave them, the young man did not seem to revel in his deed. "I was... protecting someone. Given a chance, I'd... rather not kill."

Rain nodded, accepting that. She knew that killing was not something to take pride in, but she didn't have the same… disgust towards those who were forced by circumstances in doing so that most Japanese people did. To be disgusted with people in that situation was wrong to her in many ways.

It wasn't praiseworthy, but it didn't warrant the condemnation it often received. Then again, she had been born in Russia and spent much of her childhood there. Her mother has tried to explain some things, but she hadn't been immersed in Japanese culture until about six years ago.

She understood the Japanese viewpoint, but it wasn't internalized with her way it would have been had she been raised in Japan since birth.

Still, she looked at Hadrian and saw someone who, while not proud of what he did, and sincerely wishing he hadn't been forced to do it, was also not ashamed of it. He did it to protect someone, so it was justified in his eyes. And she could tell that if the same situation popped up again, he would do it again.

For her, knowing that there were people who would do what was necessary to protect people, it was reassuring. It also made it easier to her to make a simple request of him.

She wanted to join him and his group. They were strong enough to protect Lux, who had seen the leader of those red players and was justifiably afraid of them tracking her down and permanently silencing her. And she knew the type of people that those red players were.

They would be back, and they would track down and kill anyone who had seen them and lived to tell the tale. And that included Hadrian and his group. And when that happened, she would be there, and she would be ready.

She would not run when that happened, not again.
Asuna didn't know what to make of the two girls who were with Harry and Silica when the group walked into the inn. A quick glance at Kirito showed that he was just as confused, though it quickly changed to a neutral expression. They had heard that there was a pair looking into everyone, trying to find them, but they expected Harry and Silica to talk with them and send them on their way.

They both saw Argo enter in as well, and the fact that she didn't immediately move to the shadows was indicative that the conversation would be serious. Or at least interesting. Well, they would find out soon enough.

"Hadrian, Silica, who are your two new friends?" Asuna asked.

Harry gestured for the other two girls to take a seat before he and Silica took theirs. Once they were seated, Harry looked at both Kirito and Asuna and sighed. "Kirito, Asuna, this is Rain and Lux," He said gesturing to them. "They're interested in joining up with us. I figured that you two would want to hear the why for that as well and we can decide as a group."

She nodded looked at the two. One, Rain if she was right, was rather tall, with light brown hair and eyes, and a developed but relatively athletic figure. The other, Lux, was shorter, with pale hair, grey eyes, and who was rather well endowed.

Rain was keeping whatever nerves she felt under control, keeping her expression firm and determined, while Lux looked like someone who was scared of her own shadow.

Asuna shook the thoughts her observations were making out of her head and gave them both a level look. "So these are the two that have been trying to track us down," she observed. "And you said they wanted to join us, Hadrian?"

Harry nodded.

"They do know that we're not a guild, right?" Kirito asked idly. "It's not like we represent anything to join."

Argo snorted from her spot off to the side. "I don't think it's about that, Kii-bou." She said drily. "Rain was one of those who escaped Johnny Black and Red-eyed XaXa, in fact, Harry pointed her out to me after you little incident with him." She then pointed to Lux. "In this one's case, she's one of three I know of who's seen the leader of those red players, the same guy who was probably the one who set them on Harry, Silica and Lind."

"Speaking of Lind," Harry said. "That reminds me. He sent me a rather amusing picture a few months ago. Really helped with the nightmares after that incident. Anything you'd like to tell us, Argo?"

Argo's face turned crimson and she glared at Harry. "You were the one who put him up to that, weren't you?" She asked.

Harry smirked. "I may have given him the idea," he replied. "And no, we're not distributing it."

Argo sighed in relief and brought herself back to the task at hand. "Anyway," she said, shooting another look at Harry. "I think it's for other reasons that they want to join up with you two. Well, Rain wants to at any rate. I think Lux is just along for the ride, though given that she's actually seen the bastard in charge of those guys..."

Rain looked around and leaned in. "She'll be a target." She said simply. "So will I, if only because I
escaped and XaXa is still at large. And so will you all." She took a breath. "I can't say it with certainty, but I know their type."

Harry quietly swore in English. "Damn it, she's right." He said. "Those bastards haven't been seen since that incident, but that might be due to them laying low, and I have no doubt that Argo knows who most of them are by now." He looked at Argo, who nodded. "And unless they ran into something that killed them, they're only keeping a low profile." He then turned his gaze to Rain and Lux. "So, you two want to join us for protection then?"

Rain looked at Lux and then back to Harry. "For her, yes." She replied and then took a breath. "For me, it's more the strength in numbers being with you would provide. I was able to escape, no, I ran when they came after me and my friend. I got away, but…" She closed her eyes. "I can still hear her screams as that, that ublyudok, had his fun." Her eyes hardened. "Since the other one will come after me anyway…"

Harry nodded. "Forgiveness." He said simply. "That's your motive. With a large helping of revenge thrown in for your friend, but you want forgiveness and think that being with us will help you. You ran and lived, while your friend didn't make it. You want forgiveness for that." He shook his head. "No, you want to be able to forgive yourself."

Rain looked at him in shock. Harry returned her look with a sad one. "I know the feeling. My parents were murdered, my mother right in front of me." He said. "I was only a year old, but I remember some of it, and now knowing what it actually was…" He didn't finish the sentence, he didn't need to. He then shrugged. "It's irrational, I know. It's not like I could have done anything there, but that feeling is still there.

"You want forgiveness for escaping, while your friend didn't. I won't trivialize it, or dismiss it, but had you stayed, you would have gone through the same thing. You would have been tortured for their sick amusement, or worse before they killed you." He didn't mention what the worse was, but everyone knew what he meant. Johnny Black's reputation was circulated, which convinced many that killing him was well justified. "Prioritizing one's own self-preservation isn't cowardice, it's simply human. You wanted to survive, and you did.

"That you want protection isn't cowardice, either. That you want revenge is understandable. Unfortunate, but understandable. But they all come down to the first reason in the end.

"You want forgiveness. The dead can't grant it, so you want to be able to forgive yourself."

Rain met his eyes levelly for a minute and then lowered her gaze.

"Um, can I offer my input on this?" Lux asked. At Harry's nod, she decided to continue. "I kind of figured that there was a revenge motive with her, but the forgiveness bit is new. She's been working so hard to get stronger and level up that she's taken some fairly crazy risks." She then shot her companion an exasperated look. "And I've been dragged along for the ride enough times that I had to get stronger just to keep up."

Asuna looked at Rain with a raised eyebrow and watched as the older girl had the grace to look embarrassed. She then glanced at Harry and Kirito then back to Rain before sighing. "And now there are three reckless idiots." She said.

"Hey!" Harry and Kirito protested, while Rain looked confused.

Asuna shot the two boys a sharp look and smiled at Lux. "So, does she charge in without a care in the world, somehow always coming out alive, if not unscathed?" She asked.
Lux nodded while Kirito looked ready to protest before simply raising his hand acknowledging that Asuna had a point.

"Despite all that," Asuna continued. "Does she need someone at her back who often questions what they're doing and making sure that someone has the sanity to be cautious?"

Silica giggled and shot Harry an amused look. Harry simply shrugged, not even bothering to make a token effort at protesting what Asuna said.

Lux just nodded again at Asuna's statement and Rain was now shooting her a hurt look.

Asuna seemed to think on it for a moment and nodded. "That settles it then." She looked at Kirito and Harry. "You two will start taking Rain out and evaluating her abilities. See where she's weak and shore those areas up. Also, teach her how to moderate her recklessness, or at least use it constructively. She's too much like you two and needs the benefit of your experience." She then looked at Silica. "Silica, you and I will take Lux and get her up to speed."

Rain blinked in confusion and looked over at Lux, who was just as confused. She then looked back at the group. "What just happened?" She asked.

Silica looked at the amused Harry and Kirito and back to the two girls. "Welcome to the group," she said with a smile. "At least for now. You two might eventually decide to go your own way later."

##

As Harry made to get up and work with Kirito on a plan for Rain, Argo caught his eye and indicated that she wanted to talk with him. He shot Silica a look, who nodded and went back to talking with Lux and Rain.

"Hadrian?" Kirito asked.

"Argo wants to talk with me, Kirito." He said. "And judging by her look, she wants it to be private."

Kirito raised an eyebrow. "Should I sit on Silica and give you time to run?" He asked.

Harry snorted. "I doubt Argo's going to come on to me." He said drily. "Might use this as an opportunity to embarrass me for giving Lind the idea of kissing her and sending us a picture, but this is Argo we're talking about."

"Point."

"Besides," Harry added with a smirk. "If she's going to come on to anyone, it would be you, and she would offer to share with Asuna."

Kirito sputtered and Harry walked off with a chuckle.

He followed Argo to an alleyway and saw her bring out what he was privately thinking of as a Privacy Field Generator. That and if he called it a Somebody Else's Problem field, he had a suspicion that many a Douglas Adams fan would use his spine as a cricket bat. Him being in SAO and thus it not getting out to the outside world be damned.

Bless Professor Flitwick and the Hogwarts Reading Club for filling out his club electives. Besides the wonderful books, it gave him a way to dodge Oliver's occasionally maniac training and pull Hermione away from her text books.
Here's hoping I get to do that again, Harry reflected.

"So Argo," he began as soon as the field activated and the background noise muted. "What's this about?"

Argo gave him a searching look and then reached over to brush his hair to the side, showing his scar. She chuckled a bit and shook her head.

Harry gave her suspicious look and then considered why she would do something like that. The only thing he could think of would be that she figured it out.

"So, you figured it out." He said simply. "That I can use magic."

Argo nodded. "And I think I figured out who you really are" She replied. "But perhaps I should properly introduce myself."

Her posture changed, and she looked at Harry directly. "My real name is Mizore Yasaka, final year student at Mahou Tokoro School of Magic in Kyoto. It is a pleasure to meet you, Harry Potter."

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

otrod'ye: Brats

sukin syn: Son of a bitch

ublyudok: Bastard
October 14, 2023 - Aincrad 43rd Floor, Glorin

Harry looked at Argo and sighed. “You’re the second person to figure out that I can use magic,” he replied drily, absently rubbing at his forehead. “But I didn’t expect someone to know what my real name is. I should be surprised, but I’m not.”

Argo raised an eyebrow. “Oh?” She asked.

Harry snorted. “Argo, it’s you.” He replied dryly. “If anyone would have, you would have been at the top of the list due to your ability to get information and figure things out.”

She smirked. “Nice to know my skills are being acknowledged.” She replied smugly. “Still, someone figured out you could use magic before me?”

Harry nodded. “Silica figured it out the same day the incident happened.” He said. “And before you ask, as far as I know, neither she, nor anyone in her family is actually capable of magic, but apparently her grandfather has a rather unique curse, so she’s grown up around it.” He shrugged. “And apparently, her being from Nerima seems to mean that a lot of rules tend to get bent with regard to some things.”

“Wait a second,” Argo said sharply. “A grandfather with a rather unique curse, and she’s from the Nerima ward?” At Harry’s nod she shook with suppressed mirth. “No wonder she knows.” She said with a chuckle. “I think I know who her grandfather might be.” At Harry’s curious look, she shook her head. “I’ll need to confirm it, first.”

Harry nodded and then considered something. “Hey, is it possible to send a message out of one of these fields?” He asked.

Argo took a moment to think of it and shook her head. “I’m not sure,” she admitted. “I never tried, but it’s probably best if I take it down though.”

“Then if you would do so, I’ll shoot a message off to Silica so she can join us.” Harry said.

Silica stepped into the alley and heard the background noise immediately fade as she watched Argo fiddle with the item in her hands. She shot Harry a curious look and he waved her over to where he was leaning against a wall.

“What’s this about?” She asked as she got next to him.

“Argo figured it out.” He replied.

Silica raised an eyebrow. “What did she figure out?”
“What am I supposed to be capable of, have been trying and failing to make work, and am not supposed to talk about?” Harry asked drily.

Silica’s eyes widened. “Oh, that.”

“Yes, that.”

“Alright, done.” Argo said. “Took a bit, but if we’re lucky, not even Kayaba will be able to spy on us now, and he’s the GM.”

Harry raised an eyebrow at that and looked at Silica. “Did she just-”

Silica sighed. “She did.”

Argo blinked and then facepalmed. “Oh come on, what’s the chance of him just looking in on us at this moment?” She asked.

“With you tempting fate like that?” Harry asked. “I would say somewhere between one hundred percent and guaranteed.”

“Well, in for a yen and all that.” Argo said cheerfully and then looked at Silica. “So, Harry here told me you already knew about magic before you figured out he is a wizard. So, I have one question, since he gave me some context about how you already knew. Are you related to Ranma Saotome?”

Silica blinked. “He’s my grandfather,” she replied. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Let’s just say I’ve heard stories about him, and half of Japan’s magical community wets the bed in fear of attracting his ire. Heck, quite a few outside Japan, too.” Argo replied. “Anyway, since you already know about magic, I am curious how you figured out that Harry here is capable of it.”

**Aincrad GM Administration Area**

Kayaba mused on the creativity and adaptability of players as he watched the conversation happening between the three with some interest. While it would be amusing to prove the famous information broker wrong about not being overheard through a message, breaking through that privacy field had been a non-trivial task. Given the nature of the conversation though, he understood their desire for privacy and secrecy.

Magic was real, and he had two people who were capable of it in SAO that he now knew of.

It was illogical. Everything he knew said that it was impossible, but the evidence was there if he looked. The incident with those red players was only the most overt example, there were numerous subtle ones that were obvious in hindsight once he looked at past data for irregularities.

He considered that and laughed. This, *this* was one of those things he was looking for. Someone who was capable of exceeding the limitations placed on him or her by the system. The method may have been one he never would have considered, but it didn’t change anything. Hadrian had managed, if only briefly and rarely, to surpass the system.

And he wasn’t the only one. There were other players who were beginning to do so, and each were accomplishing it in unique ways. He opened a menu and brought out the developer’s logs, looking for specific items of interest.

It may still be too early for these things yet, but he now had potential candidates for unique skills. He would have to compare the requirements he established with specific bits of data for each player, and
even look at some ideas that were tested during development, but it was best to start the preparations for such now.

He had one that was conceptualized and tested during development that would fit Hadrian very well. He would have to set up something in the Testing Facility, or as the development team called it, the Hollow Area, to validate the concept to make sure, but oh yes, it would fit the boy very well indeed.

As for another, Kirito was a shoe in for the Dual Blades skill. The boy’s reaction speed and coordination bordered on the superhuman, and it was clear that he was one of the very few who could actually detect the minute changes in bandwidth from the actions of the system.

Most remarkable, and if anything, just as interesting to him as Hadrian.

“Cardinal,” he ordered. “Bring up the development and requirement logs for the Unique Skills, Mystic Blade, Dual Blades, and Shrouded Scout. Flag the following players:

“Player Hadrian, ID 7856, to be flagged as a candidate for the Unique Skill, Mystic Blade. Player Kirito, ID 0829, to be flagged as a candidate for the Unique Skill, Dual Blades. Player Argo, ID 0774, to be flagged as a candidate for the Unique Skill, Shrouded Scout.”

“ACKNOWLEDGED.” Cardinal replied.

He then looked back to the conversation between Argo, Harry and Silica and watched as it wrapped up. Even with this new knowledge, it didn’t change anything, but it was interesting and he looked forward to seeing what would come of it.

October 18, 2023 - Aincrad 40th Floor, Maar

Lisbeth yawned as she walked down the square which doubled as Maar’s open air marketplace, heading to where she had set up a stall for her blacksmithing business. While business had been good in Coral, and having a proper workshop for her to work with had been nice, business had slowed down considerably once the front lines had advanced far enough that even the mid-level players had started operating above the twenty-fifth floor on average.

A shame, really, considering she had almost saved up enough to make her rented shop a permanent arrangement, but that’s how things happen. Then again, it would probably be wise to save the col she had made and wait to set up on a higher floor. Perhaps one of the floors near the halfway point would have something…

“Hey, Liz!” A shouted voice interrupted her thoughts.

She turned and saw several familiar players walking from the teleport plaza and grinned.

“Asuna, Silica!” She called out. “Also, I see Hadrian and Kirito are with you as well. What brings you guys here?”

Asuna gestured over her shoulder to two other players who were trailing the group. “We picked them up a few days ago when they asked to work with us for a bit.” She replied. “They’re pretty good, but there are some things that can use a little refining, so we’re getting them kitted out first.”

“Oh?” She asked. She took a closer look at the two and nodded. “So, taking them shopping here then?”

Asuna nodded. “This place is where most of the Merchant’s Alliance has relocated, after all.” She said, referring to the network of merchants and crafters who were a part of SAO’s bustling player
“Ah,” Lisbeth replied. “Well, if you guys don’t mind waiting, give me a few minutes to get my stuff ready and I’ll open up my stall.” She then walked over to the unoccupied stall she had reserved for herself and began the process for opening it. “That reminds me, outside of getting some new gear for your new companions, you guys need anything repaired?”

“It wouldn’t hurt, Liz.” Harry said, rubbing at his forehead. Almost like the small scar was bothering him, but that was silly.

“It’s not looking as bad as it did after you guys faced that one mob, is it?” She asked, not even looking up.

“No, it’s not looking like it went through a woodchipper, my shield doesn’t have a piece bitten off, and so on.” He replied. “It only happened that one time anyway.”

“Had to ask, kid.” Lisbeth replied. “I still can’t figure out how your gear got that shredded and didn’t have its durability go to nothing.”

Harry shrugged.

“Wait, when was this?” Asuna asked.

Harry looked at her. “Field boss on the twenty-seventh floor.” He told her. “We scouted it, had a run-in, and decided that everyone else can play with it while we went and got our stuff repaired.”

“Oh, I heard about that fight.” Asuna replied.

“Heard about it? I was there.” Kirito said and then shuddered. “Not going to forget that fight. That thing’s call of-”

“Kirito, if you finish that sentence, I will stab you.” Silica interrupted.

“Seconded.” Harry added. “Good thing I was wearing brown pants then,” he muttered in English, which Silica snorted at. He leaned over and whispered something in her ear, which caused her to flush and elbow him in the stomach.

“Motion carries then.” Asuna finished and then looked at Kirito with a raised eyebrow. He raised his hands in surrender while Rain and Lux looked on bemusedly. Seeing those four interact with each other was certainly different. Entertaining at times, though.

“All right, finished.” Lisbeth said and then turned her attention back to everyone. “So, you need to get weapons for those two?”

Asuna nodded and gestured for Rain and Lux to come forward. “Liz, this is Rain and Lux. Rain, Lux, this is Lisbeth, a blacksmith friend of ours who handles a lot of our repair needs and occasionally making weapons or us.”

“Only because you guys get the most out of your weapons, enhancing them long past the point where most players would replace said weapons.” Lisbeth commented.

“What can we say, when we get gear that works well for us, we tend to keep using it.” Kirito said.

“It also doesn’t hurt that we spend enough time fighting mobs that we can usually replace our gear given time, no offense to you, Liz.” Harry added. “Still, it might not hurt to see what Liz can come
“Nice to know I’m appreciated.” Lisbeth said drily. “And none taken.” She then looked at Rain and Lux. “All right then. I make just about anything designed for the ancient art of killing things before they kill you. So, what’ll it be?”

Rain stepped forward. “I tend to prefer a bastard sword,” she said. “I’ve been using a spatha recently, but I definitely prefer something with a little more reach than that.” She patted the sword at her waist. “This would work better if I used a shield, but I never really got the hang of doing so.” She gave a wry smile. “I prefer to be mobile.”

Lisbeth gave Rain a look over. “You’re taller than average, and are slightly stockier, so that would work. You don’t have the build to really make the best use of two-handed weapons, so a bastard sword is a good compromise.”

Rain nodded and Lisbeth looked toward Lux.

Noticing that attention was on her, Lux fidgeted a little before taking a breath. “I’ve been using a schiavona for the last few floors, and I find it suits me,” she said. “So I guess that broadswords are my main type.”

Lisbeth nodded to herself. “So, a bastard sword for Rain, and a broadsword for Lux.” She said. “And how about the rest of you?”

Harry, Asuna and Kirito all indicated that they were currently fine with their weapons. Silica did walk forward and browsed over Lisbeth’s selection of blades suitable for dagger skills, which included short swords. She took a close look at one blade and then looked at Lisbeth.

“How much for it, or will you take a mix of mats and col?”

Silica nodded and handed the xiphos back to Lisbeth.

After she put the weapon back, she turned to Rain and Lux. “Well, look at what I have, and if nothing catches your fancy, I can probably make it, provided you have the mats.” She said.

October 27, 2023 - Aincrad 45th Floor, Volor Caves (Field Dungeon)

Rain sidestepped the attack from the mob, some kind of orc, and countered with a slash before backstepping from it before it could lash out. Hadrian immediately moved in and deflected the mob’s follow on attack with his shield and used the momentum to set himself into position to hit it with one of the most basic one-handed sword skills out there, Horizontal, to finish it off. If she hadn’t seen him
pull off several high-level sword skills over the last couple of weeks, she easily would have thought that those basic sword skills were the only ones he knew.

But then, he was proving that the basics are every bit as deadly as the more advanced skills. Or as he put it, basics kill.

She took a look around where the fight took place before she relaxed her guard and lowered her sword. “Looks like it’s clear.” She said.

Hadrian nodded. “Looks like it,” he replied. “Surprised you decided to come along with me on a simple fetch quest.”

She shrugged. “I need the practice, and Lux went with Silica on her quest.” She replied.

“As the two of them walked down the passage, Rain considered her partner for this quest. For someone so young, he carried himself like a seasoned fighter, but without the swagger she sometimes saw amongst higher level players. It wasn’t even humility on his part, just a quiet self-confidence in himself. It was a far cry from what she had expected, to say the least.

At the same time, she saw the look in his eyes when she went with him and Kirito to a field dungeon a few days after she had met them. There was an alertness in him, an anticipation of the upcoming battles, and a certain glint of eagerness in his eyes. It was like night and day, considering how he was before they had gone there.

It was puzzling, but she chalked it down to him probably being an adrenaline junkie in real life, and it carrying over. The feeling of fear when in combat, the thrill of surviving, all of it could be addictive, and she would admit that. A part of her was drawn to that thrill, after all.

As they continued to walk down the passage, she idly wondered how Lux and Silica were doing. They had taken a quest in the same cave complex, if in a different area, after all.

 Lux wondered what she had been thinking, accompanying a front-line fighter on a simple quest on the current top floor. While the mobs weren’t too tough, the safety margin for being on a floor was there for a reason, and she barely met that requirement.

“Relax,” her companion, Silica said. “You’re strong enough for this, and we made sure your equipment was current. This is as much to give us an opportunity to get used to our gear, as it is for experience and a quest reward.” She stopped and looked at her.

“Aren’t I holding you back?” She asked.

Silica shrugged. “Not really,” the girl replied. “You need some refinement, but you know the basics of handling a sword, and your level is good enough to be up here.” She then shrugged. “The level recommendation is just that, a recommendation. I know of two groups of players who do scouting and mapping that have a lower average level than that recommended one, and they do fine. And if you’re worried about your skill, I wouldn’t have you with me here if I didn’t think you were good enough.”

Lux could accept that and was about to ask another question when the sound of movement to her right reached her ears. She drew her weapon and turned to face where it came from. She felt, more than saw, Silica take position at her side as a group of patrolling mobs came in sight.
Lux felt her stomach drop at the size of the group. Ten mobs, three of them orcs, and the rest were smaller kobolds. She heard Silica quietly curse and saw her shoot off a quick private message before she opened up her map and looked at it. She looked at the advancing patrol, nodded, and dismissed the map.

“Lux, remember that chamber we were in a couple of minutes ago?” she asked. “We’ll back off to there.”

The two of them carefully backed away, not drawing the patrol’s attention until they had backed about fifteen meters. The two then quickly turned and made their way back to the indicated chamber.

Silica opened up her menu and looked at a received message before nodding.

“That was from Hadrian, he got my message and said to wait here if practicable.” She said. “He and Rain finished their bit and are making their way here. With two more, if we run into that patrol again, we should be able to-” She saw several mobs respawn in the chamber. “And we’ll finish this later, let’s go.”

Lux turned her attention to the mobs that just respawned and nodded. “Six of them, only kobolds, thankfully.” She said. “But we will have an orc or two after we take them out.”

Silica nodded. “Well, let’s get to it, then.” She said.

They readied their weapons and attacked the kobolds.

Aincrad, 45th Floor, Falstead

Harry stretched as the group of four walked back into the town. Backing Silica and Lux up was not a problem for him, he knew full well that a large patrol of mobs would have been problematic, at best, for two players. And that was if it was himself and Silica. They might be over levelled, but against enough mobs, their level advantage meant little. At least on the higher floors.

Kirito and Asuna might be a different story, Harry knew. He also knew that both of them were simply better in a fight that he and Silica were. He wasn’t ashamed to admit that there were those who were simply better than him. At the same time, even those two had come to admit liking having someone to back them up.

The trip to that objective drove home that calling for backup and waiting for it was a wise decision on Silica’s part. Five to one odds, while manageable by skilled players, were still not ideal odds, and the fight could easily take long enough for the mobs to respawn.

He and Silica both had that happen to them enough times, and handling such encounters usually ended with them breaking contact and pulling back. Sometimes, they would take it on after they recovered and rested, knowing what to expect had its advantages after all. Sometimes they waited until their levels were a little higher, using the advantage that levels provided. And sometimes, they went back to town and got some backup. Besides, a delay of a couple of hours was well worth it if it meant everyone coming back alive and unharmed.

There was no disgrace in knowing that you needed help and asking for it. While many on the front lines were somewhat elitist, few refused helping someone if they were available to do so. After all, it might be them needing help later down the line, and someone with a reputation for refusing to aid someone who needed it quickly found that there were few willing to help them in turn.

Some might bring up quality over quantity and be countered by the old saw of quantity having a quality all its own.
If he'd been able, Harry would have referred them to McGonagall and Flitwick.

Between wars, duels gone to brawls, and just day to day life in the armed society that was Wizarding Britain, the animagus and part-goblin had told many a tale on weekends in common rooms and the Great Hall about how quickly the quality of quantity built up. "The Wisdom of Crowds applies to battle as well," Flintwick had once said after explaining how he and a goblin relative had routed a large war-band from a contentious clan. "Luckily and sadly, so does the stupidity."

Staying alive in SAO might require skill, but it also required trust in your fellow players and the ability to trust the wisdom of the groups you made. Someone who couldn’t be trusted to help others, couldn’t be trusted period, and few were good enough to go solo for long. And few groups that couldn’t build trust and communication between members lasted long.

Trust was a key factor in staying alive, and most players valued living, after all.

**October 31, 2023 - Aincrad 40th Floor, Maar**

Silica looked around the various stalls set up for what could only be an improvised festival put together by the players. Somehow, someone who had been to America had remembered that this date, called Halloween in the West, was somewhat celebrated and passed the information on, which lead to a chain of players, adventurers, and merchants working together to set this up.

Frankly, she thought it was more an excuse for them to set up a week of parties to celebrate surviving a year in SAO, and people decided to run with it. That merchants and crafters would stand to make a killing in getting the more adventurous players to part with their col from all of this was a given.

Several tailors, including one named Ashley, who had made a name for herself as someone who did quality work, had made clothing and accessories for specifically for this day, though the clothing would likely see use after this.

*As it is, people are using this as an opportunity to make idiots of themselves,* she thought with some amusement as she observed several colorful players making poses that were reminiscent of the sentai genre. That they were making idiots of themselves was a given, especially considering that their flushed faces indicated that they were slightly drunk, but they were having fun, and several players were having just as much fun taking pictures of them with image crystals.

She glanced to her side and saw Harry looking around and remembered the shopping trip that they had all done the previous day. Asuna had dragged everyone to a small shop where the tailor Ashley had set up a temporary business, where the woman took one look at what they were all wearing before taking each of them aside and finding a look that was suitable for them.

The end result was on the expensive side, as it all was chosen for fashion rather than practicality, but the tailor knew how to mix armor and clothing and make it look *good.* The long blue silverthread coat was held closed by a truesteel breastplate, covering a form-fitting cropped top. The short black skirt with a golden edging was complemented by black stockings and calf-length boots and a finely done sword belt that had a floral motif completed the look.

It created a look that was certainly fashionable, but a quick look at the stats showed just how protective it was. Any complaints that Harry would have had, he was more focused on practicality after all, were silenced by that revelation. Not that he would have made much of a fuss about it, if his appreciative looks at her new look were any indication.

She then noticed him rub at his scar, as if it was bothering him. He had been doing so with increasing frequency over the last couple of weeks, and she was wondering why.
Harry’s scar was beginning to bother him more and more often, and he was beginning to find it rather irritating. Giving it another irate rub, he wondered what was causing it, given that it hadn’t bothered him in over a year, not since the last time he was in the presence of...

He took a surreptitious look around and didn’t notice anyone paying him and Silica any attention, so it couldn’t be that. Voldemort was a shade stuck in the real world, probably haunting some dark forest in Albania, not in SAO.

He didn’t dismiss the possibility that it was Voldemort though, even if he was sure that the man wasn’t here in SAO. For all he knew, it could mean that something had caused him anger, considering some of his experiences with the scar and Voldemort’s effect on it.

If that was the case, then he hoped that whatever caused it was a result of misfortune. It would serve the misbegotten son of a whore right.

“Harry, are you okay?” He heard Silica ask.

He looked at her and saw her looking at him with some concern and realized that she must have noticed that his scar had been bothering him.

Of course she had, he thought. And unlike everyone else, she knows me well enough for me to not be able to pass it off as a nervous habit.

“It’s been bothering me for the last few days,” he said simply. “I think I know why, but it’s one of those things that I’m not really comfortable with talking about.”

Silica considered that and nodded. “One of those things related to...?”

Harry nodded. “It is.”

Silica sighed but apparently decided to drop the matter. “If it continues to be a problem, you know you can talk to me.” She simply said.

Harry gave a small smile. “I know,” he replied.

Unknown Location (which was co-incidentally old Gaunt property)

Tom, who only really raged at others calling him that, though he’d rather be a Thomas...

Tom was enraged that the boy (thinking the name would give it power, the way the taboo gave his nom du plume a particular power) was out of his reach.

Months of planning to get the boy in his grasp and to get himself a new body, or at least a means of eliminating any possible threat the boy posed, and it all went to hell due to several factors, the chief one being that Harry Potter wasn’t on the British Isles.

And in his mind, months was an eternity. Worse, he’d lost one of the best at helping him curb his impatience. Barty... one of the few people Tom let close enough to almost like, with a flare for the dramatic he could appreciate.

That scheme with the cup-- out of the old stories, the ones in Hogwarts’ library he’d loved. And unlike others, he was honest with himself-- he knew that like everyone else, he wanted the freedom and power of being the bad guy. He just fessed up and owned it.
And all that planning, chuckling with Barty, and wishing Peter was there... Pettigrew was a coward, but he knew it and was honest about it. He had that self honesty which made him more trustworthy than Malfoy.

He had been gearing up for a fun year of manipulation. And bloody Lucius Malfoy had made his own plans and mucked it all up.

Tom forced himself to calm. He'd keep Lucy out of the loop on purpose, and the risk had bit him.

Still, the boy was out of the way, which meant that any possible threat he posed was gone for the time being. He could deal with that. It had been half of the genius of Barty's idea of entering him into the Tri-Wizard tournament. If he still could enter the boy, he would at least force him into being a competitor, albeit one that was unable to compete. Forcing the boy to lose his magic would have been a satisfactory alternative result.

No, the problem was that Albus Dumbledore had put security measures in place, measures that he told nobody about. This meant that his servant, perhaps friend if he were honest with himself, who had impersonated Alastor Moody, the very man in charge of security, was caught with contemptuous ease. This also meant that Dumbledore and several others now knew that he was back in England and trying to obtain a new body. Fortunately, his servant would be unable to tell them his exact location. Barty had insisted on that, and now Tom saw the wisdom in full.

Now he was stuck, without his right or left hand and not wanting to try the true loyalty of his pureblood figurehead and former spokesman, Malfoy. Bella was still in jail, though her... mindset made her a distant third to Peter and Barty.

Damn that old man! Damn the boy! Damn the world for losing the plot when he was gone!

Tom gave in and let himself fume a bit.

##

If it wasn’t for Silica’s weight holding his right side down, he would have shot up from the bed, hissing in pain as his scar flared. He idly wondered when she moved from the other bed before dismissing the thought. They only used two beds more as a formality anyway, given that while their relationship was nothing official, neither of them would deny that there was a relationship.

Not anymore, or amongst themselves, at least.

Still, the scar’s flaring in pain was indicative that Tom had been up to something, something that made him feel strongly, and it seemed as if whatever it was, it failed.

Good.

It didn’t explain why his scar reacted like that, especially when he was on the other side of the world, and stuck in SAO, but Professor Dumbledore had indicated that his scar’s reactions during his first year may have indicated that the two were connected in some way.

How? The elderly man admitted that he had some suspicions, but no proof. And Dumbledore had told him up front that while some were more likely than others, until he could confirm it, he would keep those suspicions to himself for the time being.

Harry had, albeit reluctantly, accepted that.

He heard Silica give a tired mumble as she began transitioning from sleep to being groggily awake.
His eyes went to the upper corner of his HUD and checked the time, giving an annoyed sigh as it registered as three o’clock in the morning.

“H’ry?” Silica mumbled.

He looked over and saw her eyes crack open, the low light of Aincrad’s night allowing him to see just well enough to notice that. Not quite realistic, but he wasn’t complaining about that break from reality. Still, while the scar flaring in pain woke him up, it had, thankfully, already faded.

He moved his left arm and gave her head a gentle pat. “Scar just acted up Silica, nothing to worry about.” He said. “Just go back to sleep.”

“Mmm’k.” She mumbled and proceeded to shift herself more closely to his body. He felt it relax and listened as her breathing slowed from her groggy state to sleep and gave a small smile.

Somehow, part of him doubted his aunt and uncle ever had anything like this. Or if they did, those days were long past, which was a pity in a way. If they had it and kept it, they might have been better people than they were.

Idly, as Silica’s warmth and his own tiredness helped sleep reclaim him, he heard a crack. A distant rumble of thunder, so far away the lightning was not evident from where they were on the floor. He fell asleep smiling.

He liked storms. As long as he wasn’t in the middle of one, at least.
Take it Easy and Breathe

Chapter Notes

Beta help done by Mighty Bob and The Raven Sennin.

Mystic Knight Online

Chapter 17 - Take it Easy and Breathe

November 15, 2023 - Aincrad 46th Floor, Ant Hill (Field Dungeon)

Harry glanced at the time and sheathed his sword, gesturing to everyone else that it was time to leave. The field dungeon, or at least the part they were in, was small, crawling with mobs that could hit hard, though not take a hit, and they provided a lot of experience for their level. Not an insane amount, but the fact that they provided nearly double the experience they otherwise should, made this field dungeon highly popular with players.

So popular, in fact, that it was apparent that Kayaba had put a system in place to limit how much it could be used. There were four paths, one per party that entered, and the parties could only be in the dungeon for one hour before they had to leave. They could do so willingly, and get a fair amount of col and moderately valuable loot, or they could be forcibly teleported out and get nothing. After that, they had to wait six hours before they could enter again.

Even then, it could only be accessed twice per day at a maximum, and that was if the party in question was lucky, given how many tried to do at least one run in there per day. It was usually every day and a half, and would probably be that way for some time yet.

“Well, that’s enough of being here for today.” Kirito said as they left. “With the labyrinth open, we should probably head there tomorrow and help with the mapping and exploration.”

“That’s not a bad idea, Kirito.” Harry replied and looked at the others. “What do you all think?”

Asuna and Silica nodded, but they knew that Harry was asking Rain and Lux.

Rain shrugged. “I got no problem with it, it’s not like we’re going to be taking on the floor boss.” She said.

“If it’s no bother, I am willing to go with you all.” Lux said.

Harry restrained a sigh at Lux’s statement. They really needed to work on her confidence issues. For all that she was the weakest of them, that didn’t mean that she was weak. Quite the contrary, considering that she had been able to keep up with them.
She might lack Rain’s enthusiasm and drive, but she was determined to get stronger as well. Having a group of red players after you tended to make you prioritize things. It also said a lot about her situation that she thought being out on the front lines was safer.

Then again, despite the name, safe zones weren’t completely safe. Harry knew that there were ways to bypass the no damage restriction, a few duels gone wrong had made that abundantly clear. And those were duels where both were fully capable of acting. He could only imagine what would happen if someone figured out how to initiate a duel without the other person’s consent.

Silica walked up, Pina perched on her shoulder. “What’s on your mind?” She asked, breaking Harry out of his train of thought.

“Just had a thought of something I might need to bring up with Argo,” he replied. “It might not be anything important, but it just might.” He saw Silica’s inquisitive look. “Not here.”

She nodded and the group of six left Ant Hill to head back to town.

Aincrad 46th Floor, Sillendra

Keita was beginning to wonder if Hadrian and the others had decided to use a teleport crystal to a different floor when he spied the four players who had spent more than two months training up his guild enter the town. To his surprise, he saw two others with them.

Did they pick up two people to train? He thought to himself. Or have things gotten difficult enough for them to recruit two solo players. Shrugging and deciding it wasn’t his business, he stepped forward to greet them.

“Hey guys!” He called. “It’s been awhile.”

The group stopped and looked at him with some surprise before Hadrian grinned and walked forward. “Keita!” He exclaimed, clapping him on the shoulder. “It has been awhile. What brings you up here, and how’s your guild doing?”

Keita smiled. “They’re doing fine, Hadrian,” he replied. “We all just decided to come up here and touch base with you guys since we haven’t seen you all for months.”

Harry nodded, still smiling. He turned back to the group he was with and saw Silica and Asuna give Rain and Lux a gentle push forward. “That’s good to know,” he said. “Anyway, let me introduce these two. Keita, this is Rain and Lux, they’ve joined up with us for the time being. Rain, Lux, this is Keita, guild leader of the Moonlit Black Cats. We worked with them for a bit back in April and May and parted ways in June.”

Rain and Lux gave their greetings and gave him a curious look while Keita shook his head. “Worked with us, he says.” He commented wryly. “What he isn’t saying is that he, Kirito, Asuna and Silica trained us up for preparation to tackle the challenges of the twenty-fifth floor and higher. They would have guided us through there, but after what happened in June... I can understand why they are rather soured to that floor.”

“And let’s not go any further on that subject,” Asuna said firmly. She then looked at Keita. “So you and the others decided to come up here for a visit?”

Keita nodded.

“Well then, where is everyone?” She asked.
Keita gestured to a nearby inn. “They’re already inside.” He replied. “You guys up for joining us for dinner?”

“Eh, what the hell,” Harry said. “I’ve been wondering how you all have been doing anyway. You can only get so much from Argo.”

##

Silica smiled as they all entered the inn, the rest of the Moonlit Black Cats having taken a table that was clearly visible from the entrance. It had been months since she had seen them, their groups having gone separate ways since the incident in June.

They had understood, even without Harry going into detail about the events. The very brief explanation about things having gone horribly wrong had said enough for them, though she wouldn’t be surprised if they got more details from Argo later.

Even so, she knew that Harry and Kirito had kept track of their progress, and that Harry had on occasion sent them little bits of info on some lucrative quests or areas for grinding experience, col and mats.

Still, it was nice to have a chance to meet up with them again.

As she took her seat at the table, Harry waiting until she was seated before taking his own seat right next to her, she looked across it and smiled at Sachi, who returned the smile and nodded. She let go of Pina, and the feathered dragon took wing and landed on the table right in front of her. She saw that Rain and Lux were still standing, looking a bit lost until she waved them over. She stood up and got everyone’s attention.

“Everyone, we all know each other, save for these two,” she said, gesturing to Rain and Lux. “This is Rain and Lux, two players who joined up with us last month. They have their reasons, and if they don’t feel like bringing them up, just let it be. Rain, Lux, this is the Moonlit Black Cats guild. You two have already been introduced to Keita, so I’ll introduce you to the others.

“Right across from me is Sachi, the only girl in the group and someone I personally trained in my fighting style. Next to her is Tetsuo, their primary tank, and going down from there is Ducker, a knife user and Sasamaru, who preferred spears when we last saw each other.”

“I still use spears, though mostly partisans and halberds now,” Sasamaru said. “We found that I work best with weapons designed more for defensive roles.”

Silica nodded. “So you tend to work on defending the group’s flank, or keeping mobs at a distance when Tetsuo needs to break off?”

Sasamaru nodded. “Sometimes.” He replied. “Most of the time, I’m pinning a mob down that Tetsuo couldn’t get aggro on while Sachi, Ducker, or Keita kill it. Or pinning it for Tetsuo to get aggro.”

“Really?” Harry asked. “Interesting. I can see how that could work, but it can be risky.”

Sasamaru snorted. “It can be, so I also have this.” He pulled out a large knife. “A grosse messer works well as an OS weapon.”

“OS weapon?” Lux asked.

Harry snorted. “Officially, OS stands for Off Spec. Basically a weapon you carry as a secondary in case the one you normally use might not be appropriate.” He explained. “Asuna uses a spear as an
OS. An OS weapon can also mean it’s your ‘Oh Shit’ weapon. As in, ‘Oh shit, the mob’s right on top of me and I need to stab it before it eats me.’” He turned his attention to Sachi. “What about you, Sachi? Still using a one-handed weapon and shield, or did you go back to using a spear?”

“A bit of both,” she said. “It depends on what we do for the day, but I’m often using a mace and shield, so I’ve kept in practice.”

Harry nodded.

“So, you’re also a tank?” Lux asked.

Sachi shook her head. “No, I’m not. Keita initially wanted to make me one, but I don’t use heavy armor and I’m not built for it.”

“I’ve been wondering about that,” Rain said. “I’ve heard Hadrian and the others talk about that, but I don’t understand what it means. Isn’t it all determined by stats?”

Silica shook her head. “Not entirely, Rain.” She said. “Stats do matter, but the fact is, that your body’s build does determine what weapons and roles work best for you. Tanks tend towards being bigger and stockier, as the extra mass helps them absorb blows better when properly armored. Harry could try it, but he’s too wiry to make a good tank, not to mention that heavy armor would restrict his movement.”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “That and the fact that a good solid hit like what a tank would take would knock me on my arse due to Sir Isaac Newton.”

Lux gave him a confused look.

“He means that Newton’s First Law of Motion still applies.” Asuna explained. “When a mob hits you, you end up moving from the hit. Depending on the amount of force and your ability to counter or absorb it, you either move a little, get knocked flat, or in a couple of cases I’ve seen, get sent flying. His style is all about redirecting that force, or using it to help him position himself, not taking it and being an immovable wall. It’s still better to not be hit, though.”

A look of understanding dawned on their faces after Asuna’s explanation.

One of the easiest things to forget about being in SAO, is that the developers aimed for as much realism as reasonable. Things like how using a weapon was based on research on the actual weapons, or that the laws of physics more or less applied. Things were muddied when combined with the fact that players were capable of things that would otherwise be outside of human capability. They were stronger, faster, and more durable than what any human would be capable of in the real world.

Well, any human not trained to a basic standard in martial arts, Silica thought. Basic by Nerima standards, at least. And she had met that basic standard. Being the granddaughter of a martial arts grandmaster meant that she did receive that kind of training. None of the more advanced techniques, she would have to choose pursuing mastery for that, but she had a firm grounding in the basics of her family style.

She turned away from those thoughts, and focused on the group. She heard Harry make a comment about treating this like a reality in its own right and turned her attention to him. “Harry, what do you mean by treating this place as its own reality?” She asked.

Harry blinked as everyone turned their attention to him. “Well,” he started before clearing his throat.
“It’s like this. While we know this isn’t the real world, this place has rules of its own which are consistent. I don’t know much about games, but the fact is, treating this place as its own reality is probably safer than treating it as the game everyone thought it would be.” He gestured at the table, with its food, drink, and Pina eating food off of Ducker’s plate.

“Hey!” Ducker shouted. “Quit eating my food, you overgrown feather duster!” He gave the feathered dragon a firm poke and shove towards Silica. Everyone shared a laugh at that, Pina’s habits were well known to them all, including her penchant for going after food if people weren’t paying attention to it.

“Well, aside from Pina stealing food off of someone else’s plate, and at least it’s not mine this time, we need food and drink to generally survive. I don’t know how long you can go without eating or drinking before it affects you here, and I am not interested in trying, but we all feel hunger and thirst, so we eat and drink. We sleep when we are tired, and we still have many of the responses we would otherwise have in the real world.”

“But there are differences, Hadrian.” Asuna said. “Food doesn’t taste the same, though given that most of these are Western inspired, you would know better about how close they come. We also don’t feel things the same way, and smell is sometimes off. There were a lot of things we had to adjust to because they were different.”

“And let me ask you, Asuna, how often do you really notice it unless you stop and think about it?” Harry asked. “The fact is, we’ve adapted to this place, to its rules.”

“He’s right,” Keita said. “We all have. I still remember you all talking to us during that time you trained us, and how you hammered it in that we shouldn’t treat this place as a game, despite how it operates. Once we did, we started doing much better, as we started using our other senses more often. I don’t know if you guys noticed, but because of how vision works here, you tend to rely much more on your ears and even sense of smell, now that I think of it.”

Rain nodded. “That makes sense, now that you mention it.” She said. “There’s also the fact that they can’t program in just how much our bodies take in and filter out.” At Harry’s confused look she clarified. “I was thinking of studying to become a doctor, so I did some research. The fact is, the real world sends our bodies signals at a phenomenal rate, and our bodies filter most of that out as a matter of course.”

Kirito blinked and then swore. “Damn, when we get out, our senses are going to be adapted to this place, not the real world. Our bodies are still there, so the mechanisms are in place, but our ability to process and filter all of that information is stuck here. We’ll be hypersensitive until we readjust.”

Harry winced. “Oh, ouch. That’ll make the first few days out fairly rough when we get out.” He replied. He then signalled over a waitress. “Well, outside of all of that, why don’t we order some more drinks and continue talking. I want to know how all of you have been doing, and we will share some of our stories from the front lines.”

Everyone nodded and they large group spent a few hours playing catch up. At the same time, Silica noticed that Rain and Lux looked a bit lost at times, until Asuna dragged Lux into a conversation with Sachi, while Kirito got Rain involved in a debate with Keita and Tetsuo about something. Before long, it was as if the two had been a part of the group for a while.

She smiled at that. They had all wondered about how to make those two feel like they were a part of the group. This would make for a good start for them, giving them an opportunity to share their own stories, and to finally integrate in.
“You know, I didn’t expect to run into a floor that was a giant garden,” Harry said as they walked back into the town. “Also, the mobs on this floor? Not cool.”

“It’s not like they’re that powerful,” Kirito commented.

Harry shrugged. “True, but I don’t think the ladies really appreciate the nature of the mobs,” He said, looking back to see the girls looking more than a little irate.

“Perverted mobs,” Asuna grumbled.

Rain was muttering darkly under her breath in Russian. Harry couldn’t understand what she said, but he assumed that whatever it was, was fairly vile and promising some painful retribution on them.

Those two ended up getting rather well acquainted with land anemones, which seemed to be hell bent on wrapping them up in ways that were rather… intimate. On the other hand, Lux and Silica ended up giving everyone a free show when they all stumbled on a bunch of gerberas. Who knew that the roots of those things were prehensile?

“I’m finding some way to set my blade on fire, and then I’m going hunting,” Silica growled. “Force me to flash everyone will they?” Lux nodded in agreement, her face still flushed in embarrassment.

Harry blinked at Silica’s comments and resolved to stay out of her reach until she calmed down, or at least put her weapon out of immediate reach. She could get a bit stabby when she was angry. He then looked at Kirito. “Good thing it’s afternoon,” he said. “Want to just break for the rest of the day, grab a meal, let the ladies take a bath, and relax? Also, I can do with a bath as well.” He grimaced. “You don’t want to know how bad those flytraps smell from the inside.”

Kirito snorted. “Well, I wasn’t the one who the plant was trying to swallow.” He said drily. “And that only served to irritate you, considering you cut yourself right out of it. Besides, it could have been worse. They could have dissolved armor and clothes.”

Harry winced. “Yeah, that would have ruined anyone’s day.” He admitted. “At the same time, imagine if it was you.” He smirked. “Asuna would have certainly gotten a view. Whether it was a good one or not, though...”

“Hadrian!” Asuna shouted, an embarrassed blush on her face.

Kirito flushed and glared at Harry. “And what if it happened to you? I can imagine Silica’s reaction, though she would probably be disappointed from what she saw.”

“Not at all,” Silica chimed in. “He has nothing to be ashamed of, not even in that regard.”

Kirito blinked and then looked at Silica, as was everyone else but Harry, who was facepalming. “What?” He asked.

Silica realized what she said and flushed.

“Oh?” Asuna asked with a grin, looking at Harry. Rain and Lux nodded, giving both Harry and Silica some speculative looks.
“You know how we often share a room, right?” Harry asked and then shrugged. “Some of them have baths, and it’s happened a couple of times.” His face got a slight flush with that admission.

Rain decided to interject at that point. “You know, I’ve been curious about something,” she said. “Just what is the relationship between you two?” At their confused looks she decided to clarify. “You two, well, you two are close, closer than simply being friends. It’s almost as if the jokes I heard about you two being a married couple have a bit of truth to them.”

“Rain, we usually don’t” Asuna started before Harry interrupted her.

“Don’t worry, Asuna.” He said and then looked at Rain. “She’s only asking what has been on a lot of people’s minds for months, anyway. The best way to sum our relationship up is that it’s complicated. We’ve been through too much together for it to be something as simple as friendship.”

“And Rain, any more than that is private.” Silica added.

Rain nodded. “I understand.” She replied. She had only been curious and really hadn’t been fishing for details.

Harry looked around and spotted an inn. “Well, anyway, we’re near the inn.” He said. “Let’s go in, get some rooms, bathe, eat, rest and relax. Now that we know what kind of mobs to generally expect, we can do better with our exploration tomorrow.”

“You’re taking a bath first, Harry.” Silica said. “That flytrap didn’t do your smell any favors.”

##

Silica flopped down on one of the beds in the room she and Harry had taken for the night. The inn didn’t have any baths in the rooms, but it did have an attached bathhouse, and Harry had already walked down to it. She hadn’t been kidding about how the flytrap mob that had tried to swallow him made him a bit on the ripe side.

They had all agreed to take a bit of time before gathering back together for dinner and planning out what they would do tomorrow. That meant that Harry was taking a bath, and she was tempted to either take some time to groom Pina, an activity the feathered dragon certainly enjoyed if the coos given off when she did were any indication, or take a nap.

Before she could decide on such, she heard a knock at the door.

“Silica? Hadrian? It’s me, Rain.” she heard.

She got off the bed, walked over and opened the door. “What is it?” She asked.

Rain gave a glance inside and saw that it was only Silica in the room. “I take it Hadrian’s taking a bath?” She asked.

Silica nodded.

“Ah, um, I can come back later if you want.” She said.

Silica sighed. “I take it Asuna took you aside and gave you an earful about that question you asked and you came to apologize.” She said. “Don’t worry too much about it. As Harry said, you just asked what’s probably on a lot of people’s minds.”

“Still-"
“As I said,” Silica interrupted. “Don’t worry about it. The two of us are aware that people find it odd that the two of us basically live together without being in a formal relationship.” She shrugged. “It’s complicated, just take my word on it.”

Rain nodded. “I wasn’t fishing for information, just curious.” She said.

“You and half the front line,” Silica said drily.

November 22, 2023 - Aincrad 43rd Floor, Glorin

“When that floor gets cleared, I’m not going back there unless I have to,” Silica said grumpily. “What is it with those damn plants?”

Harry shrugged as he took a drink of his beer. “Don’t ask me.” He said. “I wouldn’t be surprised if one of the devs was a pervert, though. Still, it’s not all bad, you did get something that might come in handy if something ever happened to Pina.”

Silica nodded. “True, but it would be best if nothing happened to her in the first place.” She said, reaching up and giving the feathered dragon a gentle scratch.

“Better to have it and not need it, though.”

Silica nodded at her partner’s words. Both of them had lived by that maxim since SAO started, though the reality of things often meant that they usually needed the items they had, and more.

Not that it was a concern for them for the rest of the day. They had worked out taking the afternoon off with the rest, and were planning to make the most of it for what everyone jokingly called one of their “not dates.”

No one believed it, least of all the two of them, but it was something of an inside joke amongst the group and their friends by this point. The specific details of their relationship was known only to the two of them, but everyone who knew them well, knew that there was a relationship.

November 25, 2023 - Aincrad GM Administration Area

Kayaba looked at the results which had come from the Hollow Area and nodded. Dual Blades and Shrouded Scout were working as designed, but the results from the Mystic Blade testing were still mixed. Apparently, the normal testing avatars weren’t flexible enough in their processes to make the best use of the skill, and he was loathe to create an avatar that had more processes and flexibility.

Not after he had to personally put down one which had almost managed to threaten everything he was doing by trying to replace all the player data with the data for actual hollow avatars. While he might not really care what happened to the players, the end result would have killed the nearly seven thousand players still alive. He would admit that he could be considered a number of things: madman, monster, and cruel. He was not, however, wasteful. That many players dying like that would have been a needless waste.

If the players were going to die, then they would die due to their own actions, not the actions of
something that had been created for a limited purpose. Anyway, he had refrained from allowing Hollow Avatars with that degree of flexibility since, and he had no intention of allowing another one. He would not let some program with delusions of being an AI interfere.

He already had two AIs that were trying to break out of where he had them contained in order to interact with players as it is. Given how one of them had actually been working to create a player avatar for herself, he figured it was only a matter of time. In the case of one, there was little risk. MHCP001-Yui, had the build and temperament of a child. From what he had gathered from the data, it, or she as it identified itself as female, was more interested in companionship, fitting with some respects to her original design. MHCP002-Strea, another AI that identified itself as female, was proving to be a handful on the other hand. Much like Yui, Strea wanted to be around the players, but her personality seems to have begun shifting itself to a desire to have fun, though she would probably help the players.

He had no issue with that, admittedly. If either of them managed to break free, so be it. He had programmed in something to revoke their admin privileges and keep them from talking about exactly what they were if they managed to. Outside of extenuating or extreme circumstances, at least.

It would be a moot point if such came to pass, after all.

He glanced at the data one more time and nodded. The testing results for Mystic Blade may have been mixed, but they did demonstrate that the unique skill would work as designed. The results for the remaining ones were also satisfactory.

All that was left was to wait for the appropriate time.

Unknown Location

Tom flicked his wand and the page of the tome he was reading was carefully turned. Without a servant handy, things had become much more difficult for him, but he hadn’t become a dark lord by being unwilling to do something because of the difficulty. He might only be able to use a fraction of his magic right now, any more could disrupt the homunculus body he inhabited, but it was sufficient for the task at hand.

That being ensuring that his body continued to be sustained, and doing research for anything he could use in his current situation. Potter might have escaped what had been planned for him, but that didn’t mean that he would remain out of his reach. Bringing the boy to him might be out of his ability right now, but there was nothing saying he couldn’t go there.

He wasn’t afraid to do things himself, after all. It just required the right means.

And from what he was currently reading, he may have just the means to do so, though it would take a little bit of time. Unfortunate and irritating, but he knew the value of patience and would make sure that everything was in place first. He had ignored that once before, and it had cost him.

Still, as he continued to read, he could barely restrain his eagerness to do this.

Aincrad, 43rd Floor, Glorin
The pain shooting from his scar caused him to wake up with a hiss as it flared painfully and then faded. It had been almost a month since the last time, so he wondered what Tom was up to this time. Over two years between events, and now twice in less than a month.

*Damn it, the bastard’s plotting something,* he thought. *And knowing him, he’s looking for a way to get to me.*

That worried him a bit. Magic was capable of a lot of things, often limited only by the imagination of the person using it. There were a few hard limitations, true, but the primary limitation was on what the caster could believe was possible and having the power to make that belief a reality.

From what he had heard, Tom certainly had that. Whether he could do something with the two of them effectively in different worlds was a different matter, but Harry wasn’t going to discount that possibility.

Think it highly unlikely? Yes. Completely discount it? No.

*At least I didn’t almost wake Silica up this time,* he thought as his body relaxed and he went back to sleep. He didn’t notice his partner in the other bed looking at him with an eye cracked open as she watched with a slight frown.
“Okay, after that boss fight, I need a drink.” Harry said matter of factly. “That boss was just wrong.”

“Agreed, on both counts.” Silica chimed in with a shudder.

The rest of their companions agreed wholeheartedly with that comment. They had all gotten out of that fight unscathed, but fighting a mass of tentacles and what it did to that one group of unfortunate players was the stuff of nightmares. None of them would look at plants the same way again, and Harry resolved to stay well away from magical plants. He had personal experience with one that was reminiscent of that mob.

Though Devil’s Snare would just strangle you, not what happened during that boss fight.

“What kind of mudok came up with, with that thing anyway?” Rain asked, still looking a little green, even after an hour.

“The kind that really needs to get a girlfriend,” Kirito said with some disgust. “After seeing that? No, just… no.”

“As if any girl would go for someone who designed that.” Asuna grumbled. “That thing made me feel dirty just looking at it.”

“Do you think those players are going to be okay?” Lux asked.

Harry stopped and looked at her. “After what happened to them?” He asked incredulously. “I heard someone say that he’s taking them down to Mishe and pouring a cask of Lost Fruit Rum down their throats to help them forget it. I don’t think we’ll be seeing them on the front lines any time soon, though, if at all.”

“Sounds like something Klein would do.” Asuna commented. “But he wasn’t there. Rather odd of him.”

“Heard he was helping some mid-level players out.” Kirito said. “It’s very possible that he couldn’t make it.”

Harry shrugged at that. It would have been nice to have him there, he was one of the few players outside of those with him that he unequivocally trusted with his life, after all. However, his presence, or lack of it, didn’t change the fact that the boss, for all of its... peculiarities, was actually fairly easy to kill.

When he realized that, he stopped and started vehemently swearing in English.

“Whoa,” Rain said a minute later, impressed. “That’s some creative swearing.”

Silica walked over to the still swearing Harry and smacked him upside the head. “That’s enough Harry.” She said.
“Thank you Silica,” Asuna said.

Silica shrugged. “He was starting to repeat himself,” she replied. “Now, what got you to start going on like that?” She asked him.

Harry rubbed his head. “Just realized that the boss was rather easy,” he said.

“Isn’t that good?” Lux asked.

Harry turned to her. “Normally, I would say yes, but we’re getting close to the halfway point.” He said. “But the fact that it was fairly easy reminded me of something. Remember the last time things got like this? When we were a few floors shy of the Twenty-Fifth?”

Silica, Asuna, and Kirito thought about that for a moment, pales and then started swearing.

Harry nodded. “I knew you would get it.” He said drily. He turned his attention to Lux, who was looking at the four of them with some confusion. “You spent some time of the twenty-fifth floor, right?”

Lux nodded.

“And you remember how much harder it was, correct?”

Lux nodded again.

“And how much easier the few floors before it were?”

Lux continued to nod, paused, and then her face paled.

Rain seemed to think about and reached the same conclusion. “Yob tvoyu mat.” She said. “Are you serious?”

Harry nodded. “Yes.” He said. “Even if the reason for things being easy, for a given definition of ‘easy’, is different this time around.”

“Well, we’re not going to get anywhere here,” Asuna said. “Let’s head to town, activate the teleport gate, and talk about this over a meal.”

“Seconded.” Kirito said.

“Thirded.” Lux said as her stomach growled. They all looked at her and she blushed.

“Well, motion carries then,” Harry said. “Let’s get some lunch.”

##

Asuna finished her wine and looked around the table.

Her companions were all finished, or finishing, their meals, with both Harry and Silica chatting while Pina was happily eating some meats that both had provided her from their own plates. Harry absently reached over and gave Pina a gentle scratch between the wings as Silica said something and made a couple of gestures. From the look on his face, Asuna could tell that he was slightly amused by whatever Silica was saying.

Those two had long since settled into their relationship, which was more akin to a husband and wife, marital status notwithstanding, rather than a pair of young teens feeling things out. She sometimes
wondered how it had gotten that way, considering how different the two of them were.

Silica was open and friendly, the events in June hadn’t stopped that, even if they did dim that aspect of her. At the same time, that open and friendly nature hid an iron will and a personality that was not above using manipulative tactics to accomplish her objectives if that was what was necessary. That iron will was necessary, from what Asuna could tell, in order to keep Harry in line.

Harry, she would continue to call him Hadrian in conversation, on the other hand, was a jaded and very private person. He was politely friendly, had a biting wit, and it was clear that he was the type who was normally slow to trust and get close to people. However, it was clear from what he has said in the past, along with what he hasn’t said, that his life had forced him to grow up far too quickly. Asuna firmly suspected that abuse was responsible.

And yet, despite their contrasts, both complimented each other well.

Kirito was sitting back and sipping his drink, giving the look of someone who was indifferent to it all. Of course, everyone present knew that it was an act, particularly Asuna. She hadn’t helped him deal with the trauma of killing someone without getting to know what made him tick.

In many respects, his prior aloof demeanor and armor of composure was a defense mechanism to hide just how uncertain and vulnerable he was. It had worked for a time, but the shock to his system that the incident in June had showed just how brittle it was.

Rain and Lux were still eating, both of them taking their time with their food. Even after six weeks, Asuna was still forming an opinion on them.

She could tell that Rain had a massive guilt complex about having run from the red players responsible for the murder of her friend. That same complex had made her reckless and driven, though Harry and Kirito had begun to focus and redirect that, keeping it from going down a self-destructive route.

Harry, more so than Kirito. He often taken her aside and talked with her. The exact nature of those conversations were private, but he understood her motivations better than anyone present. He later admitted that he was basically doing the same thing a man who he looked up to as a mentor had done for him.

Lux’s generally timid demeanor, both in battle and amongst them belied the fact that she was extremely deadly with her broadsword and could gauge a situation extremely well. True, she had confidence issues, but at the same time, those same issues made her overly cautious. In Aincrad, being cautious was a good thing, but not to the point where it paralyzed your ability to make decisions. Fortunately, Asuna knew how to handle someone like that. Training Sachi paid off in that respect, though Sachi didn’t have a very real fear of being hunted by red players to contend with.

She had gotten better about it, but Asuna figured that the girl would remain cautious and somewhat afraid. Considering that any player who wants to go out and actually survive needs caution and a healthy amount of fear, she wouldn’t complain. She already had enough trouble keeping Kirito and Rain in check when a fight starts.

Asuna broke off from her musings as she noticed that Rain and Lux were apparently done with their meal. She cleared her throat to get their attention.

“All right,” she said. “Hadrian noticed something that I think all of us hope isn’t going to be the case, but it still needs to be said. The last boss was relatively easy, despite the way that fight went. So, Hadrian, you suspect that the fiftieth floor is going to be a problem?”
He nodded. “I don’t know if it will be like the Twenty-Fifth, and give us a massive difficulty spike as a whole, but I wouldn’t be surprised if the boss of that floor is significantly stronger that what we’re used to. Part of why things have been easy can be explained by the fact that we’re over leveled by a significant margin, and it might not be enough.” He looked at Rain and Lux. “Yes, even you two. You’re now three or four levels past the recommended minimum.”

“And what does that have to do with it?” Rain asked.

“It means that the two of you are now higher than the average for most of the front lines,” Kirito said with a shrug. “You’re more around the average for the Assault Team, and the boss fight proved that you both can hold your own as well.”

“When you consider that the two of you got to that point in around six weeks, that’s not bad at all.” Harry complimented.

“But what makes you think that the boss would be significantly stronger?” Lux asked.

“It has to do with the logic of SAO,” Kirito said. “For all that we’ve advised treating SAO like its own reality and not as a game, it’s still a game. A deadly one, and one where even those consequences which aren’t deadly, are still very real, but a game nonetheless.”

Asuna nodded. “It’s the paradoxical reality of being here,” she added. “You need to accept this as its own reality, but at the same time, you need to accept that it isn’t reality as well, despite the real consequences of things here.”

Rain and Lux gave her a slightly confused look.

“There’s a word in English which sums it up,” Harry said. “Doublethink. It’s the ability to believe two things that are complete opposites, are true at the same time.” He shrugged at their looks. “I’ve read 1984, and Orwell had a gift for using simple words to sum up complex concepts.”

“A rather apt summation, Hadrian,” Asuna said. “Let’s just hope that other things from that book don’t apply as well.”

December 4, 2023 - Aincrad 46th Floor, Ant Hill (Field Dungeon)

Lux looked at her companions as they all headed toward the entrance, their time in the field dungeon almost up. Even after close to seven weeks working with them, she really couldn’t say she knew them all that well. Well, outside of Rain, but the two of them had been working together, sometimes reluctantly on her own part, for months.

Not unexpected, really. She had gotten to know them, but there were a lot of things that had welded them together as a cohesive group over the course of almost a year. Those things, those experiences, were things she and Rain had not been a part of.

That wasn’t to say that they were unfriendly, far from it. If anything, the four made an effort to make their two new companions feel welcome. They included the two of them in conversations, asking for their own input on various things. When it came to planning, their own opinions were sought out and given serious consideration.

It was nice, even though there was a distance that Hadrian, Silica and Kirito had from others, even Asuna. There were times when the three of them would become quiet, or they would show signs that they had not slept well, and it didn’t take a genius to know why.
The three of them had killed, and that fact haunted them. It seemed to happen to Hadrian less often, and Lux wondered why. Was there some secret he had, or was his personality just better able to reconcile it? She didn’t know, and she wasn’t inclined to ask.

Not that he’d likely talk about it.

“Is there something on your mind, Lux?” Came a question from him.

She shook her head clear of her thoughts and looked at him. “Nothing important,” she replied. “I was just musing on some things.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Oh?” He asked.

“Just musing on you all.” She said with a shrug.

“Nothing bad, I hope.” He said with a little amusement.

“Not at all, Hadrian.”

“Well, if you have any questions, don’t hesitate to ask.” He said. “We’ve already established which subjects we’d rather not talk about because they are either uncomfortable, or just private.”

“And it’s more fun to speculate on some of the private ones, anyway.” Lux said.

Harry snorted and Silica walked up.

“I couldn’t help but overhear,” she elbowed Harry when he snorted again. “But you said something about it being more fun to speculate on some private subjects.”

Lux grinned. “Well, yes.” She replied. “The speculation on you and Hadrian can be fun, especially with the rumors of you two floating about. The more scandalous the rumor, the better.”

“Oh, which rumor do you find the most entertaining?” Silica asked. “I found the one that speculated that he and I were in a sordid S&M relationship to be amusing.”

“Well to be honest, it was more that they had you as the dominant one that amused you,” Harry said.

Silica raised an eyebrow. “Well, that and the image of you that rumor brought to mind.” She replied. She gave him a speculative look. “Or it might be the image of you licking my boots and being submissive to me.”

Lux thought about it for a second and her face heated up. The idea of Silica dressed as a whip holding bondage queen and Hadrian wearing tight pants and a harness at her feet and… Ah! Bad brain, bad! Once she got control of it, she shot them an irritated look and huffed. “SAO has been a bad influence on you two.” She said.

Harry and Silica both cheerfully nodded. “Yup.” They both said.

“By default, we blame Klein.” Harry added.

“He’s useful that way.” Silica chimed in.

**December 7, 2023 - Aincrad, 48th Floor, Lindarth**

“So, do you know why we got dragged here?” Kirito asked.
Harry shrugged. “They’re plotting something,” he said.

“You’re not worried?”

“Nope.”

The two of them were off to the side, looking out of place in the clothing shop. Ashley, a tailor who was well known for the quality of her goods, had set up shop in the town, and judging from the building, it looked to be a permanent arrangement. The girls had quickly gone to the woman and began a quiet, if animated, discussion with the tailor, and from the amused looks she was shooting them, Kirito already had an idea of what they were planning.

Not good, and from what he saw of Harry, the boy had figured it out as well. He seemed rather unconcerned about it, which likely meant that he had a response to it already planned out.

“Calm down Kirito,” Harry said. “The worst that will happen is that we’ll be embarrassed. Besides, Christmas is coming and you know the girls will want us to take them out.”

“And?” He asked.

“And now is a good time to look for a proper suit.” Harry replied. He looked back towards the girls and sighed. “At least this way, we can pick our own.” He said.

“And the fact that they’re likely to-”

Harry shrugged. “As I said, the worst that will happen is that we’ll probably be embarrassed.” He said. “And that’s if they decide to pull that prank.”

#

“All right, the two of you can open your eyes now.” Ashley said.

Harry opened his eyes and saw his reflection in the mirror. As Kirito had feared, and he had resigned himself to, the two of them had been dressed in drag. He took the reflected image in, noticing how the green dress hugged his body to the hips before it seemed to flare out slightly from the waist, and went down to the knees, though it might go lower if it wasn’t for the petticoat. It came with matching shoes and dark stockings that had been applied so deftly that he wondered how it had been managed without him noticing. His hair, while still untamed, had been lengthened and styled in a way to make it wavy, instead of a bird’s nest, and he spied the hints of makeup on his face.

All in all, not bad. He shot a look at Silica, who was looking at him with amusement and smirked.

“If you’re expecting us to go out like this, you need to be properly attired, my good sir.” He said. “A Lady should never go without a proper escort.”

“You’re taking this all too well, Harry.” Kirito grumbled.

Harry turned and saw what Kirito had been put in and snorted in amusement. The black color scheme had been kept, but where Harry’s garb had been designed to hug his body, Kirito’s was designed to flare out, and all that lace… the look fit him.

The sour look on his face, with his hair lengthened and the makeup made it seem almost as if he was pouting. Judging from the fact that Asuna was trying to restrain her laughter, that was intentional.

“Well, Miss Kirito,” Harry said. “I have to say that Ashley does good work. The lace accents are
wondrously done, and the coordination of the colors is excellent. The mix of white and black fits you nicely, and the headdress adds a nice compliment.”

“Harry.” Kirito said. “Shut up.”

“Well, we have to go soon, so-” Rain began before Kirito’s shout interrupted her.

“What?!” Kirito shouted.

Harry looked at them, then at Ashley. “This is unacceptable.” He said primly. “Two ladies going without a proper escort? Asuna and Silica aren’t properly attired yet. Furthermore, if Rain and Lux expect to be proper chaperones for this outing, they need to be in the proper garb as well. Now, Miss Ashley, do you have anything in mind?”

Ashley looked at the girls and by her amused look to Harry, she knew exactly what he was implying. “Indeed I do, ‘Miss’ Harry. In fact, ‘Sir’ Silica insisted that I be prepared for this.”

“Excellent.” Harry replied and gave a nod to Silica.

“Wait now,” Asuna began. “We weren’t planning on heading out of here. This was all meant as a joke.”

Harry looked at her and raised an eyebrow. “Ah, but ‘Sir’ Asuna, you must understand something.” He said. “If ‘Miss’ Kirito and I are going to be like this, then you and ‘Sir’ Silica should be properly clothed as well.”

##

“I can’t believe you just ran with it like that.” Kirito said to Harry later while the two were in a tavern, waiting for the girls to finish their shopping. Too bad it hadn’t ended quickly enough to avoid pictures being taken.

His friend shrugged. “It’s not the first time I’ve seen that prank pulled, even if it was the first time it was pulled on me, and the best thing you can do is roll with it.” He replied as he took a sip of his beer.

“That’s not the point, and you know it.” Kirito grumbled.

“Look on the bright side, Kirito.” Harry said. “We got to see Silica and Asuna in very form hugging clothes that left little to the imagination, not that I need to imagine with Silica. Ashley made the four of us look good like that.”

And she had, even Kirito had to admit that. While being in drag was embarrassing, it was confined to their group, kept private, and Harry had turned it around on the girls and forcing them to be dressed like gentlemen from eighteenth century Europe. With how clothing was cut and tailored in that period, it really did leave little to the imagination.

Kirito raised his mug. “That’s true.” He replied. The two clinked their mugs together and went back to drinking. “Still glad it wasn’t in public,” he said later. “I would never have lived that down.”

“Lived what down?” Asked a familiar voice.

Harry turned and grinned. “Klein!” He exclaimed. “It’s been awhile.” He looked past the older player and saw the rest of his guild. “So, has he gotten slapped or chased out of a town recently?” He asked them.
“Hey!” Klein protested as his companions laughed. “It was only that one time!”

“And we will never let you forget it.” Harry said. “Anyway, why don’t you guys take a seat? I’ll buy the first round, and we can catch up.”

December 13, 2023 - Aincrad 48th Floor, Lindarth

Lisbeth put her book down with a sigh when she heard the door to her newly established shop open. It was something she did when she was bored and not inclined to work at her forge, which didn’t happen often, but it did happen on occasion. Surprisingly, Aincrad had its own NPC publishers who printed out pulp novels by the wagonload.

They were cheap. They were trashy. And they were entertaining. The most popular series was the Tugger Nuts series by NPC author Antoine Graffitto, and while the books were written in English, it was at a simple enough level for most players to be able to read it.

Still, she had a feeling that there was a joke in the title, but she didn’t have enough knowledge of English to figure out if there was a play on words involved. She looked up and saw some familiar faces. She knew that one of them was a native speaker of English, and another of them was fluent in it, so perhaps they would know.

“Hey guys, it’s been awhile.” She called out as Asuna and the others entered. “You guys in for repairs, new weapons, browsing, or a combination of all three?”

Harry looked at her. “Liz, you know us well enough to know the answer to that.” He said drily.

“Well, it’s been a slow morning anyway,” she said. “I was catching up on my reading. There’s a series of books that have turned out to be popular. Despite being in English, they’re pretty good.”

“Oh?” Harry asked. “What’re the books called?”

“They’re called the Tugger Nuts series.” She replied.

Harry blinked. “Really? Huh.”

“Yup, though I do think there’s a joke or something in the titles. I mean, it would make sense, given that Aincrad’s devs thought they were being funny, but book titles like Tugger Nuts and the Big Finish, Tugger Nuts and the Midnight Snatch, or Tugger Nuts Gets in Deep, and… are you okay, Hadrian?”

Harry’s face was red. “Yes,” he choked out. “I’m fine.”

Lisbeth realized that her suspicions were correct then. Given that it was Aincrad, and the apparent sense of humor some of the devs had, not to mention the players themselves, it was probably ribald. Still, in for a col, in for a thousand. “Well, there was also the one called Tugger Nuts Wrestles the One-eyed Champ, also called, for some strange reason, Tugger Nuts and the Pearly Orchid on the lower floors. I never could get an explanation why.”

Harry couldn’t restrain himself and fell to the floor and started laughing. Everyone present stared at him with some confusion, and Asuna, who was fluent in English, was obviously thinking about what other meanings could be involved.

Silica looked down and nudged Harry with her foot. “Harry, can you calm down for a moment and explain it to those of us who aren’t native speakers of English, or reasonably fluent in it?” She asked and then looked at Asuna, who shrugged. “Okay, all of us, since we don’t get the joke?”
Harry calmed himself and looked at her. He slowly got to his feet, leaned in, and whispered into her ear. The expressions on her face went from amused, to embarrassed, to scandalized, and then to a combination of the three in short order.

“Um, excuse me,” She said and then walked outside. Before the door closed, they heard her break out into peals of laughter.

He looked at the rest, who were giving him expectant looks and sighed. “Okay, all of those titles? Well, they’re all plays on words. I’m only partially surprised that Asuna doesn’t get it, but I bet she was being taught to speak English properly.” He looked at her for a bit. “Hmm, might want to do a few conversations in English with you, even if you probably learned from a Yank…”

“Harry, back to the point,” Kirito said.

Harry nodded. “Sorry about that,” he said. “Anyway, those plays on words are basically plays on sexual acts and masturbation. And that’s not when they’re talking about certain body parts.”

Asuna gave a slight hum. “You know, that makes sense. I mean they could be taken that way, from what you said, but they’re probably intended to be innocuous.” She said. “I mean, a one-eyed champ could just be a champion wrestler with one eye, not what… ever…” She then realized just what Harry meant and looked at him, a slight flush on her face. “You, Hadrian, have a dirty mind.”

Harry shrugged, completely unrepentant. “Just imagine what they meant by pearly orchid.” He said.

“Hadrian!”

December 21, 2023 - Aincrad 49th Floor, Myujen

Silica gave a content sigh as she allowed herself to relax in the hot water of the bath. They had all been busy for the last few days, often returning to town late at night. While it wasn’t overly unusual in and of itself, the fact that they left early and were often out of town until nearly midnight meant that taking advantage of some luxuries were put on hold.

Taking a proper bath and relaxing in one was one of those, much to her disappointment. Then again, it wasn’t as if she hadn’t gone days or even weeks without bathing before. Not every inn had a bath in the rooms, or a bathhouse for that matter. Even with the towns, it could be a toss of a coin on whether that luxury was available, though there was usually at least one bathhouse in each town.

Still, bathing was a luxury she took advantage of at every opportunity, especially when they were private baths in the rooms like this one. Asuna and the rest of the girls understood, and Harry would just get fondly amused when the first thing she did when practicable was take a bath. Well, maybe she’d get a meal, it really depended on how hungry she was.

*Harry tends to find places like this, she thought with a smile. He has, ever since the first floor.*

She appreciated that, she really did. She knew that he didn’t have to go for the extra expense, it was often cheaper to take a room and then go to the town’s bathhouse, after all. But if the town had an inn that had baths in the rooms or an attached bathhouse, he would find one and arrange lodgings.

Which begged the question on his frugality earlier on. At least until May, he was incredibly frugal, prioritizing his purchases and spending to the essentials: gear, items, food and lodging. Anything else was secondary, and she’d had to drag him clothes shopping on more than one occasion just to give him some variety in outfits.

She remembered someone joke once, that for Harry, keeping her happy fell under essential expenses.
At the time, she really didn’t get what was meant by that, but now she understood it, and found it amusing. After all the jokes and rumors about the two, which ranged from amusing to absurd, they had both just settled on being amused and exasperated by them. It always seemed as if the players on the front lines didn’t have anything better to do than gossip like a bunch of old women.

_Besides,_ she thought. _Simple luxuries should not be unappreciated. Good food, good drink, a nice bath, and a comfortable place to sleep? He could do worse, and he does take me out on those ‘not dates’ every now and then, and he acts like a gentleman on them._

She knew that their relationship was complicated. They were too close to be simple friends, too comfortable in their casual intimacy, and they were both very aware of their attraction to each other. Neither of them would claim to be lovers, as they were in no hurry to go that far. They were comfortable with what they had, and that was fine with her.

That might change in the future, but that was then. There was no need to rush it.

##

Harry took a sip of his beer as he watched both Rain and Klein try to drink each other under the table. Aside from their rocky introduction, caused by Klein’s antics whenever he met a new girl, the two had hit it off quite well. Then again, Klein was one of the few men in Aincrad who could get slapped one moment by a female player, and then be sitting there and telling funny stories of his misadventures, with the girls laughing at them.

_It must be due to him just being that friendly on a normal basis,_ Harry thought. _Hell, even Heathcliff likes him, and getting even a pretense of emotion from him is harder than getting a compliment from Snape._

Then again, the entire Fuurinkazan guild as a whole was like that. They might not have any luck in picking up the ladies or getting girlfriends, but each of them were actually on friendly terms with many of the female persuasion. Then again, they understood that no meant no, which was something many male players tended to forget on a regular basis.

Well, not with Asuna and Silica, but those two had proven more than willing to enact violence on anyone who decided to get fresh or grabby. The occasional repeat offender had Kirito and him taking said player aside and had a nice and friendly discussion with him about his behavior. At sword point.

They tended to get the message after that.

A twinge from his scar then brought his mind to something else. Ever since October, it had begun to bother him periodically. He knew that Tom, the so-called Lord Voldemort, was up to something, but for him to feel it from half a world away was disconcerting.

He wouldn’t claim to understand it, but he had a feeling that the connection was active due to Tom planning something involving him. Something that got the man to think strongly enough, as he hadn’t even noticed anything until October. Whatever had been planned back then had obviously failed. The scar’s activity had given him some insight, if only towards the man’s emotional state.

That had been fury back then, but now…

Now he was sensing anticipation.

_What are you planning, Tom?_ He thought.
Albus sat back and pensively thought about the last six months. Ever since June, he had been busy, either with damage control, or with the handling of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. While the Wainwrights had continued with providing the recordings of Harry’s activities, he had little time to peruse them, trusting Miss Granger to keep summarizing the activities.

Still, the damage control aspect had been successful, mostly because he was able to explain that they didn’t know if Harry had used magic, and even if he did, it was unlikely that those present would have recognized it. He had also pointed out that the circumstances were exceptional in their own right, and self-defense and defense of others in a situation of clear and present danger were well known exceptions to the rule.

That had quieted things, and he then had to ensure that they didn’t classify him as being a danger to others. Dolores Umbridge had been particularly insistent on that at first, but had fallen afoul of a scandal involving possession of Blood Quills and documents of all of her blackmail sources. The rest had died down after that.

Tragic, really, and he made sure to send Lucius a nice Christmas card for that maneuver. The entire thing had been brilliantly executed, and more in line with the more subtle and pragmatic maneuvering he had normally demonstrated until a couple of years previously.

And then, Tom had made a move, countered only because he had the foresight to ensure that Harry couldn’t be roped into any contracts, and Alastor had the paranoia to ensure that he wasn’t informed of all the security measures in place. It resulted in his agent, Barty Crouch Jr. being captured, but the man had apparently read from the same book Alastor had and bragged about his intentionally not knowing where Tom was specifically.

Still, it wasn’t a complete loss. Tom had lost a valuable servant, and had been set back months, at the least, due to the failure of his plan.

And yet, Albus still felt that it was only a setback for his former student, and that he hadn’t been idle since.

_Just what are you planning now, Tom?_ He thought, pensively before turning his attention away from that line of thought. No matter how much he wished otherwise, he was in no position to do anything about it right now.

**Unknown Location**

Tom looked over his preparations with satisfaction. It had taken him weeks of research and preparation for the ritual he found, and it would be over a week still before he could use it. The instructions had been extremely specific that it could only be done when the New Year began.

Still, it was coming close. While it wouldn’t give him his body, it would put him in the perfect place to kill Harry Potter. The prophecy said he would have the power to defeat him? He would prove it wrong and prove beyond a shadow of a doubt, that he is the greatest Dark Lord to walk the Earth.

Besides, there were plenty of ways for him to get a body. He had everything else for the ritual he had intended already on hand, and setting it up later would be of no consequence.
Chapter Notes

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Mystic Knight Online

Chapter 19 - A Carol of Swords

December 24, 2023 - Aincrad 48th Floor, Lindarth

“So, you made the preparations?” Kirito asked as Harry walked up to him.

Harry looked over and nodded. “Made them last week when I was shopping for gifts. Silica and I have a reservation at the Wandering Pony in Mishe for tomorrow evening at 19:00.” He tossed Kirito a card. “Also, made a similar arrangement for you and Asuna there as well, same time.”

Kirito caught the card. “Thanks, Harry.” He said and looked over the card. The information for the reservation panned out and he put it in his inventory. “You know what Rain and Lux are doing tomorrow night?” He asked.

Harry shrugged. “Heard they’re going to go with Klein and the Fuurinkazan, along with a few other ladies to a party being held here in Myujen.”

Kirito considered that and nodded to himself. That a party was going to go on wasn’t a surprise. It was Christmas, and while it wasn’t as important amongst the Japanese as it was amongst other cultures, it was still celebrated. Then again, it was an excuse for a party.

“You going to go to the party after you and Silica finish your date?” He asked.

Harry shrugged. “It’s not guaranteed, but probably. Silica likes to be social and if she goes, I’m going as well.”

Kirito snorted. “You mean she’ll drag you to it.” He replied drily.

“It’ll be willing this time,” Harry said. “Besides, I’ll be getting Klein to foot at least part of the bill on the drinks then.”

“And then he’ll get you to pay for his drinks.” Kirito said with a chuckle.

“Nah, we’ll just make it a part of some bets on a dice game. I win, he buys; he wins, I buy.” Harry said with a smirk. “Especially since he will likely be just drunk enough to think it’s a good idea.”

Kirito laughed at that. Harry’s luck with dice was well known, to the point where most players of the front line knew better than to play a game with him. It didn’t matter whose dice they were, Harry tended to at least break even at worst. And that’s when he was playing against a player who was using loaded dice.
They’d caught more than a few cheaters that way, though no one knew how someone could get loaded dice in game. Kirito suspected some back alley merchants, the “honestly reputable” kind.

The two then settled into a companionable silence as they waited for the girls to finish their shopping at Ashley’s. They had bought their suits a few days ago, so they were prepared, but the girls had ordered their clothes for Christmas back when they pulled their prank on the two of them, but with Ashley’s booming business, the tailor had only just finished the orders a couple of days ago.

Add in that they probably had to pick up other things as well, and the two had decided to wait outside, just in case the girls tried to pull another prank on them. At least that was their official reason. The real reason was that the girls wanted to try them on, just in case, and didn’t want the boys to see the outfits.

Neither Kirito, nor Harry had a problem with that. They would see the finished result tomorrow, and they found that they were quite capable of waiting.

**Aincrad 49th Floor, Myujen**

“No, why not?” Silica asked. “I already don’t need to grab his attention, I already have it, but this makes me look a little more mature.” Asuna heard the girl grumble something under her breath and turned to look at her friend.

“I’m sorry, what was that?” Asuna asked.

“I was just grumbling about the fact that I’m more or less stuck like this.” Silica replied. “I’m fourteen, and I still look more like I did when I was thirteen than I should. I have grown a bit, and filled out some, but not much. Of course, there’s a plus side to this.”

Asuna blinked. “And what would that be?”

Silica smirked. “Not having to explain to those who don’t know better why I weigh around fifty kilos while being only a hundred and fifty centimeters tall with a dancer’s build. I’m actually lighter here in SAO than I was IRL.” She shrugged. “Of course, I don’t have the muscle tone here I did outside.”

Asuna looked at Silica, surprised. “How did you manage that? I’m fifty-five kilos at one hundred and sixty-eight centimeters tall. You’re a lot smaller than I am, but your mass to height ratio is higher? With that build?”

Silica shrugged. “Comes with the territory amongst the ladies on my mom’s side of the family.” She said as she sat back. “We tend towards petite, athletic builds, and high muscle density. The martial arts tradition also helps.” She glared down at her chest. “Unfortunately, it also means that getting a guy’s attention can take some work. Unlike most ladies, we can’t just thrust out our chests and make them drooling idiots.”

“It would help to have them,” Rain said idly. “But then, it’s not your tits that Hadrian looks at. Why don’t you stand up a bit?” She asked.

Silica did, not even minding that she was naked. She was amongst friends, so it wasn’t like it would be a problem.

Rain moved closer and looked Silica over. “Hmm, you’re right about it being a dancer’s build. Well,
from what you’ve been saying, a martial artist’s build. You have small breasts, but they’re there, a small waist, nice hips, nice butt, and good legs.” She observed. “If we weren’t stuck here, you would fill out nicely as you got older. You also don’t look thirteen. More like some of those gymnasts I was going to high school with.” She then grinned. “Besides, as I said, it’s not your tits he looks at.”

Silica shrugged and then sat back down into the water. Rain was right about that. Harry tended to pay more attention to her hips, rear and legs, though he did pay attention to her body as a whole. Also, when they slept in the same bed, one of his hands always seemed to find its way to her hips he would pull her closer when he was asleep. She would admit, it was nice.

Didn’t stop either of them from being embarrassed at each other when one walked in on the other in the bath, though Harry had long since gotten his reaction under control. On the other hand, his seeing her half-dressed, her hair mussed from sleeping, and such tended to get his attention more anyway.

“I can’t believe we’re having this conversation.” Asuna said, interrupting Silica’s train of thought.

“Silica did bring it up, Asuna.” Rain said. “Besides, how long has it been since any of us engaged in girl talk?” She then looked at Silica and then grinned. “So, on that line, you and Hadrian basically live together and have had some ‘accidental’ bath encounters? Details!”

Silica blushed. “Rain!” She shouted in protest.

Silica caught Asuna looking at Lux, who was rolling her eyes. Asuna shook her head, a bemused smile on the normally composed girl’s face.

But that was Rain. She would start the girl talk with something like that. No matter. Asuna would rein things in.

After all, she knew once Silica rallied and started bringing up embarrassing matters on the rest of them, her longer association with Asuna meant that she had a lot of ammunition she could use. Silica was counting on it.

##

Harry blinked when Rain gave him a speculative look upon exiting the bath house, looked back at Silica, and gave her a thumbs up. He gave her a confused look, only to see her blush in embarrassment. He considered asking what it was all about and then thought better of it.

He had a feeling that girl talk was involved, and he’d suffered through that once after Fred and George had cheerfully tossed him naked into the girl’s shower room after a Quidditch game. Fortunately, the girls knew who was at fault. Unfortunately, they took the opportunity to embarrass the hell out of him, between their cheerful cooing over how cute he was, washing him, their own girl talk, and upping the ante on that by explaining what they were actually talking about.

True, they were going to an extreme when they did that. He seriously doubted that girls regularly talked about their monthlies in such lurid and disgusting detail, if at all, but it was enough. He would have tried to escape, but those girls easily managed to keep him corralled. They weren’t chasers for nothing, and they were used to doing so with things travelling much faster than he could run.

That had made him wonder why his thoughts had turned towards the real world more often recently. Not thinking or talking about the real world had quickly turned into a part of the culture of the players. A player was fully allowed to freely talk about the real world if he or she wanted to, but it was a touchy subject at the best of times.

Also, not thinking or talking about the real world served as a defense mechanism for them all. By not
thinking about it, it allowed them to at least put aside the fact that they really were risking their lives for what may very well be a false hope. That in doing so would give them a chance for something that Kayaba had promised, but was in no way guaranteed to honor, their freedom. Regardless of what he had claimed that day, over a year ago. The man might have had no reason to lie, but he also had no reason to tell them the truth.

_And I’m just going to stop there_, he thought. That line of thought was not conducive to maintaining a more or less positive mindset, or at least one that was somewhat hopeful.

He turned his attention to Silica and noticed that her hair was still down. He mentally shrugged it off, not bothering to point it out. It wasn’t the first time she had decided to wear it loose after a bath, and it wouldn’t be the last.

That he found it more attractive than her habitual twintails, had nothing to do with it. He actually wondered why she still did her hair that way, given that they did make her look cute, and she had claimed that she didn’t do cute. Then again, that might have been the reason why right there.

Her going for something that was cute and childish kept all but the worst from trying to hit on her, and she knew that he saw past that.

“Hey you all.” He heard Argo’s voice pop up from right behind him. “I got some info you all might like to hear.

Harry felt his body tense and then relax. Looking back, he could see Argo’s disappointed expression and smirked.

“Argo, you really need to change your routine a bit,” he said. “Anyway, you got something?”

**Aincrad 35th Floor, Forest of Wandering**

“I still think we’re wasting our time on this.” Asuna said as they made their way to the location specified by Argo. “I know that Argo believes that there is some truth to the rumor, but…”

Rain looked at her, easily keeping pace with the rest of the group. “It’s probably not exactly as advertised…” She went quiet and pensive.

Asuna silence was not that of impatience, or resignation. For someone she'd known for such a short time, Asuna was giving her the same room her partner did.

It was a running theme in this party. Or was it group? Or team? Terminology got muddled with players like this. Silica wanted to train up her Martial Arts skills, even though she only just used them as a supplemental to her typical approach in game? The others took turns sparing with her. Harry decided that he didn’t like the way a wannabe frontliner was treating one of the lower level players? Chances are at least two of them would be backing him up when he 'had a word' with the idiot.

Kirito got wind of something shiny, or at least interesting? They all went along with him on a crazy misadventure.

Rain wanted to chase down a forlorn hope that likely wasn't what it said on the tin?

They all understood why Rain wanted, needed, to do this. This wasn’t like those moments in a badly done shonen anime where she had to restate her motives and personality for the three hundredth time. Even though Lux and Rain had only briefly been part of what she'd heard referred to as "Kirito's Group", "The Flash's Guild", "Oh God Run It's Them", and other nicknames. The kind of nicknames that proliferated when a group doesn't have an official one.
Not that they gave a single damn about the nicknames outside of amusement and exasperation whenever those names were bandied about within earshot.

When Argo gave them the damned rumor they were chasing, she had scanned the others after mastering themselves.

Every look back screamed skepticism. Every look back told her they knew she'd chase the damned rumor despite that. And every gaze that met hers said they were with her.

So here they were, chasing a rumor.

The rumor that an item capable of reviving someone was out there. A time sensitive prize, and probably one that was a onetime only thing. One you could only get once.

Asuna had been most articulate in her doubts, but Rain could tell everyone else had their own reservations. Even so, Rain remembered what Harry had said when he made it clear that if she was going to do this, she wasn’t doing it alone.

“It’s probably not true, at least not the way people are assuming,” he said. “But something like this wouldn’t have even Argo thinking it is valid without a reason. And Rain, I understand why you need to do this, but you’re not doing it alone.” He then smirked. “You’re a part of the team, after all.”

And that settled the issue. They would all accompany Rain on a fool’s errand, not because they even believed that the rumor was true, but because she was a member of the team. It was that simple, and it made her feel... connected to something grand and wonderful.

As they continued moving, they saw the fir tree that was specified in the rumor, and Rain had to restrain a giddy giggle. Not for the fir tree, no. But for a sudden thought, a remembrance of stories of a town somewhere in Russia full of fools who shared such wisdom in their actions.

*The wisdom of fools it is,* Rain decided.

##

Rain had been a little surprised to find Everybody's Bro and his guild the Fuurinkazan had shown up. She could see Lux was too, but none of the others were. Another reminder. Being taken in by Kirito and Asuna's odd little family didn't just mean getting Silica and Hadrian, getting the Beta Tester turned trusted frontliner and the Flash. It meant their friends were disposed to be yours, because their judgements were trusted.

The only thing Asuna wondered, and it was an idle wonder by her polite tone and diction, was how’d Klein had known to show up.

Rain had jokingly called Asuna 'Oujou-sama' once, on account of her manners. The stricken look the obviously more 'high bred' girl had given her was enough to tell her not to do that ever again, even before Silica had had a word, an actual word, about it with her.

The look had been enough.

Harry satisfied Asuna's curiosity easily, the second they turned up on the floor, he'd informed the "Bro" they were there and why, and the rest naturally came along with him. The Fuurinkazan not back up those two love birds their leader loved to tease? Had the Knight and that Lind fellow suddenly become the best of friends? Madness.

That'd been how Klein himself had put it, to Harry and Silica’s rude gestures. Then he'd grown
serious. "Back up, in there fighting, running interference, you name it, we’ll do it, Harry." He said simply.

Harry was like that, Rain had come to know. People who tried to befriend his reputation could find him cold, aloof, and a bit of a Kirito Jr. To those that got in, that gave earnest friendship, what they found inspired such loyalty, she’d no doubt Klein would have gone the Twenty-Fifth again to back Harry up.

Harry would do the same, and that was why he inspired loyalty. The Englishman of Aincrad instinctively knew that loyalty was a two-way street.

That nickname was only teasingly said to get a rise out of him.

As to how he caught up to them so quickly, Kirito gave a quick lesson that explained that. There were ways to track people down, especially when they were on your Friends List. And of course, anyone in Klein's guild without Harry and his posse on theirs would be getting looks of disbelief and annoyance. For all that he acted the idiot at times, Klein was one of the more skilled players on the front line, and the guild he led was distinctive in the fact that even after a year, it had not yet lost a single member. Of course he'd make it a point to know where its members and allies, not to mention its annoyances and antagonists, were when he could.

Rain had initially thought Klein's guild was just him and the five members he'd brought with him, which would explain their survival rate. But over time, she'd found it was almost impossible to turn over a rock in Aincrad without finding one of them. Hell, that small guild the Moonlit Black Cats, a.k.a “Kirito and Asuna's kids”, to the former’s bemusement and the latter's amusement, worked closely with the guild’s mid-level members.

Even as a virtual reality game, even as a death game, SAO was as much a social construct as it was a thing on ones, zeroes, and game mechanics.

“You caught up pretty quick, Klein.” Harry said, and the statement snapped Rain out of her reflections in time for her to catch "Kurama and Simone" trade smirks.

Each insisted the other was the shades wearing manliest man EVAR, the GWAR of the two, of course.

“I was already on the floor,” Klein replied with a shrug. “I had to talk some of the middies out of doing this, especially since I saw some of the shadier groups hovering around.”

Kirito raised an eyebrow. “Shadier groups?” He asked.

Klein nodded. “Yeah.” He said. “There are a couple of guilds who aren’t above using nastier methods to get what they want, either through threats, harassment, or even attacking other parties. There are even a couple of red guilds who have clean players working with them. Lind and the DDA keep them in check for the most part, but they can’t be everywhere.”

Kirito had caught her eye at that and smirked at her eye roll. She'd only met this Lind after what Harry and the others typically referred to as ‘that thing in June’.

By the time she had really become aware of the DDA beyond the rumor mill, it had evolved into a sort of militia or police force. Lind had whipped his guild into shape for action on the mid-levels, with the recommended additional grinding, of course. Now the DDA patrolled those floors.

While not always appreciated, much like the men and women that served justice in the real world;
while Lind had to be a hard case about his own people not abusing their self-appointed role, much as in the real world, it was clear that their presence had kept criminal activity down to a reasonable level.

Their own occasional run-ins with the man were marked by both him and Harry being polite, carefully so, to each other. The others took Harry's lead in this, knowing the history between the two. They might not be at each other's throats, but anyone with eyes could tell that they didn't like each other.

"Sounds productive," Harry allowed. "Are we still seeing that slow uptick in Reds?"

"Much as I know it will displease your refined fellows," Klein said wryly and indeed with honest regret, "Yes. There's a guy in town you can talk to about that. Actually, he was looking for you, Harry."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"I don't think you know him, but he was calling you Harry," Klein related. "One of those folks I've seen around, but haven't placed a name to."

"Standard Argo check first then," Silica decided, and Harry nodded his agreement.

This time, Rain shared an eye roll with Klein.

"Yes, yes, we're such an old married couple," Harry mock groused. "You and yours want to join us on this, Klein?"

Klein grinned. "Why not?" He replied. "Who's in charge of you guys?"

Harry smirked and pointed to Rain, and Rain knew she was blushing.

She had tried to defer to Kirito or Silica, or anyone else really, but Harry had stopped that.

"Your mission." He said. "You're in charge."

And so here she was approving Klein's request for him and his to join her party. Silica had somehow caught the quotes she'd been using the first few times she'd said it and had relentlessly squashed that.

Rain took a look at the time. "It's almost midnight, so we need to get in place," she said. "Let's go."

"Why Father Christmas, though?" Harry groused behind her.

"Yeah, what did Santa do to the gaming industry?" Klein agreed. "Why are all the holiday mobs based on him and his crew? Why not... what is it called... the Crampy!"

"Krampus," Harry corrected. "Or a copyright safe Grinch parody!"

"Yeah! Hell, gaming could do with some Seuss!" Klein said. Apparently that got him some looks, because he was now explaining how his mother had become a fan of the good rhyming Doctor.

Rain wasn't really paying attention to their byplay, though.
She stared at the item that appeared for her, the very item she had come to get, and frowned. What had been implied by the rumor was true, but not in the way everyone assumed from it. Then again, they all had their doubts, even her. But, she still needed to do this, if only for the slightest chance that it might have been more than a fool’s errand.

They had taken on the event boss, Nicholas the Renegade. With their levels, it was unsurprisingly not difficult. If any of them had been doing it solo, it might have been different, or at least taken some time. As it was, it took them about twenty minutes to cut the boss’s health down.

Just because it was on the thirty-fifth floor didn’t mean that its’ health pool was small. If anything, being an event boss made it slightly overpowered.

Still, they killed it, and they had all arranged for her to land the last blow on the assumption that it would be a drop for the player who killed it. She now looked at the item in her hand, The Divine Stone of the Returning Soul, and placed her finger over it. She saw a text box appear, explaining what it could do.

It could revive a player, provided that it was done within ten seconds of the player’s death.

She gave a bitter chuckle at that revelation. It was true, but not in the way anyone assumed was meant by the rumor. It was more than what she honestly expected, though. She had done this, knowing it was a fool’s errand, but she had hoped that it wasn’t.

And even though the result wasn’t what she hoped for, an item that could bring her friend back from the dead, it was still more than what she expected. After all, with this, she could save someone else from dying if it came down to it.

At the same time, holding the item in her hand served as a painful reminder. She wanted to throw it away, to get rid of that reminder of her cowardice.

And yet, she wouldn’t do that. For one thing, it would be needless waste. For another, if she couldn’t bear to keep possession of it, she could simply hand it to one of the others. She glanced up and saw them giving her curious looks and waved them over.

Mishe, later the same night.

"I only agreed to this because Argo said enough cautiously good things about you," Harry told the man before him bluntly.

The stranger looked to be about Kirito or maybe Rain's age, but could easily be a couple of years older. He was just a touch taller than Harry, but seemed fit.

The same kind of hard life lived fit as Harry himself... and something else. Something refining it.

"You're an American," Silica said flatly.

"I am," the man agreed with a sigh. "I visited my godmother just so I could say I was in Japan for the release."

"And you wanted to meet me because...?" Harry prompted.
"Because I recognized you, Mr. Potter," the man said bluntly, and instantly raised his hands as Harry's hand moved to his sword. He knew Silica was ready as well. "Peace. I'm not related to a Death Eater, or some sort of fanboy. Though, I am bound by certain... statutes."

"She knows," Harry said. "Her family technically is under it, but is of a more... edge case nature rather than being users you could say."

"Oh? Curse or-- never mind, it's none of my business," the man stopped himself. "Forgive me, growing up as I did... secrets are craved, and trying to find them out is second nature."

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “Wainwright?” He asked.

The man blinked. "You know about the Wainwrights?" He asked. “I mean, no but-- wait a damn minute. Are they why the Boy-With-Too-Many-Hyphens is in SAO? Well, if Mom's figured that out..."

"And your mother is...?" Silica pressed. "And are we secure?"

"I felt his field when I walked up," Harry noted. "It’s stronger than Argo’s. I'm getting better at that in here."

The man sighed. "Magicals in America are under the Department of Magic and the Arcane." He said. “We're like most of the magical nations. Like most magical communities, we’re largely autonomous, but if we fuck it up too badly, the Mundanes do have means to hold us accountable."

"I'm with you," Harry said, relaxing but keeping his hand on his sword.

"My mother heads up our intelligence wing-- like what your Unspeakables do when they’re not probing the deep mysteries of magic. It's called Aladdin--"

"Your mother's Eden Blake?" Silica asked suddenly, and Harry blinked.

"Yes," the man allowed, eyeing her carefully.

Silica shook her head. "She's dealt with my grandfather and a couple of family friends," she said. "One of those friends is an out of towner called Gordon. Or--"

"Alf to his Earth friends," the man said, eyes going wide. "Fuck. You're a Saotome. Oh, totems and gods, you’re a Saotome. If your grandpa hasn't torn down Argus Corp, whoever took over after this started, or put a fire under the collective asses of the Diet over this yet..."

Silica nodded. “Then his hands are tied, for now at least.” She admitted. “He’s also not that influential, despite what some think. Now, my great aunt Nabiki, on the other hand...”

"Wait, wait, wait, Earth friends?" Harry asked. “You know an alien, Silica?"

"Don't worry about it," Silica advised offhandedly. "So, I'm a Saotome, and he's part of Magical America's first family of spooks." She looked at Harry. “Haven’t heard of you before I met you, though.”

“Someone aware of the magical world who doesn’t know who I am? Awesome!” Harry said, smirking. "I'm just a guy on vacation."

"Damn, I was going to use that one," the man said. "I'm... my name is August Blake. And if Koya, or whatever that fucks name is got through my field he's at least... re-assessing the situation a bit."
Blake chuckled. "And that's not even why I reached out to you."

"Doubt he will change things, though." Harry said. “He’s gone this far, and passed the point of no return.” He got a thoughtful expression on his face. “He said we had to clear this place and... well, we know who will be at the top now."

"Why did you want to meet Harry, Mr. Blake?" Silica asked.

Blake sighed. "Because I want to get out of here, where my girlfriend Ami is waiting. Because I want to see the kid she's already had by now."

"Little young for fatherhood," Harry noted dryly.

"The life I've lived, I had the chance and we took it together," Blake said, and Harry saw something in Blake's face he recognized from the mirror in the morning. Life hadn’t been kind to the man.

"And you think I can help you with that?" Harry asked. “No offense, but I’m just one person. I don’t care what the stories say, I’m not that special, powerful, or anything really."

"Yeah, but we're similar in one important way," Blake said. "Mr. Potter, have you found yourself bending SAO's rules in a way that made you think you might be... tapping our gift?" A look of wary hope came to the American's face. "And if you have, I'll do anything to get back to my Ami, sir, that won't stain me so much she won't see me..."

Harry considered that for a moment. “As things stand, I can’t do anything more to get anyone out of here than what I’ve already been doing, working to clear this damn game.” He said. “I don’t have the knowledge, let alone the control, to even try anything else. I get-"

"Flashes. Moments when the game lets you do things you shouldn't," Gus said, nodding. "Nothing like I can do with my focus in the real world..."

"And nothing I can call on demand," Harry agreed.

Blake nodded. “Not what I wanted to hear,” he admitted. “But it was a long shot anyway. Better to ask and be disappointed, though.”

Harry nodded. “Better to do something, hoping for the best, than nothing.” He agreed. “Listen, I’ll add you to my list of contacts. It’s not as good as a Friend’s List, but it means we can get in contact with each other if we find out something. As it is, just work on staying alive for now, and maybe you should work with some of the mid-level guilds or players if that’s your thing. Or, you could work with Argo."

"I already do," the American said with a smirk. "She’s always looking for people who can keep their eyes and ears open. And gathering intelligence? I was born for that. I've been keeping tabs on a certain class of player. Red. I doubt that now is a good time, but we should meet up some time after the New Year."

**December 25, 2023 - Aincrad 49th Floor, Myujen**

Silica tried to burrow into the covers and hoped that the morning sun would do them all a favor and either get turned off for a few more hours, or go bother someone else. She was feeling even less like a morning person than normal as it was, knowing that they were taking the day off because it was Christmas, and wanted to keep sleeping.

And if Harry decided to do his normal morning antics to wake her up, she wasn’t going to be held...
responsible for the consequences. Though from the grumbling coming from the body she was using as a combination of pillow and teddy bear, he wasn’t happy about it, either.

“Couldn’t they at least make it so the curtains can actually block out the damn sun?” She heard him grumble as he stirred. “Silica, I’m going to need to move, so can you shift a little?”

“D’nwnna.” She mumbled into his chest.

“Same, but that damn light is getting into my eyes.”

“D’nwnna!” She mumbled more insistently. “‘M w’rm ‘n c’mfy. ‘Wnna slp.”

She heard him sigh in exasperated amusement. “Well, I guess we can stay like this for a bit longer.” He said.

Silica mumbled appreciatively at that comment, only to be shortly interrupted by a knock on the door. Growling, she reached out and put her hand on Harry’s chest, stopping him from rising to answer it. Her eyes cracked open, glared at him, and she got off the bed.

Muttering imprecations under her breath about morning people, their constant need to share it, and her general irritation with them, she stomped over to the door and opened it to see Asuna with her hand raised to knock again.

“What?” She growled out to the older girl.

Asuna blinked. She looked over Silica’s shoulder to see Harry bemusedly staring at her from the room’s only bed, and back to an irate Silica.

“Um, did I come at a bad time?” She asked.

Silica only glared.

“Asuna,” Harry chimed in. “It’s too bloody early for this right now, and she’s not a morning person at the best of times. What do you think?”

“Oh.” She looked at the still glaring Silica, who looked to be reaching for a dagger that wasn’t there, and raised her hands in surrender and carefully backed away. “I’ll… come back in a couple of hours then.” She said. “I’ll make sure they know not to bother you two.”

Silica nodded, and firmly closed the door. She then made her way back to the bed, crawled under the covers, and made herself comfortable, her back to Harry in order to keep the sun out of her eyes. She glanced back and noticed that Harry was looking at her with some amusement.

“What?” She asked.

“Nothing, Silica.” He said. “Nothing at all.”

“Mmmm.” She murmured as she felt Harry wrap an arm around her and went back to sleep.

##

Harry joined Asuna and the others an hour later, taking a seat at the table and waving over a server. After giving his order, he turned his attention to the rest of the group.

“Asuna,” he said. “I’d apologize for Silica’s behavior, but she’s been a bit more irritable in the mornings recently. And to be honest, for once, I’m just glad it wasn’t directed at me.”
Asuna blinked. “What do you mean?” She asked. “I know she’s not a morning person, but she looked ready to stab me, or rip my head off.”

“If you want my opinion, which I’m giving anyway, it’s probably because we’ve all been so busy for the last couple of months.” He said and then shrugged. “Early mornings, late nights, and not a lot of downtime. She still has trouble sleeping unless she’s had a couple of hours to relax and decompress after we get back.”

“The fact that she likes to use you as a teddy bear probably helps with that.” Kirito replied drily.

“It helps us both with the nightmares.” Harry simply replied. He then looked between Kirito and Asuna. “You two might want to try it,” he said with a grin.

Asuna and Kirito both blushed and glared at Harry, while he, Rain and Lux laughed.

Despite his amusement with teasing Kirito and Asuna about their growing relationship, Harry knew that the two of them had a relationship that was developing in a healthier way than the one between him and Silica did. The relationship that he and Silica had wasn’t unhealthy, far from it. It was clear, however, that it could easily have become unhealthy with the way the two would occasionally use each other as crutches to keep themselves sane. Given their experiences since they were all trapped in SAO, though, it was understandable.

He shook that line of thinking out of his mind and looked at everyone. “Well, Silica was able to get a little more sleep, and she’s happier for it.” He said. “She’s taking a quick bath right now, so she should be down shortly. So, what’s the plan for today?”

Kirito shrugged. “Well, it’s Christmas, and we’re taking the day off.” He said. “Outside of some things going on this evening, I don’t think we have anything planned.”

Harry nodded and spied Silica making her way towards them. “Well, Silica’s done,” he said. “Quicker than usual, but I guess she wants to get started. She’ll probably insist on a longer bath later, since we’re going out tonight.”

“Oh?” Lux asked. “Sounds like you’re planning on taking her out on a date.”

“I am” He said, to everyone’s shock.

“Wait, you’re going on a date?” Asuna asked.

“I think I said that.”

“With Silica?”

“It’s tonight at the Wandering Pony in Mishe. Your point?”

Harry watched in amusement as both Asuna and Kirito tried to reconcile the fact that he was calling it a date, rather than his usual, and habitual, denials. Rain and Lux looked a bit startled for a moment before their expressions turned to amused.

“Well, if there’s any day that he would admit to going on a date, it would be today.” Rain said simply.

Lux nodded. “Yes, it makes sense that he would.” She chimed in. “Or he’s just finally gotten past the denial phase.”
Silica finally reached the table and looked at Kirito and Asuna with some confusion. “What’s up with them?” She asked.

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know.” He said. “I only admitted that I’m taking you out on a date tonight.”

Silica nodded and then paused. “Wait, you’re admitting that it’s a date?” She asked. At Harry’s nod she took a look out the nearest window. “I don’t see any signs that the world’s ending.” She said.

“Very funny, Silica,” Harry replied sarcastically.

“I try.” She replied smugly, causing Harry to snort in response.

The rest of the group laughed at the byplay while both Harry and Silica grinned.

“Thank you, thank you, I take my payments in beer, food, and snacks for Pina so she doesn’t steal from my plate.” Harry said, standing in order to take a bow. “My lovely and dangerous assistant takes hers in wine, baths, and snacks for Pina. Seriously, that flying feather duster has a black hole for a stomach.”

Silica lightly smacked him in the arm. “Pina’s not that bad, Harry.” She said.

“You’re just saying that because she doesn’t steal from your plate.” Kirito said, causing everyone to laugh.

“Anyway,” Harry said. “It’s Christmas, and I bear gifts. And no, none of them came from that Greek chap, Odysseus. I sent those to that tit, Agamemnon.” He opened up a menu and made several selections. Various wrapped packages appeared in front of him and he began to sort them.

“Greek chap? Odysseus?” Silica asked in confusion. “Harry, what are you-”

Rain snorted. “He was basically referring to a classical piece of Western literature, The Iliad, if I recall correctly.” She said. “I read it when I was in school back in Russia before my parents divorced and my mother returned to Japan, bringing me with her. It’s the source of a Western saying, “Beware of Greeks bearing gifts.”

“Actually, that was from the Aeneid, not The Iliad.” Harry countered. “A later work, written by the Roman poet, Virgil.” He looked over the packages and nodded. He started to hand them out to everyone. “Anyway, let’s not talk literature. I have presents to give out.”

He then handed the wrapped parcels to everyone at the table. Once he finished, he looked at everyone. “Well, what are you waiting for?” He asked.

They all looked at each other and then back to him, before Silica shook her head.

“Well, looks like I’ll start it off then,” she said before opening hers. As soon as she did, she pulled out a silver bracelet that had rings for each finger linked by several fine chains. She considered it for a moment before checking its stats and nodded. She equipped it and gave Harry a small smile.

“It’s beautiful and practical,” she said. “Somehow, that’s just like you.”

Harry gave her a slightly embarrassed look and rubbed the back of his head. “Well, I did look around and asked some people for advice on appropriate gifts.” He admitted. “Why don’t you all open them? It’s Christmas!”

As they did, Harry sat back and watched as they all made pleased sounds at receiving the gifts. He
had focused on gifts that were practical, and for the girls, looked nice as well. He doubted that Kirito really cared about the looks, so long as they weren’t too outlandish.

Asuna found herself holding a nice bangle that was designed to increase the accuracy of her attacks. Rain appreciated the fine leather gloves with the silverthread embroidery that also improved the stability of her grip on her sword, making the damage more consistent. Lux found herself the proud recipient of a new embroidered jacket that could fit over her armor and provided improved resistances.

As for Kirito, Harry got him practical heavy boots that helped with his defense and footing.

Black, of course.

All of them were practical, and all of them were fitting to the recipient.

Harry did make a mental note to thank Argo for the gift ideas, and Agil for having most of them for a reasonable cost. Those that Agil didn’t have, he knew who did have them and were willing to sell or trade for them.

He saw the expressions on their faces, their delight in receiving gifts, and their embarrassment in having not done the same. He didn’t expect them to, nor did he require it.

After all, it didn’t matter to him if they did or did not have gifts for this day, Christmas was more of a Western thing, so if they didn’t, he wasn’t offended in the least. Then again, he only had two Christmas holidays where he got anything of worth, and none of those things came from family. At least not directly; and his father’s cloak had more been the Headmaster returning what was his. None of the actual gifts he had been given were expensive either, but the price never mattered.

It was the thought and feeling behind them that did.

And the gifts he gave were of the same vein. Practical, as was appropriate for SAO, but also given with the intent of ensuring that his companions had as much chance to survive as possible.

**Aincrad, 35th Floor, Mishe**

Unsurprisingly, the Wandering Pony, or at least the tavern portion of it, was packed to the rafters with people. The actual restaurant portion was less crowded, but that was only because people could only enter it with reservations for the night. Reservations which had been made with incredible alacrity by just about every attached male player as soon as word had gone out. Harry had been there for the general brawl that had happened right in front of the establishment, noticing it as soon as he had walked out, having secured the reservations for himself and Kirito.

It paid to have Argo as a friend, even if she enjoyed trying to embarrass the hell out of him.

Still, he had secured those reservations, and he was now escorting Silica there for a nice dinner to start the night off with. Turning his attention to her, he considered the headaches that came from putting a stop to that brawl and getting it into some sense of order worth it.

Silica had taken advantage of Ashley’s services, and it showed. The tailor knew her work, or was it his? Harry would admit that he had a hard time telling. No matter. Ashley knew how to make and tailor clothes specifically to fit the personality wearing them.

And fit Silica, it did. She was wearing a long sleeved blue dress that hugged her body in all the right ways, while not being so form fitting as to restrict her movement. The silverthread embroidery highlighted her breasts and hips in a way that drew his eye to them without being blatant, the dress
flared out from her hips, and managed to be long enough for the hem to almost touch the floor. If he were to bet anything, the only reason it didn’t was due to the heeled boots she wore. Add in that her hair had been pulled into a bun, light makeup, and the simple change to her bearing, and it made her look quite a bit more mature than her fourteen years of age would indicate.

His own attempt at formal was a dark green waistcoat over a white linen shirt, black pants, matching shoes, and having a crimson cravat and cummerbund for a splash of brighter color. His hair also had been “tamed” by getting done in a way that made it look deliberate, rather than the bird’s nest it usually looked like.

“Welcome to the Wandering Pony, do you have a reservation?” The maître d’ said as soon as they entered. The NPC hadn’t changed one bit since they were last there, Harry noted with some amusement. His polite interest in their presence, and his desire for them to spend their col at the establishment if they had a reservation was still on his face.

“Yes,” Harry replied. “A reservation for two, under the name, Hadrian.” He handed the card, showing his reservation.

The maître d’ took the card and looked it over before placing it to the side. “Thank you, sir.” He replied. “This way, please.”

As the two of them were led to their table, the two of them politely ignored the looks and quiet comments that followed as they passed. Once they arrived and were seated at their table, both took the provided menus and began to browse them before making their orders.

Silica took a sip of her wine after it arrived and took a casual look around. “I’m beginning to think we might be a bit overdressed for this,” she said idly. “Also, I didn’t think you would actually drink any wine, either.”

Harry shrugged in response and took a sip of his own. “Well, it’s not like beer would really be appropriate for this, not tonight at least.” He said. “Also, the fact that we decided to dress nicely is a bad thing… why?”

“It’s not a bad thing, just an observation.” Silica replied. “Still, you knew to get a reservation for this night, and you’re calling this an actual date.”

Harry chuckled. “Thank Argo for that, she let me know so I could get here soon enough to do so.” He said. “I got the reservation when I was shopping for gifts while Kirito ran interference for you all. As for admitting that it’s a date, you really think that denying that this was a date would hold water this time?”

Silica nodded. “You have a point there,” she admitted, taking another sip. “So, anything you want to talk about?” She asked.

“How about anything not related to being stuck here?” Harry asked. “Something light, at least.”

Silica smiled. “I think that’s a great idea.”
Guests, Invited and Otherwise

Chapter Notes

Again, thanks to my Beta, The Raven Sennin for the polish. Check out his Team Anko series here on AO3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mystic Knight Online

Chapter 20 - Guests, Invited and Otherwise

December 30, 2023 - Unknown Location

Tom finished inscribing the last of the runes required on the border of the ritual circle, cursing the difficulty in using the homunculus body he had decided on when Barty found him. While it had been sufficient for the plans he had months ago, the preparations he was now doing required far more fine control than the body he was using was really suited for.

Still, he had persevered and had finished the painstaking process after several hours. Even then, he would be spending the next several hours evenly filling each etching with the special fluid required by the ritual. A fluid that had been harder to make than he had expected, as it was extremely difficult to acquire the blood of an innocent, an infant girl to be precise, not to mention making an emulsion that could be mixed with acromantula venom and hemlock without ruining its own properties. The former was easily handled by Nagini surreptitiously acquiring the infant for him from the nearby town, and he was fortunate that he had the emulsion and other ingredients hidden away in one of the caches he had nearby. It was ensuring that the mixture was correct, heated to the proper temperature, and maintained that way until it was used that was the hard part.

Unfortunately, he was required by the specifics of the ritual to do so, as once the preparations were started, they could not be stopped until completed. As it was, he was doing this faster than most who would attempt it would. They would usually do this over the course of a week, the meditations, chants, and other aspects which he had dismissed as unimportant as mandating extra time he didn’t need to waste. Instead, he was attempting to have this finished in less than two days.

Aincrad 50th Floor, Algade

The city of Algade was the largest settlement seen in Aincrad since the Town of Beginnings. A kilometer long and half a kilometer wide, its streets were a warren of alleys, dead ends, and confusing passages that could quickly cause a player to get lost. And yet, despite that, players knew that if they took a few different turns, or backtracked a bit, they would always find themselves on the city’s main boulevard, or back at the teleport plaza.

Still didn’t make the city any less confusing to navigate, though.

Harry cursed Argo as he looked around, checking his surroundings for the location Argo wanted him to meet her at. He had followed her directions to this part of the city, but its layout was a nightmare to navigate, and likely would be until he got familiar enough with it.
He would have turned and consulted Silica, but she was with Asuna, Rain, and Lux, and Kirito got snagged by Klein early on and dragged off. Knowing Klein, they would probably spend a few hours outside the city before Klein decided to make an attempt at hitting every bar, tavern and seedy dive in the city, dragging Kirito along with him.

And so, he was looking for Argo, which could be difficult enough as it is, in this maze of alleys that seemed to be designed to be her own habitat.

He spared a glance behind him and saw a familiar figure staying to the shadows. He would call it predictable, which it was, to a point. She was still able to sneak up on him when he wasn’t paying attention, however.

He was just used to her enough to be able to control his reactions. It also helped that he was getting sensitive enough to the system that he was beginning to be able to tell when something was directing its attention towards him. Not as well as Kirito, but then most players really couldn’t measure up to him when it came to something to do with the game.

Interacting with other players? He had Kirito beat, most players had him beat, in that respect. A social butterfly, Kirito certainly was not. Doing anything related to the game? Harry could count on one hand, with fingers left over, the number of players he knew of who might, might, be better at it.

He heard a quiet chuckle in a familiar voice coming from behind and sighed. “Argo,” he said. “If you’re going to sneak up on me, you might want to save the laughs for after you do.”

“So that’s how you notice me, Harry?” Argo asked teasingly.

“Well, you weren’t really trying this time.” Harry admitted. “The other times? Well, I keep saying that you’ve been getting predictable for a reason.”

He heard a man’s chuckle. “He has you there, boss.” The man said.

“Mr. Blake, nice to know you’re here as well.” Harry said, looking to the side where he barely noticed a slouched figure waiting. “So, Argo, what’s with calling me all the way out here, rather than your usual habit of simply sneaking up on me at the inn while I’m eating?”

Argo shrugged and then made her way to a nearby alley. Harry quietly followed her and noticed the privacy barrier that was in place. From its feel, it was one of Argo’s. He could almost sense something unique from it, as if a fingerprint, but that was it. He knew better than to focus on it, as if he did, it would simply slip away.

He saw Argo give him a confused look and he realized he stopped. He shrugged it off and continued into the alley. “Sorry about that, just felt that privacy barrier you had up.” He said. “It was yours, right Argo?”

Argo nodded. “Gus here said that you noticed his, and could tell that it was different from mine,” she said, pointing at the man. “Interesting, but not why I called you here.”

“And why did you?” Harry asked. “I know that Mr. Blake wanted to talk a few things out, but he decided to wait a bit.”

The man nodded. “I would have as well, but it’s also the reason why I’m talking to you about it now.” He said. “I told you how I was keeping an eye on the red players, discreetly mind you, but after we talked, the ones I was really paying attention to seem to have vanished.”
“I take it’s not because they did us all a favor and turned themselves in,” Harry noted. “Or got themselves killed for that matter.”

“I checked the Monument when they dropped off the map,” Argo said. “They’re still alive, and a few checks at the Black Iron Palace showed that none of the ones we are really worried about got captured recently.” She gave him a careful look. “Harry, the ones we’ve been trying to keep an eye out for, and an eye on when we could track them down… they’re the ones who attacked you and Silica back in June.”

Harry’s eyes hardened when he heard that. “You have my attention.” He said.

August Blake straightened himself. “First, call me ‘Gus’, that’s the player name I picked.” He said. “Now, the fact that they’re hiding isn’t unusual, they have been laying low since June, after their little confrontation with you.”

Harry nodded. “Not surprising, whatever they were planning, myself, Silica, Lind, Kirito and Klein’s main group ruined it.”

Gus nodded. “That nine of them died, seven of them between you, Lind, and Silica also hit them pretty hard.” He said. “While we don’t have an exact number in that group, let alone back then, you three killed close to a third of those who were there. I can’t say with any certainty, but it looks like around twenty-five of them went against you.”

“Had Klein, his group, and Kirito not shown up, we wouldn’t have lasted much longer, you know.” Harry said.

“True,” Gus admitted. “Not because of any lack of ability on the part of you three, but simply because of their numbers. Still, the three of you would have probably taken half of them with you.”

Harry considered that for a moment and then shrugged it off. That they would have handled themselves in such a case didn’t eliminate the fact that they would have still died had backup not arrived.

**Aincrad 48th Floor, Lindarth**

Lisbeth calmly held the blade against the grindstone, allowing the water powered instrument to do its work, moving the blade carefully and slowly to ensure that the edge was evenly sharpened. Months of experience in doing things both using the system and in doing them manually had shown her which methods worked best, and to be honest, some things were simply better with a more personal touch.

She withdrew the blade and examined it before giving a satisfied nod. She then reached for an oiled cloth and wiped the blade down before looking up and handing it over. “There you go, Asuna,” she said. “Everything’s fixed up, the blade’s been sharpened, and it’s good to go until you need to bring it back in.” She then gave a slight smirk. “So, should I schedule for you and everyone else to be back here in three or four days?”

Asuna huffed as she took the rapier and, after a quick examination, sheathed it. “We’re not that bad, Liz.” She said.

“We kind of are, Asuna,” Silica said from the side where she was watching with Rain and Lux. “Well, Harry and Kirito are, and Rain’s almost as bad.”

“Hey!” Rain protested while Lux giggled.
“Well, at least I make any things for you guys with durability in mind, given the abuse you put your shit through.” Lisbeth said. “And it only took Harry and Kirito breaking only one of my swords each to do it.”

“They did that?” Lux asked.

Silica nodded. “They did,” she replied. “They weren’t doing it to be mean, but to prove a point. It doesn’t matter what the stats on your gear are if it can’t take the abuse. I’ve seen Harry pass on gear that had significant stat increases because of it.”

“And he was right to do so,” Asuna added. “While we all have extra weapons it takes time to get them out and equipped, and the middle of a fight is the worst time for that. If it’s your armor that breaks, you might as well get your teleport crystals out, get back to town, and call it a day.”

Lux nodded. Most players who spent a lot of time outside the safe zones have had something break on them due to the durability wearing out, often at the most inconvenient time. She also knew that Harry and the others had a rule of never going out if their equipment durability is below half, and to always have it at max durability before a boss fight.

“Almost got killed on the twentieth floor because I didn’t pay attention to the durability, a newbie mistake, really.” Harry told them when they went to fight the one on the forty-seventh floor. “Now I make sure it’s always at full before a boss fight.”

Lisbeth smirked at that. “Most of my customers aren’t members of the Assault Team, so they tend to be a little less selective.” She admitted with a shrug. “Anyway, the repairs are done, so anything else?”

Everyone shook their heads and she then grinned.

“Well then, if you all have nothing else to do, what’s up with all of you?”

Asuna looked at Silica with a smirk. “Well, you will be glad to know that Hadrian and Silica finally went on a date, without them denying it was one.” She said.

Lisbeth blinked. “Wait, you mean that they actually called it a date?” She asked and then grinned. “So, they’re finally admitting that there’s something there then?”

“They haven’t denied that there was something there for months, Liz,” Asuna said. “They just don’t bring it up.”

Lisbeth looked at Silica, who was giving Asuna an exasperated look. “So, you two are boyfriend and girlfriend now?” She asked.

Silica shrugged, not saying anything.

“More like married in all but name,” Rain said.

“Yup,” Lux added.

“Don’t deny it, Silica,” Asuna said. “The two of you basically live together.”

“Wasn’t planning on it,” Silica replied drily. “It wouldn’t matter what Harry and I say on the matter anyway. With all the rumors, the players gossiping like old women, and so on, no one would believe us if we denied it. That reminds me, did Argo close the betting pool?”
“She closed it a while ago, doesn’t matter, I still got time before my bet becomes a moot point,” Asuna said. “And no, Silica, I’m not revealing what it is, you know the rules.”

Silica nodded. “Wasn’t going to ask.” She said. “Besides, both Harry and I figured it was a bet on if and when we get married anyway. Argo confirmed that was one of the bets out there, even if it might not be the one you’re talking about.” She then grinned. “Then again, considering some of the things I’ve heard, if you did bet on the other ones… naughty, naughty.”

Asuna blinked and then flushed, and Lisbeth grinned. “Oh ho,” she said. “So Asuna’s not so innocent?”

Rain laughed. “Innocent?” She asked. “Asuna? She might be prim and proper in how she acts, but trust me, she can be as dirty minded as the rest of us.”

“Rain!” Asuna protested.

“She has a point, Asuna.” Lux commented. “You just hide it well. Then again, I don’t think anyone can beat Rain in that department.”

“Iidi sosat’ khuy.” Rain said to Lux.

“I think you will first, with how often you go drinking with Klein.” She replied. “I wonder if I should start a betting pool with Argo on how long it takes for that to happen?”

“Khuy tebe!”

“Buy me dinner first, Rain.”

Rain was about to say something else, but paused and raised her hand, giving the point to Lux.

“Wait, she understands what Rain is saying?” Lisbeth asked.

Silica shrugged. “She has been working with her since before they joined us.” She replied. “Besides, it’s not hard to figure out what that last bit meant.”

Lisbeth considered that and nodded. “Makes sense,” she acknowledged “So, what else is going on? Got any plans for the New Year?”

“We didn’t schedule anything, so unless Hadrian or Kirito did, I don’t think we have any.” Asuna admitted. “We came by to not only get our gear repaired, but to see if you’re willing to come with us. You know, make it a girl’s day out?”

Lisbeth shook her head. “Sorry, but I can’t.” She said. “I got my shop to run and I have some customers who are scheduled to come by today.”

“Ah, I see.” Asuna replied, slightly disappointed, but understanding.

“It didn’t hurt to ask, Asuna, and it was something of a spur of the moment thing for us.” Lux said.

“Well,” Lisbeth said. “If you guys don’t have anything planned for then, I know of a New Year’s party that’s being held that you all might be interested in. It’s on the thirty-ninth floor and is being hosted by the Knights of Blood.”


“What do you mean?” Rain asked.
“Heathcliff doesn’t strike me as the type to organize and throw a party.” Silica said.

“It’s an open invite, so I figured I’d let you guys know.” Lisbeth said.

“We’ll keep it in mind, though we’ll have to convince Harry if we decide to go.” Silica replied. “He doesn’t really trust Heathcliff. He hasn’t since he met him back on the twenty-sixth floor.”

Everyone but Asuna blinked in surprise. Asuna only nodded.

“I was there when he tried to recruit them, well us when you get down to it, but it was when he was giving his sales pitch specifically to them,” she said. “Hadrian politely refused to join his guild, and during the meeting...” She looked to Silica as she trailed off.

“Something about him put Harry on his guard,” Silica agreed. “I don’t know what it was, and I don’t think Harry really knows, but something about that man just didn’t sit right with him. Since then, both Harry and I noticed that there is something off about him.”

“What would that be?” Rain asked.

“His lack of empathy, for one.” Silica said. “I think the only reason we noticed it is because we’ve been to most of the floor boss battles. He isn’t there for all of them, but he’s there for enough, and you can tell that there’s a disconnect. It’s like he simply doesn’t think like the rest of us.”

“At least he’s working toward getting people out,” Asuna said.

“True,” Silica admitted. “Well, either way, we’ll see if he’s up to it. Just because he doesn’t fully trust the man, doesn’t mean that he isn’t willing to work with him.”

Aincrad, 39th Floor - Knights of Blood Headquarters

Heathcliff idly considered how the game was progressing as he looked over reports sent from the various sub leaders of the guild. As things stood, everything was working fine, or as fine as the situation could be. He still needed someone who could take over as an effective second-in-command, but no players really stood out.

Or rather, the only ones who did were not in the guild.

Of them, Asuna would have been his first choice. The girl was a solid front line fighter, and he knew from watching the dynamics of the group she worked with that she was a tactical planner. She made plans based on the information available, whether they came from NPCs, her own observations, or Argo’s network, but she rarely went out without one. At the same time, she had demonstrated an ability to change plans on the fly in light of new information, or changing circumstances. Most importantly, when she gave an order, people listened, regardless of whether she was the one in charge or not.

It was regrettable that she had declined his offer.

Hadrian, who was likely the reason why Asuna had declined his offer, would have been his second choice. The boy was a solid fighter and had demonstrated leadership qualities. While he didn’t have Asuna’s knack to plan, he was someone who quite simply could take charge of a situation and get a lot of players to work together. His organizing a rescue raid on the twenty-fifth floor demonstrated that, and his ability to handle surprises and crises were demonstrated during other boss battles.

At the same time, he knew that the boy was wary around him. He had noticed it when he gave his offer, there was a guardedness around the boy that his companion, Silica, easily picked up on. It
made him wonder if he saw something. Was it that the boy saw past his public mask?

He didn’t know, but it also meant that their interactions had an element of tension to them.

The only other one he would have considered was Klein, and he was busy running his own guild. And running it very effectively as well, considering that it was currently the only sizeable guild that had not lost a single person since SAO started. That said a lot about the man’s ability, despite how his usual antics made him seem like a jovial fool most of the time.

Still, he would make do with what he had.

“Sir,” came a voice. Heathcliff looked up and saw the guild’s head of finance, Daizen.

“You have the reports of the expenditures for that New Year’s party that is being organized?” He asked.

Daizen nodded. “Right here, sir.” He said as he sent the report.

Heathcliff pulled it up and looked it over. He had given the organizers a generous budget, but made it clear that he would need to see a report on the expenses. This was for the simple reason that it made sure that those involved knew that he would not only know what was being spent and on what, but that they would have to justify them as well.

Not that funding was of any concern for the guild. Daizen made sure that their coffers were well funded, after all. Still, it was one of those things that was necessary, and the expense report was more simply another means for Daizen to track every col that entered or left the guild’s coffers.

He had chosen the right man for that job.

He closed the report and looked at Daizen. “Everything seems to be going fine, Daizen.” He said.

Daizen nodded. “Anything specific you have questions about?” He asked.

Heathcliff shook his head. “Not at this time, no.” He told the man. “Dismissed.”

As soon as Daizen left, he secured the door and pulled up the reports on specific players. While not as comprehensive in terms of the information he could access as a GM, these reports had the benefit of being based on observations of other players.

For all that the data could provide him, it was impersonal, based only on numbers and combat statistics. It was lacking that human touch, that necessary insight.

The reports collected from what players have seen may have lacked the raw data, but were rich in insight. Insight which allowed him to determine if his original judgments on them that had been based on raw data, logic, and his own observations had been correct.

He was a logical being, he knew that. Things like emotions, feelings, and instinct were only known and understood at an intellectual level for him. He could put on a mask that allowed him to function amongst people, but he knew full well what he was.

A sociopath, albeit an unusually high functioning one.

He could look at the psychological data and see the signs, but it was his own studies on how the human brain worked and how it affected the mind that proved it to him. How could they not, as he had those studies done in order to ensure that the Nerve Gear interfaced properly with the wearers?
It didn’t bother him. If anything, it made what he had intended easier. After all, for his goals, for his dream to be realized, he would have to be willing to sacrifice everything.

Including himself.

**December 31, 2023 - Aincrad 50th Floor, Algade**

“The Knights of Blood are hosting a New Year’s party?” Harry asked.

Silica nodded. “It’s supposed to be tonight on the thirty-ninth floor.” She replied. “It’s an open invite, so we were wondering if you were interested in going.”

“You do know what I think of Heathcliff, Silica,” he said. “That hasn’t changed, though I will admit I might be wrong, but…” He gave a shrug.

Silica nodded. “But you might not.” She finished. “It hasn’t stopped you from working with him, though.”

Harry gave another shrug. “So long as he’s working to clear the game, I can work with him. Regardless of whether I can fully trust him or not, but you do have to admit that something’s off about him.”

Silica knew what he meant by that. “To be fair, I don’t think it was his idea, but the idea of some of his guild members.” She said.

“Probably Godfree,” Harry said with a nod. “It sounds like something he would do, and I wouldn’t put it past Heathcliff to go with it. Just because he’s not the type to organize or throw a party, doesn’t mean that he wouldn’t be against it if some of his subordinates thought it was a good idea.”

Silica snorted. “More like he probably didn’t care, so long as they planned it properly and gave regular reports about it.” She said with a scoff. “How many times have we heard Godfree complain about the paperwork?”

Harry chuckled. “Often enough.” He replied. “Ah well, it wouldn’t hurt to go and show ourselves. How formal is it?”

Silica shrugged. “As far as I know, it’s not that formal, so I guess a lot of players are going in their gear.”

Harry nodded. “I’ll send a message to Argo to make sure,” he then smirked. “How would you like to make an entrance?”

“Oh?”

“If we’re going, we’re going to do this right.” Harry’s smirk widened. “If we can go in our gear, we polish it up, make it look good, and so on.”

Silica grinned. “I’ll work with Asuna, Rain, and Lux on a few things,” she said. “After all, if we’re going to make an entrance, we need to make sure we look good doing so.”

Harry nodded.

**Aincrad 39th Floor - Knights of Blood Headquarters**

The party had been going on for half an hour when they arrived. The members of the Knights of
Blood who were waiting at the entrance to the hall that had been rented gave them all a brief stare before getting their bearings back. Even then, the surprise on their faces was apparent. Not just due to who had arrived, but toward what they were wearing.

Harry was wearing his armor, all the metal polished to a reflective shine. Under it, he was wearing a padded green tunic, with gold embroidery around the collar and wrists. The buff leather cuisses and polished boots completed the look. His sword was at his waist, the plain sheath replaced with a more ornate laminated wooden sheath that was edged in polished brass. His typically mussed hair seemed to sweep down over the scar most knew not to ask about, almost like a beak. At odds with this were the thick-fingered gloves he favored. Later the Daily Argo's Fashion section would liken them to a great cat's paws, but the rivets at the knuckles showed their purpose as an additional means of attack. Rather like sheathed claws, easy to forget about.

Silica was next to him, wearing a polished breastplate that was seemingly part of the blue overcoat she wore. The coat was embroidered with a vine motif, with golden ivy seemingly wrapping itself around her. The black skirt and matching stockings had a gold trim, highlighting the color scheme, and her feet were in black boots. She had her dagger belted at her waist, the belt was of a dark leather and held closed with a polished bronze buckle. Her companion, Pina was laying across her shoulders, looking around at everything. But the feathered dragon did not take flight, and in fact made no indication she might. The serpentine companion barely reacted to coos and exclamations from the crowd, and only her curious head movements made clear she was more than heraldry.

Rain’s armor was a burnished red breastplate with silver edging. Under it, she wore a white shirt, black skirt with silver trim. Her legs were clad in crimson stockings the color of blood, and her feet were clad in low-heeled boots. Her sword was strapped across her back with a brown leather belt that was closed with a steel buckle. Her brown hair was tightly braided, in a complex pattern and fastened at the end with a silver ring.

Lux followed, wearing a steel breastplate under an open jacket that was dyed a purple so dark, it was almost black. Along its edges, was a golden embroidery with a floral motif, displaying lilies, roses, and orchids. Under it, she wore a lighter purple shirt which was tucked into a black, form hugging pants that left little to the imagination, which were tucked into polished, calf length boots. Her schiavona type broadsword was belted at her waist, the brass basket hilt polished so it gleamed.

Kirito, as was his habit, wore black. His long black coat was edged in silverthread with his sword was sheathed across his back in a black scabbard, the belt being black with a silver trim and a steel fastener. His dark pants were pressed and carefully tucked into polished boots. His garb was the most austere of the group, the most basic, but somehow it stood out above more elaborate garb, or even those with similarly simple garb.

Asuna was at Kirito’s side, garbed with a similar simplicity. While his was austere, hers was elegant. Her breastplate was on the finest truesteel and was worn over a white tunic. It was edged in silverthread, the finely stitched embroidery woven into the form of blades, all pointing inward. Her skirt was a simple white, with matching stockings and boots without the embroidery. Over all that, she wore a white coat that was edged in silver, a crimson clasp at the neck adding a splash of color to it. Her rapier was belted at her waist, fastened with a polished steel buckle.

The simplicity of the latter two and how they brought up the rear belied the fact that they were the strongest members of the group whose various nicknames were now being murmured through the crowd. Though of course, they were not the deadliest in the minds of others. Harry seemed unbothered by the wide berth some gave him due to his reputation, and his fellows seemed to simply take advantage of how easily this let them pass through the crowd.
The Six had arrived. Call them Harry's or Asuna's group, the Beaters, their known monikers, what have you. Everyone knew they were there. And more over, that four of SAO’s most well-known players and their two newest associates (protégés? friends? the jury was still out) had arrived.

##

“Man, you guys know how to make an entrance,” Klein said to them as they made their way over to him. Unsurprisingly, he had a tankard full of beer in his hand.

He hoped his friends realized his admiration was real, they had managed to enter the party and own it. If it wasn’t an open invite, it would have been the most awesome way to crash the party. No verbal statements, no coming in loudly, just sheer presence. Their gears' look certainly helped, but he could tell when they were making a statement.

The question was, to who? Kirito alone made it unlikely the answer was "all and sundry." On the other hand, something like this had either Asuna or Harry written all over it. He was leaning more towards Harry, the slight smirk on the boy’s face was very indicative that he was behind this.

That still begged the question of who they were making a statement to, however. Ah well, it wasn’t his business.

“Well, if you want to do it,” Harry started.

“Go big,” Silica added.

“Or go home,” Asuna chimed in.

“And carry a giant pair of brass ones while you’re at it.” Kirito finished.

"We... haven't been around long enough to add to that," Lux added.

"I might have had something!” Rain protested.

Harry snorted. “It was my idea, and the others know what was an unofficial motto in my dorm at my school,” He said.

“I thought it was about smuggling the alcohol in.” Silica said.

“No, that was the tradition,” Asuna corrected. “He told us about that, mostly because he was complaining about the beer at the time.”

“Something about it being filtered through a horse or cow for maximum offense to those with taste, if I remember correctly,” Kirito said. “Or at least, most of the beer was that way.”

“It’s not my fault that most of you Japanese have been corrupted by the Yanks when it comes to beer.” Harry protested.

“Must have been some cheap beer then,” Rain commented. When everyone looked at her, she shrugged. “I may have been to a few parties which had alcohol. Don’t quote me on that, though.”

Lux snorted. “And how many people did you drink under the table at them?” She asked.

Rain shrugged. “Not my fault those college boys couldn’t hold their liquor.” She said.

“So says the Russo-Japanese girl who was practically nursed on vodka,” Lux countered.
“Nursed on vodka?” Rain asked. “Like hell I was. Though I was probably baptized in it.”

“I’ve learned so much about other cultures since I was trapped in here,” Silica deadpanned. “And what I’ve learned is about them is not inspiring.”

“And Silica wins via verbal jiu-jitsu,” Klein said drily.

“Thus proving our culture is best,” Asuna noted brightly.

Harry and Rain responded with rude gestures. Harry’s used two fingers, Rain used one.

“What do those...?” Kirito began, making as if puzzled.

“It’s English and American for ‘I concede your point,’” Klein explained.

“Ah, quaint,” Kirito said.

“At least get us drinks,” Harry pleaded.

“Considering what they have, you sure about that?” Klein asked. “I’m pretty sure all of the available drinks can get you drunk.”

“Only if we drink too much,” Harry said. “And if you start trying to get me or Silica drunk, I will tie you over a log with your arse bare in front of a gerbera.”

“Now that’s just mean,” Lux said. “The poor mob didn’t do anything to deserve that.”

Klein winced and raised his mug, giving her the point to everyone’s laughter.

“And Lux is joining in on the quips,” Harry said and wiped away an imaginary tear. “They grow up so fast.”

“Except you,” Rain quipped.

“That was too easy, Rain.” Kirito said. “No points.”

Rain simply shrugged in response, completely unashamed at her comment.

The group continued to make small talk throughout their time at the party until all of them decided to take their leave. The party might still be going on, but they all planned on heading out in the morning and wanted to at least have the pretense of being well rested.

Unknown Location

He was getting impatient with the waiting for the right time, but he knew that completing the ritual at the wrong time could be disastrous. As it was, he was taking a risk, as while the ritual needed to be done when the old year transitioned to the new, it was written at a time when people didn’t have a concept that specific times could be different depending on where in the world the target was.

It might bring the Potter boy to him, helpless as a newborn babe, and thus an easy victim. It might bring him to the Potter boy, which would be the same. Or, it might do something completely unpredictable.

He had already invested the time and research into it, and the hours, painstakingly long hours, of preparation meant that he was committed to this course of action. He had done what he could to speed the process up, cutting out all extraneous aspects, but some things were very specific, and the
timing was one of them.

He had come this far, reached so deeply into the dark arts, that he wouldn’t be stopped by a damned technicality.

In a short time, it won't matter either way, he thought as he looked over his preparations. Even if it doesn’t go to plan, I am immortal.

Using a quick tempus charm to check the time, he then realized that it was time to get started. He carefully moved his homunculus body to the center of the circle and began to chant. As the time approached the exact moment, his sibilant voice raised in pitch, pushing through the memorized chant as the air seemed to vibrate.

And then, as his chant reached a crescendo, it stopped. The ritual circle flared and the next thing Tom Riddle felt was pain as his homunculus body was disintegrated and his soul was carried to where his target was.

Unnoticed by him, Nagini spasmed and withered as the fragment of his soul embedded into the snake was ripped out. Elsewhere, around England, numerous objects smoldered, shattered, or melted for apparently no reason. Had they been in public places, the few possible observers sensitive enough to magic to notice, would have noted hearing a strange scream, or witnessing a discolored cloud, but little else. Fewer still, would have reasoned the significance.

In a hospital in Japan, however, those who were observing Harry Potter certainly noticed, and many of them were knowledgeable enough to suspect the why.

January 1, 2024 - Aincrad 50th Floor, Drauen Keep Ruins (Field Dungeon)

Harry rubbed his scar irritably as he and Rain looked across the courtyard for any hidden mobs as Silica consulted the map. They had taken a quest that brought them here to this field dungeon as a means of getting back into the swing of things. The rest of their group had split off to other parts of the sizeable keep on their own quests, so everyone was close enough to aid each other if it became necessary.

Of course, being a field dungeon so close to the town, the mobs weren’t a problem, but it never hurt to have backup just in case. It was when you thought things were easy and safe that you suddenly found yourself having to take on a small army of mobs, after all. And in a place like this, which was crawling with undead, that could easily happen.

Heh, wonder how Asuna’s taking that, he thought to himself. She didn’t like undead mobs one bit, and while most of them were skeletons, zombies and such, others were of the less tangible kind. Those kinds of mobs, she really did not like fighting.

They were here to retrieve a chalice from the keep’s chapel, or so the quest required. Given that the apparent chapel was on the other side of an apparently empty courtyard, the entire thing just screamed trap to his instincts, and so he was carefully scanning to see if he could spot it.

He heard Silica close the map and felt her touch on his arm.

“It’s on the other side of the courtyard,” Silica confirmed.

He nodded. “Let’s be careful,” he said. “This place looks like the perfect place for a quest related event mob.”

Silica looked at the courtyard “So, be ready for a fight after we get out?” She asked.
“Wouldn’t surprise me.” Rain added.

The three of them cautiously made their way across the courtyard and to the chapel without incident, the quiet of the courtyard serving as an eerie warning of what was to come. If they weren’t sure that something was going to happen on their way out, they were more or less certain of it now.

“Let’s get in, get what we came for, and top our health off.” Harry said quietly.

Silica and Rain nodded and the three of them entered the chapel. The moment they crossed the threshold, Harry’s scar flared painfully, causing him to scream. As both Rain and Silica turned to see what was wrong, they didn’t notice as a dark figure began to materialize. What they did notice, was the strangely dark smoke coming from between the fingers of the hand clutching the scar.

Harry, however, didn’t even need to see the dark figure that was materializing to understand what the pain signified. Not that the pain stopped him from looking up, or his eyes instinctively moving to the forming figure.

“Tom,” he growled out. “Of all the- why would it be you who found a way in?”

Silica and Rain blinked at what he said, especially since it was in English, and were about to ask him what was going on when they noticed something in his eyes as he opened them and stared at the other end of the chapel.

Fear, but at the same time, they could see something else in his eyes: hatred.

For at the other end of the chapel, he saw it, him, forming right in front of their quest objective. Had they seen it, and had the context of what it meant, both Silica and Rain would fully understand just why he was afraid.

Crimson eyes locked with green ones, and a sibilant voice cut through the silence that had descended.

“It has been some time since we last met, Harry Potter.” The figure said as the mouth the words came from twisted into a sneer. “A shame that it will be the last.”

Tom Riddle, better known back in England as Lord Voldemort was in SAO.

Chapter End Notes

It would be the Ultimate Showdown of Ultimate Destiny, but well, it’s only Voldemort. Bad enough, but c’mon, it’s including Harry Potter and isn’t post DH, it’s almost mandatory and kind of tradition now.

Anyway, TAKING ALL BETS! I have this nice chap in a trench coat who isn’t shady at all to take them.
Of Magic and Swords

Chapter Notes

And the battle begins. My thanks to The Raven Sennin for his beta work and those little tweaks that cleaned this up nicely.

Mystic Knight Online

Chapter 21 - Of Magic and Swords

January 1, 2024 - Aincrad GM Administration Area

Kayaba had arrived within seconds of Cardinal alerting him to the foreign intrusion, and he was actually thankful for the fact that his guild threw that party last night. He might not be one for them, but at this moment, he was glad he had allowed it.

It made it easier to come here when his guild was still busy sleeping off the results of a party that went on well into the morning, after all. He could come here without having to find a reason to break off from them as Heathcliff.

Still, a part of him cursed, as the intrusion meant that his security and firewalls weren't as good as he had hoped for. He knew full well that any security measure could be defeated with enough time, determination, patience, and resources, but he had been confident that what he had put in place would stand up to what could have been thrown at it.

An 8192-bit asymmetric encryption algorithm that was unique to each Nerve Gear, changed the keys in real time, and was part of the hardware, was something that would give even the best systems fits. Well, unless someone got lucky, which he could not rule out.

"Cardinal, report," he ordered.

"FOREIGN PRESENCE IS OF UNKNOWN ORIGIN," Cardinal replied. "INITIAL ANALYSIS INDICATES THAT IT MAY BE FROM THE UNCATEGORIZED FACTOR KNOWN AS 'MAGIC'."

"I see," he said, as he brought up the feed to see what was going on. Unsurprisingly, Hadrian was at the center of this incident, though by seeing the expression on the boy's face, this unexpected intrusion was not appreciated.

He considered the irony of the fact that the two of them would be in agreement about something for a moment before dismissing it. Whoever or whatever the source of the intrusion was, it was obvious that it was something that young Hadrian had a history with, and it wasn't a pleasant one.

The mix of fear and hatred on the boy's face was rather obvious.

"Cardinal, what is the designation of this foreign presence?" He asked.

"CURRENT DESIGNATION IS UNKNOWN," The AI replied. "STILL ANALYZING."
"Continue doing so," he ordered.

**Aincrad 50th Floor, Drauen Keep Ruins (Field Dungeon)**

Harry looked at the figure in shock, the pain from his scar slowly fading. His mind processing exactly what his eyes were seeing while he got the storm of emotions running through his mind under control.

Tom Marvolo Riddle, the self-proclaimed Lord Voldemort had somehow arrived in SAO.

He noticed that Silica and Rain had turned their attention to the man after he spoke. He could tell from Rain's posture that she was confused, but Silica's…

Hers was alert. She knew about magic, so she knew to be very, very wary. He didn't know how much she knew, but he assumed that it wasn't much. Considering that her awareness of it was due to being related to someone who apparently had a particularly powerful curse on him.

"What… what the hell is going on?" He heard Rain ask. "Just who is this guy?"

"Tom Riddle," Harry said. "Someone who shouldn't be here."

Tom's eyes flared with anger. "Do *not* call me that, boy," he hissed at him in anger. "Call me Lord Voldemort! I have gone beyond that- how did you learn that name? Was it Dumbledore?"

Harry didn't bother replying, still looking at him. He saw Silica and Rain out of his peripheral vision, and gave a gesture to both to get behind him. He saw Voldemort reach into his robe, and felt some grim satisfaction as he got a confused look on his face.

"Missing something Tom?" Harry asked in a tone of voice that was almost mocking. "I don't know how you got here, but however you did, it seems as if not everything came with you."

"No matter, I don't *need* a wand to kill a boy like you." Tom hissed out. "You will be helpless before my might, Harry. A wand? A simple tool that makes it easier, but it is not a requirement."

"I don't think that will help you very much here, Tom."

Tom growled and then shot Harry a glare. "I told you... don't call me that name!"

Before any of them could react, Harry, Rain and Silica were sent flying out the open doors of the chapel by a wave of force. Silica managed to flip herself and land on her feet, while Harry and Rain were sent sprawling.

"Harry," Silica said idly. "I think you made him mad."

"Noted," Harry grunted as he got to his feet. He kept his eyes on the entrance of the chapel. "Silica, you're not going to like this, but I need you to do something. Take Rain, and get far enough away to be out of the line of fire, use a teleport crystal and find Argo."

"Like hell I will," She said in a tone of voice that brooked no argument. "We're a team, Harry."

"Silica… ah fuck it." Harry said. "You wouldn't even if I begged you to. Just... stay off to the side on this, this is something I have to do."

"Do you know what Grandma said to Grandpa the last time he said that to her?" Silica growled back. She looked to Rain. "Rain, get somewhere out of the line of sight and teleport to Algade," she commanded. "One of Argo's people should be at a place called the Golden Way. If it's an American
named Gus, tell him we have a problem, and if he asks, just say it deals with certain statutes or just say Voldiwhatsit's name. He'll know what it means.

"Oh, just mentioning Voldemort will get his attention," Harry assured. He then pulled the two of them down as a crimson bolt came out of the entrance to the chapel. "If you're gonna go, do it now."

Rain looked at the two of them and hesitated. She quickly opened her menu and found something, she sent something to Silica. "Just in case," she said as she took a teleport crystal out of the inventory and dashed out of the line of sight of the chapel.

Harry gave Silica a look and the girl shrugged. "She's worried," she replied, looking at what she was given. "She handed me that."

Harry nodded, knowing what Silica was referring to, the Divine Stone of Returning Souls. Given the kind of threat he was facing, having something like that might actually be necessary. Unlike Silica, he knew what they were facing, which was why he had tried, if not very hard, to get her to withdraw.

He already knew she would refuse, but he still had to give her the option.

If he were to be honest with himself, he would have done so as well if it wasn't for the fact that he knew that giving Tom any time to adapt to SAO was a bad idea. For all the man's arrogance, something he had easily seen during the instance with the Philosopher's Stone, and a perception that was reinforced in the Chamber of Secrets, the man was a genius. If anyone would find a way to make magic work reliably here, it would be him.

And considering that they had all just been tossed out and had to dodge something, he already was.

*This is going to be one of those days,* he thought as he prepared to fight for his life.

**Aincrad GM Administration Area**

"ANALYSIS COMPLETE," Cardinal said. "FOREIGN PRESENCE, GIVEN THE SELF-DESIGNATED TITLE OF 'VOLDEMORT', HAS BEEN CLASSIFIED AS A MAGICAL FOREIGN ENTITY. READINGS ON POWERS ARE INCONCLUSIVE, BUT ENTITY STATUS SHOWS COMPLETE PHYSICAL PRESENCE IN AINCRAD"

Kayaba nodded, still watching the screen. He would not pretend to understand magic, it was too different from what he knew. Kayaba was a man of science, a person of logic, and magic was by definition illogical by conventional explanation. However, that didn't mean that magic was without rules.

Observing this "Voldemort" on the code level, it occurred to him, would be like testing a daisy on the atomic level to explain why it was yellow. The molecular level might give some ideas, but it was only by comparing and combining the evolutionary and chemical perspectives that one could understand the how and why. Despite the risk to Hadrian and his world, to learn from this event he would have to observe.

He blinked, and reviewed his thoughts. *Hmm. I cannot seem to avoid factoring in what happens to Hadrian concerning this matter. How odd.*

He shook his head to clear that odd thought out of his mind. It didn't matter. This "Voldemort" had broken into SAO, something he couldn't allow. At the same time, he had no desire to interfere in the fight that he could see was beginning. He could tell that this was something that Hadrian had to do.
That did not mean that he would do nothing about this.

"Cardinal," he said. "Activate Unique Skill, Mystic Blade and attach it to player Player Account ID 7856, Hadrian. Have it equipped and useable, max level. Upon conclusion of the current encounter, provided that player Hadrian survives and the account remains active, reset the skill to starting level. During the encounter, it will be the only skill he can use."

"ACKNOWLEDGED, DO YOU WISH TO AUGMENT PLAYER ACCOUNT ID 6287, SILICA AT THIS TIME AS WELL?" Cardinal asked. "THERE IS A-

"Significant chance she will be involved, yes," Kayaba confirmed. "For duration of the fight, render Player Account ID 6287, Silica unable to interact with both Hadrian and this "Voldemort" and designate her as an immortal object. Further instruction, designate the Foreign Entity known as Voldemort as an Event Boss, and merge his form with the Fallen King. Designation: Vol de Mort, The Fallen Lord." And then, a thought occurred to him. "And designate all data we gain from this event 'Anomaly 1.' Voldemort, 'Anomaly Focus 1.' Upon completion of encounter… ensure that Voldemort is deleted from the system. There's no indication this is not possible?"

"NOT AT THIS TIME."

"Good." He said, firmly. "This is my world, and I chose who is allowed here." He then looked at the screen. "Initiate."

"ACKNOWLEDGED."

"Let us see what you do, Hadrian." He said. Hmm, perhaps a little flare for the dramatic might be appropriate here, he thought as he saw the changes be made in the system.

**Aincrad 50th Floor, Drauen Keep Ruins**

Tom noticed it as soon as it happened, that something had observed him and had found him worthy. He felt the rush of power, the feeling of his body changing to properly hold it. And while he felt pain as his body changed, the pain was immaterial. He was a Dark Lord, pain was a familiar thing to him due to the price Dark Magic could exact. A price he more than willingly paid.

And so he felt his body change, the breaking and elongating of bones, the withering of his flesh, the immolation of his eyes, the fusing of an armor of the darkest, blackest iron. He felt it all. And through it, he heard something.

"THOU HAST BEEN JUDGED WORTHY OF THIS POWER."

He saw Harry look at him in shock, and what he saw as fear.

"Yes… look upon me, Harry Potter," he said, his voice having grown deeper and more resonant. "This is power, this is the form it takes. This… is the right I take by virtue of my own might. Your fear… I can taste it, feel it. I will revel in your pain, suffering, despair, and hopelessness."

##

Harry had barely noticed Tom's transformation, as he saw his menus open up without his input and all of his skills be disabled. At the same time, he saw something forcibly enter itself into his useable skills and activate.

He already knew who was responsible for this, and it didn't surprise him. Not one bit.
Kayaba had noticed, and from the looks of things, he had noticed more than just Tom's coming by for a visit.

"Just don't think this earns you any house points, mate," he murmured, taking in the skill name: Mystic Blade. He would have to tell Argo about this, as he knew, just knew, why it was called that name.

Kayaba knew. He knew about magic, and Harry would tell the information broker he blamed her for this.

He heard Silica yelp in surprise and saw her basically pulled to the side by an unseen force. He wondered what it was, but he saw something, briefly, as it happened. A simple hexagonal window popping up, much like the occasional system messages that appeared to players. And what he saw, relieved him.

**IMMORTAL OBJECT: ENABLED.**

"Ok," he said to himself. "Now I owe you a beer, if you ever show up in game."

He then heard something from Tom's direction, and his eyes widened a bit as he looked up and saw Tom change. *Well now*, he thought. *That's new.*

Where there had been a vaguely snakelike humanoid form, there now stood a three meter tall skeletal, armored, thing. Its burning eyes were the same red as Tom's, and it was looking right at him.

He heard Tom's bombastic proclamation and bit back a laugh. The bastard didn't realize it, he *didn't* realize it.

Time to correct some assumptions.

"No, that's not your power," he said. "That's Kayaba giving you that form, making you a part of the system itself."

"What?" Voldemort asked, his new form's voice more like a growl than a sibilant hiss now.

Harry smirked. "He noticed you entering, and seeing as how he managed to change your form… well, I don't know if you believe in gods or not, but you just got noticed by *this* world's demiurge."

Voldemort actually paused and blinked. "I thought you were in Gryffindor, who in Merlin's name-"


"I am his heir!" the Dark Lord roared. "I have delved further into the Dark Arts than anyone! Salazar would have been in awe at my accomplishments!"

Harry shook his head. "I rather doubt that," he said. "I think he would be rather disappointed."

"I have achieved immortality, he has not! I cannot die, he is long dead!" Tom roared back.

"Maybe in your own little world," Harry said, drawing his sword. "But not in this one. So then, let's finish this."

**Algade**

Rain sprinted from the teleport gate as soon as the light from the teleport faded. She had been given clear instructions, and while being forced to leave chafed at her, she knew the accepted reason there.
Whatever was about to happen was not something she was ready for.

As much as it galled her to admit, they were right on that. That Hadrian had wanted both herself and Silica to withdraw also indicated that he didn't like their chances in that fight. That Silica flat out refused was unsurprising, she and Hadrian were a matched set.

Where one was, the other would be there as well, or was always nearby.

Before she knew it, Rain found herself sprinting into the Golden Way- and in fact right into the man she was looking for. Well, the one she was told to look for if Argo wasn't available.

"Whoa there," the man said, his American accent clear. "Where's the fire."

"You Gus?" She asked.

The man nodded.

"I just got sent here by Harry and Silica," she said. "Something about this being related to certain statues... no... look, Harry gave me a name... Voldi- Voldo- Voldsomething."

"Voldemort?" Gus asked. At Rain's nod, he started swearing at length in English, and a couple of other languages.

"Merde! Oh fucking hell. Him?!!" Gus exclaimed. He spun, looking around the inn, and spotted who he was looking for. "Argo!"

The information broker stopped her gadflying at the bar and met the American's gaze.

"Flight from death! Here!"

Argo's face paled and looked at Rain, who had a look of confusion on her face. "This is out of my expertise, Gus," she said. "But… FUCK! You got this?"

Gus nodded and turned back to Rain. "Where?" He asked. "Is it mapped?"

Rain opened her map. "Field dungeon, Drauen Keep Ruins," she said. "I got the map data right here, as we had to map the area out ourselves." She looked at him. "What's going on?" she asked. "We were about to get a quest objective when Harry screamed in pain and this… weird mudok showed up."

Gus gave her a level gaze. "The best I can say is... a terrorist of sorts," he said. "One that... one that feels he has a reason to be going after Hadrian."

"And what would that be?" She asked sharply.

Gus' gaze didn't waver. "Hadrian survived him. He's a terrorist, and the last attack he led, Hadrian was the only survivor," he said. "Considering that he was trying to kill everyone there..."

"And that's..."

Gus nodded. "The man is an arrogant shit," he said. "When he attacks someone, those he wanted to die, they died. Until that attack, at least."

And that put a few things into perspective for Rain. How Harry could act when someone was threatening his life or the life of one of his friends. He had to learn how, if only to survive.
"Well, then why are we standing here like a bunch of spletten starukhami" she said. "We need to-

"You need to stay here," Gus said, firmly, like he was giving an order to a soldier and expected it to be followed.

"But you're going? Why?"

The American smirked in the irritating manner of their action heroes. "Because my job before all this shit was dealing with assholes like him," he said. "And I can do more than simply swear at him in Russian. Dosvidanya seychas."

And then he turned and ran out, Rain's fervent cursing following him.

**Drauen Keep Ruins**

Harry dodged another attack from what Tom had become, and felt a bit of grim humor at Kayaba's own feelings of this. Vol de Mort, the Fallen Lord indeed. Let it not be said that the man didn't have a flair for the dramatic.

And giving him something like Mystic Blade… well, it was a badly mixed potion for him. While the intent behind it was clear, he was used to his other skills, more familiar with them. They were tried and tested by over a year of combat, so he knew their strengths, weaknesses, and how to use them to his advantage.

Not so with this one, though if he survived this and Kayaba let him keep it, he would certainly put it through its paces and train it. The primary advantage he could see right now was that, somehow, Kayaba had managed to develop something that worked with his magic, guiding it to work within SAO's rules.

Useful, that, but there had to be more. He saw a crimson wave come towards him and slashed his sword, cancelling the wave out as the two met.

The main problem, was that he had no idea what else to do. Yes, his magic now worked, but there had to be more. Skill usually had something that a player could research to learn the basics of how to use them, after all. Then again, he was a bit busy.

"Damn it, why couldn't this thing just set my sword on fire?" He growled out before blinking in shock as his sword did just that. He then looked at Tom, then back to his sword. He then smiled ferally as he realized that he now had something to work with beyond what he had been doing so far.

##

Silica had struggled against what was holding her in place before realizing that whatever caused it would not allow her to move. Harry was fighting for his life, and something, someone, was keeping her from backing him up, leaving her with no option but to watch.

And she hated it with every fiber of her being.

Harry had been there for her since the first day of SAO. He had kept his head and avoided panicking while thousands of other players lost their collective head, and he then set about doing something about their situation.

She had accompanied him because she had nothing better to do, having realized that moping around and feeling helpless would accomplish nothing. It also helped that he hadn't left her behind, always coming back during that first week, and staying with her since. Perhaps it was his protective nature,
perhaps it was because she was a face he knew amongst a sea of unfamiliar faces, but he was always there.

And then, he brought her with him, opening her up to the realization that she wasn't helpless here. That she could do something, that she could fight against this world they were trapped in.

It hadn't taken her long to realize that he was out fighting in order to keep his own inner demons quiet. He didn't want to think about his issues, and so found something else to do, and in SAO, that had initially meant fighting. It would be months before he couldn't run from them anymore, months before she saw the troubled boy underneath the confident exterior.

She saw the boy troubled by his experiences. She saw the boy who valued friends so much because he had so few. She saw the pain of someone who had blood on his hands, a stain that could not be washed off.

Someone who did not take pride in the stain, but would do the deed again for a cause he found just.

She saw someone who feared losing it all, and who would fight, even kill, to protect it.

Despite that, she also saw the caring boy, who would help someone who needed it. Someone who had a strong sense of honor and decency, even as his life stripped him of any illusions of innocence. Someone who had a strong sense of what was right and what was wrong, who knew that rules are sometimes best served broken. Someone who knew that courage was acting even when you wanted to simply run away.

She had seen the scared boy.

She had seen the protector.

She had seen the regretful, but unhesitant, killer.

She had seen the man he was growing into.

And she loved every part of him.

Then she saw his sword catch flame, and his slow smile of growing confidence. She suddenly knew what her grandmother saw when her grandfather was doing a kata or battling a challenger that pushed him.

And part of her roared that she'd be a fool not to make him hers. And to make herself his.

After she gave him a piece of her mind for this latest exercise in reckless idiocy. Or she would take a page out of her grandmother's book and cast that very powerful spell for correcting men when they're being idiots: FIST.

##

Tom bit back a growl. The boy simply refused to lie down and die.

Every attack he cast forth, the boy had a defense; blocking, cutting them apart, or even dodging. Every attack the boy gave was with the clear intent to kill, as impossible as that was. It was taking longer than he liked, but that would make his inevitable victory all the sweeter, he knew.

And yet, he found himself exhilarated as well. No one had fought back so hard, had given him such a fight, since the last time he fought Albus Dumbledore. It was the sense of someone rising to the
challenge, but this was so much better.

Albus Dumbledore's reputation was well deserved. The man had more than a century to refine his craft when they last fought, and it showed. So, those battles were always satisfying, even when he, himself, was the one forced to withdraw.

And now, he was facing another such opponent. Not as skilled, not as powerful, but one who knew what he was doing. One, who was in his element. And while he didn't have his wand, he was now glad for it. Having it would have ended the fight before it really began.

He then noticed the boy's sword ignite into flame, and his smile became as feral as the boy's. The boy not only had plenty of fight left in him, but was beginning to actually use his magic.

"This is how it should be, Potter." he said. "A true battle, committing everything, using everything. It is a pity that you have to die."

"The only one dying today," Harry said coldly. "Is you."

Tom laughed. "I told you, boy, I'm immortal," he replied. "But if you are so intent on trying…" His eyes flashed. "SHOW ME WHAT YOU CAN DO, OR DIE WHERE YOU STAND!" He shouted, his voice reverberating throughout the courtyard.

##

Gus swore as he killed another mob. The mob itself wasn't anything his skill and level couldn't handle. He cursed the delays the encounters, or avoiding them for that matter, were causing. He avoided fights where he could, at least those where avoiding wouldn't cause any significant delay. Otherwise, he attacked quickly, using the strongest attacks he could that didn't give him a recovery lag.

He was glad that the field dungeon was basically right outside the gates of the town, or the delay arriving would have been worse. Even so, he had been delayed several minutes already, and he knew full well that the battle could already be over. Especially with who decided to show up.

Voldemort.

That madman had managed to terrify the entire UK's magical population, and had managed to be feared enough to make the rest of Europe reluctant to involve itself. The man might not be the worst of a bad lot, but he was one that even in the States, they were wary of.

It didn't help that they had their own problems to deal with at the time, with a death cult dedicated to Aztec death god Xolotl trying to bring their god to the world, and the less said about the various doomsday cults that had turned up as 2012 neared, the better.

"There's always trouble somewhere, son!" his step father's voice reminded him. "Deal with the problem in front of you!"

What a fun trip to Toronto that had been.

Then, he heard it. A voice roaring so loud he'd be shocked if they hadn't heard it back in town.

A challenge, to attack or die.

The real shocker was the roar in answer as he arrived at the hall that led to the courtyard.
"AS YOU WISH!" Harry roared back as he charged in, the flames on his sword seeming to glow brighter as he accepted the challenge.

The clash between them had no grace to it, no technique. Just a power fueled by the determination of two individuals now fully committed to killing the other. Harry could feel the magic as it began to affect the environment, and even saw everything in the courtyard that was firmly set into the ground be pushed away from the force of their clash.

There was a moment the forces felt equal. Like neither would break the other, the meeting of an unstoppable force with an immovable object. But it was one or the other, not both. One would give.

Harry grunted in effort as his attack was stopped, planting his feet more firmly into the ground. He knew that the moment would decide everything, and he was determined to not be the one to falter. He knew that Tom was the same, just as determined. And he had a solution to that.

He remembered one of Flitwick's lectures.

"Magic and science alike tell us there is no such thing as immovable or unstoppable. There is only deadlock, and whether one or the other side can break it. Of course," the half goblin chuckled, "I've always been fond of introducing a third force."

He had used his shield for defense, weathering Tom's attacks so far, but that wasn't what he always used it for. Too many players made the mistake of assuming a shield was only for defense, and he couldn't blame them for it. That was what the first users of it meant for one to be. However, anyone who studied history, or studied how people fought with them, knew full well that a shield was also a weapon in its own right.

The Greeks used a shield wall to stop charges from disorganized infantry and then used the leverage they provided to push the attack back. The Romans refined it even further, adding a quick jab right before the attack hit to disrupt the attacker's momentum. The Medieval Knights often used their shields, depending on type, in an attempt to brain opponents, or break limbs, or simply beat them to death with them. A shield could warp armor a sword could not pierce, unbalance an opponent, or itself be a movement aid in combat, after all.

In short, a third force.

The hand of Harry's shield arm let go of the hilt of his sword, knowing that his grip would hold only for a moment.

A moment was all that he needed.

A lightning fast movement of his arm had it out of shield's straps, and the edge in a firm grip. He then threw the shield, right at Voldemort. The impact was weak, he hadn't set himself up properly for it, but it distracted the Dark Lord.

A distraction Harry then used to remove one of Tom's legs at the knee. Three meters tall he might be, but Harry was long used to fighting such opponents. The minotaurs, trolls, and whatnot that SAO was full of had given him ample practice with dealing with such, and they all had one major weakness.

A well placed strike at the legs would force them to the ground.

He followed that up with removing Tom's arms, the attacks flowing into each other. It was quick, it
was efficient, and left him with one last thing to do. He reversed the grip on his sword and looked into Tom's eyes.

"I am immortal, I cannot die," was the defiant response.

"Let's test that," Harry coldly replied as he stabbed the burning sword down into where the heart would be. "Burn, you son of a bitch."

He watched as Voldemort screamed as the flames burned him. He watched as the avatar faded, leaving a screaming shade pinned to the ground. He watched as the flames then began to consume it.

He saw the confusion as the flames started to burn it. He saw the horrified realization as to what it meant. He understood that Tom had honestly believed that he was immortal, but as he told him…

Not in this world.

And so he watched. He listened to the screams of a man damned by his own arrogance. He did so until it was finished, all that remained being a fading scream that was soon silenced by a shattering sound.

He then walked over and picked up his sword and shield. He thought of something to say, and then thought better of it. There was no point to it.

He heard the sound of feet rushing up behind him and turned just in time to receive Silica's fist to his jaw. He found himself laid out on the ground, and his attempt to get back to his feet was stopped by Silica diving down and basically pinning him.

"You... you... you..." she stammered.

He didn't try and start the banter for once. Instead, he just wrapped his arms around her.

"He's gone. Finally," he said. "He's gone."

And then she slowly hugged him back.

He thought he vaguely heard that Blake chap in the background, and he didn't fucking care.

It was done.

Chapter End Notes

Before any of you ask, Tom Marvolo Riddle, the so-called Lord Voldemort, is dead, kaput, shuffled off his mortal coil, pushing up daisies, etc. I planned for him to be dealt with permanently, and this did the trick. What killed him was his own arrogance.

He died not understanding why his immortality failed him. He died without realizing that his horcruxes were destroyed. He deserved no more. He died leaving nothing behind but a bad memory.
A Phoenix Forged of Steel

Chapter Notes

And as always, many thanks to the guys who helped me with the polish.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Mystic Knight Online

Chapter 22 - A Phoenix Forged of Steel

January 1, 2024 - Aincrad 50th Floor, Drauen Keep Ruins (Field Dungeon)

Gus looked at the embracing pair and then at the spot where the… thing that was apparently Voldemort had been. Where what had been Voldemort had shattered like… well, a boss.

He then looked back and focused on young Mr. Potter again, wondering just what had gone on. The boy had done something to set his sword on fire, and that something had managed to apparently kill the so-called Dark Lord.

And that was if, if it was Voldemort.

Well, he had two witnesses to it all that he could question.

He walked up to the two and waited for them to notice him, and waited some more.

Jesus, those two are in their own little world right now, he thought. He gave a polite cough to get their attention, and smiled as the two started and separated themselves with blushes on their faces.

“If you two are done, I would like to know just what the hell that was,” he said.

Harry looked at him. “Did Rain find you in Algade?” He asked.

Gus nodded.

“Then yes, that was Voldemort, or as I learned, Tom Marvolo Riddle: Dark Lord, terrorist, murderer of my parents, and all now, not even ash on the wind,” Harry said.

“But… how?” Gus asked.

Harry shrugged. “How did he get here?” He asked. “No clue, and probably not something we could do anyway. As for why he looked like a skeleton drunk on Re’em blood, we can thank Kayaba for that.” He then rubbed his jaw a bit. “And damn, Silica, was that really necessary?”

Silica gave him a level look. “Yes.” She said levelly. “You keep doing things that a reckless and stupidly noble. Just… don’t keep doing things like that, please.”

“You know me well enough to know that.”

“Any promises I make on that would be a lie,” he said just as levelly, though he was smirking. “You know me well enough to know that.”

Silica growled and she then gave a resigned sigh. “Yeah, it wouldn’t be you if you didn’t.” She
admitted.

Gus cleared his throat. “Work on this later, you two.” he said sharply before turning his attention to Harry. “You mean to tell me that Kayaba was responsible for turning him into that?”

Harry nodded.

“That... that means that Kaya- ah fuck it, that bastard, knows, doesn’t it?” He asked.

“Probably,” Harry acknowledged. “And I’m not surprised, really. You shouldn’t be, either.”

Gus looked at him and nodded. “Yeah, you’re right,” he admitted with a sigh. “We did think it was possible that he was watching. Anyway, what was with your sword being on fire? Was that a drop you got or something?”

“Or something,” Harry said. At Gus’ look, he shook his head. “As I said, Kayaba was paying attention. He decided to give me a new skill to play with, but the bloody pillock also decided that it was the only one I could use in that fight.”

Gus blinked and then winced. “Only one? Bad time for something like that.”

Harry nodded. “You’re telling me.” He agreed. “I was lucky to get the sword on fire, and lucky to figure out well... something, at least. My magic seemed to work a bit better, I guess. Maybe because I had something that allowed it to work within SAO’s rules.”

Gus considered that and nodded. It made sense to him.

“So, what is it called?” Silica asked.

“**Mystic Blade.**”

**Aincrad GM Administration Area**

Kayaba looked at the replay of the fight, watching it and also looking at the data that came from it. He was unsurprised that Hadrian won, the boy had long since proven himself capable. And yet, he was also disappointed in how it went. There was no climactic element to it, no struggle. It was Hadrian merely using the tools he had on hand to win, showing the pragmatism in a fight that was his hallmark.

And that... Voldemort. He was also disappointed. He had honestly expected more, considering how bombastic he was. And considering things like the biometrics, both real and digital, that he had received from Hadrian. The boy had been terrified when the man had suddenly appeared like that. At least until he had gotten his fear under control.

Ah well, so be it. While the fight wasn’t what he had anticipated, he still got a lot of interesting data from it. Nothing groundbreaking, but he now knew what to look for. He had no doubts that Hadrian and the few known magic users would be able to provide him much more data.

He may have expected more from it all, but it was done and over with. He could live with what he got.

At the same time, he recalled a comment or two that Hadrian made in the fight. Something about it not earning him any house points, which was probably for the skill. Or it could be the one about how he owed him a beer. Since it was after the safeguards to protect Silica were enabled, if only for the
fight, that was probably it.

He might actually collect on that.

He idly looked over the data and sent a command to Cardinal to modify what would be streamed out in order to keep some secrets. There was some delay between recording and transmission, if only because to allow him to control what went out. Those who saw from the direct connection to the Nerve Gears were a different story. They had an unfiltered look in real time due to it. Well, as unfiltered as allowed by the personal privacy settings.

He was under no obligation to keep the various secrets he’s learned, but he decided to anyway. Perhaps it was simply out of some sense of fair play on his part. After all, letting those secrets get out without the player’s knowledge wouldn’t be sporting of him.

Besides, with regards to some, like magic, he had a feeling that the government already knew. He expected that, really. That, and the hints of the lengths that some would go to protect that secret, or punish those who let it out, even unintentionally…

And Hadrian… interested him. Not just as a sort of lab rat, though that was surely part of it. Magic was an interesting phenomenon, he wanted to investigate it. And… he respected the boy. He respected all those who ventured out, really. They had not been paralyzed by their fear, and had taken a look around the world he created.

They might eventually stop and settle down, but they at least made an attempt. And he respected them for it.

And more importantly to him, much like Kirito and a select few others, the boy… challenged him, challenged the system. And wasn’t that part of the point? The boy was indeed interesting, one among several, true, but interesting. He didn’t want the outside world taking that away.

If the boy was going to die, he would die because something in SAO killed him, not because of someone in the real world trying to remove him from it. This was his world, his creation, and he dictated the rules of it. There was only one way out of SAO, and Hadrian, no matter how interesting, would have to get out by clearing the game.

A part of him idly recalled how Hadrian had referred to him, not as SAO’s god, but as its Demiurge. A quick query showed him what was meant by that, and he smiled. A builder, a maintainer, a… false god. How apt, how very apt indeed.

**Algade, Golden Way Inn**

“You know,” Harry said idly as he sat at a table with Argo, Silica, Rain and Gus. “Now that I think about it, I’m a bit disappointed. About that fight. Not that I’m complaining, mind you, but it was Voldemort for fuck’s sake.”

Gus nodded. “I only saw the end of the fight, so I can’t say much, but given that I got there pretty quickly, it really didn’t take you long, did it?”

Harry shook his head. “It wasn’t like what I know of him, and I’ve had to fight him twice since that day back in 2010.” He said. “It’s like… I don’t know. It was far easier than what I’ve dealt with whenever he was involved in the past was.”

Argo chuckled. “Ah, I see what you’re saying.” She said. “You know his reputation, and you’ve run into him before, so you’re now asking yourself ‘that was it?”’
Harry nodded.

“I’ve heard of some stories my grandfather told me,” she said. “About some of the challenges he faced. Some were as epic as his reputation said they were, but he admitted that some of them were rather underwhelming. Sometimes, it was because he fought them in situations that weren’t ideal for them. Others was the simple fact that for all that their reputations was built up, they failed to live up to it.”

Rain just looked at Silica and then shrugged. “I really don’t have much to say here.” She admitted. “There are some things I’m missing from this, I know that, but I don’t think you guys are going to talk about them.”

Harry shook his head. “There are a few, but they’re the kinds of things we can’t talk about.” He said.

“Anyway, you have to keep in mind,” Gus said, getting the conversation back on track. “You had an advantage in the fact that you’ve been here for over a year. You’ve adapted to this place and know its rules. He wasn’t adapted, and didn’t know the rules.”

Harry had to acknowledge Gus’ point. “And it wasn’t like I was going to give him a chance to do so on either count.” He said. “And you know what? I’m fine with that.”

Gus smiled. “Best to see it that way.” He admitted. “Take your victories, no matter how they come. Sometimes, you get lucky and get an easy one, or at least one that was simple to get.

“I’ll drink to that,” Harry replied. “And on that note, I might as well buy everyone else a drink.” He stood up and walked out of the privacy field that Argo tended to put up out of habit whenever she was talking business, or just keeping secrets in general. “May I have your attention?” He called out. “Next round’s on me!”

The other patrons cheered at that.

“You know,” Argo said as Harry handed her a drink. “The hard part has yet to come.”

Harry gave her a curious look. “And what would that be?”

Argo smirked as she looked past him. “Explaining what happened to Asuna.”

Harry winced. “I was hoping I could put it off.” He said. “I mean, I know she’ll find out and all, but-” he saw their expressions. “She’s right behind me, isn’t she?” He asked, a note of resignation entering his voice.

“And what precisely would you be hoping to put off explaining, Hadrian?” Came Asuna’s cold and calmly questioning voice from behind him.

##

Asuna stared at Harry as he explained what had happened to his group earlier that day. He had asked Argo to strengthen the privacy field, but to remain in case he needed her or Gus to add in their own input.

That had been her first warning. Whatever he did, he wanted it kept reasonably private.

The second warning had been his own nervousness as he tried to think up something to say. The boy normally worked well under pressure, able to roll with the situation. But there were times when he realized he had stepped in it. That he needed to talk his way out of it, and was at a loss as to how he
would.

But, he did explain what had happened, and Asuna was busy trying to process it.

“So, let me get this straight,” she said with an apparent calm she didn’t feel. “Someone from your past hacked into the system for the purpose of killing you, and you didn’t think to simply get the hell out of there?”

Harry winced at the emphasis she put on the last statement, but nodded.

“You irresponsible, idiotic, reckless… what were you thinking?”

“Well, outside of the burning hatred for the son of a bitch who murdered my parents,” Harry said, a slight edge of ice in his voice. “It was ‘Damn it, this bastard again?”

“Wait, what?” Asuna asked. “Again? How many...?”

“Three times, Asuna. That bastard has tried to kill me three fucking times before this.” Harry said. “The first time, my parents were killed. I told you what happened the second time, though the bastard got driven off by someone else. And he tried again a year later. I ended up having to kill someone in self-defense a second fucking time because of that. My friend’s sister was nearly killed in the crossfire because of that.” His eyes and voice got colder as he spoke.

“And then, he comes after me for round four,” Harry said. “And this time… I dealt with him… permanently. I’m not someone who would be proud of killing a man, but him? There was a certain… satisfaction felt. And with it over, that... that... never to be sufficiently damned son of a whore, will never hurt or kill anyone, ever again.”

There was a shocked silence from the others, well… from Kirito, Rain, and Lux at least. Asuna knew that she was shocked by Harry’s admission. Silica just sat next to him quietly, her hand gently resting on his.

“Miss,” Argo’s companion, Gus, said. “The man came after him and got killed because of it? He was bad news in a way you really don’t want to know about. That guy was sick and twisted on a whole different level. He might not have been the worst out there, but he was bad enough. I… worked in the security services, and… knowing about and dealing with fuckers like him was a part of the job. That’s why I went to back the kid up the second I heard, and… oh fuck, I should have thought about this.” He then turned to Harry. “I should have brought this up earlier, but people have thought him dead before. Are you sure he’s dead?”

Harry absently rubbed his scar. “I don’t know why or how, but yeah… I’m sure.” He replied. “It’s over.”

Gus’ eyes looked at Harry’s scar briefly, and he nodded. “Yeah, I can see what you mean.” He said. “I’ll trust that you’re correct, but…”

Harry nodded. “Trust, but verify once we get out of here.” He said. “Not a bad idea.”

There was something unsaid there, something that Argo and Silica apparently got from their looks of understanding. For the life of her, Asuna couldn’t figure out what, but she knew that there were secrets, and then there were *secrets*. Her father did enough work on the government side of things for her to know that. If she didn’t know what was being left unsaid… she would have to live with that.

“There’s one thing that bothers me about this, outside of everything else,” Kirito said. “There’s no
way Kayaba didn’t notice.”

Harry chuckled, a bitter edge to it. “Oh, he noticed.” He said. “He turned the man’s avatar into some kind of… event boss I guess you can say. And then the pillock decided to disable all of my skills, and give me something to use.” He opened his menu and pulled up his list of skills. “Here it is,” He said as he made a copy of the list and sent it around.

Asuna looked at it, and then looked around. “And this is…?”

“As far as I can tell, a Unique Skill,” Harry said. “And the fact that it came from Kayaba, well I think you can see what that means.”

Argo nodded. “Yeah, it does,” she said. “It means that Kayaba noticed you. And if Unique Skills are gifted by him then…”

Asuna made the connection. “Then Heathcliff’s own was given by Kayaba as well.” She looked at Argo. “You think he made the connection?”

Argo shrugged. “Maybe.” She said. “He’s sharp enough, at least. Though if he did, he’s keeping it quiet.” She looked at Harry. “I’ll keep this off the market for now, but you know people will figure out you have one despite that.”

Harry shrugged. “It’s not like I’ll be able to not use it forever,” he admitted. “If I tried, Kayaba would probably force a situation that would require me to use it. To give the bastard credit, he’s fair, so he’ll probably wait before that happens. See if I actually do anything with it first.”

“And see if you’ll out yourself,” Asuna said.

Harry just gave another shrug.

##

“It’s strange,” Harry said from where he stood, gazing out the window at Algade’s nightlife.

Silica blinked as she looked at him from the chair she was sitting in. “What do you mean?” She asked as she absently brushed Pina, the feathered dragon’s coos showing her appreciation.

“Ever since I was one, that man’s actions dictated my life.”

She understood. “You said he was the one who killed your parents.”

Harry nodded and then turned to look at her. “Yeah, he was,” He replied. “Because of him, I don’t have any memories of them. Because of him, I never got to know them. And because of him, I had to live with relatives who, at best, resented my presence.”

Silica nodded. “We suspected that your home life was bad, but—”

“It wasn’t as bad as you feared,” Harry interrupted. “Trust me, it could have been worse. I knew kids who had it worse.” He closed his eyes as he remembered something unpleasant, and decided to continue.

“The man who left me with them, my school’s headmaster… he was apologetic about it, as he knew I would grow up in a… less than ideal environment. But he was stuck with bad choices all around. At least with them, he could protect me from other threats that would have killed me at the first opportunity, so it was the lesser evil. I resent him for that, but I also understand why he made that
“So, I grew up in a loveless environment, being raised, if you can call it that, by an aunt and uncle who hated magic. It didn’t fit with their views of what was normal, and they certainly didn’t like that. My cousin Dudley, their son, was spoiled rotten and given everything he wanted, while I was given the bare minimum, having to earn even the tiniest scrap more. He could do no wrong, while nothing I did was ever right. You know, things like that.” He gave a bitter laugh.

“I don’t hate him, you know. Resent him? Oh, I do, but I can’t bring it in me to hate him. He never knew any better, and they made sure he never learned. I can only hope that someone comes around and teaches him what he should have learned before it’s too late for him.

“I don’t even hate my aunt and uncle Instead, I pity them. I pity that they’re so wrapped up in what they think is normal that they can’t see the world for what it is. A beautiful and terrible place where wonders abound, and anything’s possible. And now that Vol- no, Tom, has been dealt with, I will be shut of them eventually. And then, I will simply leave it all behind, never looking back. They’re not worth it.” He sighed.

“It says something that I was related to them, but they weren’t… family.” He said. “I can wish all I want for it to be different, but…”

“Harry,” Silica said sadly.

Harry gave her a sad smile and shrugged. It was as if he was saying, “Well, what can you do?”

She carefully placed Pina on the armrest of her chair, stood up, and walked over to him. “Perhaps here…” She started and then paused. Taking a deep breath she looked at him in the eye. “Perhaps, at least for now, for our time here… you can have a family. A real family.” She said softly.

Harry blinked. “Silica, what are you…?” He words were stilled as she put a finger over his lips.

“Keiko,” she said. “My name, is Keiko Ayano.” She then grabbed a hold of his shirt, and pulled herself up to kiss him.

She broke the kiss and gave a small smile at his befuddled look. Her smile widened as it cleared and what she said and did finally worked its way through his mind and his higher thought processes rebooted themselves.

She watched him look at her and then smile. “Well, it’s a pleasure to finally be introduced to you, Miss Ayano,” he said. “As you know, I’m Harry Potter, wizard, Boy-Who-Lived, and very glad my name’s not in the phone book.”

She smiled. “And it’s a pleasure for me as well, Mr. Potter.” She then blinked a bit in confusion. “Also, what’s a phone book?”

Her confusion deepened as Harry just burst out laughing. She shut him up by pulling him over to the bed and using his falling on it to kiss him again.

*I can always ask him in the morning,* she thought as she absently reached over and turned off the crystalight lamp that illuminated the room.

##

Harry idly wondered how his life could be the way it is as he lay in the bed, listening to Silica- no, in private like this, Keiko’s, rhythmic breathing. On one hand, his luck would have him face monsters,
the certainty of death, and the occasional dark wizard out for his blood. On the other hand, it had allowed him to see new and wonderful things alongside those dangers, obtain friends he valued, and… possibly more than that.

And, the fact that something that had haunted his past was over and done with was reassuring. It meant that he was no longer under Tom’s shadow, and that his life would no longer be dictated by that.

Oh, there was a possibility that Tom wasn’t as dead as he personally thought. Personally, he thought that unlikely. Whatever means that was used to get here, it meant that Tom was here, not in the real world. And as he told the man.

Immortal? Not in this world.

And as he began to drift off to sleep, lulled by Keiko’s warmth and the sounds of her breathing, he gave a soft smile.

Things were looking up.

January 7, 2024 - Algade

“I’ve been thinking,” Harry said to the group as they all sat down for a meal.

“I hope you didn’t hurt yourself too much,” Rain said.


“Besides, we didn’t smell anything burning,” Lux chimed in.

Harry shot her a glare. “Can I get to the point?” He asked.

“You may,” Asuna said.

Harry gave an aggrieved sigh. “Okay, I walked into that,” he said. “Anyway, I’ve been thinking on some things. We’ve been a group for some time, and despite it all, it looks like our current working relationships will continue. So, here’s the thing.” He looked at all of them. “We know things are getting harder, and will continue to do so.”

“Get on with it, Harry.” Kirito said. “This is nothing new to us.”

Harry shot him a look. “Well then, to cut to the chase, I think we should formalize our group.” He said.

Kirito blinked. “Formalize?” He asked. “You mean…”?

Harry nodded.

Asuna gave a hum as she thought about it, and nodded. “It makes sense,” she admitted. “While it’s not exactly necessary, there are support perks to being in a guild, even one that’s only us. Besides, it’s only a matter of time before the many of main guilds up here start getting… insistent on us joining one if we don’t make our own, or join one of the existing ones.”

“For you all, maybe,” Kirito said. “But me? Well…”

Harry cut him off. “If they’re still going on about that bullshit, they aren’t worth our time or attention.” He said. “Not that many of them do, and half the time they include us in that.”
“Though, to be honest, the connotations of that title have changed,” Asuna said. “At least when it applies to you, or us.”

Kirito nodded, accepting that.

“There’s also another good reason, at least from my perspective,” Silica added. “Considering what Harry got on the first, you know that the Knights of Blood are going to be sniffing around the moment they find out, or even suspect it. There’s no way Heathcliff would let that kind of opportunity go.”

And that was the truth. Outside of their group, Argo, and Gus, no one knew that there was someone with a Unique Skill outside of Heathcliff. And they all knew that was a particular point of pride for that guild. The second someone else becomes known to have one, they would become very insistent on said player signing up with them, any guild would really, but the Knights of Blood especially.

After all, if another guild had someone who possessed a Unique Skill, then it was as special as some members of that guild tended to think it was. Some of them were damn arrogant about that fact.

If said player was already in a guild, then they might encourage the person to change guilds, but otherwise not be able to do anything else. Poaching from another guild was heavily looked down upon.

“But, what about Rain and I?” Lux asked. “I mean, you four I can understand, but the two of us… well, we’re nothing special.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Kirito said drily. “You two have stuck with us for this long, and are keeping up with us. Others have noticed that.”

“And word on the street indicates that you two will probably be earning titles soon,” Asuna added.

Both Rain and Lux got surprised looks on their faces, and Harry could understand why.

Titles, monikers, things that other players used that could only refer to one player… those things were not handed out lightly. They were always descriptive of the person, be it their accomplishments, a distinctive feature, something. But having such made you stand out amongst the other players. And it could be in a good way, a bad way, or sometimes both.

And now, Rain and Lux may find themselves added to that exclusive group.

Silica pointed at Rain. “I’ve already heard that some players are beginning to refer to you as Blood Rain,” she said. “Considering what you wore at that party, and the fact that red does seem to be your color, it fits.” She then pointed at Lux. “Yours, from the word on the street, seems to be settling in with referring to you as The Dusk Maiden.”

Harry nodded. “And that’s only the start,” he said. “It’s not guaranteed that they will stick, but the fact that some players are starting to refer to you by such names means that you’re really starting to stand out as players.” He then smiled. “Welcome to the club. The hours are long, the pay’s shit, the complimentary drinks taste like piss, and the food was used to poison the mobs.”

“Since it wasn’t Asuna cooking the food, it was only fit for the mobs,” Kirito said.

“Besides, we just give the drinks to Klein, he can’t tell the difference,” Asuna added.

“As for the pay, that’s why we work long hours killing mobs, we earn more that way.” Silica finished.
They all shared a laugh at that.

“Well, what do you all think?” Harry asked after it died down.

**Aincrad 1st Floor, Black Iron Palace**

“You called me here, Thinker?” Argo asked as she walked into the office of the man who headed the SAO Support Network, or SSN. She noticed that his second in command, and rumored wife, Yulier, was standing off to the side.

The man looked up at the information broker and made a gesture for her to sit down.

Argo did so and carefully looked at the two. Anyone who looked at Thinker would not think that he didn’t fit what many people thought of when they heard the term guild leader. Thin, lanky, and looking more like a salaryman, he just didn’t fit the ideal. His easygoing manner also didn’t help his case, but he wasn’t the first leader she met who was easygoing. Yulier, with her severe appearance, silver hair that indicated some Youkai heritage to Argo if it was natural, and icy blue eyes, gave off the opposite vibe. When looking at the two, those who didn’t know better often thought that *she* was the one in charge.

It was intentional, Argo knew. Thinker was the one who had started arranging the distribution of supplies to those who remained in the Town of Beginnings, and networking with players to ensure that a steady stream of them continued. Yulier, while similarly capable, was the one who ensured that Thinker’s instructions were followed, and also worked with Kibaou to keep the peace on the lower floors.

By looking so different, and by looking as if their opposite was the one who should be doing the other’s job, they managed to keep others off balance. That had been important early on, but was less so now. Even so, the SSN was responsible for ensuring the safety and well-being of the over thirty-five hundred players who populated the lower floors, and they did so admirably.

Those thoughts went through her mind quickly and she refocused her attention on the two in front of her.

“So, what happened?” She asked.

“Over the last week, we’ve had over sixty names crossed out on the Monument of Life,” Thinker said. “All of the means of death were consistent with PKs.”

“Sixty in one week?” Argo asked in shock. “And by PKs? That’s… oh hell.” She looked at Thinker. “I think I might have an idea of what group was responsible.”

“We know who it is,” Yulier said. “Lind, of the DDA had managed to foil one of their attacks and was able to rescue a couple of players in the party that was attacked. I’ve never seen him that angry.”

“If it’s who I think it is, you would understand why he was angry.” Argo said. “He, Harry, and Silica tangled with them back in June.” She then gave a cold smile. “And that group came off the worse for wear from that, but not before they killed almost a dozen of his men before the… Grand Finale, I guess you can call it.”

Thinker nodded. He had heard about that confrontation, and the end result of it. Over twenty players attacking three, and having nine of their number killed while the three they attacked survived tended to make its rounds. Oh, he knew that two of the deaths were due to the backup arriving, but the rumors tended to leave that out.
“Anyway, we got a name for the group,” he said. “One of their own said it as they withdrew from Lind’s group.”

“And what is this group calling itself?” She asked, leaning forward.

**Aincrad 3rd Floor, Zumfut**

“Well, it’s been awhile since we’ve been down here.” Kirito said to the group as the teleport finished.

“It has, indeed.” Harry said as he looked around. “And man, this place is just… quiet.”

Kirito understood what Harry meant as he also took a look around, but he was not surprised. Outside of a relative handful of floors, the rest were fairly lacking in terms of population.

“Well, we’re not here to sightsee anyway,” Asuna said. “Let’s go and do the quest we need to do.”

They all nodded and headed to the large tree that was the mayor’s office and central administration building for the town.

##

“Okay, we’ve so far ended up dealing with kobolds, heavily armed kobolds, armored kobolds, naked kobolds, and… more kobolds.” Rain said tiredly. “How many did we end up fighting? I lost count after the first sixty or so.”

“I think it scaled up because we’re so high level,” Kirito said. “Nothing I got from other sources said it was like this.”

Harry gave them both a dry look. “And the second I got my sword to catch fire, you all started using me to create kobold bonfires.” He said. “And Pina thought that some would make a nice snack as well, meaning we have a sick dragon on our hands now.”

The feathered dragon, hearing her name, gave a sound that almost sounded like a groan. Given that her stomach was distended and she was limp in Silica’s arms, it was clear that what she ate didn’t agree with her. Silica, for all that she doted on the feathered dragon, was giving her a notably unsympathetic look.

Asuna just shook her head tiredly. “Well, we got what we needed,” she said. “Let’s just head back to town, turn in this quest, and get on with the rest.”

They all saw several kobolds appear as if out of nowhere and shared a sigh as they readied their weapons. Harry fully agreed with the sentiment behind it all.

They might be easy to kill, but the sheer numbers were getting tiresome to deal with.

##

Asuna almost slammed down what they were required to get as a part of the quest, shooting the quest giver, and guild registrar, a heated look. The party had a heated debate as they returned to town, debating over things like the guild’s name and who would be the one officially in charge.

The NPC looked the item over and nodded. “Everything seems to be in order,” he said. He then pulled out a long sheet of parchment… the Guild Charter. “Who amongst you will lead this guild?” He asked, his speech becoming far, far, more formal. “The one who will, step forward, declare
Asuna pointed to herself. “I, Asuna, will lead the guild.” She said formally, knowing that in this stage of the formation process, the formality had to be observed. She took the offered quill, and carefully signed her name.

“Who do you have to stand as witnesses for your guild, signing its charter?” The registrar then asked. “You only need four, but more is acceptable.”

She looked back at her five companions as she remembered the conversation they had on their way back.

“Me?!” she asked in shock. “You want me to be the one in charge?”

Harry nodded. “Well, at least the one who is officially the leader,” he said. “I think we all have our areas where one of us can take the helm.”

She gave him a level look and then nodded. “I can see that, but why me being the public face?”

Silica snorted. “Because Kirito and Harry hate the spotlight, half the front lines still thinks of me as a mascot character, and neither Rain, nor Lux have the reputation yet to do so,” she said drily. “Also, I’ve seen members of even the Knights of Blood jump when you said ‘jump’ before.”

“She’s got a point, Asuna.” Kirito chimed in.

Asuna sighed, knowing that they had a point. She then looked at Rain and Lux. “And what about you two?”

Rain shrugged. “I wouldn’t want to be in charge anyway,” she said. “Just point me at the mobs.”

Lux just simply nodded. “They do have a point.”

“All right then, fine.” Asuna grumbled. “Anyway, Hadrian, since this was your idea, you get to pick the name.”

Harry smiled. “I have an idea.”

“My companions will stand witness,” Asuna intoned formally. As the registrar looked at them, each of them stepped forward and gave their names and signed the document that the registrar indicated. Most of them gave a bemused look at the quill they were to sign with, and had to carefully write with the unfamiliar instrument. She noticed that Harry gave the quill he was presented an almost nostalgic look before he gave his signature with a flourish.

“The witnesses have presented themselves and signed the charter,” the registrar intoned. “Do you have a name for the guild to use, so that its deeds may be recorded in the annals of history? Or, has one who stood witness come up with one, to carry its standard throughout Aincrad?”

Asuna nodded. “One who currently stands as witness has discussed it with me, and he will be the one to name the guild, carrying its standard.” She indicated Harry to step forward.

Harry stepped forward and looked at the registrar. “I, Hadrian, will name the guild, to carry its standard throughout Aincrad.” He said.

“Then name the guild,” the registrar said. “Give the guild its name, its title, and write it on the charter. Once done, speak the guild’s name, so that it may be heard in the spoken word.”
Harry nodded and then took the quill. He carefully wrote down the guild’s name and handed the quill back to the registrar. He then seemed to notice something cross his HUD before he took a breath.

“I, Hadrian, have given name to this guild. This guild will be known throughout Aincrad by its’ name:

“Steel Phoenix.”

Chapter End Notes

Outside perspectives follows next, provided it doesn't keep growing, and growing, and growing, and... I knew I shouldn't have gotten those beans from that guy named Jack.
Third Time Outside

Mystic Knight Online

June 21, 2023 - England, Aboard the Hogwarts Express

Hermione looked out the window pensively, not seeing the scenery pass her by as the train continued on its path back to King’s Cross Station. What she had watched yesterday had been an unpleasant shock to her system, to everyone’s systems really.

They had thought it to be more along the lines of a simple confrontation and argument, perhaps some punches thrown. Instead, they watched as Harry dueled Lind in a manner that showed that he could have ended it right then and there, but didn’t. It was as if he wasn’t taking it seriously. No, as if he was taking it only as seriously as necessary to avoid killing Lind.

No, it was what happened afterward when Harry decided that the fight was over that bothered her. Harry had been so focused on the confrontation in front of him that he, and by extension them, had missed two players ambushing Silica. When Silica called out, everyone noticed what was going on.

The moment one of them made a move to attack Silica again, the lethal intent behind the move apparent to all of them, Harry acted.

One moment, he was too far away to get to her in time, the next, he was separating the attacking player’s arm and head from his body. The sheer suddenness of it, the fact that Harry had so quickly and coldly killed someone… everyone watching was stunned into silence.

The following fight, as the associates of that player came out of hiding, was as confusing as it was violent. They all came after him, Silica, and Lind with lethal intent, and Harry responded in kind. There was none of the Harry that they had seen present then, only someone who moved and fought with grim and lethal determination.

Every strike delivered was delivered with one singular purpose. To do unto those attacking him before they did unto him or those with them. He had killed three more people in the fight, and the number of attackers he sent flying, their bodies going in one direction, an arm or leg going another… well, she lost track of the number.

It wouldn’t have surprised her if some had simply healed up with an item and jumped back into the fight, only to have the same happen to them again, and again, and again.

That… that was not the Harry Potter she, any of them really, knew. That wasn’t the shy boy she had befriended, the one who disliked his fame. That wasn’t the somewhat indifferent student who only did enough to pass his classes, was crazy about flying and Quidditch, and seemed to have a reckless disregard for his own safety that made him so stereotypically a Gryffindor. In other words, the Harry who disappeared, the one who they watched in SAO.

Until yesterday.

The Harry she saw in that recording, the one who fought with such cold and deadly fury, was as different from the Harry she knew as there could be, while still being the same person. As if he was able to turn that aspect on or off. Or, perhaps, he always had that, but had kept it firmly in check.
And as soon as the fighting ended and he saw that they were relatively safe, he then saw to everyone else, making sure that they were all right, helping Silica gather herself after she had an emotional breakdown, and somehow resolving things with Lind, who had survived all that, afterward.

But she could tell now, he was changing. And she didn’t know what to make of it. It also puzzled her that Ron was completely unsurprised when she talked with him about it.

“You didn’t see him coming out of the Chamber with more of his own blood on him than would be good, and holding the sword he used to kill a basilisk with,” he simply told her. “Even still, you should have realized that once the wands are drawn and the spells are cast, he doesn’t back down or hesitate, he fights back. We know that the whole incident with the Stone gave him nightmares for months, and while he never went into detail, it’s not hard to see why. Not now at least.”

And while that put some things into perspective, it didn’t help her reconcile the two images she now had of the same boy.

**Hogwarts, Snape’s Quarters**

Severus looked into the glass of firewhiskey in front of him pensively as he considered what he had watched the previous day. His opinions on Harry Potter were well known amongst the students and faculty, but the boy’s actions in that viewing were completely unlike any expectations.

It wasn’t like the events in March, where the boy had gathered a group and led them on a rescue mission with only the loosest of plans. That was so typically Gryffindor, and the fact that it got five people killed, on top of the twelve they failed to save, that he considered it just like the boy.

**Always acting without considering the consequences.**

It was unfair of him, he knew that. He knew that he was layering his perceptions and hatred of James Potter onto the boy, forcing the sins of the father onto the son. But it was what allowed him to ignore the part of the boy that always pained him to see. The part of the boy that made it clear that he wasn’t only the son of James Potter, but also of Lily Evans.

But what he saw yesterday, it wasn’t James Potter he saw in the boy. James Potter was always one for bluster, for showmanship. The man had been able to fight, but there was always that tendency to show off in his actions.

There was none of that in Harry Potter’s actions that day. Not when he faced that one player who had issues with him, and certainly not when things became deadly. And the second he saw that there were those trying to kill him or those he cared about, any vestiges of James Potter left the boy.

And there was little of Lily there as well. Lily could be dangerous when she was feeling protective, even deadly if need be, as several of his peers amongst the Death Eaters learned. But going straight for the kill, attacking with the intent to maim, that wasn’t her. It wasn’t her he saw in the boy at that time.

It was his grandfather, Harold Evans he saw in the boy. The former SAS commando who had served in Ireland facing off against the Provisional IRA, and other parts of the world as well before settling down to marry. The man who had beaten Tobias Snape, Severus’ own father, within an inch of his life the second he learned of the man’s abuse of his wife and son before taking the man to the police.

The man who killed three of the five Death Eaters who had been sent to kill him and his wife to send a message to the newly married Lily Potter. The man who did so using whatever he could reach, be it a knife, a piece of furniture, or simply breaking his attacker’s neck.
It was seeing Harry kill four people and hack off limbs in battle that showed that. It was the cool efficiency of his movements, the sheer, ruthless pragmatism of it all. And it made him realize that under that exterior, there was a dragon that slept lightly.

He drank down the glass of firewhiskey and continued to think about what he saw.

**June 22, 2023 - Kawagoe, Kirigaya Residence**

Suguha lay on her bed pensively, trying to think. She had heard of the events a couple of days ago, even watched them before the data was deleted from the system, and was still trying to come to terms with what her brother did. Most of the events she could understand, even approve of, but at the same time, there was one particular detail that she had a hard time with.

Kazuto had killed. It was so unlike him that she didn’t want to believe it.

And yet, she could not deny what he had done in defense of another. That was bad enough, but the fact that the one he had gone out to back up had killed several of his attackers on his own, rather than having been attacked himself, that seemed to make it worse. That Hadrian, the one that Kazuto had gone to back up was also more able to deal with things was also shocking.

But still, her brother had killed.

It had been sudden, an attack was countered by apparent instinct, only for the blow to be a lethal one. She didn’t even know if it had even registered on him at the time, but it was clear that it had after the fight was done with.

*Kazuto,* she thought. *What is that place doing to you?*

She didn’t know what to think about it, or even feel about it. Should she feel sad for her brother for what he just went through? Should she hate him for what he did? Should she hate those who he went to back up? She really didn’t know.

And she hated the fact that she could do nothing about it.

**June 23, 2023 - Greengrass Manor**

Daphne Greengrass kept a polite expression on her face as she looked at the Malfoy Family patriarch, who had requested her presence. The absence of Draco indicated that it wasn’t for something as archaic or outdated as an arranged marriage, as their two families were not inclined to form any alliances with each other, so she could only think of one reason.

He was fishing for information on Harry Potter. For what purpose, she didn’t know. And to be honest, it wasn’t of any concern of hers. It was a harsh truth, but that was how things were. She told Granger that if asked about what she saw, she would speak it honestly, hiding nothing.

The muggleborn disagreed with that outlook, but the girl was ignorant of many aspects of the magical world’s culture and family politics. Especially the parts which weren’t written down, as the families were expected to teach their children.

“Lord Malfoy,” she said politely.

“Miss Greengrass,” Lucius replied, nodding to her. “I have no doubt that you are already aware why I am here.”

She looked to her father, who was in the room, and saw the slightly apologetic look on his face and
nodded. “You’re here for information on Harry Potter,” she said calmly. “Specifically with regard to the events that happened three days ago.”

“Indeed,” Lucius said with a nod. “Not the specific details, the Headmaster is allowing those of us on the Board of Governors to see the recording later today before it goes to the Ministry. What I want, is your impression on things.”

Daphne nodded politely. “Then, I will begin by saying that he had acted in self-defense, and in the defense of another,” she said. “There is the possibility that he used magic, apparition to be precise, but from what I’ve seen from the recordings, the witnesses will probably think that it was because of something else. The more specific terms are bugs and exploits, each meaning that some part of the game weren’t working quite as intended by whomever made it, or that something wasn’t thought of.”

Lucius nodded. “And you think that any muggles who witnessed it would think so?”

Daphne nodded. “Yes.” She replied. “There is a possibility that his companion, Silica, might realize differently. I don’t know why, but there are a few hints that she might know. Another would be the player Argo, who operates as an information broker.”

“Oh?”

“Silica, real name: Keiko Ayano.” Daphne’s father said. “She is the granddaughter of a Living National Treasure, Ranma Saotome, grandmaster of a fairly esoteric combat style, and one who is under a Jusenkyo curse.” When Lucius looked at him, he shrugged. “I have a few business contacts in Japan, and there are a few things my family provides to the Shiba Clan in particular, so I sent a request for any information that they were willing to part with.”

“And this Argo?” Lucius asked.

“The only information I have is that her real name is Mizore Yasaka, and that she is a student at Mahoutokoro.” The man said. “A little extra digging got me politely, but firmly, told to drop the matter by members of the Japanese Magical Consulate. Whoever she is, she’s fairly high in their society.”

Lucius frowned. “Yasaka,” he said thoughtfully. “I’ve heard that family name somewhere before. No matter” He turned his attention back to Daphne. “How about your perceptions of Mr. Potter’s mindset, Miss Greengrass?”

Daphne gave a thoughtful hum before speaking. “He only used lethal force because of the circumstances,” she said. “During the immediate aftermath, it was clear that he was not happy about having done so, but he was also remarkably composed as well. Given that his companion had a brief emotional breakdown in response to people trying to kill her, and the fact that she killed one of her attackers, it was probably for her sake.”

Lucius gave a nod. “My thanks for your giving me your impressions, Miss Greengrass,” he said. He then nodded to her and her father. “Now, if you don’t mind, I must take my leave. Good day.”

Malfoy Manor

Lucius sat in his study and thought about the impressions Miss Greengrass gave, as well as what he saw from the recording.

Even with Miss Greengrass’ words going through his mind, he found himself surprised at how quickly the boy had gone from the typical Gryffindor who simply charged in, heedless of the
consequences, to a cold and efficient soldier. It had given him the impression of a veteran Auror from the time when the Dark Lord had the magical community terrorized of him. Someone who set about a grim business, and got it done.

It was very different from the public perception of the Boy-Who-Lived. The public perception would have him as some saintly figure who would never use lethal force, and yet still carry the day. Idealistic foolery, but most wizards and witches were used to having a ready means of defending themselves non-lethally.

That perception also meant that to the masses, their heroes were saints, whose hands would never be stained by blood. Who could walk onto the battlefield and win, despite that. How? Who cares?! That’s a Hero for you. He’s a Knight in Shining Armor!

Lucius was not so idealistic. He knew that knights were warriors, their stock and trade was violence and killing. If it wasn’t necessary, then they didn’t. The boy’s handling of that one player showed that. But the second it did… He would walk onto that battlefield with shining armor, and walk off it with his sword and armor stained crimson.

He would have to make sure that the boy, no… the young man, remained in Japan as long as practicable. The young man who returned from that ordeal, provided he survived, would be very different from the boy who began it. As different as the reality of the boy was different from the stories.

He would also have to start plans for divesting himself of any connections to certain people in the Ministry. This would provide them too much of an opportunity to pass up.

**June 24, 2023, London, Ministry of Magic**

Albus bit back a sigh as he listened to the protests of those in the Wizengamot chamber. He knew that making this public would put the kneazle in the henhouse, but he also knew that it needed to be done. There was no way that they could have kept what had happened under wraps.

And it wasn’t as if Hogwarts’ having a means to watch Harry’s activities, if well after the fact, was a secret. The students who were involved in watching it, providing their perspectives, their analysis… they would have told their families, regardless of what he tried to do.

The only reason the Ministry had stayed out of it... he had Lucius to thank for that small mercy. The man clearly didn’t want suspicions of his involvement to evolve into certainty, and that was a possibility, despite Harry having remained quiet on the matter of magic and how he ended up in his situation.

Albus had already offered his own explanations, not only of what happened, but how those inside would likely see it. That had quieted some of the uproar. Even those who often disagreed with him on many things still took his word seriously and under consideration. If he said that those who saw what Harry did would rationalize it away, then he was probably right.

Not guaranteed, but probably.

That was enough for many, but there were still many who were claiming that the boy should be brought back to England and damn the consequences and risk to the boy’s life, so that he could face justice for violating the Statute of Secrecy. Unsurprisingly to him, many of them were those who had supported Tom, openly or not. Others, such as Dolores Umbridge, saw Harry as a potential threat to their positions, or to whomever they owed their loyalty to.
Of course, some of them were simply odious people at their core, who didn’t care about the consequences.

What did surprise him, though it shouldn’t, was how Lucius was firmly against bringing the boy from Japan, and he had offered a rather apt argument.

Harry was under the protection of the Wainwrights, and while they wouldn’t be able to fight the Ministry and win, they would still do plenty of damage regardless. Better to simply wait and see, rather than stirring that particular cauldron. Also, there was the possibility of it drawing the attention of others, which could hurt their international standing, already on shaky ground, even further.

And so he watched, his part done with, as the Wizengamot argued, shouted, and basically went through the motions of doing something about this. Everything that needed to be said and done, any decisions that needed to be made, they had all been taken care of behind closed doors anyway.

And he noticed Lucius pass something to someone amongst the more neutral traditionalists, one who wasn’t in the man’s political camp, and wondered what was about to happen. He watched as Richard Greengrass looked at what he was passed, some sheets of parchment it seemed, and then shoot a look to Lucius before rising.

He waited for the chamber to quiet down, and looked at everything.

“Ladies and Gentlemen of the Wizengamot,” he said. “I perhaps should have brought this up beforehand, but I thought the matter of what Mr. Potter did would have been properly resolved by now, and in a manner appropriate for this chamber. However, some things have come to my attention…”

He then told a tale of some things that came to light while he was doing a routine check of some Ministry files. Merely for the sake of keeping an eye on what is going on, when he found some irregularities. Misplaced files, misallocation of funds, actions which had not been sanctioned through the proper channels… and all pointing to the actions of the Minister’s Senior Undersecretary.

And, as the Wizengamot exploded, Albus sat back and enjoyed the show.

Oh, well played Lucius, he thought. Your father would be pleased by such a maneuver.

Dolores had been an occasional ally of the man, but it was clear she had become a liability to him. Furthermore, she was a toxic influence on Cornelius, and despite no direct connection to him, this was probably something he had planned on months ago.

Albus also did not doubt that everything would be as had been revealed in a subsequent investigation. Lucius either had his facts straight, or had carefully planted them with help. He wouldn’t have even needed to bribe, blackmail, or threaten anyone for it. If he had made it known what he was doing, more than half the Ministry would have been at his door and eagerly volunteering for this.

Dolores was that hated by the rank and file.

June 30, 2023 - Setagaya, Wainwright Safehouse

Richard looked over the reports of how their efforts to run any damage control in response to his principal’s actions were going. Unsurprisingly, many in the public were understanding of what happened. Surprisingly, they were not being condemnatory about it, or at least not openly. What they might think in the privacy of their own minds could be, and probably was, very different from what they were expressing in public.
He could accept that. He knew that the Japanese didn’t take well to the idea of anyone outside of law enforcement or the military, and only in the performance of their duties, using lethal force at the best of times. At least, the law abiding sectors of Japan’s population didn’t. The less law abiding sectors could be a different story.

He picked up one report that contained information that they were able to dig up on one of those killed that day. Johnny Black, or as he was known in the real world, Atsushi Kanamoto.

Name: Atsushi Kanamoto

Age: 19

Occupation: Career Criminal

Family: None

Status: Deceased, killed by Harry Potter

Mr. Kanamoto has a criminal record dating back to his early teens, having been suspected several times for burglary, theft, assault, robbery, and three murders before SAO. However, he was always able to cover his tracks well enough to divert suspicion to others, frequently his own associates. Despite his apparent career as a criminal he is not affiliated with any Yakuza organizations, though they knew of him. At the same time, he was always careful to not attract too much attention from them, and regularly backed off of whatever he was doing if any Yakuza made any noises about his operations.

His actions in SAO show a similar, if more violent bent. Information recovered from the streamed data showed that he regularly engaged in murder, torture, and rape, simply because he could. His associate, Red-eyed XaXa showed a similarly sadistic bent, but with a more demonstrated self-control.

Even were he still alive, he would not be recruitable. His criminal history and his actions in SAO imply extreme sociopathic behaviors, behaviors which SAO may have exacerbated as he no longer had to even maintain a pretense of civilized behavior.

There were similar files on some of the involved players, but the information was based more on what they could get through more legal means. He had thanked Miss Tendo for her own assistance in this, as her own grandniece had been dragged into the mess, so she had an interest in helping with the damage control. At the same time, he made a mental note to not get on her bad side.

She might not be Eden Blake, the head of Aladdin, the Department of Magic and the Arcane’s intelligence and special operations department, but that woman had an amazing ability to ferret out information. That the Wainwright’s own Yakuza contacts had warned him not to make an enemy of her only reinforced that.

"Mr. Wainwright."

"Think of the devil, and her hand appears," Richard sighed.

The man before him removed his shades, dark piercing eyes meeting his own.

"Mr. Wainwright, my stepson is in SAO, and there is a chance that he will make contact with your charge. When that happens it’ll open up a whole other can of worms." The man said.

Richard groaned. "I expected you and your wife to take interest in this anyway, Mr. Kaz." He said.
“Though I will admit, I was hoping for it to happen later, if at all.”

Luke Kaz grinned at him, and the man's dark skin made the pearly white teeth stand out all the more in the dimly lit room. "You don't know the half of it. Ms. Ayano may be the granddaughter of the Living National Treasure, Ranma Saotome, but there is one other who will now be noticing that Mr. Potter is in there, my son's godmother to be precise. Care to guess who she is?"

"A notable in Japan's magical community, is she?" Richard sighed.

"Karou Shiba."

Richard froze, meeting the grinning man's gaze. "The head of the Emperor's own demon hunters?" He asked. At Mr. Kaz’s grinning nod, he put his face into his hands. "And there’s the other shoe dropping that I’ve been worrying about since this whole debacle started. And you're telling me his death will more than likely bring not one, not two, but at the least three magical governments down on us?"

"I know this won't help, but Lady Karou's mother was a rather dear friend of the Potters via Mr. Potter’s grandparents, who funded some of the rune work that helps protect Tokyo from the supernatural.” Mr. Kaz said with no small amount of malicious glee. “And Lady Karou kept in contact with them, as well as James and Lily. Especially with Lily, who met her when she and James married. The two apparently hit it off due to Lily’s interests.”

At this point, Richard just let out a moan of surrender and laid his head on his desk for a bit. “I should have never taken this job.” He muttered.

“You should have done your research before taking the job, Mr. Wainwright.” Came the unsympathetic reply. “I won’t ask who hired you, you are sticklers about protecting the confidentiality of your clients, and I can respect that. But this entire thing was not up to your usual level. Not as… thorough, so to speak.”

Shiba Compound, Unplottable Location - Tokyo

Ami Blake, nee Anderson, suppressed the urge to thank the black clad servant who refreshed her tea. They apparently took it as a rebuke, as Karou's adopted son Takeru explained.

He may have been five years older than his adoptive mother, but the nineteenth head of the Shiba showed the eighteenth all due deference.

"This sucks," Serena muttered beside her.

Ami turned to her friend-- her first real friend, really, and smiled. "You've said that before."

"It's true," Serena Knecht, affectionately nicknamed 'Bunny' by her friends, and known in some circles within Japan as Tsuki no Serena, replied flatly. Looking at the two of them, one would guess Ami's Japanese, or at least Asian, ancestry immediately, but Serena, as Lita put it, "Jenny Bealed” it. Blond hair, blue eyes, and grew up eating pizza and dango in equal measure in Seattle.

Then again, Serena was further removed from her Japanese ancestry than Ami was, her great-grandmother coming to the Americas as a war bride after the War. An observant person could see it, but Serena’s German-American heritage was very prominent, so many often found it hard to understand how she could claim Japanese ancestry.

The two looked down at the form of August Blake. While not the 'beef cake' (that had been Raye's term) that his older adopted brother Kevin was, August was an incredibly fit and active man. Now,
after months in SAO, he looked... diminished.

"Did you hear?" Ami asked, frowning.

"The Boy-Who-Lived thing?" Serena replied, and at her friend's nod sighed. "Never good when they give you the hyphens," The fact that she herself had multiple titles was politely ignored.

"At least your default nickname doesn't have them," Ami noted with a small grin.

"Moon Princess," Serena groused, "make me sound like a magical girl out of an anime, why don't you? I am not a princess, regardless of what Kaguya says."

“She did adopt you into her clan, naming you her heir,” Ami said.

"It is better than what they call us," a new voice noted drily.

The dark haired woman that entered to join them had a quiet dignity to her. If the corporate daughters of the modern day were given the title "Oujou-sama", Lady Karou Shiba was the classic model they were based on. She looked pleased when they held themselves to respectful nods.

"What do they call you, my lady?" Ami asked.

"You are familiar with Toei's Super Sentai Franchise?" Karou prompted.

"Oh," Serena winced, "they have a nice little portmanteau name for you?"

"We are the Samurai Sentai Shinkenger. Mako's students at the Imperial Academy call her Shinken Pink," Karou noted with a wry smile.

"Shinken..." Serena puzzled. "Oh, so... like a battle ready blade."

"Apparently, they are quite disappointed she doesn't have a transformation," Karou said. Her eyes fell on the young man wearing a Nerve Gear and tied to life support before them. "Of all the ways I saw one of my boys possibly meeting Lily's boy..." She shook her head, and it was so poised and offhand it left no doubt of her upbringing. "I actually rather hope this... game Kayaba set up ends before they meet there."

"Luke mentioned that he planned on having a word with certain people about how Potter ended up in there," Ami said, and had the sudden realization that barring someone else talking, she was staring at the man laid out before them.

"I do hope your father-in-law expresses a measure of our disdain for the situation," Karou said stiffly. "They should have realized at the onset that any number of variables did not make SAO an ideal place to hide anyone, or for anyone to hide. And that's before you take into account that none of these players thought or even know they can be observed in there. Aladdin and Canada's Office of Arcana instantly offered to back up the Ministry of Shugenja once they discovered some of their citizens were here for it. That's just on the magical side; the main governments stepped up too." She snorted. "Though I do hear that Downing Street has been rather... unimpressed with the British Ministry, and the international magical press are going on about 'Fudge's Folly'. Then again, Minister Fudge isn’t leadership material. A competent administrator and bureaucrat? Perhaps, at one time, he was. But he isn’t a leader."

"Are they... that out of touch with what the rest of the world is doing?" Serena asked.

"Not really, no. They are aware of things, a few British friends were the ones who alerted me of the
Korean Smartphone Boom a few years ago, after all. Still, those who actually pay serious attention to what’s going on in the mundane world are in the minority." Karou said. "The problem is that in Britain... I think the only other country where the magicals so firmly treat themselves as having a different world is China. To many of the higher ups, being seen as interested in 'muggle' things is seen as distasteful.

"I once talked to their head of Muggle Relations, his official title makes it clear that the Ministry mainly sees his job as keeping magic out of mundane hands. He gets flack for being interested in how electricity, engines, and other modern things work. And this is his job."

Ami winced at that. “They put someone who is ignorant of these things in charge of such an office?” She asked.

"He’s at least trying to learn, which is better than his predecessor from what I head.” Karou noted. “Ami, you're working toward a medical degree and a healer’s certification,” she then said with a sigh, "and if you tried to so much as help at their St. Mungo's, you'd likely be stonewalled with those qualifications, depending on the healer or department. World War II was a wakeup call for so many magicals, even them, but they’re more inherently conservative. What they have works well enough, and is sufficient for their needs. So why would they see a need to adopt something new?"

"And yet they had the first female head of a magical government," Ami sighed.

"It was before our times, but Margaret Thatcher was a conservative too," Karou reminded, a hint of rebuke in her voice. “Also, don’t mistake conservatism for the so-called traditional values you hear some mundanes harp about, especially back in the States. Magic tends to be an equalizer in many ways, and no European wizard is foolish enough to think a witch is anything less than capable.” She smirked. “Those who do, tend to get beaten unconscious with their own testicles or their spines used on their skulls like a baseball bat.”

"... yeah, I'm nodding but most of this," Serena waved one hand over her head and whistled. "So basically, they’re twits in a way that means they aren't helping Potter much. And British witches can be hardcore too."

"And I just find it hard to really care about all of that," Ami found herself saying blandly. Her hand settled on her swollen belly. "Gus isn't going to be here when our child comes because some asshole decided he wanted to be a god-king."

Karou took her hand. "Ami. You've seen him. Every step, every battle, every bit of information he gathers is a way to get back to you."

"He shouldn't have to fight to be here," Ami said, a bit bitterly. "His life shouldn't have to stop..."

"When someone's so selfish as to have decided for everyone for their own personal benefit... that's how I know who's evil." Serena caught their looks. "I... did the profound thing again, didn't I?"

They were distracted by the sudden entrance of their friend, Raye Mendez.

“Guys,” she said, her accent stronger than normal. “I got bad news.”

“What’s that?” Serena asked.

“That hijo de puta Cassals,” she began. “He’s still alive… and he’s in SAO.”

July 3, 2023 - Portkey Terminal, Narita International Airport
Sirius tried to shake off the effects of the international portkey and resolved, for the fourth time that day, to take a plane the next time he wanted to go to the other side of the world. Portkeys were fine for shorter distances, but going from one side of the world to the other meant taking several that often pushed the limits of what the person making them, and the person using them, could handle.

Portkeys might be faster than planes, but use enough in quick succession, and even a wizard’s harder constitution took a beating, even with brief periods to rest and recover. Then again, most wizards and witches weren’t stupid or reckless enough to attempt a trip to the other side of the world by portkey over the course of a day.

On the other hand, Portkey travel can be arranged far more quickly and reliably than muggle air travel, but he really should have thought it through before doing something like this.

Oh well, it got him here, and quickly, so in the end, it didn’t matter.

Only one person mattered right now. He knew he couldn’t take Harry from the hospital he was staying at, but he could at least be there for his godson.

“Lord Black?” A woman asked from nearby with an American accent, causing him to turn and face the owner. He saw that she was dressed as a muggle, wearing jeans, a simple blouse, and carrying a purse.

“Are you Ms. Carlisle?” He asked.

“I’m her,” she said and held out her hand. “Selene Carlisle, at your service, Lord Black.”

Sirius took her hand and shook it. “Please, don’t call me that,” he said. “You can call me Sirius, or if that’s too informal, Mr. Black is fine. Now, before we talk about my coming here, I should probably clear customs, or whatever it is I have to do.”

“I will happily assist with that, Mr. Black!” A cheerful voice piped up.

Another woman emerged from the crowd. Sirius had maybe a decade on her, and she wore a simple yellow dress. Her English "flow" was better than many Japanese could manage, though her accent still made "Mister" closer to "Mis-ta". Something tickled at Sirius’ memory, which was always a good feeling, it marked another victory against the Dementors and Crotch-all right, Crouch’s mistake. He could just hear Albus’ mild rebuke and correction in his mind for calling Bartemius Crouch, Crotch.

"Kotoha Hana... Hana something." Sirius said. “You were at Lily and James’ wedding, with... Lady... Shiba! I’m sure that was it. It's hard to forget a woman with a son a good five years older than she is.”

"Hanaori, thank you for remembering," the young lady said, blushing in a manner that he distantly remembered thinking was cute back then.

"Hard to forget someone who's such a ready mix of working class honest and potentially deadly," Sirius said with a smirk, which made the blush deepen.

"Only at my Lord and Lady's orders, Mr. Black," Kotoha said with a slightly strained smile. "And only to enemies of the Sun Throne." She turned. "Ms. Carlisle," she continued.

"I've been briefed," the Wainwright-- employee? Sirius was not clear on if she was a member of the family or not, and it'd been years since he'd been in touch with that side of things. She seemed resigned about it. "We thank the Shiba clan for their aid in this matter."
“The Shiba clan is honored to help Mr. Potter's godfather reach him in his current state,” Kotoha replied.

Never had so sweet a smile accompanied so sharp and subtle a barb. He looked between the two and could see the tension, but at the same time a sort of resigned acceptance on Selene’s part. Biting the stirring rod and playing out till the snap explodes, as it were.

Suginami, Sirius’ Temporary Apartment

An hour later, he was putting his stuff away in the small flat provided for him to use during his visit. It wasn’t much, a small kitchen, a rather small main room which doubled as his bedroom, and a bathroom that had only a toilet and shower. It was good enough for him, his time in Azkaban meant that his standards were met if the place was clean, dry, and not bone-chillingly cold. Compared to his old cell, the small flat was positively luxurious.

Besides, he didn’t have much with him anyway, a few changes of clothes, some hygiene items, and Harry’s wand, Albus had handed it to him after his name was cleared. It wasn’t as if he needed more space. Besides, he was going to be in Japan for only a couple of weeks right now, so the extra space would have been wasted. It would allow for him to see how Harry was, get a feel for the place, and look for a place for a longer term stay.

The last item was a bit further in the future, as making the arrangements would take time. Though, if the Shiba Clan was getting involved, that might be completed sooner, rather than later. Maybe by early to mid-August, instead of mid to late September.

“Everything satisfactory, Mr. Black?” Selene asked.

Sirius turned and nodded. “It’s fine,” he said. “It’s small, but I’m only going to be here for a couple of weeks anyway.”

“We could have put you up in a hotel,” he heard Kotoha say from off to the side. “It would have been roomier than a six mat apartment.”

He shrugged. “And the closest one is still farther from the hospital than this place is,” he said. “Besides, I take it that the Wainwrights were using this apartment so as to have someone close to Harry.”

Selene nodded. “We have a couple of apartments in the area which some of our members used,” she admitted.

“I hope I didn’t put anyone out by coming here,” Sirius said.

“You didn’t,” Selene said. “We simply hadn’t closed the lease on the place yet.”

Sirius simply nodded, knowing that he would have to get the full story later. He knew about the Wainwrights having taken responsibility for Harry, but the presence of a representative from the Shiba Clan made it clear that might change. The current tension indicated that there were some issues with that. Not that he was surprised. When the Wainwrights took responsibility for someone’s protection, they didn’t like others butting in. However, the Shibas have been friends of the Potters since the time of Harry’s grandfather, and he didn’t doubt for a moment that they would do everything in their power to ensure that Harry was safe.

Even if it meant getting into a wand measuring contest with the Wainwrights, a contest they were likely to win due to being on their home turf.
“Well, I can finish putting everything away later,” he said. “Now, I want to see Harry.”

**July 9, 2023 - Chiyoda, Ministry of Internal Affairs - SAO Taskforce Office**

Seijiro Kukuoka looked over the summarized reports that had come in about activities in SAO. He didn’t know why Kayaba had reversed his decision to keep the outside world ignorant of what was going on a month after he originally cut the feeds. Of course, the fact that someone figured out how to look in using the Nerve Gear’s own hardware and an Ethernet connection to a computer on the first day may have had something to do with it.

For the friends and families of those trapped, it was both a blessing and a curse. For him, it was a godsend, as it meant that they could not only see what was going on, but also look in on the details for investigative purposes.

Things such as them finally being able to isolate those who were involved with a number of deaths, murders really, in the game. For all that they were watching events, there were still over seven thousand players in the game, and only a few dozen in his team who made it a full time job of watching those.

Simply put, he needed more people, but he had to make do with what he had for now.

He looked over a particular report, reading the annotations provided by one of his analysts, as well as recommendations from his legal office and nodded to himself.

There were some who were calling for the heads of all participants in that recent incident, even those merely acting in self-defense or the defense of others, with the loudest coming from those who lost someone that day. That several were highly placed individuals, and their family members or friends were the ones doing the attack and had later been tied to several murders and were thus wanting to ensure that their own reputations weren’t the only ones going down in flames didn’t surprise him.

It had the potential to get ugly, true, but there were those who were already working behind the scenes to keep things from getting that far. And that didn’t go into the fact that there were many who were lining up to defend those who were clearly defending themselves and others.

Even that one foreign boy, Harry Potter, had people who were lining up to protect him, and given how influential some of them were, that was interesting.

Add in that he was an associate, even possibly a friend, to the daughter of the RECT CEO, Asuna…

Oh yes, interesting indeed, even if he found a different player trapped in SAO to be more interesting in his eyes: Kirito.

Maybe it was because the boy was Japanese. Maybe it was because he could see something in the boy, even if he couldn’t quite define it. Or maybe it was because the boy had established himself as the most powerful, the *best*, player in SAO.

He considered it a matter of excellent fortune that two such interesting boys were working together. It made it easier to keep an eye on both without having to divert someone from something else.

**August 11, 2023 - Bethesda, MD, Aladdin Headquarters**

“And how was your trip to Japan, Luke?” Eden Blake asked as her husband walked into her office. She was a woman of severe lines, with an almost cold, aristocratic face and eyes. The grey robes over the business suit she wore and the black hair tied up into a severe bun enhanced the “ice queen” image that she wore like a cloak while on the job.
Luke Kaz shrugged. “Fine enough,” he said. “Ami sends her regards, and don’t worry. She knows that your duties prevented you from being there for Alice’s birth last month.”

Eden nodded and waved him to sit down. “Give me a few minutes, please,” she requested. “I need to finish going over these reports, and I can give you the proper attention.”

Luke just sat and waited, Eden’s habits when she was on the job were something he had long since gotten used to. On the job, she was coldly professional, not letting anything distract her from her duties.

Off the job, she left the ‘ice queen’ at the office and warmed up considerably. Her harsh and aristocratic features softened, her hair was let down, and she didn’t bother with the cold professionalism.

The latter was the woman he fell in love with, and he was willing to accept that it came with the former. He, himself, was a different man on the job.

In their line of work, wearing a mask, having a separate persona for it... was a necessity. They needed to separate the work from their personal lives, or their work would consume their lives, and destroy them.

Seeing their youngest, Evie, that close to death was only going to happen once.

Eden finished going over the reports and put them into a folder. She picked up her wand and gave the folder a few taps before placing it in her outbox. She then sighed, stretched, and gave her head a shake.

“God, I wish I could retire,” she said. “When my predecessor gave me this job, the asshole didn’t tell me just how much planting my ass in a chair and going over other people’s work was involved, and how little actually overseeing things I would actually be doing.”


Eden snorted and then looked at the man she had been married to for ten years. “How are things in Japan?” She asked.

“As I mentioned, they’re fine for now,” Luke said. “Our suspicions that the Wainwrights were involved in Mr. Potter ending up there were right, and you’ll need to have a word with Old Man Aloysius about that. Looking at the entire thing, it was rather sloppy of them.”

Eden nodded. “And he’s probably taken it out on whoever was responsible for that op of theirs already,” she said. “He’s kept to their tradition of not harming children, and he has a very dim view of those who do, even unintentionally.” She then sighed. “If it wasn’t for the fact that they’re needed where they are to keep a pretense of order amongst the criminal element, I think they would have gone fully legitimate a long time ago.”

Luke barked out a laugh. “It would be more certain in its profits for them,” he admitted. “The one in charge of them there, Richard, he was less than surprised when I came by, though he was not happy to find out the Shibas were getting involved.”

Eden smirked. “They failed to research Mr. Potter’s family history then?” She asked.

Luke chuckled. “Oh, they did fail there.” He said gleefully. “The Shibas have been on good terms with the Potters since the boy’s grandfather helped them with warding Tokyo to help with
supernatural threats back in the sixties. Had they known that, they probably wouldn’t have accepted the job.”

Eden gave an unsympathetic shrug at that. “Their problem, not ours,” she said. “Anyway, how is August doing in there?”

“He’s doing fine,” Luke said. “If anything, he’s carrying on the family tradition, even if it’s through working under someone else.” He then snorted. “And she’s an interesting one.”

“Oh?” Eden asked.

Luke grinned. “Mizore Yasaka,” he said. “Youngest daughter of The Yokai of Kyoto, who is on the warpath when it comes to Kayaba. Goes by the name of Argo in there. That girl is running her own information network and spy ring in there, and she’s also the one we are betting on figuring out who Mr. Potter is, if she hasn’t already.”

September 1, 2023 - Suginami, Nakano General Hospital

Sirius stared at the form lying in the bed. Harry had been trapped in that illusion for almost a year, and that period of inactivity was showing on his body. He had read the reports, learning that the boy was largely underfed, but not malnourished, and everything involved. And if he were to be honest, Harry was beginning to look like he when he escaped Azkaban.

Beginning to, but not quite. The doctors informed him that of all the SAO patients, the boy was one of those in the best condition. His muscles were atrophying, but with the means they were using to minimize it, and his wizard’s constitution, the degradation of his body was considerably slower than the average patient’s.

A small mercy, really, and it only meant that if, no when, Harry got out, his recovery would be that much faster. Physically at any rate. How he would come out of this mentally could be a different story.

Especially since after that brief period of time where he and his friends just stepped back and got some much needed R&R, they have been back on the front lines of SAO, fighting to clear the game.

He once asked Albus why they hadn’t used magic to get Harry out of there. And he still recalled that conversation.

“And what means do you propose we use, Sirius?” Albus asked. “Vanish the headset? A simple charm? Transfiguration? Two hundred people died on the first day because those headsets were forcibly removed from them. We probably could do it, but would it be guaranteed to not harm or kill Harry?”

“And who do we test it on?” He then asked. “Harry? Some random muggle who would be killed if it failed? And if it failed, how many times would we need to refine and test it until it worked? How many people would have to die in order for us to do so, and all for the sake of one boy? We have no right to make that decision, Sirius.

“And if we did try something like that, how long would we be able to keep it secret? How many would it take before the Japanese took offense to what we were doing? A thousand? A hundred? Fifty? Wars have been started for less.”

He would admit that the old man had a point, several points. But as he looked at the boy on the bed, knowing that the mind was trapped in an illusory world that was all too real, he wished there was
something he could do.

“It’s hard on us as well, Mr. Black,” he heard Harry’s current watcher say. He turned to look at her, Selene Carlisle. One of those who had brought Harry here to Japan, and one of those responsible for his being trapped.

She looked at Harry and gave a sad smile. “We had no way of expecting something like this to happen,” she said. “And it wasn’t as if we were going to make an issue when he was tracked down. Our job, was to bring him here, and distract him with SAO. Instead, we entered him into... that.”

Sirius elected to say nothing, he had received several formal apologies from the members of the Wainwright team, as well as a relatively full disclosure from the team leader.

Relatively full. They would not reveal who hired them for the job, but he didn’t reasonably expect them to. They protected the confidentiality of their clients, and they would not violate that confidentiality. He could respect that, no matter how much it irritated him. If he knew who hired them for this, he would then have a target.

Not that he didn’t have his suspicions already.

He then looked back to the computer screen. “It’s just, he should be worrying about girls, homework, Quidditch, and enjoying learning magic,” he said. “He should be on the Hogwarts Express, reconnecting with his friends, figuring out what will be going on during the school year, and planning pranks. He shouldn’t be having to fight for his life, plan assaults, or wonder if he and his friends will survive another day.”

Selene nodded, but said nothing. What could she say?

September 11, 2023 - Hogwarts, Headmaster’s Office

Albus looked at the map, seeing the locations of everyone present. He had to give credit to James, Remus, and Sirius, mapping the castle like they did and doing the charms work to create something like this was quite the achievement.

And he had to thank the Weasley Twins for loaning him the map. Their discovery of Pettigrew had shown that the map was useful for more than just pranks, and with the Tri-Wizard Tournament coming, he asked if he could borrow it on occasion. Just to ensure that no one who is unauthorized was trying to sneak in.

Or, as he was seeing, had already snuck in.

Albus sighed as he looked at the name that was in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, with a full class, Bartemius Crouch. The fact that the name Alastor Moody was in his quarters, but hadn’t moved from his location for several hours, indicated what had happened.

He had thought Alastor was simply demonstrating his normal paranoia when he had explained why he didn’t want to know all the security details Albus was putting in place. Just as he wasn’t going to tell Albus all that he would put in place.

“With something like this, someone might have the idea of using polyjuice to impersonate one of us,” Alastor said in his habitually growling voice. “With my luck, it’ll be me captured and kept alive only long enough for them to enact whatever plan they have.”

“Surely they would not.” Albus countered. “They would have to get the habits of whoever they were impersonating down quite well, and have to maintain it for some time. There are very few who can
“Still, better safe, than sorry.” Alastor said. “Better to obliviate me of this conversation as it is. And if something does happen, I will simply say, ‘I told you so.’ After all… CONSTANT VIGILANCE”

Albus tapped the map with his wand. “Mischief Managed,” he said, turning it back into the apparently blank sheet of parchment masqueraded as. He would have to review his plans for the Goblet’s security and make some changes to his own planned contributions.

Perhaps altering the Age Line to recognize when someone was too old would work. Having it also take a sample of the magical signature and have it compared to the name and a few signatures he has a knowledge of… he mentally shook that line of thought out of his head.

He could just keep it simple and simply keep an eye on the Goblet for the brief time that the names will be allowed to be entered into it. A ward to alert him, a couple of security measures added to keep the target in place, and it would do just as well.

Yes, he thought to himself. Best to keep it simple. A night or two of missed sleep is a small sacrifice for me to make in this case.

October 4, 2023 - Suginami, Nakano General Hospital

Tetsuhiko watched the computer screen that was showing what his daughter was doing and watched as his daughter’s companions were wishing her a happy birthday as they sat down for a meal. He and his wife had taken the time for the evening to come by and spend time with Keiko, to wish her a happy birthday themselves, despite the fact that it would be a meaningless gesture.

Meaningless, at least to Keiko, but not to them. And as he stood by his wife as she watched the small party happening in SAO, he gave her friends and companions and brief look.

Kirito and Asuna had apparently fit into the role of older siblings. Kirito the somewhat aloof, but caring big brother; Asuna as the occasionally strict, but equally caring older sister. He approved how she had connected with the two them.

And then there was Hadrian, a boy that he wanted to shake the hand of, forcibly welcome into the family in the Saotome tradition, and strangle in equal measure.

It had been clear early on that the boy was sweet on Keiko. His actions may have been those of a perfect gentleman, but he had been spending too much time around Keiko for Tetsuhiko’s comfort. Especially as anyone with eyes could tell that the two were getting close and comfortable with each other. Far too close and comfortable with each other for his peace of mind.

And that merely irritated him about the boy. Keiko was his daughter, and it was a father’s prerogative to be overprotective. It was what happened in June which made him want to strangle the kid.

True, the boy was fiercely protective of Keiko, and that was proven back then. True, the boy had helped her through the several emotional roller coasters that she went through because of that day. And the boy had many things about him which he approved of.

But he was Keiko’s father, and Hadrian was a boy who was around his daughter.

You better survive this boy, and make sure Keiko does as well, he thought. Because we both need to have a talk.
October 30, 2023 - Hogwarts, Great Hall

Barty quietly walked toward the goblet, or as quietly as Moody’s prosthetic leg would allow. The fake eye whirled in its socket, scanning everything and finding nothing, as he continued on his path.

The plan he had worked out with the Dark Lord had been brilliant, especially as he had learned of the tournament from his now disgraced father. He had enjoyed interrogating him for all the relevant information before the strain of the interrogation killed the man. It was regrettable that it hadn’t taken longer, but he learned what he wanted to know.

It was unfortunate that the Potter brat was stuck in Japan. Trapped in some sort of illusion the muggles had managed to create, and intended to be used as a *game* of all things. A game for what? He didn’t know or care, but it did add a complication to the Dark Lord’s plans.

No matter, just because the boy was out of reach didn’t mean that they couldn’t use the opportunity this provided. After all, if they could get the boy into the tournament as a competitor, he would be forced to compete. And with him unable to, it would strip the boy of his magic.

He had brought this up, and the Dark Lord had found the possibility worthwhile. Why change the plan, when they could instead carry it out and simply aim for a different result? And even if it didn’t work, it wasn’t like they lost anything from the attempt.

Sweeping the hall with his false eye one last time, he pulled out a scrap of parchment. It had been difficult to get a hold of a copy of the boy’s written signature, and outright impossible to duplicate the magical one, but the Goblet was from a time when things were less… specific in their requirements. It only needed a name, nothing more. A magical signature, or even a drop of blood would have been better, but a name would be enough.

And, as he made to place the scrap into the flames, his movements were halted completely. He blinked with his good eye, and then realized what it meant. Dumbledore had put in measures that Moody didn’t know of.

*Clever, old man,* he thought. *Very clever. Too bad that the one thing you might want, such as the Dark Lord’s location, is something I can’t tell.* He then began to laugh. A dry, rasping laugh that held a hint of madness.

Later - Hogwarts, Headmaster’s Office

“Cornelius, what were you thinking?!” Albus roared. “Bringing in a Dementor like that? And for *what*? To make a gesture at being seen doing something? We had him captured, his wand taken, and Alastor made sure, thoroughly so, that he was in no state to escape.”

"Albus---"

"Silence," Albus said, a hint of magic seeping into his voice, "Or I'll just call your old schoolmate. William Gravel, mm? The Slytherin who helped 'discourage' your little test selling scheme? Her Majesty’s own SAS Combat Mage Bodyguard?"

Cornelius, to his credit, went silent.

"It would be easy," Albus said, his voice soft, but without its normal warmth or whimsy. "Her Majesty made an offer to lend his services out. Had Alastor not said “no”... In fact, I think maybe I should have him here. Alastor?"

Moody looked a moment from where he stood between a petrified Crouch and a now mercifully
cowed Dementor. Alastor Moody was one of the few Wizards who had that combination of viciousness and inherent good that was able to scare one. “Yes, Albus?”

“Would you be insulted if I decided to take Her Majesty up on her offer?”

“Provided I get to meet the young Sergeant Major again?” Moody asked. “To see if he's still sharp?”

“I'll be sure to have Poppy on hand in Her Majesty approves,” Albus promised.

“Then no, I would not be insulted at all.”

“Albus,” Cornelius began, "Surely we can--"

"And I do believe it may be about time to have words with the Prime Minister about you and how you've handled recent events," Albus said, ignoring the man. “I had to run damage control for all of this when I was in Bern for an ICW meeting earlier this month, Cornelius. And do you want to know what many of those representatives said? No matter, I'll inform you of what they said."

If there had been ice in Albus’ voice before, it was now positively arctic.

“They told me, in no uncertain terms, that your… bungling is the politest word any of them used, don’t ask me to translate what the Russian representative said… your bungling has made England a laughingstock. The Japanese and the Americans have done more in this situation than we have, and need I remind you the long memories from the ending of the Second World War that make the two magical governments wary of each other to this day? And they were in agreement on this matter, in agreement Cornelius. And England, where I was born and raised, and worked alongside the numerous others to hold your post with more grace, does nothing while you play your games."

“But Lucius…”

“I’ve talked to Malfoy on this matter, Cornelius, don't you dare try and play us off each other.” Albus interrupted. “He told me that he advised you to at least make a token gesture in this matter. He also offered to take veritaserum to verify that he was being truthful. You know his family’s stance on that, and yet he offered.”

Cornelius managed something that sounded vaguely like “Tickle on the tum,” but was otherwise silent.

Albus stared at the man for a little longer before tiring of his presence. “I think, Cornelius, that you should go back to your office and think very carefully about how you go forward from here on out,” he said. “And take that Dementor with you.”

Seeing the opportunity to escape, Cornelius left the office with alacrity, the Dementor following and giving Alastor Moody what could only be a wary look.

"I say we sic the Wizengamot and the Department Heads on him," Alastor muttered.

"Let him tighten the noose around his neck a bit more, Alastor," Albus advised.

His old friend snorted. "And I'm the scary one."

The two of them shared a chuckle before Albus walked over to his fireplace. It was time to get Amelia, so she could take Barty Crouch Jr. off their hands.

**November 24, 2023 - Mie Prefecture, Unknown Location**
Sachiko Yasaka glared at the partially decomposed body before her, golden eyes blazing, the fur on her nine tails bristling from her anger, and the hem of her kimono swayed as if in a wind that wasn’t there. Her escorts, humans sent to accompany her by the Shiba clan, gave her a wary glance, but otherwise stayed back. They knew better than to get in the way with an angry Youkai when they didn’t have to.

He was dead. Akihiko Kayaba was dead, and from all indications, via a slit throat. She internally raged as her golden eyes carefully looked over the contents of the cabin, little more than a shack, where they had found him.

Someone had beaten her to it. Someone prevented her from unleashing her righteous wrath on the man responsible for her daughter’s situations. Someone had denied her, her, any satisfaction.

“If you were expecting to meet me in person,” A voice said. “I apologize that I can’t as I’m a bit… indisposed as it were.”

She glared in the direction the voice came from and saw him looking at her from a computer screen. She then glanced back at the body, and then back at the screen.

“I would ask how,” she said carefully and coldly, her anger just under the surface. “But it doesn’t matter, does it? Akihiko Kayaba. You’re no longer a man, but a... ‘ghost in the machine’ as the philosophers would phrase it.”

The face on the screen nodded. “Indeed,” Akihiko Kayaba said. “The body is dead, but the mind lives on. An attempt, as it were, to see if it was possible. The electrical signals that once used the brain as their medium, now supported by superconducting circuits. If it failed, the mind would have died with the body and we wouldn’t be having this conversation. It allows for an… interesting perspective, to say the least. Free from the demands and constraints of the flesh, but limited and constrained in a different way.” He then gave her a look. “And I do have to say, my lady, of all those who I expected to find me in this state, a Kitsune wasn’t one of them. And certainly not one as august as yourself.”


Kayaba shook his head. “The former lover was the one who killed me, or at least the body.” He said simply. “I had only just uploaded myself into the system only minutes before she tracked me down. I watched as she stared in shock at what I apparently did, believing me as close to dead as it would be. And I watched, as she finished killing the body, a knife, a simple slitting of the throat.” He gave a shrug. “Perhaps she thought it a mercy, to simply finish what I apparently did to myself. Perhaps not, and she was simply making sure I was dead. It matters not.”

Sachiko stared at him, horrified at the sheer apathy that he was demonstrating. She heard a muttered curse from one of her human escorts, the young man from the Tani, showing that they had similar feelings. But for her, it was in many ways worse.

She was a Youkai, a creature of passion, of desire, of unfettered emotion. Human desires and dreams brought her kind about, their very beliefs permeating the earth and giving birth to her kind; the dark reflection of Japan’s people.

Humans did not like the unpleasant truths Youkai represented, and the two races had been at each other’s throats from the beginning. Things might be more peaceful between the two races now, but it was a fragile one at best, and one maintained by the Imperial Family. Guarded by the Shiba clan and the Underworld Knights on the one side, and the various courts of the Guardian Demons on the other.
As it always was, as it should be, and as it must always be. Let the Westerners, the followers of Abraham and Mohammed have their dualistic conflict between Good and Evil with their dogmatic capitals. Those in the East, would instead seek a balance, a co-existence.

The family that represented Japan’s spiritual heart was the only thing that kept the two races from reigniting their constant conflict. A conflict that neither side would win, or be able to.

For as Youkai were the dark reflection of humanity, needing humans to exist, so did humanity need them in order to truly feel. Their passions, their drive, their ability to change. Feelings and belief brought them about, and it would be the absence of both which would be their end. Neither was above the other. Rather, they were of the same level. Codependent.

She had once been shown a possible world by one of the Seven Sages, long ago, that showed her why Youkai and humans were so dependent on one another. The world she saw, a possibility so remote it might as well not be considered possible. That world without Youkai and only humans was… pathetic. Little emotion… no passion… merely… existing and being deluded into calling it living. A world that was not even worth pity or scorn.

And the one person who could have made that possibility a reality had been shown it by her. The girl’s sheer horror at what she saw before outright rejecting the possibility of that world’s existence said it all. She had rejected it, and the possibility of that world had ended right then and there.

So, to see this… this abomination in a human’s form be so disconnected from it all, it horrified her. It was her complete antithesis. It was unnatural. And not because of where he had put his mind, but because there was no soul from the result, no passion that she could feel. Just an apparently cold logic.

This was a man who had avoided all passion and killed his humanity for it.

One of her escorts gave a cough and she turned her attention to the young woman, Kotoha Hanaori, if she recalled. “Yes, Miss Hanaori?” She asked, using the distraction as an opportunity to regain her composure.

“Lady Yasaka,” the woman, Kotoha, said. “This raises questions that we need answers to.” She looked at Kayaba’s digital avatar with some disgust. “Such as why.”

“It is quite simple,” the avatar said in response to the implied question. “When they finally clear Sword Art Online, and I have full confidence that they will, I will die with it. And what more appropriate way, than to die as it will?”

Sachiko nodded, understanding what he was saying. “And all this?” She asked, gesturing at what was in the cabin.

“Do with it what you will.” Kayaba said. “There is nothing that would help you in any way. I said how those trapped could get out, and that is, and will remain, the only way.”

She nodded and then gestured for her two escorts to wait for her outside. The two of them took one look at her and quickly exited.

She then gathered her power, blue flames appearing in her hands and floating around her. “My daughter, Mizore, is trapped in your little game.” Sachiko Yasaka, Youkai of Kyoto and Kyuubi no Kitsune said coldly. “And while I can’t touch you because of what you’ve done to yourself, I will at least get something from this.”
The avatar nodded and cut the connection.

And with a scream, she unleashed the flames, immolating everything around her. Kayaba’s body, the equipment, the structure itself, all became ash as she unleashed her fury. She would apologize to Lady Shiba and the Emperor later, but the catharsis of being able to do something, even though it was meaningless… it made her feel better.

She tried not to indulge the urge. As with humans, doing so could be addictive, leading you to creating more circumstances for release. But now… now she made a rare exception to her personal rule, and did indulge herself.

**January 1, 2024 - Suginami, Nakano General Hospital**

It was Harry’s sudden scream of pain, a scream that sounded from two places, that made Sirius realize that something had just gone horribly wrong. He looked over to where Harry lay, shocked to the core. He could hear both Selene and Kotoha, who were Harry’s daytime bodyguards, yelp.

Not once had Harry stirred or reacted to anything from the outside world, not as far as he knew. The Nerve Gear completely cut him off, so to speak, so for something like this to happen…

His shock turned to horror as he watched something like smoke seep out from beneath the helmet, but smoke didn’t have such a… malevolence to it. He saw it seep out, and then into the helmet. A quick glance to the screen saw Harry clutching his scar, smoke seeping through the fingers and moving to…

*Oh, bloody buggering shite,* he thought as he saw what was happening, and what Harry was starting to notice.

“What…?” he heard Kotoha say from off to the side.

“What the hell is that?” Selene asked.


“I’m… gonna have to call the boss in for this.” Selene said. “And the Shiba Clan.” She added at Kotoha’s look. “It’s all being recorded, so… whatever happens, we will see how this ends.”

**Shiba Compound**

"Karou! Takeru!" Ami called out.

The 19th lord of the Shiba entered the room, "Gus is joining Mr. Potter, then?" Takeru asked. He smirked at Ami and Lita's look. "Harry's guards contacted us. His scar... the Nerve Gear absorbed something from it."

"What?" Lita Alexander asked from where she sat before the computer that let them see into SAO. "So that's-- and there Gus goes, off to help someone face a dark wizard."

Ami smiled in spite of herself, and looked down to the baby in her arms. "Your father. We'll have words with him when he gets back, won't we Alice?" She looked at Takeru. "And Karou?"

“She’s already headed over there, and will probably be at Nakano General Hospital in a few minutes with Lady Serena,” he said. “And yes, I know she doesn’t like being referred to in that manner by me.”
Lita snorted while Ami merely smiled. Takeru addressing Serena as “Lady” or “Princess”, all due to her being adopted by Kaguya, was his way of teasing her.

**Hogwarts**

"The elves informed me it was safe now," the Grey Lady said, a sad smile on her face as the elf beside her held up something he'd only known through legend. "That boy, Riddle, tainted my mother's legacy... but it is clean now."

Albus blinked, as one of his many competing hypothesis seemed to be proven, then frowned. "You said it was clean now?" He asked.

"Of all but my mother's enchantments. It is clean of the... presence he hid inside it."

Albus spun toward his fireplace, absently grabbing the entire container of Floo powder as he did so.

"Will this be helping Young Master Harry?" the elf holding the relic asked.

"I'm not sure, Milly," Albus said to the eldest of the surviving Potter elves, who had come to Hogwarts as James had directed in the event of his death. "You'll stay here so you can tell Dobby and the others, I hope?"

"Milly is thanking you, Mister Headmaster, sir," the elf managed. "This is... not being something we was expecting. Stranger than Mistress Lily's 'Telly Box.'"

"No one was expecting this," Albus murmured. He would have to alert someone. He had no doubt that Harry’s protectors were already noticing something, and if they knew, the Shibas probably did as well. So who should he...?

He stopped and then sighed. *Of course*, he thought as he placed the Floo powder down. There was no one he needed to immediately contact. He took one look at the relic, Ravenclaw’s Diadem, and then went back to his desk.

Sitting down, he looked at the Grey Lady. “My Lady, could you get Fillius?” he asked. “I do believe he would be delighted to know that such a precious relic has been “found” and safely recovered.”

**Malfoy Manor**

Lucius stared down at his arm, or to be more precise, where a certain mark had once been. It had started with a flash of blinding pain, like molten glass being poured on the spot where the Dark Mark was, and then... numbness. A lack of feeling, the absence of an old and constant ache which he had resigned himself to having for the rest of his life.

He had screamed from the pain, he would not deny that, and from Narcissa’s concerned look, it had been… rather loud. But when she pulled the sleeve of his robe up, he heard her shocked gasp and looked at it for himself. He had expected to see it charred, withered, or some other unpleasant sight… not clear and unblemished skin where the Dark Mark had once been.

And as the reality of what that signified to him made its way through his mind, he started to laugh.

He was free of that man. He was finally, truly, and completely *free* of him!

“Lucius?” His wife asked.

“It’s over, Narcissa,” he said and then looked at his unmarked arm. “I’m free of him at last.”
He then sighed. It was not in disappointment, but there was a hint of ruefulness.

With his luck, the boy his son imagined to be his rival was responsible. If that was so, and the boy managed to escape Sword Art Online, he would have to remember to do something nice for him.

**Azkaban**

"And you say they both started wailing at about the same time?" The Warden asked, frowning at two of his most demented prisoners.

"Yes, sir," the guard reporting said, shaking his head as "Bloody" Bella slammed the wall between Barry Crouch Jr. and herself. "Crotch", for his part, was screaming invectives right back at her. "And then they started arguing over who had failed their Lord more."

The Warden considered it a moment, then shrugged. "Frankly, Jenkins, after what Lestrange did to the Longbottoms and Crotch tried to do to the Potter boy..."

Jenkins nodded. "Let 'em wail."

**Hogwarts, Great Hall**

Hermione watched as the woman entered the Great Hall, making the students look up from their breakfast. The woman had oriental features, dark brown hair, and wearing some kind of robe that she couldn’t quite remember the name of. And from the clear purpose in her stride, and the small parcel in her hand, she had an idea as to why the woman had arrived. From Ron’s muttered curse, he had come to the same conclusion.

Just what had Harry gotten himself into this time?

She followed the woman’s steady walk to the Head Table with her eyes and waited to see what revelations would come about. The fact that the Headmaster had stood and made his way around and to the front mean that whatever it was, it was important.

##

“Lady Shiba,” Albus said, bowing to her. “To what do I owe this honor?”

Karou Shiba returned the bow. “My apologies for interrupting your meal,” she said. “But it was felt that it would be best that this news be delivered in person.”

Albus’ eyes went to the parcel in her hands. “Harry?” He asked.

Karou nodded. “He is doing well,” she said. “Better than well, if I may say.” She then had a small smile. “But, I think it would be best for you to see what happened for yourself. The news it will impart is... I believe you will find it to be good.”

"... so this is what this feels like," Albus murmured, and that earned him a musical laugh. His reputation on the international scene for being congenially mysterious was well earned. And now, a woman little more than a quarter his age was putting him on the receiving end of it.

He gave her an amused look and nodded before turning his attention to the rest of the Great Hall.

“May I have your attention?” He asked. “It is my honor to welcome to Hogwarts, Lady Karou Shiba, Eighteenth Head of the Shiba Clan of Japan, and one of the chief advisors in magical matters to the Emperor of Japan.” He then turned his attention to the Gryffindor table.
“Miss Granger,” he said. “I am sure you have already ascertained the purpose for her visit. Can you and a few of your fellow students go to the Viewing Room and fetch the Viewer?”

Hermione nodded and stood. “Justin, Daphne, Anthony, will you three accompany me?” She asked, naming a member from each different house to Albus’ delight. At their nods, she nodded to him and sketched a passable, if awkward, bow to Karou before they all left.

“You already have a suspicion then?” Karou asked.

Albus nodded. “Indeed I do,” he said. “Should I advise the younger students to leave?”

“Only if you feel it would be necessary.” She said. “And while we wait, perhaps I should tell you how those who watched things in Japan reacted. The reactions of the family of Miss Ayano were particularly amusing.”

“Oh?”

Karou smiled. “I heard them discussing the practicality of preparing a wedding for her and Mr. Potter to happen the moment they get out,” she said with some amusement. “And that is if they don’t figure out a way to marry the two of them while they’re still in SAO. I distinctly remember them telling Mr. Black, in a joking manner mind you, that it was basically a family tradition.”

“And how did Sirius take it?” Albus asked.

Karou smiled. “He joined in with them on the plotting,” she replied.

##

It had taken Hermione and her associates thirty minutes to gather everything and bring it to the Great Hall. By the time they arrived, she noticed that the first, second and most of the third years had already left, probably at the Headmaster’s request.

The rest of the student body was still present, and clearly curious. She could also tell that the visiting students from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons were wondering what was going on as well. Headmistress Maxime was calmly talking with Hagrid, probably getting the relevant issue from him. Headmaster Karkaroff was looking somewhat… hopeful about something. So too, was Professor Snape.

“Ah, Miss Granger,” the Headmaster said. “I do hope that you’re not disconcerted by the presence of an audience.”

Hermione shook her head. “It won’t be a problem, sir.”

She directed Justin and Anthony to begin setting up the Viewer, focusing on the task at hand. While the presence of so many was unexpected, she could deal with it. After all, it wasn’t the first time Harry’s misadventures ended up having a larger audience than normal.

Hopefully, this wouldn’t end up like what had happened back in June.

Once the setup was complete, and Justin indicated that everything checked out. Turning to Lady Shiba, she watched as the woman had already anticipated her and already had the parcel opened. Reaching in, the woman pulled out a disk and handed it to her.

“Thank you, Lady Shiba,” she said, bowing awkwardly. The woman returned the bow, smiled and nodded as she stepped back. Hermione walked over to the Viewer, she made another mental note to
come up with a proper name for it, inserted the disk, and stepped back. Looking over the Great Hall, she took in a breath.

“We are here to watch the events that Lady Shiba has brought to us related to the activities of Harry Potter in Sword Art Online on this day, the First of January, two thousand and twenty-four.” She said formally, adopting the role that had become habit with regard to these events. “I would please request that you all hold any questions until the end. Thank you.” She then pulled out her wand and touched the rune to begin the playback.

**Headmaster’s Office**

Albus could still hear the cheering and partying going on from his office, as the knowledge that Voldemort was truly vanquished spread. And as the cheers sounded, soon to spread to the rest of the magical community, he looked out the window and onto the grounds with a small smile. One that was perhaps a bit bittersweet, but a smile nonetheless.

Harry had done it. He had fulfilled the prophecy that had been hanging over his head since Tom had believed that it applied to him. And he did so in a way that no one could have anticipated.

After all, who would believe that “the power he knows not” would not be some power that was intrinsic to Harry, as he, himself, had believed, but instead, but instead a power gifted to him by another?

And the fact that it was completed in a way that no one who knew about it could have anticipated was probably for the best. Things would become downright dull otherwise.

Tom’s safeguards against death, his horcruxes, they failed to save him. They failed because the man had failed to anticipate that whatever means he used to bring himself to Harry would have brought the entirety of him, destroying the magic that made the horcruxes what they were. They failed because immortality was not something that mortals should attain.

He remembered something Nicholas told him when he had requested that Albus destroy the stone.

> “The Philosopher’s Stone doesn’t give immortality, but simply undoes the damage that life does to the body. It can extend life, and stave off Death, but it cannot prevent it. And, it’s for the best that it’s so.

*Pernelle and I, we’ve seen what happens to those who try to attain immortality, and it never works. No matter what means they use, no matter how successful they think they are... Death... It can only be delayed. Not stopped. And… it is time for my wife and I to stop missing our appointments with It.*

*We have long been ready for it… so for us.... it’s just finally taking a step. That one, necessary first step. That first step onto the next Great Adventure. When it is your time, young Albus, I will make sure to tell you of what wonders there are to be seen."

And perhaps, that was all there was to it. Tom’s desire for immortality was doomed to failure from the start.

So he smiled. A smile for the victory of a boy who had won a war that should never been his to fight in the first place. A smile, for the boy would have what he hopes will be a long and prosperous life ahead of him.

Because now, without Tom’s shadow hanging over him like a malevolent cloak, Harry Potter could finally, and truly, live his life.
Word spread around Hogwarts quickly, and to the rest of Magical Britain almost as quickly. While the accounts would vary, they all agreed on the basics: Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, had killed Voldemort almost as soon as he came back. How did he come back? Who cares?! Harry Potter set his sword on fire, planted him into the ground with it, and burned him to ash.

And that foreign woman, Lady Shibo- Shibi- whatever… she said that her own people had verified it. They used their own spells, charms, and anything else they had on hand to confirm it. And confirm it they did.

Voldemort was dead, and he wasn’t coming back.

So let the parties get started!

Chapter End Notes

That... was a lot of writing, and it reminded me why I tried to keep my arcs to only covering a few months, rather than the six months between the conclusion of the last arc and the conclusion of this one. A lot happened, it kept growing, and growing, and... Eventually, I just ran out of ideas, and didn't want to sit on this for more to come.

Some world building bits...

The Kaguya mentioned is the same one from the Japanese legend, Tales of the Bamboo Cutter, and she sits on the Moon Throne, the mirror to the Sun Throne. This is representative of the various interconnections between the mundane and the magical that forms such an integral part of Japanese culture in my story.

As you can see, I brought in Gus' wife, and several of her friends. I don't think I have to explain where I got the inspirations for their names, though they aren't magical girls here. Demon Hunters? To a degree, but it's more that they're girls who got dragged into it by circumstance, and now work with the official ones. For the most part, they're still civilians. As for Serena, she has the title, and is less than amused by it. But hey, that's what happens when you get adopted into a royal family and named heir.

And if you needed any more indication that these aren't the same girls, Serena was the one Sachiko showed that vision to, and she wanted nothing to do with such a world.

As for the Shibas, they're cheerfully being borrowed from Toei's Samurai Sentai Shinkenger.

Anyway, the next arc will begin with the next chapter, and our next antagonists are...
January 7, 2024 - Aincrad 50th Floor, Algade

After they finished with founding their guild, the six of them had decided to call it a day. Not because anything was particularly difficult or exhausting, but after fighting an army’s worth of kobolds, they’d had enough with fighting mobs for the day.

So once they had gotten back to the fiftieth floor, they had all gone their separate ways, deciding to meet back up at the Golden Way for dinner. For Harry and Silica, they decided to take a walk around Algade, taking the time to explore the small city and see what it really had to offer.

And Harry was impressed by what they had found so far. While there was a clear market district, it was obvious that the city had numerous smaller shops and hidden nooks where a player could find the most surprising things. He remembered Rain once commenting that it was almost like Akihabara in Chiyoda, while Asuna compared it to Ikebukuro in Toshima. He was reminded of Porbello Road from Bedknobs and Broomsticks, which Flitwick had mentioned a few times was just as wonderful for real, and had its own magical side. The things he learned in the Hogwarts Book Club...

Harry remembered the two getting into a heatedly friendly argument about that while he just sat there quietly and looking confused. Silica and Lux watched on with some amusement, both making comparisons to it being a friendly debate between an otaku and someone who was more proper, which was probably more accurate than either Rain or Asuna would want to admit.

He was also hearing some rumors about some place near Algade’s Western Gate that was being called Akiba-SAO, whatever that meant.

But still, Harry found the number of shops in Algade an interesting change of pace from the norm for SAO. True, he was not always able to tell what they were selling from just looking at the shop facades, which turned out rather embarrassing on one occasion. Silica would be teasing him for days about accidentally taking her into that one shop with fairly… risqué wares it had.

He very carefully didn’t make any comment on the fact that she made a note of its location. In fact, he very carefully didn’t think of why she would make note of its location. The idea that she would go back there at a later time to… buy… Bad brain! He thought.

“You’re imagining me in some of those wares, aren’t you?” Silica asked suddenly, and with some amusement. “Ecchi.”

Harry blushed and then got a confused look on his face. “What does the letter ‘H’ have to do with you implying my mind’s in the gutter?”

Silica blinked and then shook her head. “Oh, right,” she said. “You speak Japanese so well, that it’s easy to forget that you don’t always get some colloquial terms. Ecchi is how that letter is pronounced in Japanese, and is the first letter of hentai, when written in romanji. Do the math.”

Harry nodded, knowing what that particular word meant and then blinked. He then shot Silica a look. Two can play that game, he thought. “Well then, yes,” he said leaning in. “I find the idea of you in some of those… outfits... to be rather... interesting. Especially that one number that was in blue.”

Silica blushed. “You are such a boy,” she said in mock irritation, giving a halfhearted swat in his
direction. “Your mind’s only on one thing.”

Harry easily dodged the swat and shrugged. “I am,” he replied cheekily. “And that’s a bad thing... how?”

“It’s not.” Silica replied, her blush fading.

“Besides, I have something they don’t” Harry then said cheerfully.

Silica raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

Harry leaned in. “I, unlike them, have you at my side.” He said. “A companion, girlfriend, and a reason to be myself. And in the future... who knows?”

Silica blushed again and gave him a small smile.

“Well, let’s continue with braving the greatest danger we have yet to face,” Harry then said. “Walking around Algade.”

The two of them continued their walk, occasionally making small talk, but mostly enjoying each other’s presence when they stopped, hearing a familiar, deep voice coming from a shop.

“But this?” The owner of the deep voice said. “This armor you’re trying to sell me is paper mache. Its stats are okay, but look at the durability! A couple good hits and BAM! You’re done. It would cost more than it’s worth to make it useable as anything other than scrap.”

Harry and Silica looked at each other and then walked over.

“Aw, c’mon Agil! I’m just trying to clear out some of my inventory!” A second voice said. “Why do ‘ya think I’m not trying to get you to take it for more?”

“I still know when crap is being foisted on me for trades and you wanted this for more than it’s worth.” Agil said, his voice booming from the other side of the open door. “I’ll give you a thousand for this piece of crap, as that’s what the mats I would scrap it into would be worth. The rest of the stuff you’re trying to dump on me? Not as bad, but still not worth the asking price. I’ll give you thirty-five thousand for the lot.”

Harry heard the other person grumble and shared an amused look with Silica. They stepped back as the customer left, muttering about merchants who were too damn stingy to be fair.

“Still trying to con players out of earning what they should Agil?” Harry asked cheerfully as he and Silica entered the shop.

“Ah Hadrian, my least favorite customer.” Agil said as he reached out with his fist.

“That only because I’m smart enough to do my homework on what things are actually worth.” Harry said as he bumped his fist with the merchant’s. “You haven’t tried to rip me off, but other merchants have.”

“Yeah, I really shouldn’t have said anything to give you that idea,” Agil said with a laugh. “Now how will the kids at the orphanage get those medical treatments they’ll need?”

“You getting morals for them?” Harry asked.

“Nah, removing their consciences.” Agil replied with a laugh. “Still, if you heard what I was telling
that guy, I was serious. The thing he tried to sell me really was like paper mache.”

Harry nodded. “Let me guess, a Middy?” He asked.

“Probably,” came the reply.

Harry shook his head. “You think that by now, they’d know how to tell decent gear from trash.” He said sadly. “But some just can’t seem to learn.”

Silica snorted. “More like they refuse to listen.” She observed. “Half of them think that those of us on the front lines are exaggerating things, trying to keep the competition for getting the good stuff down. The other half just looks at the biggest number and goes, ‘AWESOME!’ without checking to see if it’s actually useful.”

“True,” Harry acknowledged. “Good thing, then, that they tend to listen to Klein and his group.”

Agil chuckled. “Yeah, everyone seems to listen to the Bro.” He said. “So what’s going on with you all? I heard about the entrance you all made at that party, and something about you having to deal with something the day after.”

“Huh, so word spread about that,” Harry murmured.

“No real details,” Agil said. “But when that Rain girl burst into the Golden Way, and that one guy then shouted something at Argo… it was clear that something went down that day. So, what happened?”

Harry shrugged. “Just something from my past catching up to me,” he said. “It’s not something I’m really comfortable talking about.”

Agil nodded and appeared to decide to not press the issue. He then looked at both Harry and Silica and seemed to notice something.

“Wait a second,” he said. “You got a sigil on your armor, some kind of bird holding a sword… you guys finally decided to join a guild?”

Harry smirked. “Nope.”

“So that mark is something else then?”

“Nope.”

“Then…”

“We didn’t decide to join a guild,” Silica interrupted. “Our group decided to create our own.”

Agil paused. “You mean, that you all founded your own guild?” He asked.

Harry nodded. “We did, even got Kirito to sign on,” he said. “Not that Asuna would give him a choice there.”

Agil barked a laugh. “No, I don’t think she would.”

##

“Gus, we have a problem.” Argo said to her associate the second she entered the secure room at the
inn they had been using in Algade. Less for a place to stay, she often stayed at different places each day, but as a place to work from. Though admittedly, having a more consistent place to stay, even for a week, was nice. Especially since she often moved around so much as she worked to gather information that she stayed at the nearest place.

It was a mixed bag at times, as she had stayed at veritable *hovels* at times because of that. The kinds of places where bugs in the bed would have been a certainty if this were the real world. It wasn’t helped by the fact that she was often dressed like a vagrant who wouldn’t have been out of place simply sleeping in some dirty alleyway or abandoned building.

She’d certainly done the latter enough times.

Not from a lack of col, she commanded top prices for her information, after all. But from a simple lack of concern for her image. She had taken the job of an information broker, having dressed the part for the sake of image when all this started. Now, she honestly didn’t care if she looked like a vagrant, she had more important things to worry about than her appearance.

“What is it boss?” Gus asked as he immediately put up a privacy field.

“You know how Thinker wanted to meet me earlier?” She asked. At Gus’ nod, she continued. “Those guys you were keeping an eye on… they’ve been busy.”

“How many…?”

“Sixty in the last week,” Argo said, already knowing what he was asking.

“Sixty…” Gus started and then stopped. “Those bastards managed to keep what they were planning hidden that well? And they… oh fucking hell.”

Argo nodded. “About what I thought when I got told this by Thinker,” She admitted. “However, we do have some good news. Lind stopped an attack by them, and he got a name for the group.” She said.

“What are those bastards…?”

“Laughing Coffin.” Argo said, anticipating what Gus was asking.

Gus then nodded. “Anything else?” He asked. “We have a name, but…”

Argo shook her head. “The only other thing I learned is that they all have a mark somewhere on their bodies,” she said. “A tattoo of some kind so that they would recognize each other. I don’t know how good a description it is, though. Just that it was a coffin with its lid partially off and… some kind of face.” She scowled. “Damn it, I *hate* working with second or third hand information without verifying it!”

“You do that often enough with the former, boss.” Gus reminded her.

“Shut it, or I’ll find a way to use foxfire on you here.” Argo threatened.

Gus raised his hands in surrender. “Whoa, boss, let’s not get carried away,” he replied placatingly. He then got a thoughtful expression on his face. “Still, it’s better than nothing. Now, we just need to decide what to do from here. Give me a minute to think.”

Argo nodded and waited. She was glad that he was willing to work with her, his experiences came in handy, and not just as someone who could gather information. It was his operational experience as
someone who had been involved in black ops. Simply put, this was the kind of thing he knew.

“We’ll need to tell some of the main players, Klein, Heathcliff, Harry and his group, and any others you can think of,” Gus then said. “I doubt Harry’s really interested in a second round with them, but he’s also the type to not take what they’ve been doing lying down. The others... well I can’t speak for them, but they should know, if only so we can get some people on the floors they’re most likely to operate on.” He then looked at her. “Also, we need to look closer to home, just in case they snuck one of their own people, or simply threatened one of yours.”


“Because, I’ve seen it happen, and both my mom and step-father have told me stories about the times it’s happened to them.” Gus said. “Better safe than sorry. If our people are clean, no harm done. But if they’re not... better to know now and deal with it, than when we end up with a knife in the back.”

Argo nodded in acceptance and sighed. “I don’t like it, but you’re right,” she admitted. “I’ll have to make sure my people are clean. At least we have something to look for.”

“And first, you’ll start with me,” Gus said.

Argo blinked. “And why would I... oh, right.” She mentally hit herself for not thinking about it. “I wonder what your girlfriend would think. Or did you guys actually get married?”

“The latter,” Gus replied. “And don’t change the subject. She would understand. She was there once. When we had someone compromised, I mean.” He then looked at her. “Besides, you’ve had it happen once before, remember?”

Argo nodded, scowling at the memory. “Then let’s get this over with.”

She was only mildly surprised when they found two who were members of Laughing Coffin that day, though both had been threatened into joining. She was irritated by it as well. She was irritated because it meant that until she knew that everyone who worked for her, which numbered over a hundred, and she wouldn’t be able to completely trust her sources until everyone had checked out.

January 8, 2024 - Aincrad 50th Floor, Algade

It was clear to Asuna that something changed between Harry and Silica in the last week. Oh, they still acted the same, like the married in all but name couple, best friends, possible boyfriend/girlfriend pair all mixed into one. But still, something had changed.

There was a sense that the personal connections and feelings between them were beginning to become self-reinforcing. It was never anything obvious, but little things that someone who knew them well would pick up.

Like how they sat together just that much more closely. How they became slightly more tactile with each other. Or how when they looked at each other, there was a hint of promise in their eyes that hadn’t been there before. And then there was the obvious fact that their casual intimacy was more apparent in public.

She idly checked their hands for the presence of any rings that hadn’t been there a week ago, or even the day before, for that matter, and found nothing. Not that the absence of evidence would prove anything in that regard.

After all, it would be just like them to decide to get married without telling anyone. Perhaps as a
minor bit of petty revenge for the rumors that were spread about them for the last year, and which everyone who knew them had cheerfully participated in spreading.

It would just tickle their sense of humor to do so.

But she had a feeling it wasn’t that. More like… what had been a barrier between them had been torn down and turned what had been a possibility... into a probability. No... a certainty, even if they didn’t know it quite yet.

And, she thought with an internal smile. I’m happy for them for that.

Everyone could see that they had feelings for each other, and had enjoyed teasing the two about it, after all. Oh, they had stopped trying to deny it months ago, but they were private about their feelings for each other. Now, it was less so, a first step in the direction of something that might become more. She thought that it was a good first step for them to take.

She cleared her mind of any musings on the relationship her two youngest friends had. She might have noticed, but that didn’t really make it any of her business.

She then sat down at a table and made an order for breakfast, idly noting that she would have to find a place that would rent out a kitchen for her to use. The eating food at the inns and restaurants was fine and all, but there was something to say about eating what she, herself cooked.

Or, she thought. We could just buy a place once the guild has enough funds. That would be nice as well. And it would be in a way, as all of them would appreciate having a place that they can call home. Even if it was only for their time in SAO.

She would bring it up when she felt the time was right. They had other things to concern themselves with right now.

##

“Now that everyone’s here,” Kirito said, not reacting to Asuna’s look. “We should start discussing plans.”

“You mean outside of making arrangements for you to wake up on time?” Rain snarked at him with a little amusement. “While I’m sure that Asuna makes a wonderful alarm clock, watching her drag you out of your room because you slept in gets old fast.”

“Ease up on him Rain,” Harry said. “We’re all used to Kirito’s tendency to sleep in when we’re not on a set schedule. Occasionally annoyed by it, but used to it.” He then shrugged. “Then again, it means that I usually don’t have to brave the angry mob that is a groggy Silica.”

“You all know I’m not a morning person,” Silica replied with a shrug when she didn’t swat at Harry in response. “Also, Pina, make sure you steal food from his plate.” The feathered dragon chirped an apparent affirmative and Harry scowled at her.

“Try it, you flying feather duster, and I’ll send you to the kitchen to be cooked for tonight’s dinner.” Harry said and then yelped as Silica pulled her dagger out.

“What was that, Harry?” She asked as she began to idly twirl it in her hand.

“Nothing, Silica.” Harry said quickly.

Everyone else shared a chuckle and then made an order for food and drinks.
“So, now that we’re waiting for the food, what should we discuss?” Harry asked Kirito.

Kirito looked at Asuna, only for her to motion that he continue. Nodding, he looked at Harry. “Well first, you should look at training that new skill of yours, see what it can do.” He said. “Did it come at least with an overview of the basics?”

Harry nodded. “It did, and I’ve been reading up on it.” He replied. “Nowhere near as complete as it should be, but it gives a few tidbits.”

“Incomplete?” Asuna asked. “Can you explain what you mean?”

Harry nodded. “You all know how most skills come with information on the basics, as well as hints as to how you can train it?” At their nods, he continued. “This one’s lacking a lot of that. There are hints, even a little bit about it and what it does, but nothing like what we’re used to.” He shrugged. “Personally, I don’t think Kayaba really intended this skill to be used. SAO was marketed as a game without magic, only swords. Apparently that’s a break from the norm. And of course, that’s if he’s the one who made it.”

“You think someone else might have?” Rain asked.

“It’s very possible,” Kirito said. “SAO’s development had over two thousand people working on it for five years, so it’s likely that one of the developers designed the skill. And to be honest, a swordsman using magic isn’t that odd by RPG standards. Not the most common thing, but it’s been used often enough that a gamer wouldn’t bat an eye at the concept.”

Harry nodded. “That makes sense, I guess.”

“There’s one thing I would like to know, though.” Kirito said. “Even if he didn’t intend the skill to be used, why now? And why you?”

Harry shrugged. “No clue,” he said.

Any further talk was put on hold as their meal was brought out. Kirito and the rest shared an amused look as Harry hovered over his plate, shooting a wary looks at Pina.

And while they ate, Kirito gave Harry a speculative glance. He didn’t fully believe him when he said he didn’t know. There was something there, something that Silica seemed to know, but that Harry was unwilling to talk about. A glance to Asuna showed that she picked up on it as well, but she gave him a slight shake of the head.

It might be nothing, or it might be something big. But now wasn’t the time to dig for answers.

##

“Nice to see that I caught you guys before you headed out,” Argo said as she walked in and sat at the table thirty minutes later.

“She didn’t sneak up on us?” Silica asked.

“Must be serious,” Harry said and then looked down at his plate. “Damn it, Pina!” He shouted as Pina made off with a fair sized piece of meat that she happily began eating next to Silica.

Argo shot a mild glare in their direction. “It’s serious guys,” she said.

“How serious?” Asuna asked.
“Harry, remember those guys you had that little argument with back in June?” Argo asked.

Harry scowled. “As much as I’d like to forget them, yes.” He said, his voice tight.

“And remember how I told you I was keeping an eye on them?”

“And they dropped off…” Harry trailed off. “Oh bloody hell. They resurfaced, didn’t they?”

Argo nodded. “Thinker, down in the Town of Beginnings informed me that sixty names were crossed off the Monument of Life over the last week.” She said. “And we have reason to believe that the same group is responsible. In fact, we’re fairly sure that they’re responsible for the majority of those deaths.”

“What.”

Argo then felt a shiver run down her spine as she heard that flat expression. That shiver turned into ice as she saw the rising fury in Harry’s eyes as they began to emit a dim glow. Before she could say anything to get him to calm down, Silica reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder.

And as if the girl had flipped a switch, the rising fury was ruthlessly suppressed and brought under control.

“What have you found out so far?” Harry asked, the fury suppressed and controlled, but still there.

Argo took a breath, taking the moment it provided to calm the fear that had spiked from seeing Harry’s fury manifest itself. “Not as much as I would like, sadly.” She said. “It’s only the fact that Lind stopped one of their attacks that we know they’re active again. We did get a name for the group, though.”

“And what are they calling themselves?” Harry asked.

“Laughing Coffin.” Argo then proceeded to let them know what she did, little as it was. At the same time, she did give names and what she knew of the appearances of those she knew of, admitting that whoever was in charge had likely done some recruiting since. It was Lux who provided the most surprising bit, and it reminded Argo of the reason why the girl had joined up with this group in the first place.

“Their leader,” the girl said. “I know what he calls himself here. I did see him once before, after all.”

Harry nodded. “You’re right, it was you or Rain who mentioned that when you two joined us.”

Lux nodded. “Before you ask, he’s called PoH.” She said. “He kept his face largely hidden by his cloak, but he had a jagged tattoo on the right side of his face, going from above the eyebrows to just above the chin.” She traced a jagged line on her own face. “I couldn’t tell clearly, but it looked like it was covering something. Maybe a scar.”

“Anything else?” Argo asked, noting it down on a screen she called up.

Lux shook her head.

**Aincrad 33rd Floor, Dripping Caves (Field Dungeon)**

Lind would admit, he always disliked going through this particular field dungeon. Not because it was underground, or dark, or out of claustrophobia, or anything else that would normally put someone off of being in a cave. His dislike of it was simple.
The damn place was always so damn wet that he wondered how his armor didn’t rust shut just by being there. Still, they had gotten word from a couple of players that some Reds had been spotted. While it was probable that they’d already moved on, he decided to check it out.

More a feeling of his, a gut instinct, than anything else. What he had gotten from the players had reported had indicated that they had almost walked into an ambush. Fortunately, the group had someone who had a fairly high searching skill, so it had been spotted and they withdrew.

Of course, he had another reason besides tracking down a group of Reds and at least driving them off. He had received word of a player, Rosalia, who had a green cursor, clean in other words, but who had been linked to several parties being shaken down by a group of Reds. He had no proof, but the entire thing had him suspecting a setup, rather than a particular player simply being used as a convenient target.

Most of his suspicion was based on the groups that Rosalia partied with and breaking down which ones got hit. It wasn’t every group, or even a set number of parties, but taken as a whole, it showed a pattern. After a period of time since a group she was with being shaken down, which could range from a few days to a couple of weeks, she partied with another group that got shaken down.

The consistent factor, was how each group was a solid, but unimpressive group of mid line players. Not too strong to be dangerous to the attacking Reds, but not too low level to not have anything worthwhile. But it did establish something of a pattern, and if she was in on it, a habit.

*And, Lind thought. If she’s in on it, then this habit will be her undoing.*

And if he were honest with himself, that tendency to fall into predictable habits was what made most groups like this easier to handle for him and the DDA. If not to capture them, then to disrupt their operations. He still needed proof before he could do anything, but the second he got word of something like this, he started having his people watch.

Eventually, they reached the end of the caves, finding no one. Lind wasn’t overly surprised, but it was worth checking out. Of course, given all the possible routes, and how extensive the caves were, it was easily possible to miss someone. Especially if they were hiding.

He received a private message from the group he had wait outside to observe the entrance, just in case.

*Boss,*

*Rosalia was spotted leaving the caves about five minutes ago, we didn’t see any Reds with her, but it is possible that they’re simply keeping a low profile in some area of the caves we don’t know about. But, it seems your suspicion has some merit.*

*Schivata.*

Lind nodded and closed the message. Turning to his group, he waved them over. “It seems as if my hunch was a little off,” he said. “We’re heading back to town.”

The members of his group nodded, and they all turned back and made their way to the entrance. As they were making their way out, Lind spied something out of the corner of his eye, and carefully didn’t look at it. One of those on the flank also seemed to notice and almost turned before Lind stopped him.

“Not here,” he said quietly. “I saw them, but let’s let them think that they weren’t seen. We need to catch them in the act, first.”
The man nodded and moved on. Lind kept moving, his mind already coming up with plans to put a stop to this. Hopefully, they could do so fast enough to put a stop to whatever her little game was before she did something that would force him to use harsher methods.

January 9, 2024, Aincrad 26th Floor, Unmapped Safe Zone

PoH looked over the gathered members of his band and kept the disgust he felt for the majority of them off his face. They had been lured by his words of making SAO a place for the strong, that even if the deaths were real, Kayaba would be blamed, and that proper society was too weak to do anything but sweep any unpleasant facts under the rug.

For how useful he found them, he was disgusted with the lot of them. There were a few who understood an inkling of his real motives, the pleasure and amusement of seeing Japanese people kill and be killed, but not many.

He turned his attention to one of the few who he was only mildly disgusted with. Simply because he was Japanese, no more. Red-eyed XaXa had a sadism to him that was kept carefully controlled, but that only made him more dangerous. Compared to his late and unlamented partner, Johnny Black, he didn’t lose himself in it, keeping it in check, but allowing himself to indulge in it when an opportunity properly presented itself.

*Not bad, for a worthless Japanese,* he thought to himself. *Even better, he is likely aware of the fact that I would turn on them all the moment it suits me, or when it would amuse me.* Oddly, that knowledge made the young man more useful in his eyes, more of an asset.

After all, XaXa seemed to understand the man who led this group. Understood the type of person that PoH was. He understood that the nails that would be needed to hammer this particular coffin shut would be planted by the person who built it. And it only seemed to amuse him, as if he didn’t have a care.

No, it wasn’t that. It was as if XaXa understood that betrayal was simply another part of the game and was prepared for it. And it was that, which made him useful and an asset. Unlike the others, he could think for himself and had walked into this with open eyes. He joined for the opportunity to kill, to take his own anger and hatreds out on the world, and if necessary, he would do so on his own.

PoH made a mental note to not give the younger player an opportunity to betray him. After all, theirs was a partnership of convenience, and both knew the other saw it that way.

XaXa turned his attention to him and walked over. “Boss,” he said calmly. “I just learned that our two informants in Argo’s network haven’t reported in or sent any information in the last couple of days.”

PoH nodded, unsurprised. “I don’t doubt she checked her own people the second she found out we were active,” he said calmly. “She isn’t stupid and she learned from the last time her network was compromised.”

“It does mean that we no longer know what she knows, though.” XaXa said.

PoH shrugged. “It’s of no concern for now, we still have our spies in other groups,” he said. “Despite everything, she isn’t as dangerous as you think. Though… that one person who joined with her, this… Gus. He’s actually dangerous.”

“Boss?” XaXa asked.

PoH chuckled. “It’s nothing,” he said. “Just be wary of him for now. Avoid him, if possible;
withdraw, if not. He’ll be dealt with in due time.”

XaXa nodded and walk away.

PoH watched XaXa walk off and mused on Argo’s partner. The two of them had a history in the real world. Oh, they had one, and while he wouldn’t shed a tear if the man was killed by someone or something else... that was something he wanted to do, personally.

*Oh yes, he thought savagely. Killing you would be very satisfying indeed... August Blake.*
January 13, 2024 - Aincrad 35th Floor, Mishe

“So, why are we meeting with Lind?” Silica asked Harry as they walked down the town’s main thoroughfare. “You two don’t like each other, and I think that half the people who witness you two meeting expect you two to draw swords.”

Harry shrugged. “Simple, he asked for us specifically,” he replied. “Besides, after that shit in June, we basically got over the issues between us.”

“You mean he got over his issues with you.” Silica noted.

“Same thing, Silica.” Harry countered. “He’s not the type to ask us for help, so it’s either serious, or something that would be better done by us.”

“And why would he ask us, then?” Silica asked. “He has to have others he could make such a request to.”

Harry stopped and looked at her. “Silica, what does he largely do now?” He asked.

“He’s been busy keeping the… oh.”

Harry nodded. “Exactly,” he replied. “Chances are there is a group of Reds who are avoiding him that he wants taken down. He’s too well known down here, so he needs someone else.”

Silica looked at him. “How did you guess this?” She asked.

“Simple, I asked Klein to ask around those in his guild who are Middies.” Harry replied. “Apparently, Lind’s taken interest in a player who’s been… regularly shaken down by the same group of Reds, as were those with them. Too regularly to be a coincidence.”

Silica thought for a second and then nodded. “In other words, there’s a possibility that this player’s in on it.” She concluded with a scowl. “Why would he need us then?”

Harry snorted. “I have an idea,” he replied. At Silica’s questioning look, he shrugged. “He’s probably going to use the fact that while we’re well known, there aren’t many Middies who know what we look like.”

“You mean he plans to use us as bait,” Silica said flatly.

“Maybe, maybe not.” Harry said. “We’ll just have to find out.”

Silica sighed, but accepted that. The two of them continued until they reached a nondescript tavern. Giving the rundown facade a critical look, she turned her attention back to Harry, who was simply shaking his head.

“He’s been watching too many movies,” Harry said with a combination of irritation and amusement. “Well, let’s enter and hear what he needs to tell us.”

This place does look like something out of a bad movie, Silica thought when she got a look inside the second Harry opened the door. “I would have thought he had more taste than this.”
“It does look like it belongs in a hive of scum and villainy, doesn’t it?” Harry asked. “Or it would, if there were actual villains here.” He looked around the surprisingly empty establishment.

Silica snorted. “And even if there were, they probably won’t start anything with Lind sitting over there,” she said, pointing to a table in the corner.

“Hmm, point,” Harry conceded. “On the other hand, it wouldn’t be like that one time Klein started a bar fight between his guild and the Knights of Blood. That was a fun brawl.”

“Asuna was rather pissed at you, Kirito, and Rain for getting involved in that,” Silica pointed out.

“And you were mad because it was over and done with before you, Asuna, and Lux arrived.” Harry countered.

“I see you two are up to your usual banter,” Lind observed drily from his table. “Anyway, I called you two down here for a reason. Come on over and let’s talk.”

The two of them walked over and sat down. “Sorry about that,” Harry apologized. “But honestly, I would have thought you would pick a more tasteful place.”

Lind shrugged. “This place is out of the way and out of sight,” he said. “Besides, at this time of day, things are quiet in here, so we can have some privacy. Something the places I usually frequent wouldn’t have.”

Harry nodded. “Fair point,” he conceded. “So, what’s going on that had you call for Silica and I specifically?” He asked, deciding to not cut right to the chase.

“I’m sure you did your own research before coming down here,” Lind said. “There’s a green player who’s been regularly shaken down by a group of Reds, along with whatever group she’s a part of. If it wasn’t so frequent, I would chalk it up simple bad luck, but… it’s too consistent to simply be bad luck on her part.”

“There’s also the fact that a player regularly getting targeted would take a hint and stay where it’s safe,” Harry added. “How often does it happen?”

“It averages about once every eight or so days, so three or four times a month.” Lind said. “Rosalia, that’s her name by the way, is the linking factor. And frankly, I want it stopped before she does something that would require… harsher measures to be taken.”

“In other words, you want whatever she’s been associated with stopped before it gets someone killed,” Harry said.

Lind nodded.

“And we were called down here because…”

Lind sighed. “She and her group know my people on sight, and while our presence can disrupt what’s going on, it would tie up men that are frankly going to be needed elsewhere soon enough.”

Harry nodded. “You need us to be bait,” he concluded. “Or to do the capture. I thought as much.”

Lind nodded. “It wasn’t my first choice, but I know you can handle yourselves.” He admitted.

“And I have a proven record of reacting in kind to those using lethal force,” Harry said. “In other words, I’m more suited for this if things get ugly.”
Lind flinched, but again, nodded. The reluctance of that admission was clear, but Harry didn’t think less of him for it.

“We can’t start today, we’ve almost fully explored the labyrinth on the fiftieth floor, which means that the boss fight will be any day now.” Harry said. “Given that I suspect that this particular fight’s going to be nasty, we’re going to be needed there.”

“After that, though, you’ll be able to work on this?”

Harry and Silica nodded.

Lind sighed in relief. “Then it’ll have to do.” He said. “I’ll have my men keep an eye on her and make their presence obvious. It should keep the Reds from doing something for now, at least.”

**Aincrad 50th Floor, Algade**

Asuna looked at Harry with some surprise. “Wait, you mean that after we clear this floor, you’re going to be helping Lind with something?” She asked. “All of this to track down a group of Reds that are being a particular problem?”

Harry nodded. “He asked for us and explained the situation,” he replied. “I talked to Klein and Argo, before and after the meeting, and what he told us checks out.”

Kirito got a thoughtful expression on his face. “Any reason why he would ask you two?” He asked.

“He needs people who can handle themselves if things get ugly, but aren’t so well known amongst the Middies.” Harry said with a sigh. “And while you’d think that disqualifies us, considering our reputations, you know how those on lower levels don’t really know what we look like. Not as individuals, at any rate.”

“But still, he’s going to be using you as bait.” Asuna countered.

“And he told us this upfront,” Silica interjected. “He wants a couple of players he know can handle themselves against these Reds and their… what’s the word I’m looking for? Ah yes, enabler. These reds and their probable enabler, you know, this Rosalia we’ve mentioned?”

“And let’s be honest here, we know why he asked for us, even if he didn’t say it.” Harry stated. “He was there in June after all.”

“That doesn’t make it better, Hadrian.” Asuna growled out.

"It's tactically sound," Kirito noted, then yelped at Asuna's glare.

"Yes, I am not denying that," Asuna said, and she had to force herself not to do it through clenched teeth. "My point is, up to this point, Hadrian and Lind haven’t had the kind of relationship that justifies the favor. If you just let yourself do things for others without properly grounding your motive beforehand, your mind can just fill in the blanks, and that isn't always healthy."

“No, it isn’t,” Harry acknowledged. “But I talked to Klein about this group, and then confirmed it with Argo. This group’s been increasing the violence of their shakedowns. Before, they would threaten, maybe rough some players up. Nothing serious, but enough to convince them to give those bastards what they want.” His eyes then bored into her. “But their shakedowns are getting more violent, and the last couple of times, someone was nearly killed. It’s only a matter of time before they go too far, Asuna. So, how long do you think it will be?”
Asuna bit her lip, and let him press his case. More to reassure herself his head was on as straight as he thought.

“How long before they accidentally-- or hell, intentionally kill a group of players? How long before they cross that line? Red players have a habit of criminal acts. Banditry, assault, and so on. More than a few have done solo kills, that's why Rain and Lux joined up with us outside of being targets for Laughing Coffin."

"They're sticking to shakedowns," Asuna pointed out.

“Shakedowns that are getting more ambitious and rougher," Harry countered. "How long before this group escalates from what they’ve been doing? I’ve seen how bullies tend to escalate their acts if someone doesn’t do something to curb them quickly, Asuna. Lind tries to keep the Reds in check, and he’s done a fair job of it so far. But he knows that his guild can’t be everywhere, and while he would like to nip this quickly, the fact that a clean player is potentially tied to this ties his hands. He knows what’s going on, he has suspicions that it’s being enabled by a player who isn’t a Red, but he doesn’t have proof of it. He runs into those Reds, he’d act, but he can only be in one place at a time.”

Rain sighed, almost a growl. "And if they're smart enough to use this suka, Rosalia, as bait, they're already smart enough to at least try to avoid the well-known peacekeepers.” She said. “Lind and his are the well-known peacekeepers on the mid-levels."

"Damn," Lux said. "If this keeps working for them, they may be able to coerce or intimidate more players into helping them. 'Keep your hands clean, get paid.' Or hold something over someone's head, and you've got a proxy. Someone says no, you may have a first kill to keep them silent.” She looked at Asuna. “Harry's right, Asuna. This needs to stop. One Laughing Coffin’s bad enough, we don’t need another group taking cues from them."

“And to be honest, Lind knows that his men are… unsuited for this kind of thing if things get ugly.” Silica finished.

Asuna didn’t have an answer to that, and she knew that he knew it. “At least, let us back you up in this.” She said after a moment. “You don’t have to do this alone, and with us around, we might avoid it getting ugly.”

Harry nodded, and she could see the relief in his bearing. Willing to use lethal force if it’s necessary he might be, but he would rather not. If their presence would get those Reds to surrender, then he wasn’t going to complain.

That and they had been a team since well before they established their little guild. And they backed each other up.

Asuna saw Harry look at them. “Asuna, all of you, if it gets ugly, just… let me handle it,” he requested and then looked at his hand. “I… don’t want any of you to get blood on your hands. And Kirito, Silica… I don’t want you two to get any more on yours.”

"We will try." And in one of those glorious moments that made her have hope for her oftentimes partner, Kirito laid his hand on Harry's shoulder. "But if it does get ugly, in any manner... you will not shoulder that burden alone."

"We're a team," Lux said, though the talk of the possibility of killing had her a little white. "A guild."

"We’re Steel Phoenix, we back each other up," Rain said firmly. “We take care of our own.”

Harry looked at them and just nodded. That was really the end of the matter for them.
“Damn it, this thing just bloody refuses to make any sense!” She heard Harry growl out from where he was sitting in a chair. “There’s something there, I know it, but I’m just not seeing it.”

Keiko looked over from her position on the bed, where she was reclining and reading a book, to see him scowling at an open menu window. “Still having problems figuring out what that info on the skill means?” She asked.

Harry closed the window that held the information and sighed. “You can say that, Sil- Keiko,” he replied, correcting himself into using her real name since they were in the privacy of their shared room. She didn't blame him, even thinking of herself that way was a bit hard. Over the last year, she became Silica, a dagger wielding fighter who had a feathered dragon as a pet. Even with all the weirdness in her family, that was a stretch for Keiko Ayano. So like a gamer, she made a persona that fit the world.

She was becoming the mask she wore, and she suspected that it was happening to Harry as well. He was becoming more Hadrian the Young Knight, than Harry Potter the Wizard. Taking it off was shockingly hard, maybe because the mask metaphor could only hide the fact that SAO was actually changing them so much.

Having a place to be Keiko in, a person to be herself with, actually showed her how much of Silica was Keiko. Not all of it, of course. But it also showed her parts that were atrophying, in danger of being lost. As if the line between Silica and Keiko Ayano was beginning to fade. If there ever truly was one.

Being Keiko here let her hold onto it a bit more firmly. It allowed her to use those parts of her so they would not be lost. And she could tell that it was true for Harry as well.

"Walk me through your thoughts, Harry," She instructed.

Harry frowned. “There’s something I’m not seeing here. We know there’s got to be more to it than setting the sword on fire, but whoever designed this was either being intentionally vague, or Kayaba deliberately left some information out. Come to think of it, this sort of feels like-- what did you call when a game is changed while you play it?”

"A patch," Keiko reminded him. "You're saying Kayaba patched this in because of what you are in real life."

"It feels like something our demiurge would do," Harry agreed.

“So what’s giving you problems now?”

Harry got up and walked over to the bed. Keiko raised herself up to give him some room to sit beside her on the edge and he gave thankful mumble as he sat down. Opening his menu, he brought up the information.

“Here,” he said. “This thing says this: And so, where Fire burns with the passion of spirit, so shall the Earth guard with a gentle hand, the Water nurture in its embrace, and the Wind move on currents of will.” He read aloud. “Where fire destroys, Water nurtures. Where Wind moves, the Earth holds still. Where Water flows, Fire rages. Where Earth stills, the Wind blows through the cracks.” He gave an irritated sigh. “See what I mean?” He asked.

Keiko considered what he read out loud and considered why Harry might have trouble with it. It
made some sense to her, but why would... Her eyes widened as she remembered something. “Oh, I think I get it,” she said. “It’s talking about how the elements work in opposition to each other and balance each other out. If I remember correctly, games like this with magic systems tended to have magic work that way for balance purposes. So, if it works that way, then Fire and Wind would be offensive in nature, while Earth and Water would be defensive.”

Harry looked at the passage thoughtfully. “That... makes some sense, and I should have- ah who am I kidding, this is the first game I really ever played. Well, I have the fire part down, and it makes sense that it would be focused on attacks. But why would...?” He trailed off and then facepalmed. “Oh, bloody hell, of course it would work that way.”

Keiko looked at him curiously.

Harry looked at her. “Earth, holding and defending; Water, nurturing and flowing; Wind, constantly moving.” He said. “The information was right there, but since I don’t have experience with games, I didn’t see it for what it is. Not until you spelled it out like you did, at least.” He then closed the menu, stood up, and started to pace. “It’s about how I need to fight. All of these elements are based around a different way of fighting, ways I’ve used to some degree.”

“What do you mean?”

“Earth would be about pure defense,” Harry said. “It controls the fight by forcing the mobs to beat on a wall. Water and Wind are about movement. Water flows around, taking the path of least resistance but wearing whatever it flows around down. Wind’s all about movement, you always move and strike precisely. As for fire, that’s obvious, it’s directed towards pure offense.” He then chuckled. “They’re all about controlling the fight, the mindset involved.”

“I can see that, Harry, but what do those have to do with the skill?” Keiko asked.

“Maybe nothing, maybe everything,” He replied, shrugging. “Think about it for a second. Earth would be like how a tank fights, taking blows and keeping the mobs in one place. I might not be a tank in that sense, but I can do so in a pinch to take the pressure off someone.”

Keiko’s eyes widened. “And Water... that would be like how you normally fight!” She exclaimed. “You constantly move, flowing around attacks or using your shield to redirect your movement or the attacks.”

“It’s also like how you often fight as you prefer to be in close.” Harry noted. “Wind would be like how Asuna fights. Wind has no form, it doesn’t get hit, but when it hits you, it does so with precision. It would probably rely on speed and counterattacking.”

Keiko nodded. “And Fire... that’s pure Kirito. Hit fast, hit hard, and keep hitting the mob until it dies.” She said. “But even then, none of us fight purely like that. From what you said, you’re more like a hybrid of Earth and Water with how you fight.”

Harry nodded. "Like all those classifications... one of my teachers, Professor McGonagall, once warned us that looking for 'essential types' can make you blind to the blurry boundaries were things meet and change. My friend, Hermione, she had a lot of trouble with that early on. She’s brilliant, and could get things right quickly due to her hard work and study habits, but she was too... straightforward in her logic.”

"You need inductive logic as well as deductive," Keiko said to show she understood. "My grandpa is Mr. Intuition, but it's really that he's an inductive thinker."
“Heh, look at us, two fourteen year olds talking about logic of all things.” Harry said with a snort. “We’re even using the terms for it. If they could see into here, my friends would wonder ‘Who the hell is this guy, and what did he do with Harry Potter?’ It might be due to the fact that I’m using my head for more than a brain case, though one of my professors would debate that I was doing even that.”

"Wait until you come over to the Saotome Dojo for dinner,” Keiko said with a grin. "People are stunned at where our conversations go. And people have questioned whether Grandpa actually uses his brain. But does this clear up the skill?"

"It does give me an idea or two that I’ll need to try out. When we’re done with the floor and helping Lind out, though.”

Keiko glanced at the time in her HUD. “It is getting late, so why don’t we work out the details later?” She asked before yawning even as she hugged him and kissed him on the cheek. “We do have a floor boss to kill tomorrow.”

Harry did his own glance and nodded. “Yeah, let’s turn in.” He said. "Rest the brain cases."

She rewarded that one with a snort and a pillow to the side of the head.

January 15, 2024 - Aincrad 50th Floor, Labyrinth (Outside Boss Room)

Kirito watched as the assembled players did their last minute preparations for fighting the floor boss. The boss’ room had been discovered the previous day, and the only reason why a raid team wasn’t assembled immediately to go kill it was because both Harry and Asuna brought up a valid point to the various parties and guilds that made up the Assault Team. It was better for them to go in well rested and fully prepared for what could very likely be a brutal boss fight, especially since it represented the halfway point of their climb up Aincrad.

The players accepted the reasoning behind that argument. They were not happy about it, but they accepted the reasoning.

He glanced over at his guildmates and saw them already done with their pre-battle checks. Long habit and experience had all but Rain and Lux make sure that everything was taken care of before heading out, and the latter two took cues from their more experienced members. It relegated the pre-battle checks to simply double checking everything.

He saw Heathcliff move to the front of the raid and grab everyone’s attention. Placing his sword into the floor point down, the leader of the Knights of Blood spoke.

“Once we clear this floor, we will be halfway done.” He said. “Halfway to freedom. I have no doubts that this will be a more difficult battle than usual, but we will prevail. We are strong enough. We are good enough. And there is nothing that can stand in the way of our combined might!”

“I see he’s being his usual poetic self,” Harry commented drily.

Kirito gave his friend an amused look as many of the assembled players cheered and then shrugged. “He knows how to give speeches,” he replied. “Also, they’re opening the door.”

Harry nodded and their entire group entered the boss’ room with the rest of the raid, drawing their weapons as they walked.

##
Harry looked at the boss as it began to move. The six armed monstrosity that was named Valmathra, The Awakened, had to be at least six meters tall. The sound of its steps made an echoing crash as it made its way slowly towards the center of the cathedral like room while the assembled players began to get into position to start the fight. He made a note of how many health bars it had and winced as five of them filled up.

“This… is going to suck.” He said succinctly. “Kirito, Rain, with me,” he ordered. “Asuna, Lux, stay back with Silica for now and use the time to observe. Standard attack rotation, if your health approaches half, back away and top off.”

His guildmates called out their acknowledgements as he moved forward, his sword and shield ready.

“Harry,” Kirito said. “It has six arms and six weapons, but I only see two drawn right now.”

“Be ready for it to draw more as we whittle its health down, then.” He called back.

“Teams one and three, get to the sides and attack!” Heathcliff called out to the teams that were largely comprised of members of his guild. “Team two, with me! Hadrian, be ready with your team to attack on my mark! Klein, same!”

“Got it!” Harry and Klein called back.

“Let’s go!” Heathcliff shouted.

The battle to clear the fiftieth floor had begun.

##

Silica darted in and struck with her strongest sword skill before jumping back from the boss’ retaliatory strike. She winced as the hit clipped her hip and forced her to use some quick acrobatics to avoid being sent sprawling. She didn’t bleed off the momentum that would have risked leaving her off balance until five meters later, and considered herself fortunate that it was only a glancing blow. She took a quick glance at her health and winced as the color of the bar was now yellow. The boss’s strikes weren’t overly powerful by floor boss standards, but that only meant that they hit you like a car, instead of a truck, glancing hit or not.

“Harry, switch!” She called as she backed off and pulled out a potion from what she called her quick-grab inventory and quickly chugged it down. She noticed her health climb back into the green, but it was the gradual regeneration that lasted for two minutes after the immediate heal that she wanted from the potion. She had noticed that the boss’ attacks tended to do a minor AOE whenever they hit something, and the regeneration should help offset that on her next attack run.

She took the opportunity to observe the fight. It wasn’t going as well as she had hoped, but not as badly as she or Harry feared it would. However, as the fight progressed, Valmathra drew more weapons, changing its attack patterns to reflect the fact. Add in that more weapons meant more attacks that needed to be dodged or blocked, and it was only a matter of time before a player got hit.

It had four weapons, all swords, out right now, and from the look at its health, it wouldn’t be long until it drew the last two. From the look of them, they were some kind of mace, which made her nervous for some reason.

She didn’t know why, but she felt that if there was a point where things would begin to go wrong, it was when those two weapons got put to use.

##
Asuna narrowly dodged several strikes as her attack had accidentally grabbed the boss’ attention. One of the weaknesses of her style was its reliance on a lot of hits and given SAO’s tendency towards perverse luck, all of her attacks from her current attack run had been critical hits, which had drawn aggro.

She saw an attack coming and dodged out of its way as Harry moved in to intercept it. She heard the resounding crash as the attack impacted with his shield and he was pushed back. His smaller frame often worked against him when dealing with bosses, as the extra momentum meant that more force was added to the blow.

As they had observed months ago, Newton’s Laws were very much in force in SAO, and Harry didn’t have the size, build, or necessary bulk to absorb the extra force like most tanks. He normally compensated for it with firm footwork and careful angling of his shield, which at least allowed him to not get sent sprawling, or as he put it, ‘getting sent arse over teakettle.’ However, his style was more reliant on redirecting attacks or using them to assist with his own positioning, rather than simply taking the attacks like he just did.

She then noticed that Rain and Lux’s health was beginning to get low as they finished their own attack run on one of the boss’ legs. “Rain, Lux, back off and top your health off,” she called. “Hadrian, see if you can redirect one of its attacks into the ground. Kirito, Silica, hit that arm if he does.”

She then noticed the boss’ remaining arms had already moved to the only remaining weapons. “Wait!” She called. “It’s going to its final weapons, get back!”

Her warning was too late as the boss pulled out two giant maces and slammed them into the ground. The shockwave sent every nearby player flying back. From the fact that most of them were looking a bit dazed, either because they had been stunned by being thrown back, or from simple shock that the boss had disrupted everything so quickly.

She really hoped it was the former, as that could be quickly dealt with. If it was the latter, the morale of those players would be affected, which would reduce their own effectiveness in a fight.

She saw Heathcliff charge in and start defending against the boss.

“All of you, heal up and come up with a plan, I’ll keep the boss’ attention!” He called out.

##

Harry shakily pushed himself off the floor and glanced at his health, eyes widening as he realized just how low it was. That last attack had brought him from just over three quarters health, down to just under a quarter. He was thankful that everyone in his group didn’t take chances with their health, constantly moving back to heal up.

A glance at the health bars of his party reassured him that they were fine. Kirito and Silica had been hit, but apparently the damage was based on proximity, so he was the one who had taken the worst of it. Asuna’s health was almost topped off and a glance around showed her rushing over to shove potions down the throats of downed players.

He didn’t doubt that Silica would be doing the same once she recovered from the blow. One of her secondary roles was that of a medic, as she could use Pina to deliver healing items to players who needed them. There was another option she could use, but it was better for that option to be kept in reserve unless it was an emergency.
Despite what that last attack did, things hadn't gotten that bad. Not yet at least.

He then noticed Heathcliff engaging the boss, but no one else and wondered why until he realized that far too many players were still recovering from the attack. He pulled out a healing crystal, checking to make sure it was one of the rare ones that could fully heal him, and used it.

For all that he didn’t trust the man, Heathcliff was still a comrade in arms and would need backup.

“Kirito, Rain, you guys okay?” He called out.

“Give me a minute, my health’s still low,” Kirito called out.

“I’m good, Lux and I were far enough away to not get hit,” Rain called. “Pizdets blyad, what was that?”

“That, was the boss saying he was going in raw and rough when he decided to start fucking us in the ass.” Klein remarked from where he landed. “Shit, that packed a punch. Kid, what’re you planning?”

“Heathcliff’s fighting on his own, as soon as I can, I’m backing him up,” Harry replied.

“How’re you gonna do that?” Klein shot back.

“Well, outside of giving our six-armed and testy friend another target to split its attention with, I was thinking of having Kirito and Rain try and cut its legs out from under it,” Harry said. “We’ve been hammering at that thing for over an hour, and I swear I’ve seen it at least stagger before.”

“Mind if I help?”

“I have no problem with that,” Harry replied. “However, if this doesn’t work, I hope you have an extra blindfold and cigarette handy.”

Klein barked out a laugh as Kirito and Rain came alongside Harry.

“Dynamm, Harry, back the kid up,” Klein barked out to two of his guild mates. “The rest of you guys, we’re helping Kirito and Rain. And Kunimitz, if you get a chance, shove your spear up that thing’s ass.”

“If it gets covered in shit, I’m wiping it off on you, boss,” Kunimitz shot out.

##

Silica shoved a healing potion down the throat of another injured player, this one showing clear signs of still being dazed by Valmathra’s attack. The majority of players took a bad hit, and while no debuff showed itself to her when she got herself back up from where she got sent flying, the sheer surprise and force of the attack was enough to daze quite a few of them.

Add in the shock that everyone was basically forced back by one attack, and many of the players weren’t fully engaging their brains right now. Whether it was from shock, fear, or them simply being stunned by such a change, she didn’t know.

She also didn’t care. With that attack and the level of injuries, she had quickly transitioned into her backup role, that of a battlefield medic. There might not be healing magic, but there was a reason why she kept a full stock of potions and crystals, with equipment to allow her to carry more than the default ten of each.
It came in handy far more often than she liked, and she idly wondered if she should put it out that every party should have at least one person who had a similar setup as she did. She shook that thought out of her head. She could wonder about that later, she had a job to do in getting players back into the fight.

She heard Harry call out and briefly turned her attention to him as she made her way to a player who was shaking his head as if to clear it. She also heard Klein respond and listened with half an ear as the two worked out a plan to back up Heathcliff, who was apparently taking the boss on all by himself to buy the rest of them time.

And naturally, Harry wasn’t going to let someone fight such a battle on their own, regardless of what he felt about said person.

Typical of him, but he wouldn’t be Harry otherwise.

That wouldn’t stop her from doing something to him for this though. She just needed to think of something appropriate, and she had an idea of what to do. She always wanted to act out some aspects of her great aunt Shampoo’s pursuit of her grandfather, and this would be successful.

After all, it wasn’t every day that people saw a girl drag the guy off to apparently have her way with him. She wouldn’t do that, but the action and a few choice words… oh yes. That would embarrass him nicely, and be a good prank to pull on him.

Besides, it had been awhile since either one of them did anything to add fuel to rumors. Intentionally, at least.

##

Heathcliff blocked another series of strike, the GM’s over-assist allowing him to move his shield to quickly and perfectly block the attacks without showcasing his virtual immortality. It was cheating, but he could use this as a means of boosting his own reputation in the eyes of the players, rallying even more to the front lines. That it would keep more alive right now was simply a bonus in his eyes.

He heard a few shouting out a conversation, but the words escaped him, as the boss required his complete focus. One slip up, and he ran the risk of revealing himself. While it would happen eventually, either through him going through with it, or the unlikely, but possible, chance of an observant player connecting the dots, it was still too early for that to happen.

They were only at the halfway point, after all.

He noticed the boss move all its weapons in a way that would be nearly impossible for him to properly block with the over-assist and was surprised.

That wasn’t a part of the boss’ programming as far as he knew. Did Cardinal make a change? No matter, he could see how the attacks would land, and if he timed it just right, he would be able to do it.

It became a moot point when three other players joining him and positioning themselves to block half the attacks. Their movements disrupted the boss’ momentum, forcing the other three attacks to miss their intended location and slam into the floor.

“Heathcliff, step back and heal up,” Hadrian ordered. “We’ll keep this thing’s attention for a bit. Asuna! How’s everyone doing?”

“We’re almost done,” came the shouted response. “Silica, those two by the wall near you are still too
low, take care of it. Lux, get Team Three sorted out and in position to hit the boss from the left!”

Heathcliff blinked as he realized that the recovery of players was going faster than he thought it would. From how many had gotten sent flying, he thought it would take five or ten minutes for them to get healed up and reorganized.

It hadn’t even been three minutes yet.

*Most impressive,* he thought with some admiration as he took Hadrian’s advice. *Most impressive indeed.*

Five minutes later, the boss was defeated.

##

Klein sagged in relief when the boss shattered and the message congratulating them for defeating the boss came up. He was tempted to sit down, but kept himself on his feet as he knew that if he did sit, he wasn’t going to want to stand back up.

That had been an intense fight.

“Kunimittz,” he said, panting slightly. “How’s the spear?”

“It’s clean boss, so you don’t have to worry about being smeared in shit.” Came the reply.

“Glad to hear it,” Klein said. “Harry, both of you, Dynamm, you guys okay?”

“We’re fine, Klein,” Harry said. “A little banged up, and Liz is gonna have fun fixing the damage to my shield, again.”

“What happened?”

Damn thing hit it hard enough to bend it with that last attack.”

Klein snorted. “At least you didn’t have a bite taken out of it this time,” he said, remembering Harry’s story about that one field boss. “Which reminds me, who got the Last Attack Bonus?”

“Who else?” Asuna asked with some wry amusement. “So, Kirito, what did you get this time?”

Everyone turned to look at the named player, who was holding a sword that was pitch black save for a gray trim and the blued steel of the edges of the blade.

“It’s called Elucidator, and…” Kirito checked the weapon’s stats and whistled. “This... might last me awhile.”

“Does that mean you won’t be trying to get the last hit in anymore?” Someone called out.

“Dude,” someone else said. “It’s Kirito.”

Kirito blushed in embarrassment while several players laughed.

Chuckling, Klein spotted Silica walking over to Harry, a gleam in her eyes. “Hey kid, you might want to run,” he shouted. “Otherwise, you’ll be facing your next danger in here.”

And apparently, his warning came too late as he watched Silica grab Harry, who yelped in surprise, and start dragging him off.
“Silica, leggo!” Harry yelled.

“I’ll let you go when we get back to town,” she said as she pulled out a teleport crystal. “Asuna, you all fine from here?”

Amusement clearly showing in her eyes, Asuna nodded.

“See you all back in Algade then.” She said. “Klein, stop by the Golden Way later, Harry will buy you a few rounds.”

“Silica, what are you planning?” Harry asked.

“That’s for me to know, Harry.” Silica said teasingly, interrupting him. “Don’t worry, it’s nothing bad. Teleport, Algade!” The two players disappeared in a flash as the teleport crystal activated.

Klein blinked and looked at everyone else. “Did she just…?” He asked. “Asuna, is there anything going on with them?”

Asuna shrugged. “I doubt it will be anything inappropriate, but something did seem to change between them a couple of weeks ago.” She admitted and then smirked. “If things keep going like this, I’ll be winning the bet. I did say it would probably be in the spring,” She then turned and motioned for the rest of her group to follow her.

Klein looked confused for a moment before it dawned on him what she meant by her last comment. “The bet?” He asked. “Spring? What are you- oh. So things are that far along?” He asked and then began to laugh when Asuna nodded.

“It definitely looks that way,” she said.
"So, what happened after Silica dragged you off?" Klein asked as he sat down next to Harry. "Also, where is she?"

"Oh nothing," Harry said as he handed the Bro a full tankard of the local beer. "And where do you think? She's taking a bath." He then looked around. "When she dragged me off like that, she knew it would fire up the rumor mill something fierce." He shrugged. "It's been awhile since one of us added fuel to that particular fire, intentionally at any rate. We were tempted to play it up even further to pour some petrol on it, but we both agreed that it would be a bad idea to do so."

"How would you have played it up, and why would it have been a bad idea?" Klein asked.

"Let's just say that she knows the location of a lingerie shop that's more appropriate for getting things for… bedroom games," Harry said with a slight flush. "We found it accidentally a little over a week ago."

"And you two had an idea of getting something from there?" Klein asked slyly.

Harry's flush deepened. "There was this blue number…" He trailed off and shook his head. "Let's just say that she's aware that some of those items were something that I imagined her wearing."

"Nice ones I hope."

"In my mind?" Harry asked. "Yes. Though if I thought you were the type to be imagining her in those things, I think you and I will need to have a talk."

Klein snorted. "Don't I know it, kid?" He said. "I'd be right there with you if I thought an asshole was- hell, I have been. She's too young for me."

"I know you that well, I'd think," Harry admitted.

"That aside, even if she were my age… I like my girls to be a bit more developed. Nothing wrong with petite, but I like my girls to be a bit bigger. Now, if it was Rain on the other hand…"

Harry thought about that for a second and nodded. "I can see that, though it would have to be red then; that's Rain's color." He said, taking a pull from his tankard. "Anyway, Silica and I realized that playing the entire thing up, might not be the best idea."

"Because it would give people the wrong impression?"

Harry shook his head. "I think it's a bit late for that," he said drily. "No, we don't care if it would have given the wrong impression, you know how the rumors are. It was more that we might have found ourselves going a bit farther than we intended. Tempting rather than teasing, if you get me."

Klein nodded and took a drink of his beer. "Man, you found a decent beer again," he observed idly before coming back to the subject at hand. "So it was more the risk of you two… well, you know what I mean. It was about that then?"

Harry nodded.
"Good." Klein said. "For all that we joke about the relationship between you two, for all that we have some bets out there, and for all that many of us want things to work between you two, it's your relationship. You two should take things at your own pace and not rush it. If you two don't think you're ready for it, then you're not. Besides the two of you are what, fourteen?"

"Fourteen, and going on forty it sometimes seems." Harry replied. "But yeah, you're right about that. Besides, what we have is good enough for now."

"You two basically live together." Klein observed. "The only thing you're missing is your own house or apartment. Well, that and being married."

Harry thought about it and gave a small smile. "That would be nice, and it's something to keep in mind," he admitted. "But us two being married? That's… something I wouldn't be opposed to, but to be honest, we're not ready for that." He looked around the pub. "So, where's the rest of your group?"

Klein gestured over to a spot off to the side, near one of the walls. "They're over there, talking with some other guys who were at the fight." He finished off his beer. "So, before I head on over there, want to buy me another beer? Hell, why don't you join us? We can get a couple of friendly games going."

"No problem, Klein," Harry said and gestured to the barkeeper. "Barkeep! Two more!" He then looked at Klein. "And by games, you mean cards, right?" At Klein's nod, he shrugged. "Eh, what the hell, why not? You guys'll clean me out of whatever I put in as the stake, and then I'll talk you idiots into rolling the dice and return the favor."

Klein raised his tankard to Harry. "It'll all be in good fun, Harry," he said and the two knocked their tankards together in a toast.

##

Keiko walked out of the bath in a green chemise, which was her normal sleepwear, to see Harry sitting in a chair and reading something he pulled up from his menu. She saw Pina in his lap and that his left hand was idly scratching her behind the tufts of feathers that indicated where her ears were.

She gave a small smile as she padded over to him, her bare feet making little noise until she was right behind him. Taking a look over his shoulder, she noted that he was going over the information they had on Rosalia and the Reds who were probably connected to her.

"Just refreshing my memory on what we already know, Keiko." He said, closing the window and glancing back at her. "Nothing new, and I haven't noticed anything I missed the last time I looked at it."

"It doesn't hurt to take another look over information, just to be sure." She said as she walked around the chair and took a seat across from him. "Anyway, you have an idea how we're going to go about this?"

Harry nodded. "We can go down there, posing as some young Middies." He said. "We'll need to use different armor, our stuff for up here is too recognizable. I wouldn't put it past her, or one of those Reds to make the connection, even if they otherwise wouldn't recognize us. The weapons shouldn't stand out, though. Most players can't tell the difference between a front line sword or dagger and one that would be used by Middies anyway."

"The armor… oh, the colors and how our gear looks." Keiko said, making the connection. "Much like those times where players who didn't recognize our faces recognized us from what we were
"And we did so for a reason," he said.

"To make it easier for us to see and find each other in a fight." Keiko observed. "Well, that and to look good while kicking ass. So, we'll need armor that doesn't stand out as much then. I think I still have that one set. You know, the one that had the long brown jacket?"

Harry nodded. "And I can switch out to one of the older sets I still have, and ditch the green." He added. "We still have those skills which allow us to switch gear out quickly, so we can keep our main gear in reserve."

"And what about the others?"

Harry grew thoughtful "I'll work on something with Asuna in the morning," he replied.

January 23, 2024 - Aincrad 35th Floor, Mishe

Rosalia scowled as she went over everything that had happened over the ten days. Lind had been making his group's presence more obvious due to recently emerged Laughing Coffin's activities, but it was an annoyance for her and her guild. Officially, it was for the protection of the players, and she had no doubt that Lind's decision was partly due to that. However, she also considered that it was also a means of showing the flag and demonstrating the he and the DDA were doing something.

She found it rather pathetic of them, really. Instead of taking the initiative and hunting down Laughing Coffin, they were content with just making a big show and a lot of noise.

It still forced her to call off several shakedowns, denying her several chances to get all that loot that players got. It forced her own guild to be more circumspect in its movements. And the lost opportunities frustrated her to no end.

Still, it had ended, and the DDA had gone back to its normal routine. Now, she just needed to find a group with an opening that was going somewhere that would have the potential for some lucrative drops, and simply insert herself into it or follow it.

A couple of hours later, she was observing players in the Teleport Gate plaza from a small cafe near it, scanning the crowd of entering and leaving players for potential marks while enjoying some of its wares. She had a clear criteria for those she picked. They needed to have good gear, but not of too high a quality. In other words, average or slightly above average quality players for here, they were more likely to have enough to make a good profit when her men shook them down.

It would be a bonus if they were going after a rare item or two, but-

Wait, did she just hear...

She turned her attention toward the voices that had got her interest. She started scanning the crowd nearby, letting her ears lead her eyes. Such a useful talent, and brilliant of her to train it to refinement.

She eventually spied a trio of young players. The oldest of them, a girl, was perhaps fifteen at the most. The other two, a boy and a girl, were clearly at around the minimum age for SAO when it launched. She guessed that they safely into their fourteenth year by now.

She idly wondered what they were doing up here. There were few higher level players at that age. Most of them were barely known except for being young, and few had memorable names. In fact, she could think of only two. Hadrian and Silica. The Young Knight and... she forgot the girl's
generally used titles. And none of the girls or the boy could be them; Hadrian and Silica were so well known because they were the youngest members of the Assault Team. They operated on the front lines. They wouldn't come down here. That would be slumming it for them.

She carefully got up and made her way in their direction, making sure to keep her movements casual and non-threatening. It always amazed her how easy it was to avoid grabbing attention if you simply didn't act in a way to call attention to yourself.

##

"Harry," Silica said quietly. "Looks like we got Rosalia's attention. She's keeping her distance right now, but slowly approaching."

"I see her." Harry replied as he discreetly watched the player approach out of the corner of his eye. "Not bad, she knows a bit on how to blend in, but we're used to playing 'Spot the Rat' with Argo. Cautious too, she knows not to simply rush in and basically force herself on people. It would be smart tactics, if we actually fit her marks."

"Got experience with that?" Lux asked.

"A little," he replied. "Now, remember your aliases. I'm Henry, you're Kei, and Lux is Aura." When he judged that Rosalia was near enough, he raised his voice. "Anyway, I heard that there's some good stuff we can find on the thirty-sixth floor, enough that we can replace our gear, or at least make enough col to do so."

"You sure about that?" Silica asked him, a note of doubt in her voice. "You were certain that the information you got from that one guy back on the twenty-eighth floor last month was completely reliable, and look where that got us."

"Oh come on, Kei," he protested. "That was only the one time, and I made sure to double check with the Argo network this time."

"We ended up going broke from replacing our gear and healing items, Henry." Lux observed. "That and I had to put up with your snoring and Kei's kicking me in her sleep for a week because we only had enough for one room."

"Aura, that won't happen this time," Harry said and then sighed. "Ok, I screwed up with that, but I made sure this time. So, can we just let it rest?"

"No," both girls said in unison.

"At least I used what I was able to make enough to get us back in the black," he retorted. " Hadrian really is that bad at cards."

Silica glared at him. "In a card game," she said. "If it wasn't for the fact that Hadrian's as bad at cards as the rumors said they were, you would have been cleaned out. I've seen your luck with gambling. Just be glad he didn't talk you into a dice game, the rumors point out that he wins those, even when someone is using loaded dice against him."

"Hey, it worked," Harry protested. "And I made sure to win enough so that when I left, it was without hard feelings on his part."

"You mean when Aura came in and dragged you out of that bar," came the retort.

"I still don't know how you two have remained friends, with how much you argue," Lux observed
Rosalia listened with interest as the trio continued to talk. It sounded like they weren't exactly hurting on col, now at least, but they had been recently, and they were interested in getting some good stuff to make some more money, or replace their gear. She gave what they were wearing a once over and noted that while it wasn't bad, it could have been better.

That the boy had run afoul of a scam and got burned by it was amusing to her, and it spoke of a general gullibility that she could exploit. Well, if it wasn't for the two girls. Those two might be a harder sell, but she could always trail them and bump into them at some point as well. In fact, that might be better, and would give her time to watch and listen in on them.

She held back a bit before once again discreetly following them. With it being late afternoon, they would probably wait until morning. Plenty of time for her to set things up, but she would make sure to keep an eye on them, just in case they decided to leave early.

"She seems to be backing off," Silica murmured quietly.

"You think she realized something?" Lux asked.

"No," Harry said. "She's still following, she might be waiting to see where we're going."

"So how will we do this?" Lux asked.

"Well, we should top off on healing items," Silica said, pitching her voice so that Rosalia could hear them. "Aura, ask around so we know where the shops are. Henry, ask for the location of an inexpensive inn while we're at it. I'll find a cheap place for us to eat."

Excellent! She thought. While it didn't look like they were splitting up, their lack of knowledge would make it easier for her to find them later. Once she knew where they would stay, it would be child's play for her to sneak in and listen to any plans they had and decide where to go from there.

She didn't know if she could integrate herself into their group, at least not here, but coming across them in the field? Well, she did that before, and it often worked. For some reason, players had an altruistic streak when in the field. Something about getting a reputation for not helping people who needed it outside possibly coming back to haunt them, or whatever.

All it meant was that players out in the field tended to be more willing to work with someone or help them.

She saw it as more fools for the taking. Besides, worst comes to worst, someone got killed in game, though she and her group had been careful to avoid that. Doing so grabbed attention, which meant that the DDA would be on the warpath, regardless of the fact that this new group, Laughing Coffin, was getting people's attention.

As far as she was concerned, there was no reason to believe that Kayaba had been telling the truth, that the deaths here were real. Those news feeds at the beginning? For all everyone knew, they could be fake. Proof of dying being real? The only thing that they knew conclusively was that a player killed in game didn't come back.
Considering that they had all been in here for a year, that could be for a number of reasons. Being glad to be back in the real world, families taking the Nerve Gear and getting rid of it, being in the hospital, any reason really.

It was not what Kayaba claimed. It couldn't be. But players believed it, the fools, so she and her group had held back from killing.

##

It was fairly late in the evening when their tail had finally decided to go and do her own thing, finally leaving them with some privacy. Lux looked at Harry and Silica, who were glancing at the door to the room before Harry stood up and walked over to it. Opening it, he took a brief look outside it before closing it.

"She's gone," he said. "She's either not taking the bait, or she's more patient than I gave her credit for. Maybe a mix between the two, as she can always approach us later."

"From the info we got from Argo and Klein, I'm surprised," Lux admitted. "But Lind applying the pressure on her might have made her a bit more wary, even if she doesn't think that she's the target."

"That, and with Harry and I, she may be taking into account that we might be, well, us." Silica commented.

Harry shook his head. "I doubt that," he said. "If she suspected, she would have backed off. For all that she might be the front for a group of Reds, I'm not assuming she's careless or stupid." He opened his menu and set the message function. "Well, I'm letting the others know what we're up to, and where we'll be."

Silica snorted. "Also, ask how Pina's been behaving," she said. "She wasn't happy about being left behind, though Rain seemed to have her in hand with a lot of food."

**Aincrad, 50th Floor - Algade**

Rain shot a glare at Pina, who was weighed down by a distended stomach she could just see shrinking, and chirping contentedly. When she volunteered to keep the feathered dragon from flying off so Silica could do her little thing, she didn't expect that doing so by using food as a bribe, one of the few ways to get Pina to not follow Silica like a puppy, would be a combination of simple and difficult.

Simple in the fact that Pina was easily kept in one place with food. Difficult for the same reason, as she was finding out. Pina would eat just about anything that was edible, and be hungry again in short order.

*Where the hell does she put it all?* She thought. *And now I understand why Harry forwarded me all that col. I'm going to owe him big for this, and now I understand why Kirito and Asuna wanted nothing to do with it; they knew better.*

**Aincrad 35th Floor - Mishe**

"I forwarded her some col to ensure that Pina stays bribed with food." Harry commented. "Maybe we'll find out how much that flying bottomless pit eats before she's full."

Lux snorted. "Is there enough food in Aincrad for that?"

"Hey!" Silica protested. "She's not that bad. I could pack away more than what she normally eats
back in the real world, and as you can see..." She gestured at her body.

"I'd love to know your secret," Lux grumbled.

"Family genetics, a lot of exercise, and so on." Silica said. "Not that I wouldn't have complained about some expansion in some areas." She muttered.

"And I should probably take that as a cue to start running," Harry said.

"You don't have to, we already know that it's her hips and butt that gets your attention and turns you into a drooling idiot." Lux said offhandedly.

"Hips, arse, and legs, get it right." Harry corrected and blinked. "Wait a minute, did I just…?"

Silica burst out laughing. "You got him to walk right into that," she said between giggles. "Not bad."

Lux shrugged and smiled. "Well, he does make it rather obvious what he likes." She said.

"Can we get back to discussing what we're going to do from here?" Harry asked, changing the subject. "If she tries to integrate in, good. If not, she'll probably follow us anyway. I wouldn't be surprised if she suspects that people are getting suspicious of her, and the fact that we're a trio might indicate a tightly knit group."

"So what do we do?" Lux asked.

"We play the hand we're dealt, but if she does do something…" He smiled. "Well, how good are you girls at psychological warfare?"

January 24, 2024 - Aincrad 36th Floor - Virsten Trail

Rosalia kept her distance from the trio while she followed them. She had tabled the idea of joining up with them, some instinct told her that might be ill advised, so she contented herself to following them and watching. And now, she was glad she did.

With how well those three worked together, their own awareness of their surroundings, her usual habit of standing back and watching might not have worked. It wouldn't have been the first time a group noticed, but something told her that these three would be less tolerant of it than most.

Still, she saw them fight several mobs which showed that they were a solid trio, including one which often dropped a rare item. Rare, in the sense that the mob was the only known one to drop it, and while not difficult, was difficult enough that only teams which thoroughly knew what each member was doing would bother to take it on.

And these three did it with little problem.

*Not bad*, she thought. *Not bad at all. Less like a bunch of kids who are out of their depth, and more a team which had a run of bad luck, or judgment. Much like what I overheard. And…*

True, she didn't integrate herself into their group like she would have preferred, but something about what she saw implied that it wouldn't work. There was this feeling that they weren't the most trusting of outsiders, and her simply luring them into a shakedown would simply have them be suspicious of her.

That didn't mean that she couldn't shake them down, though. She would just have to be more direct about it. A pity that she would have to leave no witnesses about it though, she didn't want word of
what she did getting out. That would be inconvenient for her to deal with.

So, she watched and made note of the route they were planning on taking, the three of them not being cautious about being overheard one bit.

*Idiots,* she thought.

##

Harry stopped and looked around before he let out a sigh. "All right, you've been tailing us all day, come on out." He said.

Silica looked at a tree, while Lux looked around a bit, trying to see what he noticed.

"You're more observant than I thought, kid," came a woman's voice. "You must have a high searching skill to have noticed me."

"More like you're more obvious than you think," Harry replied. "I'll give you credit, you're not bad at it, but when The Rat decides that it's fun to sneak up on you and startle you, you get good, or you resign yourself to being her personal chew toy."

Rosalia walked out from where she was hiding. "I'm surprised that you got noticed by her, you all don't look like anyone high profile enough." She then smirked. "More like a couple of kids playing at being adventurers, really."

Harry raised an eyebrow before looking at his companions. "Playing at it?" He asked them. "Kei, Aura, do we really look like that?"

Silica shrugged, while Lux looked thoughtful. "I guess we kind of do, Henry." She admitted.

Harry nodded and turned back to Rosalia. "Ok, point," he said. "So, what brings you all the way out here?"

"Oh, I was just walking around when I saw you three," Rosalia said casually, leaning on her spear. "Seeing you, Henry, and your two friends, Kei and Aura wasn't it? Well, seeing you three work so well together on that one mob, well done."

"Thanks," Harry said. "But I have a gut feeling that's not why you're here. So, why don't we stop dancing around and cut to the chase." He looked at the tree line behind her. "And why don't your friends come out and play as well."

Rosalia smiled. *Much* more observant. She complimented. "And you didn't even wonder how I knew your names, either. Very interesting. Looks like my decision to not try and integrate in with you was the right one. I don't matter, anyway. I watched you fight. I watched you win against those mobs," Rosalia said. "And I watched you get all that loot. That sweet, sweet loot… why don't you just do the good thing and let someone who would put it to better use have it?"

"I know a merchant who will ensure it goes to the deserving," Harry countered. "Maybe you should see him?"

Rosalia wanted to glare, but refrained from doing so. Instead, she shifted her body a bit, the armor and clothing moving to reveal some more skin. It had taken some work to find something that would do so, and many hours of practice to make it seem natural, but flashing a little skin could do wonders.

Silica snorted at what Rosalia was doing. "Oh come on, it's not as if he'd fall for that." She said.
"Not a bad attempt though," Harry noted, giving what he saw an appreciative look. "Ah well, I can look. If I did more, like turn into a drooling idiot, you'd beat me to death with my own balls."

"Damn straight."

"You girl," Rosalia said. "Yes, you, the one I heard him call Kei. Why don't you wait until you're done with puberty and see how well it works?"

"I don't have to," came the response. "Unlike you, I know what he likes, and it's not a girl's tits." She smirked. "He doesn't mind them, he's a boy after all, but they're not his main thing. Now, if you were to expose some leg and wiggle that oversized ass of yours, I might have to worry."

"Broadcast my preferences all over the floor why don't you?" Harry asked with an aggrieved sigh.

"Oversized?" Rosalia asked. "I worked hard for this figure little girl. And you, what do you have? Nothing. No chest, a boyish figure, and those pigtails? What are you, a schoolgirl? You're just compensating for your deficient growth with attitude."

"And yet, I have a boy who notices me for who I am," Silica countered hotly. "So what about you? You get boys to fawn over you because you show some skin? You just wave your tits about and expect them to fall over you? That says more about you, than it does about them."

Harry put his fingers into his mouth and gave a sharp whistle. "As entertaining as this is," he said drily. "We're wasting time. Now Miss… I don't think I got your name, ah no matter. Now Miss, I think we all have places to be."

"Oh, but I'm exactly where I need to be, boy." Rosalia said. "After all, you still haven't done the right thing and handed over your goods."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "And I already said what I intend to do with them." He noted. "And it seems you don't like that. The question is… why?"

"Oh, you know. You have good stuff, and I'm someone who will make the best use of it," Rosalia said with a shrug. "Nothing more than that."

"Oh, really?"

Rosalia chuckled. "Why don't you drop the act, little boy," she said. "You're out of your depth here, and while I saw that you could fight, things only get more dangerous the higher you climb. How long would it last? How long would you last?"

Harry shrugged. "What's life without a bit of danger?" He asked. "Boring, that's what it is. Also, I've lasted this long, so I doubt things will go badly for me as long as I'm careful. I know the dangers and make sure to not take stupid risks."

"And yet you lost almost everything not too long ago, from what I heard." Rosalia countered.

"So you were the one following us yesterday?" Harry asked. "Good to know." He spied Lux opening up a window.

"Now, now, you don't need to do anything." Rosalia said, smirking. "We don't want things to get… unpleasant now."

Lux closed the window, but gave Harry a small nod.
"Unpleasant?" He asked with apparent curiosity. As if I didn't already know, he thought snidely. The woman was more transparently up to something than Draco could be. "And how would you make things unpleasant? I don't care about any rumors that you could spread, so how would you go about it?"

##

Rosalia smirked at the question the kid asked and raised her hand, still casually leaning against her spear. "I have my ways, little boy." She said as she snapped her fingers. She saw their expressions become nonplussed as her men, all of whom had orange cursors, came from where they had concealed themselves, and her smirk widened.

"And now, the reality of it is starting to sink in," she said. "I'm not usually this direct, but it was clear that I might have to be so eventually. Still, I'm not heartless, so I will give you one last chance. Hand over your loot."

The boy looked at her and shook his head. "And if I were to tell you to take your offer and sodomize yourself with it?" He asked.

She only just kept herself from blinking in shock. Stick to the script, she thought. He'll fold soon enough.

"There's no need for you to be crass," Rosalia said. "And drop the tough guy act. I can tell from here that you're intimidated. The act is only because you don't want to look bad in front of your girlfriends. But with you outnumbered like this, that act just breaks apart, doesn't it?"

"You act all tough, but you're like so many of the kids here. Scared out of your mind, and you can't hide it no matter how hard you try. So you put on a front of confidence and arrogance for others to see. You own little shell and security blanket. And like all those who do so, you persuade yourself that the act is the real you. But now, right here, it's all breaking down, showing the real you. Showing the scared little boy that you've tried so hard to hide."

She smirked as she saw him shake, as her words cut through his own delusions and showed him what he really was. And….

Wait. Was he laughing?

##

Harry couldn't help it. "You... you think that I'm some scared little boy?" He asked incredulously. "And your words, all psychoanalytical... you get that from a book or something? I've heard better bullshit come from kids who were eleven years old. I mean, are you even trying?" Even Dudley could come up with something better than that, he thought sarcastically.

Rosalia blinked and then scowled. "And you just keep up the act," she said snidely. "Acting all big and tough, but here's a hint, it would work better if your balls dropped, kid."

Silica snorted. "Oh his have," she said with a smirk. "Compared to your little friends there... I would say he measures up as being the bigger man. Those guys? I don't know where you found them, or how you got to follow them, well, I know how you got them to follow you. You shook your tits in their faces, or maybe you offered some services to them." She sneered at the men and Rosalia, not even bothering to pretend at being intimidated. "Not that they have anything to boast about, so you probably needed your right hand to finish the job anyway. Unless that's what you use your spear for."
Ouch, that's a hell of a burn, Harry thought with a wince. Rosalia managed to piss Silica off if she's going for the throat like that.

Lux giggled. "And you've seen him when he was exposed," she said. "How does he measure up in comparison?"

Silica smirked. "Them?" she asked, gesturing at the Red players. She put the tip of her index finger about three centimeters from the tip of her thumb. "Once you take off the codpieces, probably about that." She then gestured to Harry. "He's about… hmm." The gap widened to about fifteen centimeters.

"And you staked your claim already," Lux said, giving an appreciative whistle. "Good idea."

Harry stared at the two of them and shook his head. They're comparing me in that way to those guys? He thought incredulously. He noticed that the men behind Rosalia glare at Silica.

"Not a very inspirational comparison," He said drily.

"You're not finding it inspiring?" Silica asked. "I'll try harder in the future, dear."

"They're not finding it inspiring, m'lady." Harry replied, pointing at the red players. Well, orange, but he wasn't giving them that bit of leeway. "What you said does wonders for my self-image, not that it needs any help, mind you. I do have to ask, though, just what do you girls talk about behind my back?"

"Girl things," Lux replied. "You know, those things."

"Ah, never mind then." He said hastily before looking back at Rosalia and her men. "So, while the girls are busy with something more important, girl talk and all that, you all mind telling me who you all are? Not that I really care."

Rosalia glared at him and huffed. "Well, if you want to know who we are, we're Titan's Hand." She said. "And we're becoming something of a feared group on the mid-levels."

Harry snorted. "Titan's Hand?" He asked. Then he had to laugh. Wait until I tell Hagrid, Flitwick and McGonagall this one. He turned around. "Girls you heard anything about a group calling itself Titan's Hand?"

"Not that I can recall, good sir," Silica said.

Lux made a face as if in deep thought (or constipation, the two were so close, really) then shook her head in denial.

"Not even from Lind?" He asked.

"Nope," said Silica.

Lux frowned. "No."

"What about Argo?"

"We haven't heard anything about a Titan's Hand from anyone." Silica said. "Still, they introduced themselves, so…"

Harry nodded. "Good point." He opened his menu. "I think we can first let our gear do the talking, they might get the hint." Of just how royally fucked they are, he thought viciously.
Kuril was beginning to get nervous as he watched the trio act completely unconcerned about the presence of him and the others. Unlike what Rosalia claimed, he doubted that it was an act, there was too much clear confidence in their bearing.

And when Rosalia introduced their group, the only thing the kid did was ask his companions if they heard anything. From their denials, it was clear that, if anything, any intimidation factor was now gone. Instead all three simply opened their menus and...

Oh hell.

"Boss," he said. "I think we might have a problem here."

"And what would that be?" Rosalia asked sharply.

Kuril indicated the trio that just suddenly changed their gear to something that was clearly superior to what they had been wearing earlier. "Look at the colors, look at the gear, and then look at the colors again." He said.

Rosalia did so and turned back to him. "And?" She asked archly.

He had to suppress a growl- Rosie liked to think she was the smartest in the room to match her looks. "Boss, I think that's Hadrian and Silica, with one of their newest tagalongs," he said. "Lux, if I remember."

"Tagalong?!" The newly identified Lux protested. "Hey!"

"Oh, we got it when we first joined up with Kirito and Asuna," the one that he was betting was the Dragon Princess said. "Take your medicine."

"But it tastes bad, Auntie Sil," Lux whined. Mainly for show, was his guess.

Rosalia snorted. "If it was Hadrian and Silica, there would be a feathered dragon with them," she observed. "Which there isn't. And why would members of the Assault Team be down here?"

"I don't know," Kuril shrugged. "But they fit the-"

"They're not members of the Assault Team you idiot!" Rosalia shouted. "They're just looking like them, copycats! They're pretending to be them to throw us all off our game."

"Ah, no, not quite." The boy said... and fuck, when he stood up straight and glared he had to be the Hadrian, the Red Killer. "The fact is, Rosalia, people noticed your little gig." The scorn he heaped on Rosalia's name when he said it could fill a player's inventory.

"What?" She asked. And her sudden puzzled tone only added to the sinking feeling in Kuril's gut.

"Oh yes, they noticed." Hadrian said. "Hell, Lind noticed and tried to see if that was the case, but you always broke off from this lot early enough for them to hide." He smirked. "Not bad,"

"... but fucking Lind noticed..." Kuril moaned.

"I could say many unflattering things about Lind," Hadrian said. "But once he's looking for something, he can spot it. He noticed you a while ago anyway." His expression became cold. "And while he could never get the proof to act preemptively, he kept an eye open, and he made a nuisance of himself to disrupt you. Still took us a week to track you down, but that happens. Anyway, he
wanted it stopped before you crossed the line."

"And what line would that be?" Rosalia asked.

"Killing someone, Rosalia." Came the chilly reply.

Kuril started. "But we haven't killed anyone!" He protested. "We've been careful not to!"

"And how close have you all cut it?" Hadrian asked, the ice in his voice becoming razor sharp.

"How many were left with only a sliver of health after your little shakedowns? How many could have died as they made their ways back to a safe zone to recover? No, it's only a matter of time before you cross that line."

Rosalia growled. "You criticize me on pulling psychological bullshit, and you do the same thing," she hissed out. "It's not like the deaths are real. We have no proof that they are, none whatsoever! Kayaba was bluffing!"

"We have no proof that Kayaba was bluffing, either." Hadrian replied, his voice getting impossibly colder.

"Boss, he has a point." One of the others said.

"Enough!" Rosalia shouted. "These three are not who you all are afraid they are! Even if they were, they're outnumbered! Just attack them and when they've been beaten to within an inch of their lives, we'll take what we want!"

Kuril gave Hadrian a nervous look, while the boy waved his companions back and stepped forward. He looked at his fellows, who themselves looked a bit uncertain, but gripped their weapons more tightly.

"Just do it!" Rosalia commanded in a tone that brooked no argument.

*This is not going to end well*, Kuril thought as he charged forward with the rest.

##

Harry just stood there, idly keeping an eye on his health as Rosalia's men flailed away at him.

He was keeping note on how much damage they were doing, at least until his battle healing took effect and undid some of the damage. While not as good as Kirito's, which could recover close to six hundred health per ten seconds, being able to recover four hundred and fifty health was still a respectable amount.

Then again, he was far less willing to spend an extended period of time with his health in the red to really work on increasing his 'in battle' regeneration. Kirito, the lunatic, was willing to, if only so that when he actually needed such an ability, it was up to the task.

Risk versus reward, with the reward being increased survivability.

Still, it was seven attackers, and they were doing a fairly respectable job of whittling his health down. It exceeded his regeneration... but not by much. Not enough to count.

*Huh, not too bad*, he thought. *If they could do more damage, they'd be an actual threat, rather than a bloody nuisance. Still, better not get too overconfident, or next time this happens, and with Laughing Coffin out there, there will be a next time, I'll be in trouble. Keiko will figure out how to
resurrect me from the dead so she could kill me herself if I get killed because I was overconfident. Oh, wait, Rain still has that one item. One step less for her, really can't risk it now... hm?

His thoughts trailed off as he noticed them stop and catch their breath and decided to up the psychological warfare. "So, you guys can start whenever you're ready." He said idly, while his health ticked upwards and was back to full in short order.

"What are you idiots doing?!" He heard Rosalia shout. "He's just standing there!"

"Boss, we just hit him with everything we had!" One of them shouted.

"What the hell is this guy made of?" Another asked.

"How the hell is he...?"

"Wait, you guys did?" Harry asked in mock incredulity. "So that's what that breeze was. Huh." He then looked at them and sighed at their confusion. "Okay, I will put this simply. While the gear I have is awesome and all, it can be summed up this way. Levels, they matter." He then looked at them.

"You see, I'm level seventy-two, Silica is the same, and Lux is level sixty-nine."

"And that means that for you, we're a bit, just a bit, out of your league." Silica said. "While there aren't any gods around, think of us as their representatives to you."

"What would the Christians call us?" Lux mused. "Ah, yes. Prophets."

"So, there you have it," Harry said cheerfully. "We're the prophets of whatever gods you worship. I suggest you start praying."

"Would you settle for us groveling and begging for mercy?" One asked, the one who was trying to talk Rosalia out of this, if Harry recalled.

"Hmm, mercy, mercy..." Harry muttered thoughtfully before looking at Silica. "Silica, you have any of this 'Mercy' in your inventory?"

"Nope, all out. Lux?"

Lux opened her inventory and made a show of browsing through it. "It seems I'm fresh out as well," she said sadly. "Also, I think it was your turn to get some Harry."

"Oh, it was?" Harry asked idly. "Damn, I knew I forgot to get something in town."

"Wait!" Lux shouted. "I forgot, Lind gave us a corridor crystal in case we ran into these guys. If I remember correctly, he told us it leads to the Black Iron Palace."

Harry nodded. "So we do have some 'Mercy' in stock." He said the cheer re-entering his voice as he looked at the Reds surrounding him. "Well, you're all in luck boys, Lind came through for you." He then heard a growl coming from Rosalia's direction and turned to face her.

"Have something to say?" He asked.

"You... you... Lind sent you children to stop me?" She asked. "He didn't even have the balls to do it himself?"

Harry shrugged. "More like he doesn't have the time to bother with you, not with Laughing Coffin
out and about." He said. Well, if she was going to hold out her ego as a target, he'd oblige. "So, he asked us to do him a favor. And to be honest, from what I did learn, it's not a big one for him. I was going to make him owe me big for this, but… you're not making it worth that. Hell, you're not even worth his time, which is probably why the bastard asked us to do this."

Rosalia looked at him, then at his companions, and tried to smirk, though it was lacking in confidence in Harry's opinion. More like someone trying to rally their previous confidence, than anything else. "And how well can you do it?" She asked. "There are three of you, and while you're stronger than expected kid, does that apply to your friends? What if I were to tell my men to go after them and have some… fun with them."

Harry's expression went blank. "Rosalia, I'm warning you right now, don't go there." He said with a calm voice that was frighteningly cold. "You might have a green cursor, but that will not stop me from killing you if you do."

"Harry," Silica said sharply. "That bitch is mine. You just deal with those idiots. Lux, back him up if he needs it, not that he should." Harry turned back to see her draw her dagger. Lux followed suit shortly after with her sword, though her expression showed that she was less than thrilled by what was likely to be happening soon.

##

Kirito cursed as he had to kill another mob. Lux had sent the message and he, Asuna, and Rain had made their way to the Virsten Trail to back Harry and the others up. However, the distance they had to cover, being close to a kilometer, to the area, and the mobs in the way, had slowed them all down.

Of course, he thought acidly. Why wouldn't we be slowed down? It's not like our friends need backup or anything!

He gazed at his map, where his friends' locations were marked, thankful that the system had a way of tracking people on a player's Friends List. Well, so long as they were on the same floor. They were close, it should only be any second…

He stopped as his group reached a clearing and paused at what he was seeing. Harry was in the midst of a group of Reds, all of whom seemed to have surrendered, though seeing as a few were missing limbs, it was clear that his friend had to be a bit forceful about it.

Silica had her dagger to the throat of another Red, the sole female of the group, and he caught only the edges of what she was saying. Something about that Red now being a Red and if she wanted to test some theory or other. That her hand was impaled on a spear was worrying, but she seemed to be fine for now. Especially since the woman dropped her weapon. It slowly slid out of Silica's hand, but the puncture wound seemed to be taken care of by her regen before it could be affected by any debuffs or stat effects that might be inherent to the weapon.

And Lux… he stopped and stared. He was fairly sure that Asuna and Rain were as well. Lux was pale faced and holding a severed arm and looking at it curiously, as if wondering how it got there. She then looked at the Red it probably belonged to, considering he was missing an arm, and then back to the arm. Looking back at the player, she held it out.

"Um… is this yours?" She asked as the arm then shattered. "Oh… it's... broken. I'm sorry about that, but don't worry. You should get a new one when you heal up. And would you please surrender? I don't want to cut off any more of your limbs." Those last few sentences came out in a babbling rush, but the fact that she disarmed a Red player and was handing him back his own arm...
Needless to say, the Red surrendered, to Lux's clear relief.

He then heard Pina give out a call and the sounds of Rain struggling a bit to keep the feathered dragon restrained. Everyone's attention turned to them and Harry simply raised an eyebrow.

"Rain, just let Pina go, it's done with," he said.

The woman Silica was bearing down on... Kirito swore that if SAO's mechanics allowed for it, she would have died of shock as Pina settled on the Princess' shoulders. "You, you- oh fuck no, what the fuck..."

"Good to see she's remained articulate," Harry said, eyeing the woman coldly. Then, the warmth was back as he looked at the Black Swordsman. "Also, what took you guys?"

Kirito shrugged. "We ran into a bit of traffic on the way," he said simply. "You know how it is. Need to be somewhere? There's a line at the Teleport Gate. If it's not that, it's rush hour for the mobs." He looked around the area. "So, everything fine here?"

Harry looked at the ruined Reds surrounding him and back to Kirito. "I'd say so," he said as if he hadn't just gotten done fighting several players who had been trying to kill him. "But if you could be a good sport and get that corridor crystal from Lux and send these chaps on through, that would be nice. I think that Lux could use some pampering, and I think there's a spa somewhere on this floor that the girls can take her to. If not, Argo will know where a good one is."

"You paying?" Asuna asked.

Harry gave her a mock offended look. "I'm the one who got her into this mess," he said. "Of course I'm paying."

"You... did pay for Pina's food," Kirito noted.

Harry shifted slightly into a thoughtful pose. "There is that-"

"Harry!" Silica barked, not moving from where she held Rosalia at dagger's edge.

"- but for our girls, only the best!"

"Oh, yes," Kirito hurriedly agreed. "In fact, let's get these folks on their way so the ladies needn't bother!"

"Brilliant!" Harry agreed.

They both ignored the smiles the females of the guild gave them... though they savored the small one they coaxed from Lux. If she could still smile after the shock of fighting someone trying to kill her, then she would be just fine after the rest of the girls talked to her.
Lux almost purred from her recumbent position on the massage table as she felt the NPC masseuse work her magic on her legs, back, and shoulders. The woman’s hands and fingers pressing, kneading, and generally working in various oils relaxed her muscles in ways she never thought possible. Another NPC was busy giving her a pedicure, somehow able to position herself so that she didn’t interfere with the masseuse.

The feeling of pumice stone being carefully, but firmly scraped against the soles of her feet. The careful working in of various oils into her muscles from the masseuse.

It made her just want to nap.

Not that her companion would let her.

“Feels nice, doesn’t it?” She heard Silica ask from her right. “Almost like the real world in a way.”

Lux made a pleased sound of agreement as she carefully shifted herself to look at the youngest member in the guild, who was laying on her stomach as well, while her own masseuse gave her a massage. With the way the girl’s eyes were slitted open as she rested her head on her hands, she reminded Lux of a very relaxed and content cat.

“I think we should thank Harry for paying for this,” Lux said.

“I plan to, though Kirito’s footing part of the bill,” Silica replied. “Of course, that’s Asuna and Rain’s part, but he’s still footing part of the bill.”

Lux frowned. “Is it right for us to take advantage of them like this?” She asked.

Silica opened her eyes fully and met Lux’s eyes with her own. “We aren’t, Lux. Harry would have paid for both of us anyway,” she said. “Honestly, I think the two of them were looking for an excuse to do something nice for us anyway. Harry would have paid for me as a matter of course, because he likes doing things for me every now and then. He definitely would have paid for you after today.”

“Because of how I was after that fight?”

“Yes.” Silica said bluntly. Lux actually liked that about the younger girl. There was no pretense, no talking obliquely about something that would be normal for Japanese conversation. The need for clear and direct communication in SAO had caused them to become more blunt and direct in a way that would be considered rude by Japanese standards. “He saw how you were in the aftermath, and while you handled yourself well, it’s clear that once it was over, you were going into shock. You really weren’t ready for how sudden it could all be” She sighed. “Not like we really could have prepared you for it anyway, and you’re handling yourself better than I did.”

“Silica, last time you ended up fighting other players, well…” Lux trailed off, trying in vain to find a polite way to phrase it.
"I killed someone," Silica finished for her. "You don’t have to dance around it. It might have been in self-defense, true, but I really didn’t care about that fact back then.” She gave a bitter chuckle. “Be glad you only defended yourself and took the other guy’s arm.”

“I didn’t even think when I acted though.” Lux said sadly. "It all happened so fast, that it was as if instinct took over."

“And it’s good that it did,” Silica said. “Instincts will keep you alive, and in cases like that, well, better you weren’t thinking to be honest. Harry… Harry’s been there too often that he knows what he’s doing even then, and while his instincts might take control in a fight, well… you saw how angry he got with Rosalia.”

“You mean when you decided to take her on?” Lux asked. “I was wondering about that.”

"It's... look, I can tell when Harry's at his edge. And he knows where my edge is. And if I see him going there, or he sees me..." She snorted. "Actually reminds me of a lot of couples in my family when they find their balance."

"Umm, it was more the fact that Harry basically threatened to kill her that I was wondering about,” Lux said. “It wasn’t like him.”

“And that is what I meant by him being at his edge.” Silica replied. “In that context, it was very much like him. Harry doesn’t make threats, Lux.”

"That was a warning then," Lux said, the realization making her stomach feel like it was dropping to her feet. "Oh, hell. Not just to her."

"Indeed, he was warning her goons as well,” Silica said.

"And he was warning you."

“Not so much as a warning to me, but it was a warning sign that told me to intervene. He counts on me to see them, but he's not exactly sending them to me.” Silica sighed again. “Harry’s... well his life hasn’t been good, and it's left a mark on him. He has a dark side to him. He keeps it on a tight leash, but he recognizes that some things will cause it to slip that leash. Threatening those he cares about is one of them. If you actually hurt one of them, it doesn’t slip the leash, he lets go of it himself and is right there with his dark side.” Silica bit her lip, apparently thinking.

"Members of my own family know that dark side.” She admitted. “My grandpa... I think he always hoped I'd never go beyond knowing about it. That I’d never realize that I might have it as well. And he certainly hoped that I would never have a reason to face and use it. Because he's known people who followed it to dark places, and he's known people, even himself, that harnessed it to protect, to survive. And you don't know which way you'll go until you decide." The bluntness of Silica’s honesty, her sharing about Outside... Lux found herself moving almost before she thought to do so.

The hug they shared was exactly the kind of hug that ruined fantasies about girls in a bathhouse or spa, with its intimacy.

##

Harry took a deep pull from his beer as he sat with Kirito while they waited for the girls to have their pampering done. After Lux had been forced to defend herself, admirably so if he were to say so, the fact that she had to fight in ways that in any other place but SAO would cripple or maim someone,
he could understand why she had become a bit of a babbling mess at the end.

Not that he wouldn’t admit that her handing that one Red his own arm back right as it shattered didn’t do the trick in making the guy stand down. Not to mention any others who might have been inclined to continue fighting.

He had hoped that the realization that it was *him* they were dealing with would get those Reds to back down and surrender, even banked on it. However, Rosalia turned out to be far more susceptible to deluding herself about the reality of things, despite the fact that one of her *own men* realized the trouble they were in.

Of course, he had a fair amount of blame there, as he kept poking Rosalia’s ego with a stick, insulting her, goading her, and basically having her forget to step back and look at things rationally. He knew better than that.

Then he found himself chuckling.

"What?" Kirito asked. And there was no judgement in his question.

"Just realizing that I am as much to blame for what happened there," Harry admitted. "And also something my head of house in school once told me."

"Given her wisdom regarding alcohol..." Kirito prompted.

"Yeah. In this case... well, there's another student I had to deal with a lot back there, and we didn’t get along, to put it mildly. And I've occasionally been accused of baiting him. I have to admit, when she made me think about it, she had a point. Sometimes I did. But then she added that sometimes, he wanted to be baited. And sometimes, you couldn't draw a straight line from him to me."

Kirito nodded. "You have to be aware of what you are doing to others, but accept it's not so simple to predict. Maybe you pushed her."

"And maybe she was pulling.” Harry said. “Or maybe she would have crossed paths with someone else who wasn't so easy to lead around. It happened. I have to deal with it now. So does she. So did... he."

##

Kirito understood who the “he” was. Kirito supposed that was why they could have this talk. One reason, anyway. Another one was one he didn’t like thinking about or remembering if he didn’t have to. He knew why Harry had basically volunteered to be the one to do the killing if things got ugly with Rosalia.

Harry wasn't cold blooded, not to his core. But he knew the parts of himself that were and he could use them if necessary.

Kirito knew that for all that they both had killed, he wasn't like Harry. His blood had boiled in that moment, and the deed was done. Harry, on the other hand… he could shut his emotions off, detach himself from them. He would become cold, ruthless, and pragmatic about it. Not cold blooded. Too controlled for that. It was a control that Kirito would guess that unshared well of experience Harry had as good as admitted he was hiding had granted the younger man.

Only those who did not know Hadrian would call him 'boy'.

He hoped Harry never felt the need to share it. And he wasn't sure whether it was because he feared
it'd break him or Harry.

Harry chuckled again. "It’s a bit heavier than a detention cleaning the trophy room," He added dryly. "But that was at school, this is here. There, you’d get some scrapes and bruises, maybe a broken bone or some knocked out teeth at worst. Here, if things go pear shaped, people can get killed."

"Well, be fair to yourself," Kirito said after a moment’s thought. "Your school wasn't always as safe as you'd like, from what you've let slip."

Harry shrugged. "True, but the staff worked to make it as safe as they could," he admitted.

Kirito wondered what he meant by that, what 'as they could' hid. He chalked it up to one of those things from the real world Harry either wouldn’t talk about, or couldn’t for that matter. One of those things that Silica seemed to be aware of, and Argo seemed to know as well, now that he thought about it.

##

"Keiko, is Lux going to be okay?" Harry asked as he walked out of the bathroom, his hair still damp. "She definitely seemed a lot more relaxed and calmer after that spa treatment, but she did have a nasty shock to her system earlier today."

Keiko looked up at him from where she was idly scratching Pina, the feathered dragon’s coos showing how pleased she was by her ministrations. "Well, she might have a couple of nightmares, but she isn’t wound up about it anymore," she said. "Rain’s going to be there just in case."

“And it’s possible that there will be a couple of them,” Harry acknowledged. “Being on the receiving end of violence, and having to dish it out in response can do that.”

“And even with her own experiences, what with Laughing Coffin probably gunning for her due to her having seen PoH, it’s not the same.” Keiko admitted. “She had a run-in with them, but she got out of there without being attacked or having to fight back.”

Harry nodded. “She’s never had that kind of experience,” he said. “And because I just had to keep baiting Rosalia she now got it.” He scowled. “I would have brought Rain along, but…”

“Rain’s not the type who would have been able to pull it off,” she said. “She’s far too direct. And to be honest, she wouldn’t have kept a cool head the moment Rosalia started with her threats.”

She could see that Harry understood the implications, and he should. They all knew that Rain had… issues with Reds.

If there was anyone with a pathological hatred of Reds and those who abetted them, Rain was that person. Her ill-fated run-in with Red-eyed XaXa and Johnny Black had left their mark, and it was unlikely that Rain would have been able to not be the one who started things. It was also doubtful that she would have been able to restrain herself. Not impossible, but doubtful.

To her credit, she was aware of it, which is why she hadn’t volunteered to accompany the two of them. Their objective was to capture Rosalia and her goons, with killing to be as a last resort. Kirito and Asuna were too distinctive, and just about everyone in SAO probably knew who they were and what they looked like by now. That left Lux to go with them as Harry did agree that having a third person was a wise choice. And while the rest were a message away from coming and backing them up, it was not guaranteed that the backup would get there before things happened.
“You know,” Harry said. “We could use the incident to get other such groups to back off and stand down, maybe turn themselves in. Also, we can use it to enhance Lux’s reputation.”

Keiko blinked at the sudden topic change. “Ok, the first part makes some sense, but what do you mean by that second bit?” She asked.

“Well, we all know that Lux is a nice girl,” he remarked. “So the fact that a Red tried to attack her and had his arm literally handed back to him from it, well, it would fit the general sense of humor on the front lines.” He cleared his throat and gave himself a mock older voice. “Oh, my. You mean Rain’s Lux. Of Steel Phoenix. The Dusk Maiden. Yes, I do agree, she’s such a nice and gentle girl. Why, I was there when one Red attacked her! She was kind, polite, and handed his arm right back after she removed it, even apologizing when it shattered! Truly, a nice girl.”

Keiko couldn’t help the laugh that escaped. What Harry said was in bad taste, but it fit the rather sardonic sense of humor that players on the front lines, members of the Assault Team especially, tended to develop. They had to, if they wanted to remain relatively sane in light of how often they faced the prospect of dying.

February 3, 2024 - Aincrad 42nd Floor - Nouvelle Plains

Lind grimly watched as the last of the Laughing Coffin members fled, deciding that discretion was the better part of valor in light of two of their members being cut down. He counted himself lucky that he had managed to disrupt their own ambush before they had managed to kill the party they had been stalking, but he knew all too well that it was luck.

All too often, he or his men had arrived too late.

He turned his attention to the party that his group had rescued and paused when he noticed who it was comprised of, one of whom seemed undecided as to whether to be thankful of his presence or not.

Griselda, a woman whose husband had been killed because of him almost a year ago, and one who hadn’t forgiven him for it, and probably never would. In the unlikely event that she did forgive him, she certainly wouldn’t forget it.

Not that he blamed her. It had taken his confrontation with Hadrian back in June to realize that he had been deluding himself in many ways back then. That he had been treating it, if only subconsciously, as the game SAO had been marketed as. Admittedly, SAO was a game, albeit a deadly one, but he hadn’t been treating it as if the consequences mattered.

Oh well, he had a job to do now, so best be on it.

“Were we in time?” He asked.

Griselda gave him a cold look and looked at her own party. “We’re all here, if that’s what you’re wondering,” she replied. “It was… close, but you got here in time.”

Lind gave a relieved sigh at that. “That’s good,” he said. “I think you should all head back to town for now. Take a few days.”

Griselda nodded. “We were lucky it ended well,” she said. “For us at any rate, which is something of a surprise to me, given that it was you who came and rescued us.” There was a slight edge to her voice there, one that Lind understood. “But perhaps you’re right for a change. A few days of rest and
come down from the shock we had is probably for the best.”

“Hey lady!” One of his men shouted. “He just saved your life. You could at least be thankful for that.”

Lind gave his subordinate a glare, silencing him. “She has her reasons,” he said simply. “You weren’t a part of the DDA back then, but if you were, you’d know why.”

He gave Griselda a nod and turned to his men, looking them over. He spied Schivata giving a somewhat blank look in the direction the Laughing Coffin members ran off. Going back over the encounter, he winced. He knew why, especially since his friend’s hands were starting to shake.

Two Laughing Coffin members had died. One at his own blade… and one at Schivata’s, and his friend was trying to reconcile what had happened. It was something he was familiar with, no matter how much he wished otherwise.

"It was inevitable, I guess," he thought sadly. "With me putting my guild in place to keep the peace and keep the Reds in check, it was only a matter of time. He walked over to his friend and put a hand on the man’s shoulder, giving it a squeeze. It wasn’t anything much, but it reminded his friend that he would be there for him.

In the aftermath of the incident in June, Schivata had been there for him, had helped him work through the nightmares and sleepless nights. His friend had helped him center himself and decide on the direction to take the DDA. Rather than seeking glory or being heroes, they would dedicate themselves to protecting players.

It wasn’t glamorous, it didn’t make him any friends, or even do much to rehabilitate his image, but that hadn’t been the point anyway. Someone had to do it, especially since that incident had served as a catalyst for an increase in the activity of Reds. Better someone who knew just what they may end up going up against, than someone who didn’t.


Turning to her, he gave her a questioning look.

“I heard that about a week or so ago, Hadrian took down a group of Reds,” the woman said. “Apparently they had been enabled by someone who wasn’t a Red.” The scorn in her voice showed what she thought of someone aiding Reds willingly. “You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you?”

Lind’s answering smile didn’t reach his eyes. “I might have pointed Hadrian in her direction,” he admitted. “I and the DDA are too well known on the mid-levels, so we needed someone else to lure and capture them. Also, having him do it would send a message to any other such groups.”

“He won’t like that when he finds out,” Griselda noted. Given the tone in her voice, she clearly wanted to be there for that confrontation.

“It was his idea,” Lind countered. “I just wanted Rosalia stopped, but he worked with The Rat to get the word out. She added her own embellishments, but it sent a clear warning to the rest. If Hadrian is deciding to get involved, then they might want to turn themselves in, or at least stop what they’ve been doing.”

Griselda grudgingly acknowledged that point, knowing the hidden meaning behind that. The implication that members of the Assault Team were beginning to take note of what was going on.
Lind could see from her expression that she clearly divined his intent there.

His intent to get the higher level players involved before Laughing Coffin became more of a threat than it already was. They had already done a lot of damage in a month alone, and he didn’t know of just how much more harm they would cause, how many people they would kill, before they were stopped.

Too many had died at that group’s hands already.

February 11, 2024 - Aincrad 38th Floor, Serin Woods (Field Dungeon)

Silica watched as Harry fought the various mobs that this section of the field dungeon spawned, insanely fast sword work killing the mobs swiftly. He had been at it for the better part of an hour, killing the mobs and then waiting for them to respawn as he worked out the details of just how each aspect of the Mystic Blade skill worked.

As far as she could tell, he had the Fire aspect down pat, but then, that didn’t surprise her. Not only was it the first aspect of that particular skill he figured out, but it was also useful in the sense of offense. Well, that and it allowed him to set things on fire.

For a boy, that would do the trick right there. Her grandfather, her uncles, and even her father took a disproportionate amount of pleasure in occasionally doing so. Her father especially, since he worked with volatile chemicals professionally. She and the rest had long since learned to back away to a safe distance anytime he said things like “Watch this!” or “Now let’s see what mixing these things will do.”

Made for some impressive and awesome explosions sometimes. Anywhere else, they would be dealing with police. In the part of Nerima she lived in, it was just another day.

It was the other aspects which were still giving him some trouble, though in different ways. He more or less figured out how to use the Earth aspect of it. As expected, it required a shift to the defensive, and he had stumbled on it when he banged his shield to get a mob’s attention. How that worked, she would never know, but she thought it might be the shifting in stance as well as the apparent declaration of intent behind Harry’s action.

Harry had asked for her to accompany him and observe, as he usually did. It wasn’t because the others couldn’t offer their own insights, but because she knew about magic. She at least had some idea of how it worked, and he had admitted to her that the skill had a benefit he doubted Kayaba was aware of.

Ever since he first used magic in SAO, it was always limited, diminished, as if he was trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. It might work, but more often than not, it didn’t. Without a focus to help him direct it, he didn’t know where to start. Now, he had something, a place to start. It might not be how he learned magic was supposed to work, but it was a place to start from.

Knowing where to start from was just as important as knowing the path you were going to take, after all. In some cases, like Harry’s, it was more important.

She noticed that the mobs were done and Harry had sheathed his weapon. It seemed as if he was finished with his training in his new skill, at least for now.

“How did it go?” She asked as he walked towards her.

“About as well as expected,” Harry said with a grimace, looking down at the various marks where mobs tagged him. “I expected the Wind aspect to give me trouble, it’s too different from how I’m
used to fighting, and to be honest, my sword isn’t exactly the most suited for it.”

“What about a different weapon?” She asked.

“Well, a dagger would probably be a better, and I have at least some skill in one,” Harry admitted. “Something to look into later, but I think that the most appropriate weapons would be rapiers or spears.” He then gave a frustrated sigh. “If I could transfer over an aspect, even if temporarily, I could probably make use of them better, but…” He trailed off. “Wait a minute, if I could find some way too- I certainly would have the- that might actually work.” He muttered under his breath. “Probably won’t, but it wouldn’t hurt to try, and this area’s as safe as any.”

“Harry, what’re you up to?” She asked.

“I have an idea I’d like to try.” He said. “Hand me your dagger real quick.”

Confused, Silica drew her dagger and handed it to him hilt first. “Harry, if you break this, I’m taking you to Ashley’s, getting you dolled up, and parading you up and down Algade’s main thoroughfare for everyone to see until you replace it,” she warned.

“Duly noted,” Harry said, taking the dagger. Holding it in his left hand and drew his sword. Shifting his stance, she could see him concentrate, and his sword began to glow with the pale green aura that represented his using the Wind aspect. He carefully touched his sword to her dagger, focusing intently and Silica’s eyes widened as the dagger glowed as well.

“Ok, that worked…” He said to himself. Separating the two, he reversed his grip on the dagger and handed it back to her. “Silica, I want you to try something with it, anything really.” He said.

Silica took her dagger back and noticed him back away. Once he was a safe distance, she began to do her usual routine when testing a new weapon. As she went through it, her eyes widened as the dagger’s blade continued to glow, her movements becoming faster as she continued. Faster than she normally moved. Faster than she should be moving and maintaining the precise movements of the routine. For thirty seconds, she continued the routine, adding in new attack patterns, sword skills, and moving around, marveling at what was happening.

It was like she was made of the air itself.

When it ended, she looked at Harry in surprise, and she could see the pleased expression on his face. “Did you just…?” She asked. At his nod, she looked at her dagger and then back to him. “How?”

“Had an idea, really.” He admitted. “One I wasn’t sure would work, but figured it was worth a shot.”

“Oh?”

“Mystic Blade makes it easier for me to use magic, but only if that magic follows SAO’s rules.” He said. “Well, I remembered that you could add something to a blade, like a poison to allow you to cause status effects. So…”

Silica’s eyes brightened. “So you figured that you could apply the aspect to a different weapon, one you weren’t equipped with.” She finished for him. “If it didn’t work, no big deal. But if it did work…”

Harry nodded. “If it did work, then we have something that makes this skill more than something that’s nice to have, but not really necessary. Now, we need to test it some more, I can do it if I’m holding the weapon, but what about if I’m not? Also, I want to see if I can get it to take less time. It wouldn’t be very useful in a fight if it took too long. Ah well, it has potential.” He then grinned. “So,
how would you like to play with magic for a bit?”

**Aincrad GM Administration Area**

Kayaba nodded and closed the feeds, getting what he wanted from the data. What Hadrian had just done might not have been programmed in, or even something anticipated, but it really didn’t change anything. The boy would continue to be interesting, but it had been clear early on that it was the newness of what he brought in, simply having something different to bring to the table, rather than anything particularly special about him, that had caught the man’s interest.

So he gave the boy something to play with, to experiment with, and observed what the boy did with it. Unlike a lot of players, he didn’t immediately leap onto the latest thing, but instead considered it a potentially useful skill, once he trained with it and figured it out. Until then, it was something that was there, but not necessarily something that should be relied on.

Either way, he didn’t doubt that the boy would make good use of it, even if it would be in unorthodox ways if the results of his most recent experiment were any indication. But then, only a player who could be unorthodox in how they did things could really make proper use of such a skill.

Mystic Blade, which provided a “magic” system to SAO. It made use of a relatively common RPG trope, a magic swordsman, and gave the user abilities in line with that. In the hands of someone who could use magic? That magic system became more real, but was otherwise limited by how specialized it was, if the occasional conversations he listened in on were any indication.

His own Unique Skill, Divine Blade, gave him a supposedly perfect defense. When combined with his own GM powers, it made him virtually untouchable. Virtually untouchable, as he considered it possible for a player to outsmart the System Assist function. Unlikely, but possible, and not a matter of concern at any rate, as the number of players who could potentially do so could be counted on one hand.

And it wasn’t the true use of the skill in the first place. It was, simply put, a skill that gave the wielder an almost supernatural ability to exploit the weaknesses of other players. A flash of light reflected into an opponent’s eyes, a perfectly blocked strike which creates an opening, a strike that’s always a critical if done just so. The Unique Skill had the system make those opportunities to be exploited. It was, at its core, defensive.

And then there was the Unique Skill which was basically the opposite of his own, Dual Blades. A supposedly perfect offense, to offset a supposedly perfect defense.

And he already knew who it would be gifted to. The one player who had that combination of coordination, reaction speed, reflexes, and skill to make the best use of it. Aincrad’s best swordsman, its best warrior.

Kirito.

**February 14, 2024 - Aincrad 1st Floor, Black Iron Palace**

“Argo,” Thinker said as she walked into his office. “Thank you for coming on such short notice. Please, take a seat”

“You said it was important,” Argo commented as she took the offered seat.

Thinker nodded. “I’ve had men taking down the numbers, even noting names since Laughing Coffin started. While we haven’t had the kind of massacres that happened during the first week, the
numbers are slowly climbing. At the rate they are going, I would not be surprised if the death toll from Laughing Coffin’s activities passes the two hundred mark within the next few days.”

“Two hundred?” Argo asked in shock. “That’s insane! How could they kill that many so quickly?”

“If we knew, we would be taking steps to counter it,” Yulier said. “As it stands, we’ve put out the word to players on the lower levels that they should remain in safe zones for the time being. While Laughing Coffin seems to prefer preying on mid-level players from what we’ve learned, some of them have been occasionally seen below the twenty-fifth floor.”

“Few, I hope.” Argo said. “Still, this paints a bad picture. If their numbers are what I think they are, then each member has been killing at least one person each week. I know a few of them have been killed since, they usually run off before they can be captured, but...” She looked up. “Thinker, what’s the exact number of dead?”

Thinker got a pensive expression on his face. “Last report from those of my people keeping an eye on the Monument of Life said that the number was around one hundred and ninety,” he said. “Has anyone from the Assault Team said anything about getting involved and putting a stop to this?”

Argo nodded. “Klein and the Fuurinkazan are basically off the Assault Team for the time being because of this,” she said. “The front liners amongst them still go up there to help with clearing, and to take on floor bosses, but they’re spending most of their time on the mid-levels to help keep their people safe. I haven’t gotten a solid commitment from the other groups, but Steel Phoenix is likely to help Lind with patrolling and policing up the mid-levels. In fact members of that guild have already helped him with the bandit groups, getting them to stand down.”

“Steel Phoenix?” Yulier asked. “I don’t think I’ve heard of them.”

Argo nodded. “They only formed up as a guild a little over a month ago, so I’m not surprised.” She said. “You’ve certainly heard of their members though.”

“Oh?”

Argo’s grin was just a little savage. “The Young Knight, The Dragon Princess, The Black Swordsman, The Flash, The Blood Rain, and The Dusk Maiden.” She said not saying names, but referring them to their more well-known titles.

Thinker’s eyes widened and he smiled coldly. “While I am reluctant to admit that having someone know to be willing to use lethal force as he is would be a good thing... in this case, it might be necessary.” He said. “I would prefer to capture them, but it might not be practicable.”

“He would prefer to capture them as well,” Argo countered. “He’d rather not kill if he doesn’t have to.”

Thinker nodded.

“Thinker, would you mind if I bring this information to the Assault Team’s attention?” She asked.

“I was hoping you would.”

##

Argo walked out of Thinker’s office and spied Gus off to the side. Waving him over, the two proceeded to leave the Black Iron Palace for the Town of Beginnings proper.
“How did the meeting go?” He asked

“How did the meeting go?” She replied. “Thinker’s worried and some of their numbers are starting to trickle down, probably looking for easier prey.”

“Surprised it took them this long,” Gus admitted. “I take it they’re telling the people down here to stay in the towns?”

“Yup.”

“Smart move, but one that they won’t be able to do for too long,” Gus said. “Players will eventually get impatient and start heading out after a while. And it doesn’t count any green players they have, and what they can do.”

Argo nodded. She had considered that, though she didn’t tell Thinker and Yulier that much. They probably knew, but if it would keep the people they’ve taken responsibility for safer, or at least provide the illusion of safety, they’d make the decision. “So,” she said. “Did your own investigations turn up anything?”

Gus shook his head. “Nothing concrete.” he said. “I might have a lead, or at least an idea of where to start looking more closely, but I will need some more time to check it out.”

“Be quick about it, Gus.” Argo said. “These guys are too dangerous to allow to remain free. The second you have a solid lead, let me know. But first, I need to talk to the guild leaders on the mid-levels and the front lines.”

Gus nodded and began walking off. As she watched him leave to go about his business, Argo idly wondered what new surprises would be in store for everyone due to this.
Asuna sipped her wine as she looked across the table at her guest. When Argo had messaged her, requesting a meeting, she replied in the affirmative, with the question of if meeting at the Golden Way would suffice. That The Rat responded that it would be fine made her blink. The Rat was well known for picking the places for meeting her, having that illusion of control by making players dance to her tune, that this was unusual.

Either it was serious enough that Argo was dropping her games, or it was unimportant enough that she decided to not bother. Though knowing her, that just meant that she’d likely play up her gadfly tendencies.

She had decided to have the meeting in her room, as it would provide more privacy than if they had it in the main dining room. While Argo trusted her privacy field generators, Asuna knew that it was of less utility than if they were somewhere reasonably private.

Argo finished drinking her cup of wine. “Ah,” she said happily. “Good stuff, better than what I usually drink. You and Harry could make a list of the best places for wine and beer.”

Asuna shrugged, placing her cup down. “You mean the stuff that’s actually palatable?” She asked. “Not surprising. Harry’s a connoisseur when it comes to beer, and while I wouldn’t be able to tell good wine from bad in the real world, I’ve learned how to tell the difference here. I’m not sure that it would necessarily apply outside of SAO.” She then gave Argo a searching look. “Now, I doubt you called this meeting to talk drinks, Argo. What’s going on?”

“I had a meeting with Thinker on the first floor yesterday,” Argo replied. “We were going over what we believe Laughing Coffin’s activities have been like since they started and he’s worried. Worried enough that he’s put the word out that the players on the lower levels shouldn’t leave towns for the time being.”

“I take it that decision isn’t going down well,” Asuna said drily. “It wouldn’t fly up here, that’s for sure.”

Argo shrugged. “The players aren’t happy about it,” she admitted. “But Thinker also explained why. Laughing Coffin members, or at least those suspected to be a part of it, were spotted below the Twenty-Fifth.

“He also went over the latest casualty figures,” she continued. “While we can’t be completely certain, he estimates that the number of players killed by them is getting close to two hundred.”

“Two hundred?” Asuna asked with shock. She was having a hard time believing that they had killed that many already, not in six weeks. Even coming from Argo, and her knowing that Argo wouldn’t knowingly lie, it was something that was just hard to accept. For one group to willingly go out and kill players, and do so often enough... “That’s... last I heard, the number of players left alive was just over sixty-nine hundred, and that was last week! Just what kind of sick people are they?”

“That’s the million col question, isn’t it?” Argo asked calmly. “I don’t know how many of them are
really aware of just what they’re doing, that the deaths are real, but you can be sure a fair number of
them do, and they gleefully do it anyway. And I think you can see why Thinker’s worried. There
were perhaps three thousand players combined past the twenty-fifth floor on New Year’s Day, and
Laughing Coffin’s taken out six percent of that number, and that’s only because enough have been
able to fight back and drive them off to keep the number that low.”

“They’ve kept their predations to the mid-levels,” Asuna observed. “And yes, I know, that won’t
last. They’ll go looking for easier prey sooner or later, or more challenging prey for that matter. It’s
the same reason Harry agreed to help take out Titan’s Hand when Lind asked.”

"Escalation," Argo agreed, nodding. “Also, keep in mind, the players on the mid-levels are noting
that outside of a few exceptions like Klein and his boys, there hasn’t been much response from the
front lines, let alone the Assault Team. Lind’s trying, I’ll give him that, but he and his guild can’t be
everywhere.”

Asuna would admit, the information broker had raised a valid point there. She knew that Klein had
basically relocated to the mid-levels with the front liners and Assault Team members in his guild to
provide protection to the mid-level members, but that was one guild looking after its own. Even
though Klein would, and for that matter, did, cheerfully extend his help to anyone else who needed
it, that perception would remain. Besides, Klein’s willingness to help was well known. His nickname
as the “Bro of SAO” was there for good reason.

And she knew why Hadrian hadn’t made much noise about getting involved. He might not outright
say it, but he didn’t want the rest of them being forced by circumstance to kill. However, if what
Argo was saying was true, then it soon wouldn’t matter. They would have to get involved, if only so
they could sleep at night.

Soon, all of them would have to get their hands dirty.

“I can’t speak for the other groups and guilds,” she said. "I can only speak for mine. And I’m certain
that Steel Phoenix will begin helping at the very least. You might want to see if we can get a general
meeting going on, though.”

Argo blinked. “What do you mean?”

Asuna frowned. “I think… no, I’m almost certain, that most up here aren’t really aware of just
exactly how much damage Laughing Coffin’s doing. It’s something that’s kind of hard to believe,
even when it comes from you. I’m still having a hard time believing it, and I know the information’s
accurate. Of course, even getting them to believe it isn’t the hard part.”

“And what would the hard part be?” Argo asked.

“Convincing them that it’s their problem as well.” Asuna said grimly. “You know how a lot of
players up here are like.”

Argo nodded. “Still, if we can get a meeting together, and lay everything out, it should shake a few
loose to help. At the very least, it’ll let the middies and lower level players know if there will be
anyone coming down to help deal with the problem, or if they’re on their own.”

“Let’s hope the latter doesn’t become the case.” Asuna said.

##

“You know, Argo coming up to meet Asuna like that shouldn’t have surprised us, even if it did.”
Harry idly noted as he drank his beer.
Rain blinked and turned to him, giving him a questioning look. “What do you mean?” She asked.

Putting his tankard down, Harry gave an idle glance at the rest of the patrons in the inn’s dining room. Turning his attention back to her, he gave a small shrug. “Who usually comes up with the plans?” He asked. “Asuna does. The rest of us can plan, but there’s a reason Kirito, Silica, and I run any plans we have by Asuna if we can. She’s good at finding holes in them. She has that attention to detail the rest of us lack.”

Rain nodded, understanding most of what he was saying, but even so... “I’ve seen you come up with plans quickly, and have seen them work.” She countered.

Harry snorted. “Plans?” He asked sarcastically. “Those weren’t plans, so much as me acting on what’s happening. I tend to fly by the seat of my pants. Asuna says I have good instincts for those kinds of things, an ability to react to changing situations, but instinct doesn’t necessarily translate to planning. I'm the functional improv to Asuna's choreographed act.” He then sighed. “Besides, it’s not like we can’t figure out why Argo’s up here.”

Rain gave him a questioning look.

“Laughing Coffin.” He said simply.

She felt her face go into a scowl and reached over to her own beer and took a long pull, using the time to compose herself. “Them?” She asked. “What does a bunch of sifillicheskiye ublyudki like them have to do with Argo coming up here?”

Harry was about to answer when Kirito walked up to them.

“I heard Rain saying something in Russian, what’re you two talking about?” He asked, taking a seat and putting his drink down on the table.

“Argo’s reason for wanting to meet with Asuna privately,” Harry said.

“Ah,” Kirito said with a nod. “You mean that it’s probably about Laughing Coffin.”

Harry nodded.

“I don’t know the details, but word about what they’re doing is starting to turn up here, on the front lines.” Kirito said. “Surprised it took this long, given that I know that Argo put the word out.”

“I’m not.” Harry said. “People are people, and to something like this is, well… it’s hard for many to believe. I mean, a group that’s out there and killing people for no apparent reason? No offense, but most people don’t really expect that there are really people like that. They’re… innocent in a way we aren’t. Not any more, at least.”

Rain nodded and thought about what he said. Of those in their guild, only Asuna hadn’t been faced with a player trying to do violence upon her. Not yet, at least. Lux had that particular baptism a month ago. Kirito, Silica and Harry had killed when faced with it in June. And she, herself, had only escaped her run-in with Laughing Coffin with her life by leaving her friend behind.

Her friend might have told her to run, but it didn’t eliminate the fact that she had left her friend to die, and the nightmares of the fading screams before they suddenly cut off had been with her for months. They still cropped up on occasion, but time has worn down the jagged edges of those memories to a familiar ache.

And after six months of inactivity, Laughing Coffin had come back to begin anew. She had, briefly,
raged about staying up here and doing nothing, but both Harry and Asuna had cut that off quickly. Harry more than Asuna, but he did so by asking her some very pointed questions, such as whether she would leave her friends behind for the sake of revenge. If so, he wouldn’t stop her, though Asuna might have some rather pointed things to say about that. At the same time, if she did go off like that, she could end up finding herself without backup, right when she would need it the most. So... what did she think her chances of surviving were?

That had brought her up short. Asuna had called him out for that, but he simply shrugged it off, not in the least bit repentant. He simply told them that he had faced a number of situations trying to kill him on his own enough times before SAO to know that it was only through sheer luck that he was still alive.

“Musing on something?” She heard him ask, startling her.

Rain shrugged and reached for her tankard. “Just wondering how you’re so well adjusted, considering what we’ve learned of your life.” She said taking a drink. “Well, what you’ve told us and have let slip, at least.”

Harry raised an eyebrow and then shrugged. “Well, what can I say?” He asked. “That I’m strong enough for it?” He gave a derisive snort. “I’m not that strong. Kei- Silica, she’s been there for me when I needed someone to be there. She’s seen me at my worst, and at my lowest points, so she knows I’m not that strong.”

Rain politely ignored the slip of the tongue that Harry almost had. It didn’t take a genius to realize that he almost used Silica’s real name; if he knew that, it she a new light on things about the two of them. She idly wondered just how far along their relationship actually was. Something to think about later, she thought.

“You’re stronger than you think you are.” Kirito said, putting a hand on Harry’s shoulder.

Yeah.” Rain agreed. “Just because you have your own low points doesn’t mean you’re weak. Hell, admitting that you need others is a sign of strength in its own right.”

Harry smiled at them and nodded.

February 18, 2024 - Aincrad 1st Floor, Black Iron Palace

Harry knew how unusual it was for so many guild leaders to be present in one location. Outside of the meetings that happened before boss fights that the Assault Team had, he could count on one hand the number of times many of those present had been in the same place at the same time. Even counting the first day, that would still leave fingers left over.

The fact that Asuna and Argo had made the arrangements for a place to host it, send out word, and that it was actually happening in only a few days was impressive. That the meeting was agreed upon without extensive negotiation on the when and where also put into perspective the reputation of the two.

Well, just what this meeting was about added weight to the proceedings, he supposed.

When Asuna had asked for him to come with her, he was surprised. He really couldn’t understand why his presence for what could effectively turn into a council of war could add. Sure, he was good in a fight, but he wasn’t much of a planner. Not on the same level as many of the others at least. He could handle moment to moment tactics, but large scale strategy and logistics? That was all Asuna.

Still, he came. Working with her off and on before they meshed together as a group had given him
good reason to trust her judgment. If she felt he was a better choice, then he wasn’t going to argue
the matter. That, and she had a better knack for anticipating how things would go during things like
this than he did. Something to do with having dealt with the internal politics of an all-girls school if
he recalled. It had been awhile since she mentioned how she knew how to deal with such things.

He shook his musings out of his head as the last person took a seat. He was seated just behind
Asuna, not at the table proper, but he had a clear view of all the attendees. He saw Klein, Heathcliff,
and a few others from the Assault Team on one side. Lind, Keita, Griselda, Kibaou, and others
representing the mid-level players on another. He also noticed some front line guilds represented, and
a few guilds that he had no clue about. He spotted a few familiar players unaffiliated with any guilds,
but who were much like he and the rest of Steel Phoenix had been until a short time ago, members of
'known' groups and parties, however formal or informal those arrangements were.

All in all, there were about forty people here. Not all the guild leaders or players who were told about
all this, but enough to suit the purposes of the meeting. A quorum, if Harry recalled the term.

"Starting," Asuna noted quietly, and Harry reigned in his musings.

At his nod, she sat up just a touch straighter. And with a slow gaze around the table, she had all eyes
on her.

“Thank you for coming,” Asuna said after a few moments. “Also, I would like to thank Thinker and
the SSN for hosting this meeting.” She gave a nod to the man, who was attending as a courtesy for
hosting the meeting. “We all know why we’re here. The group of Red players known as Laughing
Coffin has continued their killings and the number of dead has grown considerably. As far as we
know, they have been associated with around two hundred deaths, and that number will continue to
rise until they’re stopped.”

“What concern of this is ours?” One of the guild leaders that Harry didn’t immediately recognize
asked. From his gear and general bearing, he was in charge of one of the front line guilds. “It’s not
like they’re coming after all of us, and it’s not like they’ll take their chances on the front lines. Quite
frankly, it’s not our problem.”

Harry could see several of the mid-level guild leaders shoot the player cold looks, and he could hear
some very dark mutters from their side. He could tell from Asuna’s posture and the set of her
shoulders that she was trying to reign in her temper and continue to be diplomatic.

He was under no such constraints, and he now understood why Asuna had brought him along. The
same reason Hagrid had once explained, with one of those winks the half giant knew was bloody
obvious, that the Headmaster sometimes took Hagrid and Flitwick to board meetings.

They could get away with not being diplomatic about things, getting angry, and cutting
through the bullshit.

Channeling Snape might be too much, but Harry could do a calculated lack of tact. With a bit of his
honest anger. Purely for effect, of course. Just to nip the attitude in the bud.

“Two hundred dead, and it’s not your problem?” He asked pointedly. Standing up, he got
everyone’s attention as he shot a frosty look at the guild leader who voiced that question. “How
many would need to die before it becomes your problem then? Or how long do you think it will take
before they decide to go elsewhere because they’re getting bored of easy prey? How long will it be
before they decide that you would make a fine target?”

The frontliner blinked at the interruption, and looked to Harry's side. From the corner of his eye,
Harry saw Asuna pointedly avoiding meeting the other guild leader’s' gaze. Harry took that as the okay to go on.

“Let me remind you of something, something you’d have to be ignoring every message in this bloody ‘game’ to not know,” Harry said, and somehow an Englishman using English for emphasis alongside his fairly fluent Japanese seemed all the more pointed to the mostly Japanese group. "Back in June, these... bastards is the most polite way I can describe them… these bastards came after Lind, Silica, and I. That is how long they have been around. Lind lost several guild mates that day, all taken in an ambush, and this same group had been starting up what they were doing now." He gave the man his coldest smirk. "Needless to say, they found the three of us a bit more difficult. Make no mistake, though, if backup didn’t arrive when it did, our names would have been crossed off on the Monument of Life as well. Eight to one odds will do that. As it was, we killed six of them before that. They gave us little other choice."

"How can you--" the guild leader began to protest.

"Please, do not assume I didn't find it distasteful," Harry interrupted flatly. "But sadly, details of Outside I have no wish to share with you, sir, have taught me that we don't always have the options we wished. Or are you saying you'd just stand there and let those relying on you die?"

"Here, here," he heard a familiar voice say, and as Klein was joined by others, he made note to buy the "Bro" a few rounds.

Harry leaned onto the table before him, toward the seated guild leader. "That backup... even with our planning, we could not have reasonably expected as much as we had, could not have expected them to get there in time. But I will tell you this, good sir. That backup managed to be the final punch that not only drove them off, but got them to put a halt to their activities for six months. Backup, including two players who ended up having to take another person’s life in order to protect others."

His voice never wavered as he spoke, but it got progressively colder as he stared the other player down. A coldness which was made sharper by the very politeness of his speech. A politeness that made it quite clear that the other player wasn’t even worth even the minimal lack of effort it would take to be rude.

Harry knew full well that being polite and moderately formal could be, if anything, more cutting than being insulting and rude.

Any noise and murmured commentary had died down. All eyes were on him, but Harry focused on the man who he was using to set the tone. It was an opening to be exploited as mercilessly as a boss's weak spot.

“And here you are, saying that people dying at the hands of those lunatics is not your problem? That it is just fine to leave people to die, and that you would do so? Is that what you are saying?”

"What? No!" The guild leader protested.

“Then what are you saying then?” Harry asked icily. “Because from here, it sounds like you are saying exactly that.”

The player clearly couldn’t think of a response to that and was having difficulty meeting Harry’s eyes. He tried looking around the room for any support, but it was clear that no one would support him.

“Hadrian,” Asuna said, a touch sharply.
Harry looked at Asuna and nodded before sitting down.

“He raised several good points,” Heathcliff said, nodding to Harry. “But they beg the question of how we would go about it. We don’t know where they’re based, or even if they have a base of operations. For all we know, they could simply be targeting players and groups at random. Opportunistic, as it were. And if it’s like that, then tracking them down will be problematic.”

Argo stepped forward from the shadows. “I already have people trying to find that out.” She said. “They’re probably basing themselves out of a safe area, even if it’s not a town, but would have to be a combination of off the beaten path, but close enough to where players frequent to be useful to them. That narrows down the options a bit. One of my people has some real world experience in tracking down leads, so it should only be a matter of time.”

Heathcliff nodded, accepting Argo’s point.

“At the same time, we can have people from the front lines help with patrolling the mid-levels.” Asuna said. “It should at least put a damper on their activities until we get a solid lead. Lind and a few others have been doing what they can, but they can’t be in multiple places at once.”

“She’s right,” Lind said, speaking up. “We’ve managed to disrupt them a few times, but the fact is, I don’t have enough people to cover all the mid-level floors and remain effective. Some of the other groups have started helping out, if only to be on the lookout, but that only lets me know where they might be at best.”

He looked around. “I’m not expecting you all to drop everything and help me on this, getting out of SAO is important, and you all have other responsibilities, but let’s be honest, at the rate we’re going, it’ll be about two more years before we’re out of here. A few people here and there when you can spare them would go a long way in helping keep those maniacs in check.”

“Asuna, we don’t have anything planned right now, do we?” Harry asked. “We only just cleared the fifty-third floor, so there isn’t anything major that I know of.”

Asuna looked at Harry and then at Lind. “Lind, would Steel Phoenix be of assistance?” She asked.

Lind looked at her and nodded. “You already helped me with one potentially thorny problem, so it would be appreciated.” He said.

“Count Fuurinkazan in as well,” Klein said. “I already got my front line guys down there to keep the middies in my guild safe, but it wouldn’t be too hard for us to expand it to patrolling around and guarding others. Some of the stronger middies can help as well.”

And with the offer of assistance from Klein, the “Bro of SAO”, others started chiming in and offering assistance where they could. Asuna might have the reputation to get people to this meeting, but it was clear that Klein was the one with the influence to get people to do more than talk about it.

Aincrad 38th Floor, Labyrinth Safe Area

PoH considered the information he learned, though it was second or third hand. It seems as if the activities of his little group of killers had finally gotten everyone’s attention, and they were now trying to decide what to do. A part of him was disgusted that it took this long for a response to occur. Another part of him was amused that it had gotten the reaction he wanted.

“What are you certain of this?” He asked the informant who passed the information on.
His cloaked form hid his identity, not that PoH didn’t already know who it was.

“I am,” his informant replied, his voice carefully neutral. “My… guild leader passed it on to us. Not that he suspects anything, but he was looking for those who were willing to help with what he offered to them.”

PoH nodded. “Return to your, heh, guild, and keep an eye out. If there is anything useful, be sure to report it to me,” he said. “In person if practicable, but if it isn’t… a message will do.”

The man nodded and walked off.

PoH watched him walk off and became thoughtful. It was possible that they had been a little too successful, if the various guild leaders were already discussing strategies for taking his group down. It was also possible that the guilds knew about his plants, and were feeding him misinformation as well. Not that he figured more than a few even suspected it. Argo was one thing, she wasn’t stupid, and would make sure her own people could be trusted. And if not her, August Blake would.

He would let his group’s members continue with their killing. He was planning on holding them back the moment an actual response happened, but now he decided not to. It’s not like it would have lasted anyway, and he would have betrayed his group to end it. He would have betrayed them in order to end it in a way that would have the maximum impact. Luring in those who would oppose him, letting his group know they were coming, and sit back to watch the show.

After all, his goal was to simply watch Japanese players kill Japanese players. He might participate in it on occasion, but he was in it to watch the bloodshed. And if he played it right, he would draw an old acquaintance to it like a fly to honey.

February 22, 2024 - Aincrad 36th Floor, Virsten Trail

Silica kept an eye on her surroundings, paying careful attention to areas which would make good hiding spots, as she moved around the Moonlit Black Cats. She had joined with them to fill out their group, give them an extra blade, and to provide the overwatch that might be needed in these nervous times. She already knew that Harry, Kirito and Rain were a ways behind, staying just far enough out to not be in the immediate area and potentially spook any watchers, but close enough to get to everyone in time if Laughing Coffin decided to show up.

Keita had approached them with information he got from one of the NPCs on an unusual item that hadn’t been in the information database, both the self-updating game one, and the one made by Argo’s network. He wanted them to back his guild up, as the information was too worthwhile to ignore, but his training under them, and the months of experience gained after it, made him wary. He recognized that this information would draw players to an area, and with the database updating to reflect the item’s presence, it was a golden opportunity for Laughing Coffin to set up ambushes. On the other hand, given what he had learned about the item, it was too good an opportunity for his guild to pass up.

So he approached Harry and the others, asking for them to back him up, just in case. A quick discussion had Silica going directly with them, with Harry, Kirito and Rain following closely.

A flicker of movement caught her eye and she restrained an urge to sigh. Laughing Coffin was so predictable, now that they had a knowledge of their preferred tactics. She opened her menu, typed a quick message:

*Harry, LC seen. Get here. Short, to the point, and what they agreed on.*
She sent it and turned her attention to where she had seen the movement, loosening her dagger in its sheath. She idly wondered what about this area made it seem like a good idea for ambushes. It was the same general area she, Harry, and Lux confronted Rosalia last month.

“Silica?” Keita asked quietly, having caught her getting herself ready.

“Trouble,” she replied. “Area just ahead likely ambush. It’s a good spot.”

He nodded and tightened his grip on his spear. He made a few gestures, and the rest of his guild shifted to a more defensive posture. Silica allowed herself a small smile as she saw it. The Moonlit Black Cats had come a long way since she and the others took them in and trained them in how to survive SAO nearly a year ago.

A flash of light, and her dagger was unsheathed and deflecting a thrown knife. She blocked several more before the small barrage stopped and she took a quick look behind her. Keita was fine; his proximity to her meaning that she blocked the thrown blades meant for him were deflected. Tetsuo and Sachi were behind their shields and moving to Ducker and Sasamaru, both whom had blades in them and the telltale signs of a paralysis effect on them.

“Sachi, Tetsuo, keep your shields up while you use crystals!” She called out. “Get them on their feet, and we need to get defensive.”

Keita looked at her. “Back to back?” He asked.

Silica nodded and growled as several cloaked figures came from the tree line. She recognized one of them, the mask he was wearing was distinctive.

Red-eyed XaXa was with this group, and she could see others making their way out as well. She saw his smile, a cruel thing, as his eyes met hers and she barely restrained herself from throwing her dagger at him.

“Well now,” he said. “It has been a while, hasn’t it? Time to finish what was started in June.” He raised his hand and gestured his fellows forward. “Let’s see how you do without your knightly boyfriend to save you.”

And with a simple hand signal from him, the Laughing Coffin members attacked.

##

Keita used his spear to shove another attacker off Tetsuo, grunting with the effort to keep the ones attacking them both at a distance. He heard another scream off to the side, followed by a shattering sound and almost turned, but kept himself focused on what was in front of him while he tried to keep track of the positions and the status of everyone with him. So far, they were all still alive, team tactics that they had drilled on working well enough right now for them to have their weak points covered and keep their attackers from doing any real damage to them.

If he wasn’t worried that Hadrian would stab him for it, he would kiss Silica for that instant of warning she gave. It had allowed them to react in time to avoid the worst of what they knew was Laughing Coffin’s usual means of ambushing. Sachi and Tetsuo had to get Ducker and Sasamaru healed up, but they had reacted instantly and readily.

He was also thankful for Silica giving out that order when she did, as it cut through any surprise they had.

*It really is true,* he thought as he stabbed with his spear, forcing another attacker back. *Just having
someone there giving orders cuts through the fear nicely.

##

Ducker struck out with his dagger, slashing a Laughing Coffin member across the wrist and forcing the red player to drop his weapon before stepping back to within reach of Sachi’s shield. He could see Sasamaru stabbing out from Sachi’s other side, forcing several back from the precise thrusts of his spear.

If they had a chance, they would have broken contact and retreated, but the number of attackers, the need to be on constant alert for any surprises… they couldn’t. They had to instead hope that they could hold out long enough for backup to arrive.

A quick glance to Sachi had him moving even before what he saw registered.

##

Sachi realized almost too late that one of them had managed to get inside her guard. It was only luck that kept what could have easily been a lethal strike from hitting her, but it left her off balance as her attacker, the player’s crazed eyes lighting up with bloodlust at the opportunity presented, stabbed at her again.

She tried to move her shield to block the attack, but she knew it would be too late.

##

Later, Ducker would thank the fact that he had moved on instinct, and that his conscious mind hadn’t directed it. Those instinct had recognized that one of his teammates was off balance and about to be killed. And that instinct had him charge the attacker, his dagger flashing with a sword skill and stabbing the red player where the heart would be in the real world, while his free hand knocked the other player’s blade off target.

He would thank those instincts for keeping him alive, after he watched in shock as his actions caught up to him, the Red player blankly looking down at the dagger in his own chest with confusion. A confusion which would remain on his face as he slipped off of it and fell to the ground, shattering a few seconds later.

If it wasn’t for those instincts, he would have been unable to get out of Sachi’s way as she moved her shield to block a follow on attack meant for him, or that he would be in position to fend off another attacker.

Even though he would come to hate them as well, he would be thankful for those instincts. A close friend of his wouldn’t be alive, and neither would he, if it wasn’t for them.

##

Silica knew the moment backup had arrived, considering that a lucky attacker had gotten into position to get around any defense she could implement. Of course, he didn’t have the time to exploit it, as Harry charged the player, taking his head even as he swatted the body away with his shield.

She could see the grim and flat look in his eyes, and the lack of expression on his face. Those signs that he was already drawing on the darker elements of his personality. That he was drawing on the ruthless fighter who would not hold back and whose strikes would be delivered with lethal intent.

She quickly got to his side, placing a hand on his shoulder and quickly slashed out with her dagger,
catching one of the Laughing Coffin members in the arm and using the opening to kick out with the bone crushing force of a Martial Arts skill, sending him flying. She registered his body shattering after he hit the ground, but she had already moved to send another flying away from Keita.

Looking back, she met Harry’s eyes and the two of them nodded.

It was time to go on the offensive.

She would deal with the fact that she had killed again afterward.

##

XaXa barely barely parried the strike that would have taken his head off. The two with him weren’t so lucky, as the woman who attacked him had easily cut them down. A woman, who was looking at him with her brown eyes full of a cold rage and deadly intent.

“I’m not running this time, mudok.” She said coldly right before attacking again, forcing him to fight for his life.

Her attacks were relentless, keeping him on the defensive and forcing him back. He frowned, even as he continued to block and parry her attacks. He knew this woman from somewhere. As if she…

It came back to him. One of the ones who got away because Johnny Black couldn’t restrain himself, being distracted long enough for her friend to tell her to run and blocking their attempts to go after her until it was too late.

Rain.

*Looks like she’s still holding a grudge from that day,* he drily thought to himself when he finally had enough of an opening to kick her away. He used that brief moment to take a glance around and realized that things had changed quite quickly. He could see Hadrian, a player who haunted the nightmares of several of his fellow Laughing Coffin members, being the cold and ruthless fighter he was back in June, and the Black Swordsman was cutting through several of his men like a chainsaw, leaving broken and dismembered bodies in his wake.

Surprisingly, most of the ones Kirito engaged were still alive, and a few were still able to walk, though they were out of the fight. A testament to the swordsman’s skill in many respects, but it also sent the clear message that the ambush he had planned had gone badly and it was time to leave while he and the others were still alive and able to do so.

He had brought eighteen men, and several of them were already dead, with more in no state to run. He saw one of his men attack Rain, and used that distraction to make his own getaway, pulling out a whistle and blowing into it, signaling the rest that they should run while they had the chance.

PoH wouldn’t care that he and his surviving men fled. That man wouldn’t care if they stayed, fought, and died, either. And XaXa knew that. At worst, the man might be mildly irritated with him, but he doubted that.

One of the few things PoH actually respected about him, was his ability to know when to run and get those with him to follow his lead. It would allow them to kill for his amusement later. At least, that was the impression he got from the man.

##

Kirito gave a look around as he sheathed his sword, taking stock of everything now that the fighting
was over. He could see Rain keeping one of the players who hadn’t been able to break and run at sword point while Silica walked over to restrain him. Both of them were fairly composed, only a slight shaking of Silica’s hands showing the effects of the fighting on her. Rain… was far too composed, at least on the surface. If it wasn’t for the fact that she was absently wiping her other hand on her skirt, and continuously doing so, he would have thought that it hadn’t affected her at all.

Harry was doing the same to three others, while he gestured to Keita, Tetsuo, and Sasamaru to use the rope he handed them. Of course, considering that it was Hadrian, The Young Knight, The Red Killer, doing it would have likely disabused them any notion of escaping or attacking anyway. If there was anyone who those assholes were afraid of, it was him.

Though the carefully relaxed posture and neutral expression on his friend’s face showed that he was affected by the fight. Not to the same degree as Silica, Rain, or himself, but affected. His composure was, in all likelihood, due to his own experiences having hardened his friend to the aftermath of such fights. A hardening that his friend admitted he would have been perfectly happy with not having gone through.

*How many did we kill?* He thought. He knew of the one he killed, as much as he would rather not have. However, if he hadn’t, that player might have had an opportunity to kill Tetsuo and he couldn’t risk it. So, he took another life in order to save a life.

The consequences of it: the nightmares, troubled sleep, the feeling dirty and stained in a way that would never wash out, the regrets that would result from it… he would have to live with them.

He looked over to Ducker and Sachi, and saw her giving her guildmate a concerned look as he stared at his shaking hands in shock. “What happened?” He asked as he walked over.

“I… it was so… I wasn’t even… but Sachi...” Ducker started, but couldn’t find the words.

“One of them almost got me,” Sachi said, shaken. “He… killed one of them to save me.”

Kirito gave Ducker an understanding look. He put a hand on the teen’s shoulder and noticed the flinch. “Ducker,” he said gently. “Look at me.” When Ducker did, he kept his voice calm. “She’s fine, you saved her. You saved her, Ducker.”

“I still… I... I…”

Kirito nodded. “Yeah, I know.” He said, giving Ducker’s shoulder another squeeze.

“Is he okay?” He heard Harry ask as his friend walked up to them.

Kirito shook his head. “He killed one of them,” he said. “To save Sachi, but…”

He heard Harry sigh sadly. “Shit,” was the succinct response. “I had hoped we could get here fast enough to avoid any of them having to… damn it. No one should have to go through that, and… ah fuck it. I’m sending a message to Lind so he can get the bastards we captured off our hands. After that, we’re heading to Algade, and we’ll figure it out from there.”

“I… shouldn’t have…” Keita started from where he was.

“Don’t blame yourself for this, Keita,” Harry interrupted. “Blame those bastards in Laughing Coffin for getting their jollies from killing. You’re all alive, that’s what matters.”

Kirito nodded and stood up. “Anyway, let’s get back to town and out of here,” he said. “We’re done
for the day, and we need to make sure that other players know that Laughing Coffin was in the area.”

**Algade**

Rain followed Silica and Sachi into the bath house, the idea of a relaxing bath and washing up a pleasant one to counteract what had happened earlier. Relaxing, and hopefully calming her thoughts and feelings on what had happened.

She didn’t know what to feel or think. She killed two people during the fight while she was focused on XaXa, and it was only because they were there… simply in her way. She hadn’t even really noticed them, just a few quick sword skills, and they were dead.

And the fact that she had done so as an afterthought to her rage filled focus on XaXa frightened her. It was while she was scrubbing herself down a few minutes later that her hands began moving, as if on their own. She started scrubbing furiously. Scrubbing her body, scrubbing her hair, scrubbing her hands, scrubbing everywhere. It felt like her entire body was covered in something and she wanted it gone.

She didn’t hear her own words as she scrubbed. Her desire to get whatever was on her off, and she continued to scrub.

*Get it off, get it off, get it off, get it off, get it off, get it off...!*

She felt a pair of small hands grip her wrists firmly and looked up in shock at Silica. The younger girl gave her a sad, but understanding look. When she reached for the soap, she felt a sharp smack on the hand before Silica gently, but firmly placed it on her lap.

“I’ll wash you,” The younger girl said.

“It… it won’t come off,” Rain said shakily. “Why, why won’t whatever it is come off?”

“Just let me wash you, Rain,” Silica said gently. “Whatever it is, it’s already off.”

“But… but...”

The dam burst and Rain threw herself onto Silica, tears coming out of her eyes. She didn’t hear her own wails, didn’t feel the gentle hands of a girl who knew fully well what she was going through, but she felt the firm presence as Silica allowed herself to be a shoulder to cry on.

She also didn’t notice the others. First Sachi, and then Asuna and Lux a minute later. She didn’t notice the other three girls close in on her and offer their own comforting words and their own presence.

She didn’t notice, not at first. But when she did, she was slowly able to get herself back under control and allow Silica to finish washing her. She wasn’t okay, and wouldn’t pretend to be so, but even so… she needed that. She needed to let it out, and she knew it.

##

“Well,” Harry said, closing the message he just got. “Rain just had her breakdown, and I’m glad I sent Asuna and Lux there to help.”

“Is she okay?” Tetsuo asked.
Harry snorted, the bitterness in it very obvious. “Hardly,” he said. “But it’s happening now and she’s letting it out instead of bottling it up. It’ll be a rough few days or weeks for her, depending on how quickly she can come to terms with it, but it’s better that she breaks down now, rather than later.”

“You think it’ll take her weeks to get over it?” Sasamaru asked.

Harry grimaced. “Honestly, I’d be surprised if it took less time.” He said. “The first few days are the worst, but you’re better able to deal with it as time goes on. It’ll still be there, and will hit you again down the road, but over time, it becomes familiar. Less painful, I guess. I still have nightmares, even from… well, I know from experience that it’s not something you just get over, let’s just leave it at that.” He turned and looked at Keita.

“And Keita, if I hear you apologize or blame yourself for it one more time, I’m drowning you in a keg of piss quality beer.” He said sharply. “We all knew this was possible, and quite frankly, it went better than it could have, a lot better.”

“How are you able to deal with it?” Sasamaru asked. “I mean, you’ve managed to… well…”

Harry shrugged. “Honestly, I deal with it as best I can, which is badly,” he said. “And one day at a time. I’m not going to be able to sleep tonight, probably not tomorrow night, either. And my sleep will be… less than pleasant for longer than that, but…” He sighed. “I’ve been there before, and while I won’t say I ever handled it well, I know what to expect.”

“Does it get any easier?” Ducker asked, several empty cups in front of him.

“God, I hope not,” Harry said seriously, though there was a part of him that wondered if he was saying it for Ducker’s benefit, or his own. He then sighed “I hope it never gets easier for any of you.” He saw the looks the others traded at his choice of words, but he wasn’t going to run from a particularly unpleasant truth.

That it was beginning to get easier for him, even if it still affected him.

“Anyway,” he continued. “I think you all should take the next few days off and rest. It’s going to be rough for you all, Ducker especially, but after this, you all need some downtime.”

February 29, 2024 - Aincrad 38th Floor - Labyrinth

Gus followed the party carefully, making sure to keep his distance far enough for any of his quiet footfalls to not be heard, but close enough to maintain sight of them. It had taken him two weeks to narrow down the number of floors they could be basing themselves from, and while this floor hadn’t been at the top of his list, he admitted that it made some sense, especially when the party he had been following for the last two floors had bypassed several other good places.

The floor was well situated, low population, but with the access from the lower floors and the labyrinth both being relatively close, if circuitous in the paths between them. It was a strange balance for these floors, an obvious location, easy access to other floors, and he wondered why he didn’t think of it previously.

“Of course you didn’t think of it, you dumbass,” he thought to himself bitterly. “It was fucking obvious. I bet that whoever’s in charge of these lunatics was counting on that. Damn it, the first rule of any kind of analysis is to look at the obvious answers first!”

He might be placing more stock on his targets being smart, but he would rather overestimate someone than underestimate them. Thinking them as potentially smarter, or at least sneakier, than he was had saved his life often enough.
Still, he shouldn’t have dismissed the possibility of them picking an obvious location simply because it was obvious. That was the kind of mistake rookies fresh from the academy made. Even those who were intelligent and aware of how obvious things were tended to pick the obvious areas. After all, if you knew it was obvious, you could prepare more readily, as you knew that the other side was likely to find you and how.

That, and you could use the obvious to hide other things.

He was admittedly not one for analysis. He could do some rough and ready analysis on the information he has, but he was an operations type by temperament, he went out and acted on the analysis and intelligence work. He trusted those who did it professionally to do their job and do it well.

Argo, for all her talent at it, was a gifted amateur. If the outside world could look in, and he wasn’t ruling that possibility out, he wouldn’t be surprised if the Ministry of Shugenja’s intelligence arm didn’t make a discrete offer to Lady Yasaka to at least train her in how to do it properly.

He put those thoughts to the back of his mind as he saw the telltale signs of a safe zone ahead. He slowed down and carefully made his way to a shadowed position nearby.

Not ideal, but it would at least give him a position to see and hear enough of what was going on.

##

PoH noticed the last group arrived as he watched the rest begin packing up the site. He had allowed them to hole up here longer than he should have, but the site’s location was too useful to simply discard. However, XaXa’s group getting savaged the way it did last week, and Lind’s increasing success at disrupting his operations now that he had somewhat competent help meant that it was time to move to greener pastures.

He would have them move, and lay low for a bit. Just long enough for the players to breathe a sigh of relief and get back to some semblance of normal operations.

“Took you long enough,” he said to the party’s leader.

“Sorry boss, we were four floors down when we got your message,” the player said apologetically. “We didn’t want to attract attention, so we needed to move carefully.”

PoH nodded, not in the least bit upset. While he didn’t care for any of his people, the fact that some of them still had some self-preservation instinct made them more effective for what he was using them for. Those who lacked it, well, they were already dead or in prison.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “Pack your shit up and get with XaXa and Group B. You all are to go to the twenty-third floor. XaXa knows where you will be holing up, so follow him there. You all are to lay low for a few weeks.”

“So no killing unless someone stumbles on us then?” The player asked.

PoH nodded. “If that happens, kill them and move to a different area. To a different floor, if need be.”

The player nodded and went over to where his party was gathered to pass on the instructions.

A slight flicker of movement in the shadows just outside the safe area caught his attention and he turned his gaze there. He smiled as he saw a face that he hadn’t seen in a couple of years, and saw
the chagrined expression on it. The one who had spied on him had been seen, and he knew it.

Turning away, he idly wondered what he would do with this. Should he change the orders? He had several places in mind that they could use. He could also use this as an opportunity to bait those who were opposing him, giving them a target with which he could use as bait for a trap. Despite them knowing he knew that they knew, they would have to check it out anyway, just to be sure. It made them predictable, it made it easy to anticipate them, and it meant that they would dance to his tune.

Now, he had to determine how he would go about exploiting this. Should he let the anticipation build? Or should he let this particular show reach a climax early?

Either way, he won this round against August Blake, and given time, he would beat him fully and have him at his mercy. In this world, that man’s own tricks would, at worst, be far less effective, and better yet, probably unreliable as well. That evened things between the two of them nicely.

He still owed that brujo for nearly killing him and badly scarring his face back then. Admittedly, the scar didn’t bother him, it made him more intimidating in many ways. But it was the principle of the matter.

Too bad he couldn’t do the same and leave him to die here, that would be just perfect. Instead he would just have to settle for killing him.

##

**Shit!** Gus thought as he quickly made his way out of the labyrinth. He didn’t know what mistake he made, but PoH had seen him, and quite clearly knew that he knew it, which compromised whatever intelligence he gathered. Now, he couldn’t rely on it.

Oh, he got a lead, but it was now a toxic one. He would still pass it on to Argo, but he would warn her that it was a compromised one. Depending on how the man reacted to seeing him, he might change things, or use this as bait for a trap.

*Damn it!* He thought savagely as he exited the labyrinth. *The first solid lead I get, and I fuck it up! Mom would bust me back to the academy if this was the real world, and I would agree with her!*

He opened his inventory and got a teleport crystal out to teleport to where Argo was basing herself. With the operations against Laughing Coffin, she had decided to make herself more accessible than normal, so she was in Mishe for the time being. And as the light of the teleport began to envelop him, a nagging thought began to surface.

He had a feeling he knew PoH from somewhere, but where would the two of them have met?
“Are you sure he saw you?” Argo asked after Gus finished his report.

“He definitely saw me,” Gus replied. “And he knows that I know he saw me.”

“Damn,” Argo said. “Our first solid lead, and now it’s worthless.”

“I wouldn’t necessarily say that, boss,” Gus said. “We know that they planned to set up there and lay low, that’s good info right there. Also, chances are that even though we know, they might still use it.” He raised his hands at Argo’s sharp look. “Trust me on this, it might not be used right now, or if it is, they’ll move on quickly, but the fact is, finding good places for them to lie low has to be harder than we think.”

“And with how players are now keeping an eye out and informing us of their movements when they see them...” Argo started.

“They’re having to go lower.” Gus finished. “Well, that’s not guaranteed, but the fact is, the mid-levels are getting a bit too hot for them, and most of their members aren’t tough enough to handle the upper mid-level or even the front line fighters. There are exceptions like XaXa and probably PoH. Even then, I don’t think most of them would risk it.”

Argo nodded. “So, we know PoH divided his forces into at least two different groups, one which was sent lower, or probably still is lower.” She said. “We’ll have to see if we can flush that group out.” She looked over the various maps she had on the table. “You said that PoH ordered that one group to the twenty-third floor, right?”

Gus nodded.

“Then I’ll bring this up at tonight’s meeting, with the caveat that the information’s compromised.” Argo said with a nod. “We have to check it out anyway, just in case they still decided to use it. Let’s just hope they’re not there.”

“If they know that we know, and they’re still there, then they have to be pretty confident on their chances of taking out any group that finds them,” Gus said. “Or PoH just doesn’t give a fuck about what happens to his people.”

Argo studied his face. "You think you noticed something. Of the options on the table...?"

Gus got a thoughtful look on his face. “If anything... the third.” He said. “There’s something about him... something familiar. It can’t be him, though. He’s dead.”

Argo blinked. “And who would that be?” She asked.

Gus looked at her seriously. “Someone I ended up against Outside, Vassago Casals.” He replied. “He was involved in that crisis that involved Kaguya a couple of years ago. And not in helping us, either. He couldn’t use magic, but that didn’t stop him from being one dangerous bastard.”

Argo sucked in a breath. “You mean he was working with those Aum Shinrikyo lunatics then?” She asked. “You know, the ones who had that demonic backer?”
Gus nodded. “He was working as some extra muscle.” He said. “Kind of surprised, given his hatred of East Asians in general, and Japanese people in particular. But given how that incident could have ended… I can see why he would have taken that particular job.”

Argo nodded. Had the Aum Shinrikyo succeeded, it would have restarted the war between humans and Youkai, not to mention unleashing several supernatural threats, and resulted in a bloodbath.

“How big was this hatred of his?” Argo asked.

“You might not remember, but there was a big scandal involving several major businessmen and a couple of Diet members a little over a decade ago.” Gus said. “Yakuza deals outside of what was tolerated, insider trading, smuggling, financial crimes and even human trafficking. He was a victim of the latter, when he and his mother got sold as servants to one of those who got rolled up.

“Not that the system did him and his mother any favors, as they were treated like worse than dirt by the authorities,” Gus noted. “Needless to say, he’s had a major chip on his shoulder when it comes to Japan since. Made him a nasty piece of work. And not in the well curated way of yours truly.”

“And you’re telling me that PoH reminds you of him,” Argo said. “Well, at least it isn’t him, right? Also, don’t get ahead of yourself. You’re not that special.”

“I’d tell you to bite me, but you might be rabid,” Gus retorted. He then got a pensive look on his face. “Yeah, he’s got to be dead,” he said, but the uncertainty in his voice was obvious to Argo.

An uncertainty which meant to her that he was entertaining the possibility that PoH might be the person he reminded Gus of, that he might still be alive, and that he had been one of those trapped in SAO. She already knew what that meant. That he would go out, regardless of what she said, to find out and confirm it.

And, a part of her thought. If it was him, to finish the job if practical.

##

Asuna shared a look with Kirito as they listened to Argo’s report, and both of them could understand why they had been warned to take what her people discovered with some skepticism. The knowledge that you finally had a solid lead onto the location of at least some members of Laughing Coffin, only to have the discoverer found out was worrying enough.

However, the fact that PoH not only knew, but let the discoverer go, was a different matter. It said a lot of possible things, and none of them good.

“Argo, are you sure that what you had reported to you was accurate?” She asked.

“As sure as I can be, Aa-chan,” Argo said, a hint that she was slightly insulted in her voice by the question. “If you think you’re not happy, imagine how Gus feels. He’s mad at himself for being caught out like that, though the fact that he knows about it says a lot of things about PoH.”

Everyone at the table murmured amongst themselves for a moment before Lind cleared his throat. “I would ask what you mean by that, but I can make a guess,” he said. “He’s confident at being able to either handle what we send his way, or run rings around us once he has positive confirmation that we’re trying to track them down.”

“And that’s if he didn’t already know,” Asuna said. “Since Laughing Coffin’s not a proper guild, despite many players calling them the Murder Guild, they can have clean players infiltrated in amongst our groups.”
“Why would someone willingly work with them?” Godfree, the Knights of Blood representative, asked.

“Threats, blackmail, protection, the fact that they can keep their hands clean, bribery, or maybe they simply don’t believe that there are actual consequences to killing someone.” Asuna said plainly. “There’s a whole list of reasons, really.

“The last one I mentioned is likely one of the main reasons why many in Laughing Coffin are killing. Hadrian told me that Rosalia of Titan’s Hand had basically rationalized the fact that since we don’t have solid proof that death is the real thing here, then it must not be. That was the likely reason why her guild was beginning to escalate its own bandit activities. Not that she was willing to test that herself when Silica had a knife to her throat.”

“Didn’t like it when she had to face that possibility, did she?” Lind asked drily.

Asuna smirked. “No, she didn’t.”

“Surprised it was Silica, though.”

“Apparently Rosalia managed to get under her skin,” Asuna said with some amusement.

Of course, that’s only the surface of the matter, Asuna thought. She also took Rosalia on to keep Hadrian from killing the woman in cold blood after she managed to say the wrong things to him. Not that she was inclined to give that information out. That event, as well as the clash last week had shown them all that his darker impulses were a lot closer to the surface than he thought. Or was comfortable with, for that matter.

She saw the Knights of Blood representative look like he was trying to decide whether he wanted to speak up. “You have something to say, Godfree?”

The man nodded. “Ah, yes.” He said in his deeper voice. “Coming back to the possibility of infiltrators, how do we find them? We really can’t plan on anything until we close that potential source of information to PoH. At the very least, knowing who the infiltrators are can allow us to control what PoH learns from the guilds.”

Asuna nodded and then looked to Argo. “Argo?” She asked.

“All those working with Laughing Coffin have a tattoo on them somewhere,” she said. “As far as I know, it’s to ensure that they can identify themselves to Laughing Coffin proper, and it’s the same tattoo that those we’ve dealt with have. Makes sense, as it’s easily concealed under clothing and armor, which can easily be removed.”

“Where do they usually have it?” Asuna asked.

“On their arms most often, but a few, especially the few girls they’ve managed to convince into going along that I know of, have it on their legs.” She looked around. “Most of them were threatened or blackmailed into it, but I bet that a few probably signed up for protection as well.”

“Can we use them?” Lind asked. “The ones who were coerced into it, I mean.”

Argo shook her head. “Not really,” she replied. “PoH uses most of them as lookouts and suppliers, but he keeps a couple of layers in between them and the main group.”

“He has someone act as a middleman then.” Kirito observed, speaking up. “Smart of him. You know who any of them are?”
“Nothing conclusive, but I have a few suspects that I’m keeping an eye on,” Argo replied. “Most of those are suspected infiltrators as well, which would make sense due to ease of access. I’ll give you all a list of the most likely ones. Mind you, this isn’t certain, but better safe than sorry.” She opened one of her windows and started making copies of what was in it, transferring them to paper.

Lind sighed. “Better to know who’s suspected and check them,” he said. “They might not be working for Laughing Coffin, but if they’ve got your suspicions, you’re probably right.” He frowned. “It’s better to be sure, anyway. Actually, I might as well have everyone checked, if only to keep those who might be infiltrators from suspecting that we suspect them. Might even make it a policy to periodically check.” He looked at Asuna. “I have a few female players in my guild, Asuna. You mind if I ask you and your girls to check them?”

Asuna nodded. “I don’t have any problems with that,” she replied. “It’ll probably end up being myself and Lux though. Silica’s reputation is starting to be more like Hadrian’s after last week, and it might spook any infiltrators. Rain is out as she isn’t the most rational of people when it comes to Laughing Coffin or those who work with them.”

Lind nodded. “I can accept that,” he replied.

Argo finished her copying and passed the lists around. Asuna looked over the list of names, noting that most were mid-level players who were unaffiliated, but she did notice a few who were members of guilds.

“Hmm, those two,” she heard Lind mutter before giving a resigned sigh. “Definitely going to have everyone checked because of this.”

“Anyway, outside of the infiltrators, we still need to decide on what to do with the information we got,” Kirito said. “Despite it being… compromised, a lead like this is still something we can’t ignore. Especially since the twenty-third floor is a good for them due to its low population. Risky with Coral being relatively well populated on the floor below, but most there are content to stay put due to how safe that floor is.”

“Simple,” Asuna said. “We have a fairly sizeable group go there, but split into groups to do patrols. Say, eight parties. Thus, it gets shown that we aren’t ignoring the information we have by having a large presence there. With the right people in place, PoH will know that we’re taking it seriously.”

“And what would you do with them?” Godfree asked. “Outside of patrolling, that is?”

“We keep an eye on the most likely areas, but make a point to not search and engage,” she said. “All parties doing so should have another party close enough to back them up at the least, just in case. If they’re there to lay low, then they will be trying to not draw attention and hide. Even if they’re not, we can restrict their movements because of the large presence of heavily armed players, which will make moving to that floor a dicey proposition. At the same time we can have other groups who are good at stealth and scouting look at other possible locations on other floors.” She looked at Argo. “You already have people watching both ends of the labyrinths?”

Argo nodded. “For all the good it does,” she said with a scowl. “There are more ways for them to get between floors. If they’re careful to avoid guards, and they’re good at that, they can sneak into a town and use the teleport gates, especially in the case of less inhabited towns at night. Hell, a number of sleep PKs that can be tied to them were because of that, though the number trailed off quickly when players started taking care to actually ensure that their doors are locked.”

“Noted,” Asuna said. “Still, that means that we can at least monitor any movements another way while they’re trying to lay low.”
Lind nodded. “Find towns that are likely transit points and place people to watch the teleport plazas,” he said. “While it wouldn’t necessarily stop them, watching them will also allow us to see if they’re actually using them to move around. In other words, we use the time we have with them laying low to start putting people in place to really start tracking their movements.” He gave Asuna a respectful look. “Not a bad idea at all.”

Asuna nodded. “You also have to consider this,” she said. “The longer they lay low, the more time we also have to get our own side straightened out, plug up what leaks we can or choose to, and come up with a plan to take them down.” She looked around. “Despite the fact that they were able to lay low for six months before, Argo was still able to track their general movements. It’ll be harder for them to do that now.

“They did what they were doing too well, and those who can fight back and win are now paying attention. The fact that they’re going to ground and laying low shows that we broke their momentum. We can’t reverse it right now, but we can make sure they don’t regain it.” She then gave a cold smile. “They can’t stay hidden forever, and when they do come out, or we go to them, we will be ready.”

March 8, 2024 - Aincrad 23rd Floor, Outside the Groshe Caves

Harry could feel the eyes on him and the patrol he was with as they gave a perfunctory look around the area, not entering the caves themselves. The sensation he felt, the feeling of being watched, he was familiar with it enough to know that while he couldn’t tell the source, or the direction it was in, he knew something was there.

It could be anything, but his instincts told him that it was a player.

A part of him wondered if whoever was watching would act, or if they would keep hidden. The presence of a dozen heavily armed and obviously higher level players would give anyone pause. At the same time, it could spook them into moving somewhere else, especially if they realized why the patrol wasn’t moving into the caves themselves.

After all, the caves were where one of the safe zones that Argo pegged as a likely Laughing Coffin bolt hole was located. It was a good area, with minimal cover and concealment leading up to them, meaning that sneaking up on Laughing Coffin would be difficult, but at the same time, it would be difficult to be snuck up on. It was a double edged sword, but the caves were extensive, and it would be easy to avoid others within them, or to stage an ambush and then leave.

As much as he disliked the waiting game they were now playing, he saw the logic in Asuna’s plan.

With the patrols having players with reputations as strong fighters, even if Laughing Coffin wasn’t on the floor, it would hopefully restrict their movements and allow Argo to coordinate groups of players who were better at stealthy movement and scouting to begin checking other floors.

And if members of that group were on the floor, then moving into the caves was a bad idea anyway. The lack of light and the number of potential ambush locations made them bad places to go looking for trouble. Even if both sides were trying to avoid contact, it was too easy for each to stumble on each other. Better to be cautious, and Asuna had stressed that their job wasn’t necessarily to find them, but to make an obvious presence.

That was easy enough, and while many were less than happy with it, Harry had talked them around. Outside of the DDA members, few others had much experience in fighting other players in general, and even amongst the DDA, few of them had actual experience with fighting people who were trying to kill.
On the floor, only three others besides him had that kind of experience, and only one of them, Kirito, had actually killed. None of them were inclined to complain about simply keeping an eye on various areas, but not actually going out to really look for Laughing Coffin members. They knew full well that any run-in with them would likely get ugly. Better to spare the others that experience for as long as possible.

*That it also means that I shouldn’t have need to rely on those aspects of myself that I really wished I never discovered that I have is a bonus. He thought.*

As he began to lead the group away, the feeling of being watched lessened and eventually disappeared, but he made note of it. He would pass the information on to Argo and Asuna. And then, he would eat, check his messages, and then fall into a restless sleep for the night.

It hadn’t sunk in just how much they had relied on Keiko’s presence to simply be able to sleep peacefully until he ended up spending his first night in months alone, or waking up without the familiar warmth and weight of her body on his. He had gotten used to it, been comforted by it. From the messages they exchanged every night, she was also noticing the unpleasant difference, but admitted that having Pina with her took the edge off it.

*And perhaps, the two of us need to discuss as to whether or not we should make our relationship more a formal or not sometime down the line, he thought. The statements of Keiko and I being married in all but name does have a lot of truth to it.*

He shook those thoughts out of his head and turned his attention back to the surrounding area. He and his party had another hour or so before they would begin heading back to town, and it wouldn’t do for them to stumble into trouble because he wasn’t paying attention his surroundings.

He had that happen often enough when he was paying attention.

**Aincrad 35th Floor, Mishe**

Silica calmly watched as female players were escorted by Asuna or Lux to be checked out. While relatively few were a part of the larger plan, many of the involved guilds and unaligned groups had been persuaded into having all of their members checked in an attempt to root out infiltrators. Not all, or even the majority, but many.

Silica personally thought that while the idea was sound, it could backfire badly. The checks implied a lack of trust, which was *not* a good thing. Trust between players was essential to survival in SAO. A player had to be able to trust that those fighting alongside him or her would be there, and vice versa.

To imply someone couldn’t be trusted was probably one of the worst insults a player could give another because of that.

To mitigate that, Asuna and Lind, who had both organized this, had made it clear from the start that while guild leaders can do a unilateral refusal or acceptance of this, the final decision was up to the individual players. They wouldn’t force someone to do something they clearly didn’t want to do. That had smoothed a lot of ruffled feathers, but the implications behind the checks still stood.

The only real positive side of it, was that several had been caught, and the knowledge that a concerted effort was now underway to find and identify infiltrators and informants had persuaded several of the latter to simply turn themselves in, providing even more information for them to use.

Still, the entire matter could still blow up in their faces.

A part of her wondered if her cynicism about the entire thing was due to her being separated from
Harry for the last week. She already missed falling asleep and waking up to his comforting warmth, making her sleep more restless than usual, and far more irritable in the mornings. Pina helped with the worst of it, but the feathered dragon’s soothing presence wasn’t an adequate replacement to the human contact she had grown so used to over the months.

*We really need to talk,* she thought. *About where we’re going from here, and if we should just formalize what we have.*

**Aincrad 32nd Floor, Mirien Forest**

Gus knew that what he was doing was a bad idea. Going alone, no matter how confident you were with your own abilities was always a risky venture in SAO, but if Argo realized the reason why he was doing this, she gave no indication. Frankly, he was of the opinion that if she had, she would be doing everything she reasonably could, and a few unreasonable things as well, to stop him.

But after he discussed the matter with her back on the twenty-ninth, the possibility that PoH might be a ghost from his past bothered him, and he needed to confirm whether or not that was the case. If it wasn’t, he got some valuable information on the man’s location which could be used.

If it was, he had to make a decision as to whether or not risking his life to kill a man he should have made sure was dead beforehand was worth it.

And so, he was out here, wearing light armor and garb designed to blend in as he made his way dangerously close to a safe area that was listed as a possible bolt hole. He could already see one figure, but he kept an eye out for others, though if it was Casals, then it wouldn’t be surprising if he was alone anyway.

##

PoH looked over the message sent by XaXa, showing that the players had apparently decided to search the twenty-third floor. Whether they were aware that he knew that they knew about the group there didn’t matter to him in the slightest. Even if they knew, it was a lead they could not ignore.

However, he believed that they were aware of his own knowledge of their being there. XaXa’s report had indicated that while they patrolled in the areas where the most likely safe zones that would serve as bolt holes were, they were not ignoring the others, but were also not getting too close to them.

He was also getting fewer reports from infiltrators and informants, and one of the reports indicated that they were inspecting everyone who was working with them, and more than a few guilds which weren’t had also decided to go with it as well. Not unexpected, but the speed of it showed that those who were making an effort to curtail his group’s activities weren’t being stupid.

Still, that gave him something to work with while they all waited. He could easily have rumors started to hinder his opposition, using the apparent lack of trust that such maneuvers hinted at against them. It might have been a pragmatic move on their part, but at the same time, it was one that could be turned against them, for a time.

He didn’t doubt that it would be more than a nuisance for them, but the entire point wasn’t to stop their efforts, but to make them just that added bit more difficult. To give him that little extra bit of time to set things up.

Still, they were reacting more comprehensively than he anticipated, and he had no doubts that Argo, at the least, was scouring the floors as well for any indications of the rest of his group, as well as
watching every practical means they could use to move between floors she could think of.

He then had the sensation of something watching him, even if he couldn’t pinpoint the location. Odd, as he usually could. Perhaps his erstwhile spy was making an active effort to conceal his presence and using his stealth skills to the best of his abilities. If so, then they had to be close to maxed out.

*Not bad,* he thought with a smile. He had an idea of who it was, and it was time to see if he could bait him into acting.

“So,” he said in English as he lowered his hood. “Come looking have you? Not that it changes anything. So, why don’t you come on out?”

##

The growl that came out of Gus’ throat almost surprised him, and it took an effort to restrain himself from simply charging out and cutting the man down as he heard that familiar voice. Letting his emotions get the better of him had him badly injured the last time they fought.

*I should have made sure he was dead back then,* he thought coldly as he reigned in his emotions.

That he was noticed despite everything was enough to make him almost stumble, but... of course. It wasn’t necessarily because he, himself, slipped up, though he wouldn’t rule that out. It was because PoH was able to sense the shifts in lag and computer processing to some degree.

How well a player capable of it could sense things varied. Some, like how Kirito was rumored to be, were so sensitive that they could consistently tell when an attack was coming a moment before it even began, allowing them to react faster. Others could tell that someone was there, with some able to tell things like position and direction.

How well PoH could sense things was up to debate, but it was probably best to assume that he was exceptionally capable at it. While potentially overestimating an opponent wasn’t the wisest course of action, it was still considered better than underestimating one.

“I would rather not,” He said, carefully pitching his voice to give to obscure his position. “I have to admit, I didn’t expect to see you alive, Casals.”

“Thank your friend Miller for that,” came the response. “He thought I could be useful.”

*Miller?* Gus thought. *Who the hell is he talking about?* “Don’t know who you’re talking about,” he said. “Not that it matters, anyway.”

“Indeed it doesn’t, brujo.” PoH said calmly before his hand lashed out and threw something into the bushes. Gus kept still and noted that the thrown item hadn’t even been in the correct general direction.

*So, he doesn’t know where I am,* he thought. *Or he does know, and knew the entire time, and is simply giving me a false sense of security.* It put him into a conundrum. He had an opportunity to take out the leader of Laughing Coffin, but taking the chance was risky. He remembered their last confrontation, and knew that he won it purely by luck.

For all that the man couldn’t use magic, he had managed to balance it out by being a better, far more vicious, and pragmatic fighter. Of all the purely human opponents from that incident, Casals had been the most dangerous of them by far.

Magic? It was hard to cast a spell when your focus was broken, along with your hand having a knife
going through it, and your other hand had two broken fingers. Add in the bruising, cracked ribs, and other injuries, it made fighting period difficult. Especially when you were trying to not pass out from the pain.

It was only luck that he was able to use the fact that he had a knife going through his hand against the same person who put it there. Luck that he caught the man by surprise and slashed his face, startling him. Luck that he then kicked out and forced the man off of the platform he was standing on to fall to his apparent death.

Just as it was luck that the bastard survived.

_Better not chance it, _he thought to himself. _The best time to do that is past, and son of a bitch is probably ready for me now._ “Well, I confirmed what I wanted to know and it is time for me to take my leave,” he said. “This isn’t over, Casals.”

“Until next time, _brujo._” PoH replied. “And no, it is far from over.”

Gus didn’t respond as he backed away carefully. As soon as he felt he was far enough away, he took out a Teleport Crystal and used it.

##

PoH relaxed his grip on Mate Chopper, his primary weapon, when he heard the distinctive sound of a teleport. He was honestly surprised that the younger man hadn’t leapt at the chance to strike him down, but apparently the younger man had learned from their last encounter.

It was only mildly surprising, really. Gone was the hot headed youth who had faced him in that shadowy realm bordering the mythical Sanzu River to buy time for his allies to eliminate the threat that those Aum Shinrikyo fools were about to unleash. The younger man was now a bit more collected, and had kept his feelings as neutral in his voice as he could, though it fooled no one there. PoH could still hear the hatred in it, the slight bit of fear mixed in, and the clear wariness. It was clear that August remembered their last encounter very well, remembered going against someone who was able to beat him within an inch of his life despite the lack of magic. And remembered that it was pure luck that allowed him to turn the tide and win.

_Just as it was luck that allowed me to survive and get out of there, _PoH thought to himself. _But the next time we meet, only one of us will walk away alive._

That he could die didn’t bother him all that much. He considered himself living on borrowed time anyway, considering that by all rights he shouldn’t have survived that day. He had no intention of dying, but after that, he had made some form of peace with his mortality. It was only because the man who found him, Miller, thought he might be useful down the line that he even survived, let alone recovered from his injuries as well as he did.

He was alive, so that someone could use him later, provided the Japanese authorities didn’t find and kill him first.

What ever would happen would make for an impressive show at any rate, and he would have a very personal seat and view of it. Especially since it gave him the opportunity to kill someone he failed to kill. After that, what happened really didn’t matter to him.

_March 11, 2024 - Aincrad 23rd Floor, Galdon_

Kirito looked up as Harry tiredly sat down at the table with his food, his bearing showing that he
hadn’t slept well. In a way, it was odd to him, considering that his friend always seemed to be able to hold things together, no matter how they affected him, but it was clear now that a lot of it was as much due to Silica as it was to his own nature. It was clear, however, that the separation wasn’t doing him any favors.

*And some people wonder why we treat them as if they’re already married,* Kirito mused as Harry dug into his breakfast, a simple porridge breakfast and some hot local beverage to wash it down with. Some kind of broth, which was one of the few non-alcoholic beverages that was actually palatable on the lower floors.

“Surprised you’re not getting a beer or something,” Kirito said.

Harry looked up and shrugged. “Wasn’t in the mood for it, and to be honest, the beer on this floor isn’t that good anyway.” He replied. “Tea’s out of the question, as this floor doesn’t do it, and most floors that do have it… I haven’t been impressed by what they have. Damn, I miss having a good cup of tea.”

Kirito snorted. “You and the rest of us,” he said drily. “There was that one floor, the desert one, had some good tea, if not my preference.”

Harry nodded. “The one that was like we stepped into *The Arabian Nights,* the forty-first floor?” He asked before nodding. “Yeah, that was some good tea. The food was pretty good as well.”

“Well, now that the small talk part of the morning’s done, how are you holding up?” Kirito asked. “I can tell you’re not sleeping well.”

Harry shrugged. “As well as can be expected, really.” He replied. “I don’t know if it’s from waking up alone, or the fact that she helped me with the nightmares more than I thought, but…”

Kirito nodded and sipped his own drink. “About what Asuna expected then,” he said. At Harry’s sharp look, he took a breath. “It’s not like we can’t see what’s going on between you and Silica, and frankly, I think Asuna believes that she should have separated the two of you, at least with regard to sleeping arrangements, a lot sooner. If only to avoid…”

“To avoid us being too dependent on each other for some things,” Harry finished before nodding. “Yeah, you might be right, but it’s… well, I can’t say it’s a bad thing she didn’t. A year ago, I would have tried to internalize it, as I wouldn’t know who I could talk to that would understand. After June, with having to help you and Kei-Silica with what happened, well… I have someone I can talk to who would understand. Still would have had a lot of bad nights though. Having someone there… it’s nice, and comforting.”

Kirito raised an eyebrow. “You’re doing it again, you know.” He said.

“Doing what again?”

“Correcting yourself when talking about Silica.”

Harry flushed. “I should have figured that you would notice,” he admitted. “I’ve known her real name for a few months now and…”

Kirito nodded. “I see,” he said. *So they’re that close.* He took a look at Harry’s left hand. “That explains why Asuna periodically checks the hands of you two.” Asuna told him when he noticed that habit of hers, it would be just like them to get married, tell no one about it, and actually try and hide the fact as long as they can before Argo figures it out.
Yes, it would be just like them to do that.

“We’re not married, if that’s what you’re wondering,” Harry said. “And if we were, trying to hide it would be pointless. Argo would figure it out in about five minutes at most, pay out any bets on it, and then it would spread at the speed of gossip. Anyway, the relationship between Silica and I aside, what do you think about how all of this is going?”

“Honestly?” Kirito asked rhetorically. “I can see why we’re doing this, but it feels like we’re doing a whole lot of nothing.” He would admit, their being here and putting on a show, but not having any real action irritated him. He could see the point behind the entire thing, but he would rather be doing something with more action.

“Agreed,” Harry said. “However, every time I’ve been by the Groshe Caves and a couple of other places, I’ve had that feeling of being watched. It might not be them, but it also might.” He gave Kirito a look.

“Wouldn’t PoH have told them?”

“Not necessarily,” came the response. “I got the impression that there’s not a lot of group loyalty amongst them. Besides, even if they did know, it wouldn’t be a stretch to think that they would leave a few lookouts to see if we took the bait. See if we can be manipulated into dancing to their tune, or something.”

“And if that’s the case, we can use it against them,” Kirito surmised. “That, and we haven’t had any reports of suspicious deaths, or heard of any large numbers of players dying since.”

Harry nodded. “And that gives others time to work on a good plan to take these guys down,” he said before sighing. “And even if they’re not here, they’re laying low and not up to no good. Let’s just hope that Asuna and the others come up with a plan and get some more leads soon. We can’t keep this up forever.”

“You think that will happen?”

“If not, they’ll eventually get impatient or slip up. And when it does, we’ll be there. If we could get as many of them in one shot as we can and break their back, it’ll be done with.” Harry said grimly. “The sooner we wrap this up, the better. Too many have died because of those maniacs as it is.”
March 15, 2024 - Aincrad 23rd Floor, Galdon

Harry wearily opened his eyes and groaned as the morning light came in through the window. He didn’t know how Kayaba did it, but it always seemed as if every inn was to let in sunlight and wake players up. Or maybe it was his choice of rooms, he didn’t know. All he knew was, that right now, he clearly sympathized with Keiko not being a morning person.

Mornings were evil when you couldn’t sleep right, or finally managed to sleep right and wanted to continue doing so. Not that it would stop him from teasing her about it in his own way. She was ticklish in all the right places. Several of which didn’t risk things going any further until they were ready for it.

Well, at least his sleep wasn’t restless like it had been for the last two weeks, which meant he was either adjusting to sleeping on his own again, or whatever had been troubling his sleep was sinking back into his subconscious. He hoped it was the former, but felt it was likely the latter.

Not that it would likely be a factor in the near future. He brought up his messages and looked at the last one he got from Keiko and read it again.

FM: Silica

TO: Hadrian

Harry,

We’re finally done with the inspections of players and some other details that Asuna had to look over. Shouldn’t have taken this long, but every time we would get done with one group, another would come in, or something would come up. After that, we then had some things to do with helping Argo sort through some info on which rumors are likely valid and which ones would be horse and deer errands. If her network wasn’t being tied up with searching, we wouldn’t have been needed.

Asuna decided to send me down to work with you and Kirito while she keeps Rain and Lux up here, so I should be down there some time tomorrow or the day after. I don’t know what she has planned, but it seems as if we might act on that one bit of information, even if it’s a false lead, just to do something or to force them to act.

Well, see you soon.

Keiko

Harry closed the message and nodded. They had been at this for just over two weeks, and he knew from listening to the rest down here that they were starting to wonder if they would act on anything. There was also the fact that most of the ones who had been by the Groshe Caves had admitted that something just didn’t feel right to them, though they couldn’t explain it.

Harry wasn’t surprised by that. Whether you could sense things to any useful degree or not, most front line players and many mid-level players developed an instinct for how things worked in SAO. Everything from being able to spot the tells for a trap from far enough away to avoid or disarm it, to a change in the ambient sounds, or the sudden presence of a smell that wasn’t there a moment ago, players learned quickly to not trust only their eyes.
And just about everyone on the floor agreed on one thing, if Laughing Coffin was on this floor, then the Groshe Caves would be the most likely place.

**Groshe Caves**

XaXa considered his options as he listened to the latest report given by his lookouts. He had suspected for some time that someone had figured out that they would be here, and the presence of frequent and regular patrols hinted that it was suspected, at the least. The only puzzling thing was how they never entered the caves or closed in on the safe areas within.

It hadn’t taken him long to realize that they were there to simply keep an eye on things, to restrict his group’s options of moving around. Whatever means they used to get that information, and it could have simply been someone being slightly more alert when they arrived, there was what amounted to a full raid on the floor doing routine patrols near his hiding spot.

A full raid of mid-level and front line players, with a smattering of Assault Team members to make it interesting. For most of them, he would give any of his fellow killers even or better chances against them, especially in an ambush. On the other hand, Hadrian and Kirito were amongst those patrollers.

He felt that he would have a fair chance against Kirito, despite the fact that said player was probably the best fighter in SAO. For all his lethality and skill in a fight, everything known about him pointed to the younger man simply lacking the instincts of a killer. He would kill in self-defense and defense of others, true, but he lacked that will to kill.

Hadrian on the other hand, was different. The boy proved himself to not only be skilled, but he had that killer instinct, that will to kill. He hid it well, from all reports but XaXa knew differently. He saw it back in June when he killed Johnny Black. He saw it in the boy’s cold and the emotionless eyes back then, the darkness within him. He saw it again a few weeks ago, when the boy came to aid the little bitch who was a common companion of his.

PoH had promised them power, *real power*. The power to decide who lived and who died. And he came through with his promise. Laughing Coffin had rampaged virtually unchecked for close to two months before a concerted response was able to finally check them. The numbers arrayed against them finally became too much and they needed to fade back into the background.

But Hadrian, he was someone that XaXa was not afraid to admit frightened him. That inherent darkness within the boy, was something else. If the power gained by following PoH was one thing, the power within the boy was something else, and he could see the difference.

The boy’s darkness, his power, was restrained. Kept in check. He only allowed it out when he was provoked. But rather than be a sign of his weakness, it put into perspective the difference between him and those who would stand against him.

Hadrian had power, and saw no need to use it. So long as he wasn’t angered, he wouldn’t use it. And XaXa had made the mistake of angering the boy, of putting himself amongst a very small number of people who the boy wouldn’t hesitate to kill if given both and opportunity and a reason to.

Hadrian was on the same floor, and was part of the patrols whose purpose was to clearly contain and restrict the movements of Red-eyed XaXa and his men. It was obvious that they would also be the ones to move in and eliminate his group, and he was out of options as to what he can do.

Run? Where could they run to? If the group didn’t have the cave watched, or every means of getting off the floor guarded, he would be surprised. Teleport? Teleport crystals were limited in where they could go, and corridor crystals to bypass those methods were notoriously rare or prohibitively
expensive. Only the SSN had a large supply of them, and those were set to bring people to the entrance of the prison within the Black Iron Palace.

He and his men were trapped, and he knew it.

**March 16, 2024 - Aincrad 23rd Floor, Galdon**

Silica stepped off the teleport platform as soon as the light faded, Pina resting on her shoulder and looking around before taking wing. She was mildly irritated that she was delayed in coming down here, but Argo requested that she do some scouting on the thirty-third floor, and it took longer than expected.

By the time she got done with that, it was late enough to make going down to where Harry was impractical. Well, not impractical in the sense of getting down here, but impractical in the sense that by the time she got to the inn he was staying at, he was likely to be getting ready for bed. Not that Argo expected her to be turned off from that, if the information broker’s disappointed expression earlier was any indication.

_Seriously,_ she thought sourly. _It’s as if everyone is plotting something with regard to us._ That thought had been a source of irritation to her for months, as both she and Harry would sometimes wonder just why so many people were interested in their relationship. Well, both of them knew _one_ of the reasons why, they had money riding on the outcome.

If she were honest with herself, she really didn’t care that much. Her relationship with Harry was no one else’s business, though she was aware that Asuna had concerns. Hard not to, when the girl had regularly looked at her with some concern during her separation from Harry, as her own difficulty sleeping had been put into sharp relief. That, and she suspected that Kirito had informed her of Harry’s own difficulties.

It didn’t surprise her, considering that she had shared a bed with him for months. She knew about the nightmares and those times when her presence couldn’t calm them. Just as he knew about hers, and his own inability to calm them at times.

It was one of the unspoken things about their relationship, the knowledge that each one could only do so much for the other. It simply was the reality of things that they had learned to accept. They did what they could for each other, even if it was simply being there when one or the other had to ride out a nightmare.

She heard Pina cry out and turned her attention to the direction to see the feathered dragon flying around Harry, who was making a half-hearted attempt at shooing her off, while several players looked on with confusion. He looked over to her and shot her an amused look as his hands snapped out and grabbed Pina. The feathered dragon’s protests quickly stilled as he started giving her scratches along the base of the skull as he waved the curious players around him off.

Shaking her head in amused exasperation, Silica made her way over. Several players looked at her and, realizing who she was, respectfully backed away.

“So, got delayed?” He asked.

Silica nodded. “Argo had me check a few things out, which were a bust by the way, and they took longer than expected,” she replied. “I could have come last night, but anyone who saw me would have gotten the wrong idea.”

Harry snorted. “You mean they don’t already?” He asked drily as he let Pina go. “Anyway, I take it
that they’re running out of leads?”

Silica shrugged. “I don’t know about that, but it wouldn’t surprise me,” she replied. “I have a feeling that things will be coming to a head soon.”

Harry nodded. “If they can’t find the rest, then we’ll probably end up checking the Groshe Caves in force then,” he said grimly. “And go after the one group we have a good idea on the location for.”

Aincrad 35th Floor, Mishe

Asuna looked at the arrayed maps and then turned her attention to Argo. “So, we’ve exhausted our leads and PoH’s been hiding since Gus had that run-in with him.” She said. “As for the Laughing Coffin groups, we have a good suspicion that one is on the twenty-third floor, and another on the thirty-fourth floor. Which one is more likely?”

Argo looked at the maps and sighed. “Harry and Kirito certainly suspect that there’s one on the twenty-third floor in the Groshe Caves,” she admitted. “The thirty-fourth is also likely and Gus is scouting there now, but until we have confirmation, we won’t know.” She looked up. “We might as well investigate the Groshe Caves.”

“I’ll head down there then and start working up a plan then,” Asuna said. “I’ll also see if I can free up some people from other floors for this.”

“It might tip them off, you know,” Argo commented. “So if you do, then you’ll have to move quickly.”

Asuna nodded at Argo’s comment. Any movement of theirs would likely be noticed by the infiltrators and informants who they hadn’t rounded up or suborned, which would be sent to PoH. If they hit one location, then that meant that they would have to risk that the other one would likely be abandoned before they could hit that one.

Unless…

“Argo, message Klein and the others, I want to meet them on the thirty-fourth floor.” She said as she opened a message window. Typing a message and pressing the send button, she closed it. “I’ll send Lux down to the twenty-third floor and bring Kirito up here. As soon as you get a message from Gus, confirming or denying the possibility of them being on the thirty-fourth floor, tell him to get back here.”

“What are you planning?” Argo asked.

“If going after one will tip the other off, then we go after both,” Asuna said. “Get raids together for both hits, and… do you have a corridor crystal or two?”

“I do, why?”

Asuna smiled coldly. “If we have full raids, we can overwhelm at least one quickly, and then back up the other,” She said. “With Harry, Silica, and Lux, they can more than handle things down there with the rest of the people they have. We make a production of making preparations of the thirty-fourth floor, and with the other group then done with the twenty-third…”

Argo grinned savagely.

Aincrad, 34th Floor, Zalea Caverns
Gus ducked into an alcove and used his hiding skill as he watched another Laughing Coffin patrol pass. He had to admit, this was actually a good spot for them, as the dungeon was located three kilometers from the nearest settlement, close to Aincrad’s edge, and was a place that many players didn’t really go to because of the distance. At the same time, it was one of the few places which had a three dimensional aspect, as all the caverns had ledges and passages which allowed for ambushers to jump down on the unwary.

It took him advancing well into the caverns before he noticed the Laughing Coffin presence, and if it hadn’t been for how likely it was for him to be noticed, he would have teleported out and informed Argo immediately. Well into the caverns or not, he knew better than to tempt fate, so he was taking his time leaving.

“Don’t know why we’re doing this,” he heard one in the group say. He was glad for the acoustics at least, as it allowed him to hear things he otherwise wouldn’t. Not without being dangerously close.

“Well,” the other said. “We could always find a scout or something. I heard that the players are actively hunting for us now.”

“Not that it’ll do them any good,” the first replied. “They come after us, and we’ll… wait, you hear that?”

Gus paused and then heard the shriek of a mob and a quick exchange of attacks before the telltale sound of shattering.

“Damn mobs,” Dorian said. “Sneaky bastards killed three of us last week. Anyway, no one’s here. Let’s head back.”

“Hey,” Sal said. “You think they were killed by mobs? We did have that one guy who just up and died in front of us a few days ago. Maybe the outside world knows what’s going on and…” The voices trailed off as they rounded a corner.

As he waited for them to pass by and not risk being seen, Gus considered what he heard. They were confident in their ability to hide, which could mean any number of things. There was also the implication that they expected any response to be dealt with easily. The fact that they were recognizing something he considered more and more likely, that the outside world could look in, was also interesting. If it was true, then it seemed as if there were those who were either taking things into their own hands, or law enforcement had done so.

Though he would bet on the former, over the latter. Japan wasn’t China, which would have handled such things differently, and had those who acted like Laughing Coffin quietly killed. Well, those who weren’t well connected, at any rate. As it was, it did imply that the outside world was at least somewhat aware of what was going on.

Was it warranted confidence? He didn’t know, but he doubted it. They could be dangerous, even to high level players, true, but a lot of that stemmed from the fact that they often struck from ambush. The advantage given by surprise, as well as their tendency to rely of paralyzing agents and poisons served them well in that regard. However, if surprise wasn’t achieved, either from a player picking up on the ambush, or simple caution, the odds evened considerably, if not go the other way entirely.

It was one of the major reasons Laughing Coffin withdrew and decided to lie low. Players were starting to be prepared, to expect attacks. The element of surprise was being lost, and their attacks were being beaten back.

Case in point: The Moonlit Black Cats went after a bit of information that hinted at something they
couldn’t ignore, despite being closer to a front line group, than a mid-level group. Being savvy about the dangers, their guild leader, Keita, asked for Steel Phoenix to serve as backup, resulting in a Laughing Coffin attack killing or capturing two-thirds of the attacking group, despite the numerical superiority.

The tide was starting to turn, and the result was this.

*And while that bastard Casals might have phrased it as them lying low and letting things die down, I know that he knows full well that doing something like this also allows us to get things in order,* he thought to himself. *Hell, he’s probably counting on it.* He looked around as he slowly moved out of his hiding place, checking his surroundings. Seeing nothing, he slowly made his way to an alcove he knew about that would allow him to teleport out without being seen.

Maybe, if he was lucky, he would run into that one solo player who occasionally offered her services to Argo. She hadn’t been seen over the last couple of days, though it was confirmed that she was still alive. While she wasn’t a part of The Rat’s network, Argo always looked out for those who worked with her.

##

Philia sat back and leaned against the cave’s wall in the alcove she hid herself in as she went over her current supplies. She mentally cursed not purchasing more teleport crystals or healing supplies. She was also working out how to get out of this maze of caverns, considering that she had been here for two days already and had eaten the last of her food two hours ago.

It wasn’t the first time her habit of going solo bit her in the ass, and if she survived, it wouldn’t be the last, she knew. She should have also kept in mind that the location of the Caverns, as well as the warnings about it being a good spot for potential Laughing Coffin members to lie low in.

Two days ago, she confirmed for herself that the warnings were certainly warranted, and it took every bit of stealth she had to avoid being seen. However, she also managed to get lost in the process, as the caverns were apparently known for the fact that it was one of the few dungeons which fully operated in three dimensions. The passages and the fact that you could be making your own way back, but be heading the wrong direction vertically or horizontally made this dungeon unpopular amongst players because of that.

And due to that, it meant that the dungeon wasn’t picked clean of those chests which didn’t respawn, and she had found several nice items that she could sell or trade when she got back to a main town. As much as she liked finding and obtaining loot, as befitted her self-described job in SAO as a Treasure Hunter, it was simply a means for her to keep from being bored. That, and she enjoyed exploration. The map data she gained from her forays, as well as anything on mobs was well appreciated by Argo, who either paid good col for her scouting, or traded information on lucrative items for her to pursue.

It was a workable relationship where both benefitted. She got to go out and explore, and hunt treasure, to her heart’s content, Argo got useful information and map data. Argo did try and recruit her on occasion to join her ever growing network, but that was expected and the recruitment offers and her refusals had become something of a game to both of them.

She was perfectly happy working on her own, though there were times when she did team up with groups that needed someone good at scouting. She didn’t profit as well, but her own honest dealings, as well as making sure Argo put the word out, meant that she still got a cut of the loot.

There were times where she had been tempted to make her working relationship with Argo more
official, though. The rise of Laughing Coffin into being a threat had forced her into spending more
time near the front lines than she liked, as she usually only went up there to keep her more combat
oriented skills sharp and to ensure that her levelling remained at a reasonable rate. The risk of
running into that particular bunch of Reds put a damper on it though.

Looking at her level, one would think of her as an upper mid-level, or lower end front line player,
but her specialized skill set made fighting a riskier proposition than she liked. Most players were, for
the most part, generalists. The only real exception to that came from those who were dedicated tanks,
who based their stats and gear around taking punishment and surviving it.

She, however, specialized in stealth, detection, and finding hidden things. She had a few combat
skills, but she preferred to avoid fighting when practicable. She didn’t have the more generalized
stats and skill distribution that made for a fighter.

She heard a sound and quickly moved herself behind some stones which offered a fair amount of
concealment while allowing her to observe what, or who, was coming.

She gave a sigh in relief when she saw that it was a player, and one with a green cursor. However,
despite that, she wasn’t going to take too many risks, as it was known that Laughing Coffin did use
players who weren’t Reds for supply runs and spying. Her wariness increased when she noted that
the player was looking right at her.

She saw him give a quiet sigh and shake his head. “All right, I know you’re there, so just come on
out,” he said.

Carefully coming into sight, she placed her hand on the hilt of her dagger and saw the player give her
an approving look when she did. Keeping his hands visible and away from his weapon, he looked at
her carefully and nodded, apparently to himself.

“Who are you?” She asked.

“Call me Gus,” came the reply. “I work for Argo. Are you Philia?”

She nodded, but didn’t let her guard down. The man gave another approving nod at her remaining
on guard.

“Not immediately trusting,” he commented. “Smart move kid.”

“With Laughing Coffin so close by, it doesn’t strike me as a bad idea,” she replied drily. “Prove
you’re clean and not aligned with them.”

Gus smiled and used the interface to bare his hands, arms, legs and feet. He did some movements to
show that there wasn’t a Laughing Coffin tattoo on any of his limbs before putting his gear back on.

“Good enough?” He asked.

“For now,” she replied. She knew he could have one somewhere else, but his willingness to prove
that he was clean meant that she could give him the benefit of the doubt.

“Good, Argo was wondering what happened to you.” He opened a menu and pulled out a teleport
crystal. “I’m not going to ask why you’re here, but given how this place is designed, well, I can do
the math. This’ll get you out of here, though Argo will want to talk to you later. I’m teleporting out
as well.” He tossed her the crystal.

Catching it, she saw him bring out another one and he gave her a look, as if he was waiting for her to
do something. Shrugging, he raised his and called out a teleport request to Nashin, the floor’s central town.

Philia looked at the teleport crystal and sighed as she raised it. *Might as well,* she thought. *I know that Argo’s going to want to debrief me on this, but if she wants me to guide anyone here, she can kiss my ass. I’m not dying so they can take on Laughing Coffin.*

**Aincrad, GM Administration Area**

Kayaba observed everything that was going on between those players in Laughing Coffin, and those who were working to eliminate the threat that the Reds comprising the so-called Murder Guild posed. He had kept his hands out of it for a number of reasons and now he was wondering if he should have taken a more active interest in things.

He didn’t predict Laughing Coffin’s depredations, nor did he account for them. At least, not to the degree that occurred. From his own observations, he had considered the group to be one that, while needing to be dealt with eventually, one that wouldn’t overly concern the front line players initially, let alone the Assault Team.

He did initially consider taking action against them himself, but had dismissed the idea as a viable one. First, it would have gone against the grain of how he had planned everything. Second, he had resolved to be as hands off as a GM as practicable when it came to the players. Finally, his interference in the matter would have defeated the purpose of his arranging for the players to live their lives as they saw fit in Aincrad.

He had set out his own rules for himself, and he intended to follow them. The only major interactions he had with the players were as a player, in his Heathcliff persona, with only a handful of meaningful interactions with them in his capacity as a GM. Things players needed that he couldn’t provide as a player, he either directed them to Argo, or directed them in a way that would accomplish what they needed for themselves.

The only exception was with Unique Skills. He had handed only one out so far, though with the progress of Kirito and Argo in their specialties, he could see himself giving the ones he listed them as candidates for to them within a handful of weeks at the latest. Both had long since met the criteria he had set for them, so it was only a matter of finding the right time to gift them.

He brought his attention back to what he was watching. Laughing Coffin had proven to be an unexpectedly dangerous element, though not unexpected in the sense that they came about. Some players would crack under things, some would completely substitute the game for reality, and some simply liked to play the villain. That had been the case for decades, even before Sword Art Online and the rise of Virtual Reality.

The rest of the players were acting as expected, their faster response being a reaction to just how overly effective Laughing Coffin turned out to be. And now, they were planning to bring an end to that particular group.

It wouldn’t put an end to Red Players, but the result would determine how things turned out. If Laughing Coffin was decisively defeated, then it would firmly establish an already unwritten rule that most Reds followed: Don’t kill. If it failed, then the Reds would probably take it as a sign that they could do anything and no response would be effective enough.

**March 17, 2024 - Aincrad 34th Floor, Nashin**

Asuna looked at the gathered players, the lamps of the town illuminating them. She could see Kirito
at the front, his black clad figure seeming to absorb the light and forming a striking contrast to the more colorful players around him. His grim expression and the way he constantly shifted his shoulders highlighted his own feelings of the coming engagement more than anything else.

Rain was off to the side, her own crimson and brass armor highlighting her title, Blood Rain, in more ways than one. Her hair had been pulled into a severe braid, rather than hanging loosely as was more common. She idly played with it while her own grim expression showed more in her eyes, rather than on her face. The weeks since she had engaged XaXa in his aborted attack on the Moonlit Black Cats, and the effects of the two lives she took that day had barely blunted the trauma of killing, but the older girl was determined to see this to the end.

Looking at them, she mentally prepared herself as she began to address the group.

“Thank you all for coming,” she said. “We have confirmed a significant Laughing Coffin presence in the Zalea Caverns due to a couple of players who took a giant risk in scouting the dungeon. While it hasn’t been completely confirmed, there is also a likely presence on the twenty-third floor in the Groshe Caves, which is being prepared for as we speak.

“Our mission here is to assault the Laughing Coffin presence in the Zalea Caverns and put an end to this group. Our objective will be to capture, but I won’t lie here, they will be fighting to kill. If it would be too risky to capture them, or they refuse to surrender… don’t hesitate and get it done with.” She took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

“I don’t say this lightly,” she continued, opening her eyes. “And I am not asking this of you lightly. These murderers have killed hundreds of players, and we will stop them. They won’t be allowed to continue their depredations.

“If any of you feel as if the possibility of being required to kill is something you want nothing of, or that you can’t in good conscience be a part of this, let me know. I won’t think any less of you, this is something that no one should be, nor will they be, forced into participating in. We leave in fifteen minutes, so finish your preparations.”

Asuna was surprised that only five players decided that they couldn’t be a part of this, and she politely thanked them for coming and hearing her out. She kept her promise and allowed them to leave the group, only asking that they not reveal what was going down until it was done, one way, or the other.

“Are you sure you want to be with us?” Kirito asked when he approached her.

“No,” she admitted. “But I will see this through.”

Kirito nodded and went back towards the group.

**Aincrad 23rd Floor, Galdon**

Harry looked at the gathered group after he told them what was at stake here. He could see the unsure expressions on their faces, as well as the grim cast on those who had tangled with Laughing Coffin before. To those who were unsure, he told them that if they wanted to bow out, then this was the time for them to do so.

Those who did, he didn’t blame them one bit. He didn’t force or require people to join in, knowing full well that most really didn’t have it in them to kill. Not without significant provocation at any rate. Had he been there on the thirty-fourth floor, he would have been mildly amused to note the similarities between his own statements and Asuna’s.
If this wasn’t absolutely necessary due to the threat Laughing Coffin posed, he would have happily
done something else, like taking some time off to work out just what his relationship with Keiko was,
and whether or not they should take things further, and...

He refocused on the task at hand and mentally prepared himself for what was likely to come. He
could muse on whether things had progressed to the point where he should be arranging private time
with Keiko to hammer out where they will take things later.

As it was, he had to focus on taking care of an unpleasant, but necessary task. Laughing Coffin
posed too great a threat to let run wild, and it was up to the players to do something about it. Kayaba
wouldn’t, and no one knew whether or not the outside world was able to look in. It was recognized
as a possibility, but only as such. The idea that it was the case had only started gaining traction very
recently.

He opened his menu and looked over his equipped skills, changing a few out for the coming fight.
He looked at Mystic Blade for a moment before deciding to equip it, figuring that it would be better
to have it and not need it, than run into a situation where he would possibly need it, and have to
waste precious time equipping it.

It would be just like Kayaba to be watching things and to arrange things that way, the bastard.

A quick glance at the time told him that it was time they left.

“All right, last chance to bow out of this,” he said. A moment later, he saw that no one had budged,
and nodded. “Well then, let’s go.”

It was time to finish things with Laughing Coffin.
March 17, 2024 - Aincrad 23rd Floor - Groshe Caves

Harry looked at the two Laughing Coffin lookouts who were bound and gagged and nodded to the players who had snuck forward and captured them. He was glad that Argo had found some players who specialized in stealth and capture tactics, though he wondered how that would work here before putting it out of his mind. For all he knew, they practiced it on mobs as a means of doing specific quests. Not that they would have had any trouble with this pair, considering that they were asleep when the capture team grabbed them.

"Good," he said quietly. "Pass them off to the team we have for prisoners and catch up, we're continuing on."

The players who did the capture nodded and moved back as he waved the rest forward.

"The Groshe Caves are fairly winding, and there are several good ambush points, so keep on your guard," he said. "I don't know how often the two we captured are supposed to report in, so we need to assume that they know we're coming." He pulled up a map of the caves. "Now, if I were to pick a good ambush site, these three locations would be ideal if they're using the safe zone I think they are." He highlighted the points on the map and saw the other players nod. "Now, they might not, so keep that in mind, but we have enough players that we actually outnumber them."

"What about splitting our forces to cover more ground?" One from the DDA members in the raid, Forten, if he recalled, asked.

Harry shook his head "Too risky," he said. "At least for right now. Having couple of parties trailing behind by a couple of minutes might not be a bad idea, though. Set it up."

Forten nodded and headed back to the main group while Harry looked at the map. He felt Silica come up to him and glanced at her.

"You think we'll manage this?" She asked.

Harry nodded. "We shouldn't have too much trouble, provided everyone keeps a cool head," he replied. "But once the fighting starts, well…"

Silica nodded. "It's not like we have any proper means to prepare them for what's coming," she said quietly.

"And I wouldn't want to force them through that anyway," Harry admitted. "Well, the emphasis is on capture for a reason, and if we're lucky, things will go smoothly."

"And our chances of being that lucky?"

"About as likely as Kayaba letting us go without us clearing the game."

Silica nodded grimly and looked at the players coming forward. "Well, we best get about this then," she said. "Best to get it over with."

Harry nodded and looked at the assembled players. "Let's go."

##
XaXa was worried. His lookouts hadn't reported in yet, though it was possible that they fell asleep. Hell, by all rights he should be asleep himself, but there was a feeling he had that something was about to happen, and it made it difficult to do so. Looking at the one in charge of the night shift's lookouts, he noted the other player's increasing scowl at the lack of a report.

"Bastards probably fell asleep," the man muttered.

XaXa got up and walked over to him. "Or those patrolling the floor finally decided to take action," he said. "Wake the others, just in case."

The man looked at him. "You sure, boss?" He asked.

XaXa shrugged. "Just a feeling I have," he admitted. "I made the mistake of not trusting it a few weeks ago, and you know what happened there."

The man nodded. He had been a part of that attack, and knew how quickly things had gone sour for their group. The party they attacked had proved very capable of fighting defensively and holding out until backup arrived. In the end, only six of the eighteen who attacked managed to escape.

"If nothing happens, then they only lose a few hours of sleep anyway," the man said quietly. "Not that any of us have had anything better to do anyway."

XaXa nodded and then pulled up a map. His instincts were telling him that it wasn't nothing, so he wanted to be ready. If they were lucky, it was a patrol that finally got bored of what it was doing and decided to go into the caves. He looked over the map and determined the best spot to ambush anyone coming in, and he wouldn't do things by half measure.

He had twenty men, so a well-placed and timed ambush could even the odds against even a full raid. He could see several good locations, but the one nearest to his group's position was especially good. Nothing like being able to use the layout of the caves against the attackers, after all.

##

Harry kept an eye open for any signs of an ambush as the group marched down the cave's passage. This area was particularly dangerous, as it forced them to close in on each other, restricting their movement and making them vulnerable. He knew from the map that the passage widened into a decently sized chamber ahead, and it was one of the spots he considered a good location for an ambush.

The exiting from the narrow passage would allow any ambushers time to close in on players before they could spread out. With close to fifty players, the numbers were in favor of the assaulting group, but he knew full well that while numbers mattered, if Laughing Coffin could keep them from leveraging it, they could whittle their numbers down without risking being overwhelmed.

Thus, he discussed it with several other party leaders and they arranged it so that the first ones out of the passage would be those who bore larger shields. Not only would it provide a defensive bulwark for them, but they were fortunate to have more than a small handful of spear wielders amongst them to add a more offensive bent to such a defensive formation. This would hopefully allow the group to push back in case of an assault on them as they exited. If not, they would back away and lead Laughing Coffin to the previous chamber and turn that same tactic on the bloodthirsty maniacs.

The idea behind it wasn't difficult to think of, and having been in SAO for over sixteen months had given him some knowledge of tactics, even if fights against mobs and players tended to devolve into a disorganized melee. However, it wasn't the tactics and planning for this that he was relying on, it
was the teamwork of those with him.

For all that they attacked from ambush and worked in groups, Laughing Coffin members lacked that. They fought as individuals, and a party could, and did, use that against them. It didn't matter how skilled you were, or how many of you there were. A party that was long used to working as a team could punch well above its weight class, and against players who fought as individuals, it could be even more devastating than against mobs.

Something registered on his senses, though he couldn't place exactly what it was, and his expression settled into a grim line. Even without checking the map, he could feel it. They were getting close, and Laughing Coffin was probably waiting for them.

"Silica," he said quietly. "Pass it up to the front, we're getting close, so I want them alert. Lux, do the same for the rear." It was probably superfluous, but it was better to err on the side of caution here.

Both girls complied and he loosened his sword in its sheath.

##

XaXa frowned as he watched the initial players come through the entrance to the chamber, more a cavern, really. He saw the mix of players in the forefront, the combination of tanks and those who had spears, and realized that whoever was in charge either anticipated the possibility of ambush, or was simply being cautious, which was problematic. He expected them to come in fully confident and arrogant, not with the kind of caution and preparation he could see.

Worse, with him and his men in position as they were, they couldn't simply withdraw without being seen, and even if they remained motionless, the other players would have to be paying no attention at all to their surroundings to not notice as they passed through. And judging from what he was seeing, the opposite applied.

No, whoever is in charge isn't stupid, he thought. Still, if they think we'll go down without a fight, they'll have another thing coming. We might not have the complete element of surprise, but we still have the initiative.

He then saw that if they wanted to have any chance at having the initiative and winning, they would have to attack soon. He looked to the sides and nodded. It was time.

##

The shields held against the sudden attack, and Harry watched as the lead group pushed the attackers back enough to allow more of the raid to enter the chamber. He quickly raised his shield and deflected a charging thrust from one attacker and bashed the Red with his shield. Without missing a beat, he cut off the hand holding the off balance player's weapon before knocking him to the floor with blow to the head from the pommel of his sword.

He parried a strike from another Red and he moved around to his attacker's blind spot. Slashing his back twice, he kicked the back of the player's knees, sending him to the floor and saw as two members of the raid grabbed him, disarmed him, and dragged him to the rear to be bound.

He gave them a quick nod and moved on to assist Lux, who was fending off two Laughing Coffin members on her own, protecting a downed member of the raid.

##

Lux parried the strike and sidestepped the follow on from the Red's partner, her schiavona flashing
out and leaving a deep gash in his arm, forcing him to back off before having to parry another strike. Stepping back, she got into a guard stance and looked at the two players, not sparing a glance for her downed ally. She knew if she took her attention from them for even a moment, they would use that moment's inattention to their advantage.

The initial rush of shock she felt when the attack had happened had passed, giving her mind a striking clarity. There was fear there, but it was a controlled fear. The feeling of fear was something she was familiar with, an old friend in many respects. So long as she controlled it, and didn't let it control her, she was focused. And in this fight, she was very focused indeed.

Focused on the two players who had every intention of killing her and everyone she was with. Focused on the murderous intent she could feel coming from them. Focused on defending the ally who had gone down to a thrown dagger which paralyzed him. Focused on surviving.

It would dawn on her later that a part of her mind wasn't gibbering in terror at the concept of someone trying to do violence on her person. That she wasn't being sloppy due to it, though she would admit, the expression on that one member of Titan's Hand as she handed his own arm back to him from said sloppy sword work was rather funny.

Perhaps it was the familiarity of something trying to kill her, even if that something was another person, a human being. That might be it, the familiarity, even if the source was different. After all, she had long since gotten used to something trying to kill her on an almost daily basis any time she left a town. In an odd way, it was almost comforting in the normality of it.

It didn't dawn on her until much later what that said about how she changed.

Sidestepping a thrust, her sword lashed out and sent her attacker's arm flying. Almost absently, she grabbed it in midair, turned, and slapped his companion upside the head with it before throwing it into the face of its owner.

The expressions on their faces as they stared at her with in shock at what she did almost made her giggle. The two then seemed to decide that they had pressing concerns elsewhere. If she had seen the dissonantly serene expression on her face when she did so, she might have understood why they might find that intimidating.

"Well," a voice said drily. "I see that's becoming a thing Lux. Your arguments are quite disarming."

She blinked and turned her head to see Harry looking at her.

"I guess I had to be rather sharp with them," she said.

Harry grinned at her before moved off to a knot of battling players in another part of the chamber.

She glanced down at her companion, who was giving her a strange look. It was as if he was trying to reconcile what he saw with the girl in front of him.

"Has you paralysis worn off?" She asked.

He seemed to start and slowly got up. "It seems so," he said before looking back at her. "Remind me to not piss you off." He said.

"Don't piss me off."

The player snorted. "Duly noted," he said drily before moving to the rear to finish recovering.
Lux nodded and looked around to see how the overall battle was going before heading off. She could see Silica being forced onto the defensive, and she would back her friend up.

##

Silica killed two of the Laughing Coffin members before Red-eyed XaXa focused his attacks on her. He moved quickly to rush her position, his estoc positioned to thrust right into her heart.

She dodged the thrust and darted in to close the distance and get inside the Red player's reach. Slicing out with her dagger, she managed to score a couple of hits before her opponent leapt back. She would give him credit, he was good, very good. He was able to wield the estoc almost like a rapier, which spoke of high strength and agility, allowing him to wield it fast enough to capitalize on it. With its greater reach and weight, the one hundred and thirty centimeter blade would easily keep her at a distance.

Silica was faster, but XaXa was fighting defensively now, forcing her to keep her distance and leaving false openings she knew better than to exploit. Her martial arts training under her grandparents, and their own tendency to use that same tactic had taught her the lesson of knowing how to recognize an opening that was designed as a trap.

Getting grabbed and thrown, having yourself put into a mildly painful arm bar, or tapped with enough force to leave bruises simply drove that lesson home. She could take a hit, such as on her hand, and then use her own body to tie up the weapon, but that was risky.

If she did it too quickly, and she would leave herself open for him to simply kick her. If she waited too long, she would have a hard time leveraging the weapon against him and control its movements, again, leaving her open. She saw someone coming up from behind him and...

She barely dodged a sudden thrust when she took her eyes off the weapon and was caught off guard when XaXa only retracted it just enough to thrust again, sticking it into her right shoulder. Thinking quickly, she grabbed it with her left hand, pinning it in place.

"And what do you think to accomplish with that, little bitch?" XaXa said.

Looking past him, she smiled coldly.

XaXa blinked and tried to turn around, when the blade of a broadsword cut him in two from shoulder to hip, the glow of a sword skill fading as it finished the system assisted movement. She saw Lux's shocked expression as XaXa's body went in two directions, and quickly moved forward.

"Thanks for cutting in like that," she said, giving the girl a firm bump on the chest to focus her attention on herself. "Have your breakdown later; we have a battle to finish."

It was a callous comment on her part, she knew, but the middle of a battle was not the time or place for the shocked horror that stemmed from killing. She'd apologize later for it, and probably be paying for whatever pampering, drinking, therapeutic shopping, simply being a shoulder to cry on, or whatever combination of them was required depending on what her friend needed. Keeping her focused until the end of the battle would keep her friend alive for that, and was worth far more than col.

Lux numbly looked at where half of XaXa's body was sent flying, before hurriedly looking away before she could see it shatter. She looked back as Silica, swallowed, and then shakily nodded before gathering herself and apparently firming her resolve.

##
Harry noticed XaXa's death out of the corner of his eye, who did the killing, and sighed. He had hoped to she wouldn't end up killing someone, as much as he knew she hoped the same, but she had come with them. She had accepted the possibility of it happening, not that it would help her mentally. If anything, that knowledge might make the aftermath worse. The fact that she did it to help Silica was reassuring in his mind, and he would make sure to let her know that she did it for the right reasons.

It wouldn't magically (ha ha, he added dryly to himself) make things better, but that bit of perspective should help.

*Still, I should have encouraged her to sit this one out, or be a part of the prisoner team. He thought before shaking any bitterness he felt from it out of his mind. Concentrate on the battle, deal with it later.*

He noticed one player being menaced by three Laughing Coffin members and growled. He saw the injured duo behind him, both of them on the ground with a missing leg, and was able to connect the dots as to what happened. He didn't bother shouting or anything, he simply shifted the grip on the hilt of his blade, firmed it, and saw the blade ignite.

He still didn't know what made Mystic Blade fully tick, but he had noticed that things like grip, footing, and other factors shifted the aspects of it. He still probably had weeks or months of training and experimentation to go until then. However, he knew very well how to trigger the fire aspect of it… and how to use it.

He didn't consider that he didn't need to use it, didn't need to out himself as having a Unique Skill. He simply charged the Laughing Coffin members, his sword trailing flames like a meteor. He had the lives of those who came with him to save.

He wouldn't let an ally die on his watch if he could help it. If anyone was going to die, it would be Laughing Coffin. Even if he had to rip them apart with his bare hands if necessary.

##

Forten tiredly leaned on his spear, tightly gripping it to keep his hands from shaking. He was lucky to be alive. If it hadn't been for Lux coming to his aid when he went down, and fighting off those two and giving him the time to recover from the paralysis, he would have been killed. If she was up to it, he owed her a drink or two.

The last of the Laughing Coffin members surrendered a couple of minutes ago, and were already being escorted out to be handed over to the team that would send the prisoners to the Black Iron Palace. He looked at the map and the displayed players and only saw that two icons representing the raid members were no longer there.

Two of their own had fallen, and if there was a replay of events, he wouldn't doubt that they fell early, during the initial attack. Despite expecting it, the ambush still came as a surprise. True, they got their act together quickly, but the opening seconds of the fight were nerve wracking.

Not that he was surprised, he had tangled with Laughing Coffin before. The speed of the attack, the suddenness, it was typical of their style. So long as you didn't get paralyzed, either from a poisoned blade or shock, and kept your wits, things quickly became manageable. The tables turned quickly, and if they had the option, Laughing Coffin would have broken contact and retreated in short order.

However, being trapped and cornered like that meant that they fought like cornered rats. The only reason the raid's casualties were so low was the simple fact that if a player went down, another was
there to back him up before he could be killed.

There were a lot of close calls though, and seeing a player go down and almost get killed meant that those in the raid fought even more fiercely than they otherwise would have. Blows which could have simply beaten them off, took limbs. Blows which would have taken limbs, were sent out with the same lethal intent that their enemies had.

Unlike some of the others, he understood why Hadrian gave the option to simply decide to not participate. The Young Knight laid it out plainly to them when he briefed them on the operation that hesitating to take the Laughing Coffin members down, and take them down hard, even lethally, risked not only the person's own life, but the lives of those with him.

Those who approached him to say they couldn't in good conscience participate were politely thanked for at least showing up, and told that he didn't think any less of them for it. If anything, he praised their courage in stepping forward like that.

He didn't want them endangering themselves or others because they couldn't do what might become a grim necessity in a fight that would likely be a brutal and extremely violent one.

He saw the boy, the glowing lines where those he fought got a lucky hit in standing out in contrast to his armor and clothing, open a message and read it. Typing in a reply, he sent it and looked around before the boy's eyes alighted on his. Forten was surprised by how old and tired they looked, but he nodded to him and began walking. While he walked, Forten could see Hadrian look around, his gaze pausing to linger on Silica, who was softly talking to Lux, who had a somewhat numb expression on her face. Shaking his head sadly, he continued his walk until he was next to him.

"How bad was it for us?" He asked.

Forten brought his map up, looking at the icons on it again. "We lost two," he replied. "Don't know when, things were confusing as only a fight against those bastards can be, but we captured eleven and I don't recall seeing any manage to run away."

"Two?" Hadrian asked softly. "Better than I dared to hope for us, but still too many. Even those we killed, because they wouldn't surrender, or to keep ourselves and our allies alive… too fucking many."

"That's why you gave the option to walk out, though," Forten said. "You knew this could end up like this. You wanted to spare as many of them from doing it as you could, and it would be easier if they weren't here."

Hadrian nodded and opened his menu. Bringing up the messages, her opened one and motioned for him to come over and read it. "The other group, the one on the thirty-fourth floor, they're in the Zalea Caverns and are about to move on the Laughing Coffin presence there." Hadrian said, pointing at the contents. "If they need backup, they'll message us. Argo gave me a corridor crystal if that happens."

"Don't think that a lot of these guys will be up to it."

"Then they won't have to go, if they don't want to," Hadrian replied. "They've done their part and more. If they think it's done for them, then it's done for them. I won't force them into going into another battle. I… owe them that much."

Forten looked at the Young Knight and nodded. "Let's head back to Galdon," he said. "I owe that one girl that's a part of your group, Lux, a drink for saving my ass. And while we're heading that way, what was that with your sword? I swear I saw it catch fire."
Hadrian chuckled. "I'll tell you when we get to town, it's a long story."

**Aincrad 34th Floor, Zalea Caverns**

Asuna had her rapier out as they walked down the series of tunnels and caverns that Gus' information indicated Laughing Coffin to be. She was wary, as going in, she realized that the design of the caverns meant that an ambush could literally come from any direction, including vertically. It added some complications to matters, as she noted several caverns where the organization of their raid would have helped them not one bit, and could have easily hindered it.

Shields were useless from attacks that struck from directions they weren't facing, after all.

On the other hand, it was less likely that the Reds would attack from directly above, not unless they could walk on walls or the roof of the various caverns. They might be able to clear the shield bearers she had organized to cover each side, depending on positioning, but having players who could defend and block in those positions offered the best chance of weathering the first strike of an ambush.

At least, that was the idea. The message she got from Harry said that his raid had cleared out the Laughing Coffin presence in the Groshe Caves, but he doubted that most of the members were in any state to do it a second time. On the other hand, he did give one little bit of information that was both reassuring, and saddening.

Red-eyed XaXa was dead, killed by Lux when he was focused on Silica. It was reassuring that the member who not only threatened Silica's life at one point, Asuna had no doubt that had Lux not cut him down that the youngest member of their guild would have won, and who was the remaining member of the pair that Rain had been focused on in her desire for revenge was now dead. It was saddening due to the fact that he died at the hands of the one person who was arguably the guild's most innocent member.

She blamed herself for sending Lux down there, but at the time, it was the wisest course of action. Rain's sheer hatred for XaXa meant that she was likely to disregard any plans in order to fulfill her desire for revenge. Of course, the shock she received weeks ago, in how it was changing her in a bad way might have had a different effect, and make her too hesitant to fight.

*I knew when I sent her down, that this was a possibility, a small part of her thought bitterly. I sent her anyway so that Harry would have another high level player with him to give him a better chance at succeeding. Well, it definitely worked, that bastard won't hurt anyone else. All for the miniscule price of a girl's innocence.*

##

Rain noticed Asuna's expression and was about to ask her what it was about when an unexpected sound got her attention. It sounded like a blade being drawn, and before she could turn, she heard Kirito call out.

"Here they come!"

Rain saw only a flicker of movement before her sword blocked the strike that was aiming for her neck to force the attacker off balance. Her follow-on strike then took the other player's head off at the shoulder.

*Another nightmare to add to the fucking list,* she thought grimly before refocusing on the fight as she moved to intercept a Laughing Coffin member that was bearing down on a player who seemed to be
frozen in shock at the suddenness of combat. A swing took the Red player's arm off, and she quickly hit him with the flat of the blade.

"Take him to the rear, and make sure you keep him bound," she said to the player before moving on. She didn't notice the player nod quickly before doing so, as she already focused on the next player who needed assistance.

##

Gus quickly found himself fighting PoH, and mused that the man's desire to kill him might be greater than the man's more pragmatic approach. Not that it made him any less effective as a fighter, as he almost negligently killed two members of the raid as he approached.

"Well, brujo, I think it's past time we finished things." He said as he darted forward.

Gus parried the strike, knowing that his shield would be less than useless against PoH’s weapon, Mate Chopper. He had learned what he could about the man, and one of the things he found out was how the weapon was able to ignore armor and shields. Dangerous in any hands, but in the hands of a skilled fighter like PoH, it was extremely deadly.

"Long past time, Casals," he said grimly.

The two began to exchange strikes, blocks, and parries.

##

Lind growled as one of the Laughing Coffin members simply refused to surrender, despite only having a sliver of health left. From the crazed look in the player's eyes, he could tell that he was simply too far gone in his bloodlust to be reasoned with, but he still hesitated in delivering the final blow, trying to give the killer a chance to see reason.

That didn't stop him from blocking and parrying the strikes, but he had to give the man a chance before circumstances took the choice from any of them.

"Listen, damn you," he growled out. "You're almost dead and I'm giving you the chance to drop your weapon and surrender. So just give up!"

The player grinned, his eyes unfocused, and he charged.

"So be it then," Lind said coldly. He sidestepped the blow and plunged his sword into the player. He stepped back and watched the player fall, unmoving before shattering shortly thereafter. He gave a sigh at the knowledge that he killed and directed his attention to the battle as a whole.

He saw Kirito off to one side, engaging two Laughing Coffin members, and from the ferocity of his strikes, he wasn't holding back. Considering the small group of wounded players behind him, Lind didn't doubt that the Black Swordsman fully accepted that the way he was fighting would likely kill one or more of his opponents. He saw Schivata in another place coordinating a small group to hold off a larger Laughing Coffin attack. From how they were holding, things looked fine and his second in command had things well in order over there.

He also saw another player engaging PoH and was ready to move to help as he saw the leader of Laughing Coffin sever his opponent's arm at the elbow with a counter. He would have moved, but he saw a flash of white already headed there.

*Looks like Asuna lives up to her title,* he mused idly as a motion out the corner of his eye got his
attention. Turning, he raised his sword and blocked the strike from the Laughing Coffin member who tried to approach him from the side. All thoughts on his observations ended as he focused on the here and now.

The battle wasn't quite over yet.

##

Gus fell back, clutching the stump where PoH’s attack landed, not taking his eyes off his opponent. He knew what he did wrong, allowing PoH to counterattack and literally disarm him. He was glad that pain didn't happen the same way in SAO as the real world. You get hurt, even something as major as losing a limb, and you felt it, true. It could hurt, but nowhere near what an equivalent injury should feel like. Most simply numbed the area for a bit, which was disconcerting in its own way, but more serious injuries felt like you were hit hard enough for a bruise.

Painful, but not debilitatingly so.

"Just like last time, brujo," PoH said. "You made the same mistake, and now you're wounded. Unlike then, you won't do the same thing, though." The man laughed. "Ah, this brings back memories, but enough of that. The show's almost over, and it's time fo-
"

Whatever PoH would have said was cut off as the glowing tip of a blade pierced through his throat. Gus would admit, the surprise on the man's face was very similar to how he had ended it between the two of them last time.

Except he wasn't the one to land the blow.

"You talk too much," a feminine voice said coldly.

PoH looked like he wanted to chuckle and then his body fell as if a puppet with its strings cut. He slid off the blade and Gus saw Asuna lower her weapon and look at him as PoH's body shattered.

"You okay, Gus?" She asked.

Gus chuckled. "I will be," he replied. "Thanks for the save, Asuna."

Asuna nodded and looked around. Following her gaze, Gus saw several Laughing Coffin members back off their opponents and throw down their weapons, shouting their surrender. Their leader dying had taken any fight they had out of them.

It seemed as if things were done here... they won. Now they just had to get those they captured sent to the Black Iron Palace and its prison. He looked back at Asuna, who was staring at her rapier as if seeing it for the first time before she slowly sheathed it.

"You okay?" He asked her.

"I... don't really know," she admitted. "I don't know what I should be feeling. Actually, I know what I should be feeling, but..." She trailed off and got a pensive expression on her face.

He nodded at what she said. He knew that it could take time to sink in, and that it hit everyone differently. Some were hit by it immediately, some took days or weeks, and some seemed to not be affected by it at all for various reasons. From what he could see, and what he knew about her from his previous interactions with the young woman, it probably would take a bit to sink in for her.

**Aincrad 35th Floor, Mishe**
They had all agreed that if neither group had to back the other up, they would meet up in Mishe.

Kirito looked around the tavern portion of the Wandering Pony that was agreed on as a meeting place and saw Harry, Silica, and Lux sitting at a table, all three of them with drinks in front of them, though they weren't drinking. Lux was just sitting there, staring into her cup, while Silica and Harry were on either side. Silica had a hand on the older girl's shoulder, with Pina on the smaller girl's arm and nuzzling Lux, as if both were trying to provide some comfort.

He considered what that meant and saw Asuna's pained expression as she apparently caught sight of Lux and wondered what she knew that he didn't. He knew that she sent a message to Harry and had gotten a reply, but not what the contents were, and he wondered if she learned something in that message that was responsible.

And that didn't take into account that she was troubled in her own right. He hadn't seen her kill PoH, he had been busy, but Argo's associate, Gus, confirmed it. Still, she managed to keep her composure, which puzzled several others, but Kirito knew that she had learned how to keep it in from experience. He didn't doubt that the composure that she was trying to maintain would break down soon, but that was for later, when they all had some privacy.

He saw Harry look up and meet his own eyes. Nodding, the boy waved them over. After he, Asuna, and Rain took a seat, Harry gave Lux a pat on the shoulder.

"I don't know if Asuna shared it, you all had to concentrate on your own mission, but Red-eyed XaXa is dead." He said. "Lux got him."

Kirito nodded, now understanding why Lux was the way she was. He was mildly surprised that she wasn't breaking down, but considering how quiet she was and how… numb she looked, he had a feeling that it was only a matter of time. Or Harry was keeping her in public long enough to come down from whatever emotional state she was in.

"I shouldn't have sent her down there," Asuna said quietly with an undertone that was hard to pin down. "Lux… I'm sorry."

Harry looked at Asuna and sighed. "Asuna, it's not your fault," he said. "So don't blame yourself. Could you predict what happened? No, you couldn't. You could have sent Rain, true, but with XaXa there…" He looked at the older Russo-Japanese girl. "No offense Rain, but I doubt that you would have been anything but focused on him… to the point of recklessness."

"None taken," Rain said. "You're… right about that." She admitted. "Better that Lux was down there instead of me, she wouldn't endanger herself or others like I would. Still, it's done. Also recklessness? What's that saying in English? Hi Pot, I'm Kettle?"

Harry snorted. "Not quite, but that's not an uncommon variant," he admitted. "And touché. Anyway, how did things go for you guys?"

"Asuna got PoH," Kirito said. "Argo confirmed that he was dead when she sent a message to one of her contacts in the Town of Beginnings."

Harry winced and looked at Asuna. Her nod was all he needed to confirm it and he stood up. "I think we could all use a stiff drink or two right now," he said as he walked off towards the bar.

"So, anything else?" Kirito asked.

"Harry used Mystic Blade there," Silica said. "He explained it when people asked him about it when we got to Galdon and waited to see if you needed backup."
"How'd he play it off?" Kirito asked.

"Said that he ran into a unique event, and the skill was a part of the event." she replied. "He did say that he suspected that Kayaba was personally involved in that, but that he had no real proof. And before you ask, the ones he told said that it made sense, as no one knows what the criteria for a Unique Skill actually is."

"Makes sense," Asuna said, her voice still quiet, but lacking the previous undertone that Kirito now recognized as regret.

Harry came back and placed several glasses on the table. "Well, I'm back," he said. "Klein recommended this drink for those days when we needed one, so you know what that means. Ah fuck it, if there's a day where we have a reason to get shitfaced, this day's the one." He then put a liberal amount of the probably highly alcoholic drink into each glass. The fact that he acknowledged that the drink was probably one of the ones that would get them drunk in short order was left unsaid as he handed a glass to each of them.

After all, he said that they all could use a stiff drink, and none of them were willing to argue the matter.

"Well, to still being alive," he said, raising his glass.

They raised their glasses and knocked back the contents. It tasted horrible, and Kirito would swear that he felt it catch fire as it went down his throat, but he felt the effects of it almost immediately. Coughing, he could see the rest doing the same.

"Shit, that burns worse than the whiskey that the twins smuggled into the dorms," Harry choked out.

"Damn, forgot how rough Lost Fruit Rum was," Rain coughed.

"That was Lost Fruit Rum?" Silica asked when she got her coughing under control.

"And it's the most popular drink on the floor, too." Asuna mused.

Kirito shrugged and poured himself another glass, making sure to pour less into it before knocking it back. "Let's just finish the bottle and get it over with," he said. "Klein recommended it for those days when we really need a stiff drink, so let's just finish the bottle and wash it down with something else. Something that won't get us drunk, mind you."

"I'll drink to that," Harry said. "Let's not think about today for now, and worry about it tomorrow."

"Yes," Kirito agreed. "Let's celebrate that we're still alive."

"And that Laughing Coffin is broken," Rain added.

"That, and we need to cheer Asuna and Lux up," Silica chirped. "Let's save the serious stuff for later."

Lux and Asuna looked at their four guildmates and smiled.
Outside - The Fourth Act

Chapter Summary

And we cap off another arc with the Outside World's observations.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

January 2, 2024 - Hogwarts

Ginny rose from her bed feeling the lightest she had in over a year. Ever since her second year ended, and her coming to terms with what happened, her emotions had always felt like a weight on her shoulders that would never go away. Until yesterday, when Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, had kicked off the new year in a way that she doubted many would be able to beat, despite being in Japan and trapped in that strange illusory world.

After all, it wasn’t every New Year’s Day that someone who was a hero to the British magical community ended the threat of the worst dark wizard they’ve seen in over a century. Gellert Grindelwald was bad news back in the day, but his actions had been more on the continent, with only a mild presence felt in the British Isles. He had less of an impact for them, simply put.

She had been surprised when the headmaster asked her to stay behind, overriding Professor McGonagall’s protests on the matter. If they were going to have the third year and below students to leave, why would he make an exception for Ginevra Weasley? He simply replied that it was something she had to see, something which would allow her to have closure on the events of her first year. Neither she, nor Professor McGonagall needed to ask for clarification in it, and it silenced the professor’s protests.

And so she was there when Hermione began her little speech, the one which she apparently used every time she began showing a recording. She didn’t know why, nor did she really care all that much, considering that she only turned up occasionally just to see how Harry was doing.

When Hermione started the recording, she watched as Harry and his companions, she recognized Silica, and a teen who would have been a sixth or seventh year were she to attend the school, walk through what was clearly a ruined building of some kind. She watched as the three of them fought off everything they encountered until they reached a courtyard, where they paused to discuss something. They crossed it and entered what was obviously a chapel of some kind, and then things seemed to go wrong.

She heard Harry’s scream, she saw him clutch his scar, and she watched something leave it and flow through his fingers to the other end.

Her horrified gasp as it began to form into something, a person of some sort, was heard by her brother, but she stared in horror at it as it took form. The shrieks of fear and cursing from the adults didn’t register on her as she stared transfixed at what was being played. The body and face she didn’t recognize, but the eyes… she knew those eyes. Tom’s eyes, Voldemort’s eyes.

Somehow, and she didn’t want to know more than that, he managed to reach Harry.
She almost turned away, but forced herself to watch what happened next.

She watched as they were magically thrown out of the chapel. She watched as Harry sent one of his companions, Rain apparently, away. She watched as Voldemort changed in appearance, and Silica was forced back and away.

And she watched him fight. She watched him fight Voldemort into a stalemate, until something changed, and Voldemort called out a challenge. A challenge, Harry was more than willing to meet.

And she saw him kill Voldemort, his eyes cold as he told the Dark Wizard to burn. And she saw him watch the thing that was once a man burn until not even ash remained.

She would admit that she wanted to throttle that muggle girl, Silica if she recalled, when she punched him and basically tackled him right afterward. She didn’t know why the girl hit him, but the tackle? Oh she understood that, and she would admit that a part of her positively burned with jealousy as he simply wrapped his arms around her.

She could see what it meant, and from the sounds of many of the girls, they could as well. Too bad for all of them, it seemed. His heart was taken, even if he didn’t know it yet. While not an ideal outcome in her mind, that outcome involved her, she was happy for him anyway. He needed someone in his life, and unless he completely buggered it up, he found that someone.

Still, she almost shouted in joy when he killed Tom. He was gone. The bastard that had haunted her nightmares for over a year was finally dead.

She wouldn’t tell anyone, but she was the one who came up with the ditty that spread around Hogwarts during the inevitable party that followed when that foreign woman and the headmaster confirmed that what they saw was true. That Voldemort was dead.

##

Severus looked over the assembled students of his house. He had gathered them to discuss the events of the previous day, and he made sure to have those who were involved with Miss Granger’s little group present for this.

“I’m sure you are all aware of why I gathered all of you,” he began. “Yesterday, Potter managed to kill the Dark Lord, and it is true, he is dead.” He raised the sleeve of his robe to show the clear skin where the Dark Mark once resided. “If any of you doubt it, then the proof is right here for you to see. I never made it a secret of my past associations, and the physical representation of it is no more.”

“But, how did he?” Draco Malfoy asked. “The Dark Lord… the kind of power he was said to have had shouldn’t have been beaten so easily.”

“You would be surprised, Draco.” Severus said smoothly. “More than one witch or wizard has made the fatal mistake of assuming that just because they are powerful, that it would take a greater power to defeat them. Even muggles can kill us, far more easily now than they could centuries ago.”

Draco opened his mouth as if to deny it, but snapped it shut after a moment. Severus wondered what the reasoning behind that was, but put it to the side. He saw Daphne Greengrass look as if she wanted to say something, and nodded in her direction.

“Professor,” she began. “Do we know just how he managed to get himself into Sword Art Online? And if we do, can we use that to help get those trapped in there out?”

“Good questions, Miss Greengrass,” he said. “But as far as I know, we don’t know. At the same
time, even if we did, it is doubtful. Is that satisfactory?”

She nodded.

“Now, with this in mind, many of you might be wondering, how did he do it?” The nods from many did not reassure him, though he noticed that Miss. Greengrass and a few others seemed to already know the answer, or at least think they did. He would have thought that the rest had paid more attention to the details, but it seems as if he had been remiss in teaching them what it meant to be a Slytherin.

For them, information, no matter how insignificant, was power. Without information, ambition was without direction. Without information, cunning was useless. Without information, plans were guaranteed to fail.

“You have something to say, Mr. Zabini?” He asked.

The Italian boy nodded. “Yes, professor.” He said. “Granger and the rest of us in the project watched it over a second time, with Lady Shiba consenting to offer her own insights as well. It is clear that an outside power was in play. The creator of SAO, Akihiko Kayaba, had apparently noticed the… sudden entrance by the Dark Lord, and had used it. Potter was aware of it, based on his comments, and his words to the Dark Lord. He called Kayaba SAO’s Demiurge, whatever that means.”

“It has a number of meanings, Mr. Zabini,” Severus said with a nod. “But in the context, he was probably saying that while the man’s powers were godlike in Sword Art Online, he wasn’t a god. He was basically calling the man a false god.”

“Thank you, professor.” Blaise replied. “Well, after that, the two of them fought, and while Potter was using magic as far as we could tell, he didn’t rely on it. In fact, his means of winning the fight was rather pragmatic. Mundane and improvised, but pragmatic. Though, he ended it quite impressively, if brutally.”

“Indeed, Mr. Zabini,” Severus replied drily. “Stabbing him in the heart and then burning him alive would be considered rather impressive and brutal. Anything else of note?”

“Only that it is clear now that Silica is probably aware of magic, and has been for some time.”

“She is,” Daphne said. “Her family, despite being non-magical, is an exception to the rule regarding muggles knowing about magic. Some members are affected by what is known as a Jusenkyo curse. They’re bound by the Statute, but are allowed to know about it as they are, technically, a part of our world.”

Severus considered that, and nodded. It really didn’t matter, and wasn’t of much concern to him. A curiosity at most, but not a concern.

He did hear some mentions about the apparent relationship between Potter and the girl, but dismissed them. Another thing that wasn’t any concern of his.

It might be a concern for the students, though. He had heard some students gossiping about the likelihood of Potter getting romantically involved it the girl. If he did become romantically involved with her, it meant that any possibility of a magical family forming a connection with the Potter Family line through marriage would have to be put off for a generation.

A minor political concern when it came to family politics, at most.

That any children from a union between Potter and that girl would be magical, and moderately
powerful, was obvious to him. Magic bred true more often than not, and the Potters were known for producing moderately powerful wizards and witches, regardless of blood status.

He had never really bought into that more extreme blood status aspects of pureblood ideology, seeing them as self-defeating. Keeping magical marriages and births in the magical population as much as practicable was one thing, but restricting it only to established lines, and further restricting it on the basis of ideological grounds, thus limiting it to fewer bloodlines, was simply asking for inbreeding depression to take effect.

The increase in squib births and insanity in family lines who took it far more closely than was safe served as an effective demonstration of the foolishness of that mindset. And that was if they didn't breed themselves out of existence. With the Dark Lord truly dead and gone, his more radical ideology would die as well.

It wouldn’t end the pureblood beliefs, and he wouldn’t even try to espouse an end to them. However, he could use this to moderate them and bring them back to a more pragmatic viewpoint. More like how it was before the Dark Lord’s rise to power. He would just need to plant the seeds for it.

“Many of you would wonder how a halfblood like Potter would still manage to triumph, despite the observations of Mr. Zabini,” he started. “However, you need to keep in mind that the Dark Lord was, despite what he espoused and claimed, a halfblood. Draco, keep silent until I am done, thank you.

“Do not mistake purity of blood as the end all, be all. It has its advantages, true, but being as restrictive of it as the Dark Lord espoused would have resulted in many bloodlines being irreparably weakened within a few generations…”

As he spoke, he saw that several were finding it hard to believe, but he also noticed several nodding along, as if they knew what he was talking about. All of his students from the more neutrally aligned families had apparently learned this already, but more than a few from the more traditionally aligned families apparently knew as well.

Good, it meant that he would probably have less trouble than he expected.

January 5, 2024 - Chiyoda, Prime Minister’s Office

Norihito Yakufuni looked out the windows of the Kantei as he considered the information he had just been given by the Minister of Justice, along with the recommendations on how to handle the situation. He had been Prime Minister when the SAO Incident started, and it had only been through a combination of luck, decisiveness on his part, and his popularity with the public that allowed him to stay in office. Well, that and no one wanted to be in his position if the entire incident ended badly.

This newest information about a sudden rash of killings done by players inside the game was unpleasant, to say the least. The Diet hadn’t yet made an issue of it, but it brought back what had happened in June, when a similar series of incidents had occurred. And by many of the same perpetrators no less.

The SAO taskforce and the Ministry of Justice both recommended a wait and see approach then, as the players who had acted in their own defense had managed to put a stop to it then, at least temporarily. If nothing else like it happened, then good, it could all be swept away and forgotten, though the perpetrators would likely find themselves being arrested shortly after awakening to await trial for their actions. If it had continued, then the recommendation was to transfer the perpetrators to a secure facility immediately.
For those who acted in clear self-defense or defense of others, it was recommended that they be watched and monitored, to ensure that what happened wasn’t a prelude to them developing antisocial and sociopathic behaviors. If they survived to get out of SAO, they would be required to undergo a thorough psychological evaluation, for the same reasons. Otherwise, they would be left alone. As it stood, many were expected to develop psychological issues related to the events.

Not an ideal solution, given the circumstances, but it was a compromise which they could live with.

That had been then, and the current recommendations were more of the same. No one wanted to be the ones to make a decision which could set a bad legal precedent, especially when all the involved parties were perceived as victims of circumstance. How many of them were people who simply broke under the effects of what happened? How should they be treated outside of facing the legal consequences of their actions? Could they even be considered sane anymore?

Difficult questions, and ones that were not prone to easy answers.

The public would be less than happy about it, but any uproar it would cause would eventually die down. From what members of the taskforce had mentioned, it was likely that the players themselves would take care of the matter. Violently, if need be.

That would get some members of the Diet and the Judiciary in an uproar, but unless they were willing to consign people to death without a trial, then everyone’s hands were legally tied. Not that he didn’t expect some among the private citizens to take matters into their own hands.

Vengeance had a long history in Japan, after all. And with it now known that Kayaba was dead, they couldn’t direct it on him.

January 15, 2024 - Suginami, Nakano General Hospital

*I’ll never get used to watching things like this,* Sirius thought as he watched the fight against the fiftieth floor boss end. He watched as the fight went on, his heart leaping into his throat as his godson’s health plummeted down to dangerous levels from that one attack, only to watch as Harry took only enough time to get his health up to a “safe” level and come up with a plan.

He snorted at the commentary coming from those in the fight, knowing that they were covering their own nervousness at their situation with humor, grim as it could be at times.

“I take it they won?” Came from Kotoha. The Hanaori retainer to the Shiba clan had become a regular presence in the hospital, much to the resignation of the Wainwrights. On the other hand, they didn’t complain, much, about the Shibas taking a more active role in things.

“They can act in ways we can’t for a number of reasons,” Selene said when he quietly asked her about it. “At the same time, they are allies of the Potter family, which means that they can also extend certain protections to him due to cultural matters. They’ve already extended their hospitality to him, making him a guest, meaning that they’re now committed to ensuring his wellbeing. We would have done the same if this was the States.”

Sirius knew what she was referring to. Rules of hospitality for many cultures were similar, even when the cultures were wildly different. If one extends hospitality, then they were bound by its rules to ensure that their guests were well taken care of. Of course, the guest had to first accept the hospitality, something that Harry was currently incapable of, but the meaning behind the gesture was understood.

Sirius turned his attention to Kotoha and nodded. “I’ll never get used to seeing that, and his parents
would be a mix of worried and proud, but yeah, they won.” He looked at Harry’s form on the hospital bed. “I wonder though, how much of what he can do there will remain when he gets out.”

Kotoha gave a hum as she thought it over. “Maybe the physical skills,” she said. “It’s possible that the muscle memory would carry over. His body wouldn’t be in shape for it, but… it wouldn’t surprise me if he knew his way around a sword.”

Sirius considered that and nodded. It made sense, in a way. “And what about his magic?” He asked.

Kotoha frowned. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “It might, or it might not carry over what I think you’re implying, but I don’t know.”

Sirius shrugged. “I’ll ask Albus when time I return to England next week,” he said. “He might have an idea or two on it. He wanted to talk to me about something.”

“Oh?”

“Apparently his cousin talked to the press,” Sirius said. “Seems as if Harry’s hopes for the kid might come true. The boy looks like he’s developed a conscience.”

January 16, 2024-- Smeltings

"Because, Professor Dumbledore, my parents utterly failed to see how trying to have it both ways exposed their... what's the word... hypocrisy?"

Albus lowered the copy of the London Times with the headline declaring, "COUSIN OF BRITISH SAO VICTIM: PARENTS TREATED HIM 'CRIMINALLY'" and smirked at Harry Potter's cousin. "Trying to reap the sympathies of the situation while also continuing to lambaste Harry? Oh, and the word you are looking for is hypocrisy."

"Lambaste, one of my classmates used that one. I like it," Dudley said with a smile. Then he grew serious. "I came to Smeltings with my father's reputation dogging me, Professor. That meant I had several members of staff working very hard from the day I got here to tell me how wrong I was being led, and how they didn't want another Vernon in these halls. And I've talked enough with the other boys here to know that there's no bloody way having 'the closet under the stairs' as a room is normal, sir. Pardon my language."

"I've yet to fully remove the salt from my own language, young man, I can hardly insist on perfection from you," Albus replied with a chuckle.

This was a boy rapidly becoming a young man, Albus could see. The stresses wearing down his rough edges and making cracks of character in him were different than Harry's, of course. But they were there.

"Sir," Dudley asked leaning forward over the meeting table between them, "How much of the information the Home Office gave the press about Harry's parents is true?"

Albus sighed. "The truth, minus magic. Much like the way Harry's been alluding to his life in Sword Art Online when he must."

Dudley closed his eyes. "Then pardon my language, Professor, but... that's some heavy shit. The cousin my dad encouraged me to 'hunt' and bully. Orphaned by a terrorist."

"You've helped him," Dumbledore noted. He gestured to the paper. “Events a couple of weeks ago have resulted in one of the key reasons he was left in your parent’s care being taken care of. And the
protection I placed on him and your family when I delivered him to you are only shored up by those ties of blood being acknowledged.”

"Can those... protections move with me? If the Crown gets involved--"

"They are strongest when the family is together," Albus explained. "But you each carry a measure of it, strengthened by honest care between family. Harry's godfather... he was falsely imprisoned as a terrorist, and is recovering. He's eager to take a role in Harry's life. If Sirius were to assume custody, and you were fostered out after an investigation, you'd each take a measure of that protection, based on your bond of blood through Harry's mother. If, say, your parents only kept in touch with you, but you kept in touch with them or made efforts to, and also talked with Harry regularly, that would give Harry the strongest protections, and your parents the weakest."

Dudley slowly nodded. "Sir? What were Harry's mum and dad really like? Because my parents always told Harry they were a pair of drunks on the dole... and I'd like to actually know about my aunt and uncle."

Albus smiled again. "James Potter and Lily Evans were, quite simply, two extraordinary people..."

**London, Ministry of Magic**

There were times when she wondered why she took up this job.

Amelia Bones looked at the newspaper in front of her and sighed. The last two weeks had been annoying enough. First, Harry Potter manages to kill Voldemort, who wasn't as dead as many believed. Second, the resulting parties had her department working overtime with obliviations, reigning in the over enthusiastic and often drunk partiers that got out of hand, and the mess of straightening it out with the muggle authorities.

Her Majesty and the Prime Minister had *not* been amused. Understanding, once she explained it, but not amused. Neither was she, when she realized that Cornelius had tried to throw her into the dragon's maw for that.

And now, she had *this* on her desk. If it wasn't for the fact that she paid attention to muggle news, she would have likely been surprised by it. She knew that the Wizengamot was liable to call a meeting about it, Cornelius would probably try to make a decision in reckless haste to be seen doing something, and it would leave another mess for her to clean up.

She heard a knock at the door.

"Oh bloody- come in," she said.

"Bad time, Amelia?"

Amelia Bones blinked, then she just had to smile at the white-haired man who walked in.

"Sergeant Major William Gravel," she said softly.

"Leave it out, Milly," Gravel grumbled, and the man was still solid muscle well into his... early fifties? No, late forties. He had been a third year to her first. Still one of the best Slytherins in centuries. "Your people checked my wand but missed the ring and all my guns and such."

Amelia scowled. "Which you grow in that Body Orchard of yours. So they damn well would have shown up on the standard scrying. I'll have words. You here as head of the Major Seven, SAS, Her Majesty's Magical Guardian in Ordinary...?"
"I'm here because the little scrot I caught selling OWL and NEWT tests and essays that is Minister of Magic. I'm hearing about his shite from the PMO, several of Her Majesty’s aides, and the boys and girls in the combat mage pool. Milly, Albus contacted me about this."

"And when Second Chance Albus is pissed off enough to call in Bloody Bill," Amelia shook her head. "I honestly thought getting rid of Umbitch would moderate him, but if anything he's more self-absorbed and..."

"He's too concerned with what he's seen to be doing, and not enough with what needs to be done. Like when they tried the Brexit shite a few years ago. If they had done their homework, and done it right, it could have been managed properly," William said. "Now, same party in power, but they're bloody working to repair the hit we took and make the EU work sanely. Politics is about using power, not having it. Hard and soft power in the right places."

Amelia smirked at him. "Are you here to offer some hard power?"

Bill's look back was carved of goblin marble. "How many times were the Potters on the frontlines with us against Tommy, Milly?" He asked. "And he wants to fuck with their son? A boy that the Queen asks about since he’s stuck in SAO? She’s always been interested in technology, so she has been paying attention to what’s been going on. Finding out the British boy trapped in SAO is one of her magical subjects just means she wants my ear all the more often. Albus’ too." He leaned forward. "So... do we want Corny dead politically, or physically as well? Because Her Majesty's a bit put out with him, and Prince William’s started to notice. And when he starts taking interest... the fire should already be out."

Amelia shared a nasty grin with the SAS Combat Mage. "I'm fond of a good character assassination, myself."

"Hufflepuffs, can't take your bloody eyes off them."

"And you shouldn't show your back to Slytherins." Amelia replied drily.

"Is that why you always sat across from me at Christmas?" Bill asked.

"No, I had a bit of a crush on you," Amelia admitted. "Then I got to know you. After that, it was just a bad habit I couldn’t break. Like smoking, really. Which you got me hooked on, now that I think of it. You’re really terrible, Bill."

Bill sighed. "No respect for your upper classmen."

"Like I said, I know you." Amelia replied with a smirk.

Bill chuckled. "Fair cop."

Amelia’s expression then became serious again. "Be honest with me Bill, how is Her Majesty?" She asked.

"She’s starting to decline," he said. "She’s still sharp as a tack, but she’s been alive for ninety-seven years, and reigned for over seventy of them. There are many who think she should step down, and live out her remaining years without the responsibilities, but you know how stubborn she can be. It isn’t helped that Prince Charles died last year from a heart attack. That took a toll on her, and may have contributed to her decline.” He sighed. “No parent should outlive their children, Milly.”

Amelia nodded. “It will pain Albus greatly if she passes on before he does” she said sadly. “She’s one of his dearest friends, and he has outlived so many as it is.”
“Albus once told me that being as powerful as he is a 'cursed blessing'. At first I thought he was just all mouth and trousers, trying to keep a Slytherin straight. But he was right. Think about how long our old bastard of a headmaster has lived,” Bill said somberly. “He’ll be a hundred and forty-four this year, and has seen the full reigns of all bloody three monarchs before Her Majesty. And each one, a friend at best and a respected acquaintance at least. Albie's an old man, who has a habit of outliving those he cares for.”

"He outlived his entire family and the Potters," Amelia noted. Bill smirked back.

"Except Harry.” He pointed out. “I think Harry setting Tom on fire and killing the bloody pillock gave Albus some fucking hope. The son of his favorite Griffons. He always had a few in each house. At least one or two of his favorite Badgers-- don't you wave it off, he doted on you like a niece as much as he could. You were all successful. For the Ravens, he sponsored Fillius into the dueling circuit, and got Septima to go to Uni to revolutionize Arithmancy based off of what she learned from muggle maths. And Sevvy, Lu, and me. His three favorite snakes."

“I find it odd that you consider Lucius in that group,” Amelia said.

Bill shrugged. "You think Albus couldn't have stopped the bribes, Milly?” He asked drily. “Lucius might have used a few bribes, but he fucking well burned those bridges right after. He knows better to rely on them, and hasn’t resorted to bribery since. He only waded in shite because he had to. All because that tit, Tommy, managed to get him to bow to him and secure his loyalty. Had he known then what he learned later, he wouldn’t have. He'd have probably played the neutral card and tried to sit it all out, but he wouldn’t have joined up with that bastard. Once Tom was defeated he did what he had to do to stay out of that shithole, Azkaban. Or, at least keep his family’s name clean, but he’s a Malfoy. They were pragmatists before it was fashionable."

##

Lucius knew the moment that William “Bloody Bill” Gravel entered the Ministry, that Cornelius’ career was over. And that was if Amelia didn’t decide to wash her hands of things and allow the SAS Sergeant Major to take matters into his own hands.

It is well and good that I just informed Cornelius that I would be unable to assist or advise him in things from now on, he thought to himself. While it wouldn’t keep all of the inevitable backlash off of him, it would be enough. After all, Cornelius’ actions were a result of him not following the advice he provided on several occasions.

Lucius sat in the Malfoy seat office and contemplated a bottle of brandy his father had been saving before he died. Magically preserved at its peak... it might just be due for an opening in a few days. Bloody Bill was nothing if not ruthless and efficient.

##

Augusta Longbottom received the word of William Gravel’s arrival with her usual aplomb. She had seen it coming for months, and wondered why it took this long for Her Majesty to finally lose patience with the idiot they had been saddled with as Minister. Perhaps it was simply due to waiting to see if Cornelius could dig himself out of the political hole he dug himself into, or perhaps it was her waiting to see if he would do them all a favor and hang himself with the metaphorical rope he had been so eagerly grabbing like some precious commodity.

Ah well, whatever the reason, the wizard turned elite soldier turned Queen’s guard dog (so much like his father in that!), was at the Ministry. She knew he had headed to the DMLE, so it was likely that
he would spend time talking with Amelia for a bit, perhaps to come up with a plan of action--

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in," Augusta said with an odd tingle of pleasure.

A head topped with white hair slipped into the door. "Auntie Gusta! Fancy getting your one-eyed
madman in here so you two can help us take care of a lame duck minister?"

Augusta frowned at him. "Language, William."

He sighed. "The fucking lame duck minister."

"That's better. I'll see if Alastor can be made available, but he is so busy at Hogwarts."

"Oh, brilliant. Albie can bring him," Bill said.

That got Augusta to cock her head. "Albus has lost patience with him? How the fucking hell is the
daft bloody fool still alive?" She asked. “I thought it was only Her Majesty, and maybe the Prime
Minister, that had finally decided we needed a new Minister of Magic.”

"I think Milly convinced him to go a more Hufflepuff route," Bill admitted.

Augusta thought a moment. "Acceptable." She stood. “Absolute liquidation of the tosser's political
and character capital, then. Oh, it’s been too long since the last time.” She barked a laugh. “Too long
indeed. I wonder how much blood and viscera they’ll have to clean up off the floor of the
Wizengamot this time.”

"Oh, we're not going to let him and his do anything as mundane as commit suicide, Gusta," Bill said,
moving to help her. “He’d bugger it up somehow and take ‘till the next election to die then.”

"Bill."

The two paused as he looked at her.

"Your father would be proud of you," she said.

Bill sighed. "I know. He said so when I killed him."

Augusta just patted his shoulder. "Lead on, Bloody Bill. Augusta the Vulture senses political death
in the air."

January 21, 2024 - Unplottable Location, Malfoy Manor

Lucius poured himself a generous helping of brandy as he sat down in his personal office. He had
just gotten back from a Wizengamot meeting. Cornelius was done for, and no longer Minister of
Magic. It had been obvious that his position was on shaky ground even before Halloween, when the
bloody fool basically tried to do a summary execution on Barty Crouch Jr just to be seen doing
something.

His deciding on that action simply meant that Amelia Bones, who damn well knew where the the
skeletons of the Ministry’s bodies were kept hidden, had started preparing for this. To add to it,
Sergeant Major William “Bloody Bill” Gravel was getting involved, which meant that Her Majesty
had finally had enough. And the thought of the Prince stepping in... few actually knew what the
Queen's heir and favorite grandson got up to during his tours. Lucius did. His awards and honors
weren’t entirely for show.
It had become increasingly obvious that Cornelius was buckling under the pressure of his job for some time, and that a compromise pick such as him might have been ill advised. Then again, no one suitable for the job could be agreed on, or even wanted the job for that matter. They needed to pick someone who wasn’t affiliated with any of the factions.

Perhaps it had been in the main, that tendency for something completely out of the ordinary to happen due to the actions of others that had put Fudge’s reign to the hatchet. Had he handled them wisely and well, or at least listened more often to the recommendations both he and Albus had provided, then perhaps things wouldn’t have started going downhill for him. And Augusta “Fuck with me and I’ll bugger you with your own wand” Longbottom, and the Mad Slytherin she’d most certainly not married wouldn't have joined in. Augusta alone was bad enough, she was called The Vulture for a reason. Her taking an interest in someone meant that their career was about to die spectacularly and she wanted to watch the show.

Lucius shuddered. Seeing Moody look at him and simply shake his head had been both reassuring and... well, he was still shivering at the thought of joining Fudge in his fate.

Admittedly, Lucius knew he was not without blame there. He had easily insinuated himself into the Minister’s circle shortly after the school year began the same year of Cornelius’ election. Bagnold hadn’t trusted any who bore the Dark Mark, claims of being under the Imperius curse, uses of influence, connections, and bribes, or not. She had kept them at arm’s length, but Cornelius was much more amenable, and he took advantage of that fact.

So he was able to gain more influence over the Minister, being careful to not bribe, but simply... suggest things. A few suggestions on investments to make, some nice gifts, and some policy recommendations. Nothing more than those, and all of them fully in line with what his father taught him about playing the long game and being a power behind the throne.

He remembered his father’s warnings about bribes.

“Relying on bribes will get you what you want in the short term, but it’s a losing game in the long run. Bribe them once, and you’ll have to bribe them constantly, and in greater amounts, to keep them bought,” was what he was told.

He used bribery in the aftermath of the war, because his purposes for them were short term. He needed to stay out of prison, and it had cost him deeply. Not only in money, which was almost ruinous, but it cost him a great deal of family influence as well. Influence, which was the real source of power for the Malfoy family, took longer to rebuild than money. Even after thirteen years, the influence he could wield was but a pale shadow of what his family had before he made the mistake of following the Dark Lord, may he burn in whatever hell he went to.

It would cost him, his having been within the Minister’s circle would be a mark against him, especially since he only got out just in time to avoid the fallout. He would swallow his pride, accept that he would lose money and influence, and work to recoup the losses. He’d get the shit smeared on him, and have to wipe it off.

There will always be other opportunities, he thought as he picked up a report from the same contact who informed him of the Nerve Gear and Sword Art Online. A new technology, basically an improvement over the Nerve Gear, but without the dangers, was soon to be released internationally.

Perhaps he should look into a way to capitalize on it. The viewings of Mr. Potter’s activities has already generated some interest in integrating some muggle technologies. They just had to determine how to either modify them to work on magic, and thus bypassing some of the issues with integrating in muggle technology, or find another way.
Archimedes had highlighted the primary issue more than two thousand years ago. Two things cannot occupy the same space at one time, and that also included energy. In a high magic environment, and most wizarding homes that had been occupied for more than a few generations certainly qualified, to say nothing about Hogwarts, the magical energy tried to take the place of electricity.

He heard that there was a way around it, but it still didn’t address the issue of providing the electricity. Not to mention everything else. Perhaps one of his contacts might know of a solution, even a muggle one.

He could see the possibility of change coming, and he wanted to be in position to benefit from it if it happened. He could easily moderate his stance enough without compromising his core ideals. But then, the core ideals of a Malfoy were to act in a manner which benefitted the family in the long run. If that required subtly shifting politically, then that was what was required.

He would never be on the more liberal side of the political spectrum, but he didn’t need to be. Publically shifting to a more neutral stance on some things would probably benefit the Malfoy family more in the long run. He would still espouse a more traditional outlook, but a public amenability to other outlooks, provided that a convincing enough argument could be made in favor of them, would not be amiss.

February 7, 2024 - Chiyoda, SAO Taskforce Office

Seijiro Kikuoka listened to the representative sent by the Ministry of Justice as he brought up the specifics of the plan the Diet came up with regarding Laughing Coffin and restrained an urge to sigh. The politicians who made the decision hadn’t thought of the difficulty of finding one specific person out of thousands to transfer to a location under Law Enforcement Custody.

To his credit, the functionary briefing him on the plan seemed to be aware of the issue.

“Mr. Kikuoka,” the man continued. “I am aware that this will require us knowing the identities of the Laughing Coffin members, which is why we are asking for the cooperation of your taskforce. If you can provide a list of the known members, we can be about this unpleasant business.”

Kikuoka nodded. “Before we do, I wish to ask a few questions, if it would be no bother.” He said.

The functionary nodded. “And what would those be?” He asked.

“First, if they are to face justice for their crimes, they will have to be alive to do so,” he said. “How will you ensure that while they are being moved, you will be able to do so? The window for a disconnection is significantly shorter than it was at the start, and dozens have died due to service interruptions because of that until all the areas around the hospitals had their infrastructure upgraded.”

“Second, what about those who have acted in self-defense or defense of others? There are those who have killed due to being in a situation where if they didn’t, themselves or their comrades would have been killed.

“Finally, this won’t halt Laughing Coffin’s activities in SAO, and I have no doubts that the players will eventually take matters into their own hands with regard to them. What is the legal opinion on that?”

The man nodded. “Valid concerns. With regards to your first question, we are looking into using wireless connections. We have secured the services of several telecom companies for this. It will take some time to acquire and test the proper equipment, but I have been informed that it is doable. As for your second question, it is the opinions of the Judiciary and the Ministry, with the approval of the
Diet, that in light of the exceptional circumstances, those who have used lethal force in self-defense, or defense of others will not be charged with a crime. They will, however, be required to undergo more thorough counseling and psychological evaluations than was decided for any and all survivors.”

Kikuoka nodded. “Reasonable,” he said. “And with regard to them taking matters into their own hands?”

The man grimaced. “We’re hoping that it won’t come to that, but it is recognized as probable.” He admitted. “Again, the circumstances are recognized as exceptional. While no formal decision has been made on that specific matter, it is likely that they will not be charged.”

Kikuoka nodded, unsurprised. Because of the situation, if the players did take matters into their own hands, then any killings could be considered under the answer of his second question, from a certain point of view. The legalists were probably unsatisfied about it, the law was the law, after all, but it was a recognition of just how complicated things really were. It was a complication that, thankfully, didn’t apply to the Laughing Coffin members. Since they were outright murderers who often enjoyed what they did, that simplified things, even if it didn’t solve them.

February 13, 2024 - Setagaya, RECT HQ

Noboyuki Sugou looked over the test data from the simulations and nodded. Everything was developing as he expected. With direct access to the SAO servers, as well as a complete copy of the beta test data, he and his team had managed to uncover a great deal about how it was designed, how its security worked, and were steadily reverse-engineering it all.

The data showed that the Nerve Gear systems took in a lot of data due to how they interacted with the brains of those trapped within. It then reinterpreted that data to electronic signals, programming code, and more.

With this, they now were able to quantify emotions and thoughts at a fundamental level. And it gave him an idea.

He had taken the job as a means of getting back at Kayaba. To beat the man’s system and ruin his greatest achievement. But now…

But now, he saw other possibilities. Why try and bring it down when he could subvert it to his own ends. If he was now able to quantify what was often technically and philosophically held to be unquantifiable, to show that thoughts could be translated into computer code, then what was to stop them manipulating that code? And if he could do that, then what was to stop him from breaking into the system itself and making it his own?

And if he could do that then, the possibilities were endless. He could have it all. Power, wealth, prestige. If he wanted it, he could get it.

##

Shouzou Yuuki looked at the report handed to him by the man he had carefully placed on Noboyuki’s team, and compared it to the latest report submitted through official channels. He prided himself in the ability to recruit talent, and the man certainly was talented. Not to Kayaba’s level, but talent was still talent.

However, Nabiki Tendo’s warnings about the man, his own observations in light of them, as well as having people he knew were loyal only to him on the team, was showing a different facet of the
man's character. It was showing that the man wasn’t what he presented to the public. He had dealt with men like that before, and so long as they delivered on their promises, he could work with them. But this was showing attempts at deceiving him as to what was really going on.

Just from the comparisons of the reports, he could transparently see the irregularities. Noboyuki’s report indicated a frustrating lack of progress, with no additional details. The report submitted by the man he had, well, spying on Noboyuki, showed a wealth of data that painted a dangerous, and potentially frightening picture.

Observing the Nerve Gear’s interactions with SAO at the data level in order to reverse engineer it was one thing. He could see the logic in that, and how it can be used to understand the workings of SAO. But it was the wrong level of evaluation. One didn't look at the flows of electrons in a calculator to figure out how it worked, one looked at how it directed those currents through certain circuits to trigger its operations.

And when Noboyuki's work did ascend from the physical to the design level... it wasn't looking in the right place. He was unduly fascinated with the Nerve Gear effects on the mind. Yes, that was a factor, but he was just... too focused on how the Nerve Gear could change minds.

Perhaps most disturbing was that Noboyuki's true persona came off rather more like a low-grade shonen anime villain than anything else, and that very cartoonishness made it all the more chilling. It spoke of a disconnect from reality even Akihiko Kayaba seemed to avoid while he was still alive.

Looking at the whole picture, Noboyuki was fixing either to replace Kayaba, or to set up his own world to rule.

One SAO incident was enough.

Now, there was just the matter of how to deal with him. Noboyuki was, unfortunately, too necessary right now, or he would be fired. Fired, and a few things handed to the SAO Taskforce, as the man looked like he could present a clear threat to the wellbeing of those trapped there.

Which included Asuna.

Perhaps I should release some of this information to them, he thought. They have not forced themselves into our affairs, and the head of the task force, Kikuoka… he looks like the type who knows how to be discrete.

February 20, 2024 - Kawagoe, Kirigaya Residence

Suguha swung her shinai as she went through her routines again. She might be a part of her school’s kendo club, and get plenty of training there, but the advantage of having a dojo as a part of the house meant that she had no reason to not make use of it. Especially since the cold weather outside made it far more comfortable to train inside it.

Finishing the first set, she paused and changed her stance. Her grandfather had taught both her and Kazuto a number of stances, and had encouraged both to practice regularly with them. Many might not be completely appropriate for official tournaments, at least not ones at her level, but Kendo was still a fighting art.

And if she was honest, the practice had helped when she had been one of those who had been selected to beta test Alfheim Online, or ALO, as it was already being called. It was an odd coincidence. The fact that a number of those on the kendo team also had the opportunity, probably meant that it was just that, a coincidence.
It wouldn’t be as if she was picked because Kazuto was in SAO. That would be crazy.

It was curiosity about what her brother saw in virtual gaming that kept her from simply ignoring it. Well, what he initially saw in it. She doubted he saw it the same way he did back then now. Not after what happened in June. Not after he killed someone in SAO.

She still didn’t know what to feel about that, but he seemed to bounce back from it after a few weeks. It had been painful for her to watch his emotional turmoil during those weeks. To watch him tear himself up about what he did in order to save people. She was glad that the friends he made were there for him, though.

She did wonder what that one boy, Hadrian, meant by some of his comments. Why would his hands sometimes smell like burned pork and ash? Why would a sword feel heavier? She knew it had something to do with what happened, but she lacked context.

So, she tried out ALO, experimented with it, and the experience was like nothing else. A fairly realistic world to explore, to make practical use of her kendo training in, magic, and flight. Oh gods, to be able to experience flight under her own power, even if it was in a game.

That made it all worth it right there. The combat was fun, scary at first against the mobs, but fun. The magic was cool, if annoying with having to basically memorize words from a made up language and their meanings, but cool. However, the flying? She was sold on the game right there.

Three more weeks until it went live.

February 22, 2024 - Suginami, Nakano General Hospital

Ayane Saotome walked into the hospital room, nodding to her older sister sitting by Keiko’s bed. She looked her niece over and winced at the girl’s gaunt form, but wasn’t surprised. She had seen far too many SAO victims to be surprised by the effects of not getting calories and the inevitable muscle atrophy from being confined to a bed.

For Keiko, thanks to a number of factors, it wasn’t too bad. She also didn’t doubt that Uncle Tofu had done some discrete treatments to slow it down even further. Most SAO victims looked as if they had been going through a particularly bad famine, despite the nutrients and the special hospital beds used to slow the degradation of their bodies. Keiko simply looked as if she was merely half-starved.

Still, if they couldn’t find a way to get them out, they only had so much time left before even that wouldn’t be enough. Oh, they could be kept alive, but after a couple more years, most of the players would have degraded so much that they would never fully recover.

Still, she wished more could be done. Not only for her niece, but for all of them.

She had decided to become a doctor, rather than a martial artist because she wanted to help people. Her parents had been disappointed, but supportive of her decision. After all, while being a martial artist would help carry on the family’s traditions, her siblings could do so. Akira was set to be the heir, Ko was a master of the Amazon techniques which had been incorporated into the style, and Sumire would have been a master in her own right had she not had Keiko when she did.

She, however, lacked the temperament for it. She learned the family style, but she wasn’t a fighter. She was, as her father put it, gentle and nurturing. So, while they were disappointed, the fact that she had decided to become a doctor was respected.

“A doctor can save more lives and more often than a fighter can,” her father said when she made her decision. “It won’t be easy, but that just means that you’ll rise to the challenge. You’re a Saotome, so
I expect you to give it your all.”

And she did. Seven years of schooling, a year of residency, and she was the first Saotome to become a doctor. When she had finally gotten her medical license to practice medicine, she was proud of it.

So what if she also became a local legend at Yokohama General Hospital. A little slip of a girl, as small as her father when he was in his cursed form, capable of restraining particularly recalcitrant patients was nothing odd to her. She grew up in Nerima, with its martial artists and generally weird shit. Hell, Uncle Ryoga’s alien friend, Gordon, was practically boring when he stopped by.

“It still hurts to see her like this, Ayane,” her sister said.

“I know, Sumire,” she said. “She’s better off than most, but still…”

Sumire nodded. “And with everything going on in there now…”

“Yeah…”

Ayane looked at the computer monitor and watched as her niece walked down a pathway. “She’s not with her usual group,” she noted. “I’ve watched a bit from the online feeds, when I managed the time.”

“They’re trailing behind a bit to serve as backup,” Sumire responded. “With those killers on the loose, that group, which she helped train by the way, asked for it. Just in case mind you.”

Ayane nodded. It made sense to her, even if she wished that her niece wasn’t putting herself- wait, she was paying attention to something. Specific attention, too specific for her comfort. “Um, Sumire… that just in case might have just become…”

Sumire turned her attention to the screen and cursed when she saw what her sister had.

The two of them watched as knives were thrown out of the bushes. Ayane noted that Keiko had managed to block or deflect any of the ones that came her way with her dagger and smiled grimly. She heard Sumire growl as the attackers came from their hiding spot and looked at her.

“Know them?” She asked.

“I know who the one in charge of them is,” her sister ground out. “He attacked her back in June. His partner was killed by that boy, Harry Potter, Keiko seems to be sweet on, but he got away. If he was where I could get him…”

Ayane nodded, understanding. Her medical oaths would have prevented her from taking direct action herself, but… accidents happen. Too bad the police had already removed all those in the group he was most likely a member of.

“How bad is it?” She asked.

“She’s getting her group to be defensive,” her sister replied. “Once the backup arrives, those guys are going to run, especially with Mr. Potter among them. He’s the one that’s been with her since day one, and is fiercely protective of her.” She gave a cold smile. “He has a bit of a reputation with players like them.”

Ayane nodded. All Keiko had to do was hold out, and as she watched the fight, she saw that doing so wouldn’t be a problem for her niece. Her companions were solid fighters in their own right, she could tell. And they weren’t being reckless about it either.
She didn’t agree with standing and fighting like that, the numbers alone made it a losing battle. She would rather Keiko and her friends withdrew, but that wasn’t wise in light of what she saw. Even if it was, she doubted that her niece would have anyway. She knew that some things were just in the blood, and Keiko was a Saotome by blood, with all that implied.

March 2, 2024 - Shiba Compound, Unplottable.

Lady Kaoru Shiba considered her guest carefully. "This was... before the fall of your original home world, Mr. Shumway?"

When the Melmacian had sent word to his contacts in the American government, originally it was hoped his friend from Nerima could step in. But Mr. Hibiki was, true to his reputation, proving hard to find. Still, being used to dealing with non-humans native to Earth gave her a bit of an edge, and the fact that Gordon "Alf" Shumway was used to humanity already helped.

That the American representative appeared to be an old friend of Mr. Shumway (greeted with a hearty "Captain Rick!" and an story about Captain Rick Mulligan saving Gordon's life from a traitor) and spoke decent Japanese was simply a bonus. She wouldn’t have had a problem having the conversation in English, she was fluent in it after all, but it was always appreciated when someone spoke her own language.

Shumway nodded. His own Japanese actually had more of a working class British sounding accent--more the phrasing than anything. Perhaps it was his native tongue’s influence. "Most major civs reach the point you get your immersive VR, and we hit it about five years before we blew up. In our case, it was a system glitch that got people stuck in the first upgrade of Meltarian Freedom Fighters vs. The Mel's Angels. Standard fantasy, as it went back home."

"And one of the first things you tried was some kind of controlled EMP?" the Captain asked, tapping a note into his tablet.

"And there's problem number one," Shumway said, and what must of been the Melmacian version of a frown crossed his face. "Skip'd be better at your technical side, but basically, hitting the machine making your people see the world in there and not scrambling their brains with a strong enough EMP is gonna be difficult. We had contact with folks inside, so once we thought we had that licked, we got volunteers." The XT shook his head. "We went through three, the last one insisting we give it just one more shot, before we gave up. The head of the Science Bureau team looking after them said it was a matter of trying to do... eh, compare it to removing the tonsils of an awake patient who was compulsively dancing. Too many factors. Too much going on."

"Did they get out?" Kaoru asked, not able to keep the worry from her voice.

Shumway sighed. "It was pretty much accidently doing what your local jerk set up on purpose," he said. "Someone did something in game that made the glitch resolve. But I've put a line out there in the Big Black. If any species on the Clear List knows a way, we'll find it. It might not work for humans, but it would at least give us a place to start. If we find it, we'll clear it through Rick and the MIB."

"You know the CIA members of the Alien Task Force hate that name, Gordon," the Captain said, smirking.

"Then why does Agent Klein chuckle every time I say it?" Shumway shot back. Then he looked thoughtful. "Rhonda did find some data on how we kept people in there healthy and helped them recover. I know we're different in a lot of ways, but we're similar enough I survived here for four years without too many problems. You're doing good with what you already have, but it can't hurt."
"I have a crystal to SD transfer device, and we can get you a translation, Lady Kaoru," the Captain offered.

"That would be most agreeable," Kaoru said.

"Good. Now, when do we eat?" Shumway said.

"Gordon!" the Captain chided.

"What, you're saying not to feed the Melmacian Ambassador?" Shumway said, feigning shock. "Rickie, you know my metabolism..."

"Fourteen plus years of friendship and I still walk right into that..." the Captain grumbled.

Kaoru smiled, amused. "We do have a meal prepared, actually."

With a small smile, Shumway nodded. "As long as it's no problem."

**March 9, 2024 - Hogwarts, New Viewing Room**

Hermione listened to the various analyses provided by those with her. Since Harry’s actions on New Year’s, the number of participants had increased enough that they needed to move to a larger classroom for the extra space. And while the attendance had dropped a bit, it hadn’t dropped enough to warrant moving back to the old room.

Better, several Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students had offered to sit in and offer their own observations. While it was impossible to show them everything in the two months since, they were able to show them the highlights and get them up to speed. Those observations had been rather insightful.

The Beauxbatons students who decided to participate decided to focus on the player interactions and the psychology of them. While the sample size was low, since this was all from Harry’s perspective, they had still managed to collate a wealth of data. It surprised her just how much they were able to notice, and it pointed out her own group’s tunnel vision.

Then again, they all knew Harry personally, and were understandably focused on him. It was still embarrassing to find out, that for all their own observations, they missed details like that. Hermione prided herself on her attention to detail, and it irritated her to know that she could be just as vulnerable to missing details as anyone else.

It was the only explanation for why they all missed the fact that while things were recorded from Harry’s point of view, more or less, it captured everything he saw, even those things he didn’t notice or pay attention to. It was more like a camera slaved to his eyes than it was looking directly through them.

Well, not quite his eyes, as the point of view wasn’t directly through them, but slightly offset. It was as close a comparison that she could immediately think of. Or, perhaps like a memory viewed through a pensive. It was something to think about, and maybe she could ask the headmaster about it. Maybe they should take an opportunity to do a comparison between the two at some time.

And with the Beauxbatons students having unintentionally pointed out the weaknesses of what she and her own group had been doing, the Durmstrang students were making observations on what they saw on the skills used. They would compare them to actual combat styles they knew about.

They had made many disparaging comments about the early on fighting, noting that only a handful
of players knew their way around a weapon. It was very much hack, slash, and pray at first. And while most didn’t follow any particular school of thought, even at the higher levels, they did note that the surviving players had learned.

From experience, maybe, and with all the bad habits that entails, but they learned. They learned how to use their weapons effectively, and efficiently. They learned how to be disciplined fighters, and how to operate as groups, rather than as individuals trying for the same goal. They learned, and they survived.

She remembered the observations Victor Krum made about Harry.

“He does not fight the way others do,” he said in his heavily accented English. “He uses everything as a weapon. Sword, shield, body... to him, they’re all weapons. He is a weapon. That’s how he got so good. He knows a truth about fighting most do not learn. He knows that he has to be one with his weapons, a part of them, and them a part of him. That girl with him, Silica? She knows as well. Kirito? Same. Asuna? Almost there. Rain and Lux? They are learning. That is why they are so good.

“Will be hard for them when done,” he concluded. “Too much fighting, too much war. They may forget what peace is. May be a bare blade left to rust.”

Hermione had obviously made a face at that, because Victor had frowned sadly at her. "I am...." He paused, searching for the words. "This, what they live now, will not make them monsters. We must be ready to stand with them and help them..." He pause again. "You have read Descartes, maybe?"

"Cogito ergo sum," she replied easily. “I think, therefore I am.”

Victor nodded. "His flaw was in not taking his 'radical doubt' far enough. He had no grounds to claim there was one self-located in... the pituitary, I think he claimed. Many do not know, but he was a... squib, I think you say. Magical members of his family treated him well. He was a... materialist, that is it. But he also tried to cling to the idea of having one central spot that was the self. But that is not the self. The self is the sum of what we are. The soul is woven of all our thoughts and feelings. We must be ready to... strengthen the right threads, you see? So I can meet your Harry and play Quidditch against him like Ronald keeps insisting I must. We are who will help him be a warrior who can live in peace, yes?"

Hermione nodded. “We will,” she replied firmly. “Though Silica may well be a part of that deal as well.”

"Oh, most certainly. They are all but married!" Victor agreed with a laugh. “Will be married before long!"

Hermione laughed at that comment. Those two were so obvious, that the only ones who couldn’t see it were either blind, or completely delusional. It wouldn’t surprise her one bit for them to find a way to get engaged, end up married for some odd in-game reason, and somehow make it stick in the real world.

She heard Lady Shiba mention, only half-jokingly, that Silica’s family was already planning on the possibility of that happening.

**March 17, 2024 - Unplottable Location, Shiba Compound**

Ami’s only reaction on hearing that Casals was dead was a small, bitterly satisfied smile and holding her daughter tighter. The smile emerged again on seeing how the man that so fixated on her August died.
Inside, she vowed only to speak of it after the whole SAO thing was over. And only to the select few directly involved in putting down Casals and his lot.

She had no doubt that they would survive. That's what she told herself, late at night rocking Alice to sleep after feeding her. While there was always the possibility that they would die, each of them had a little something in them. An intangible little something that reassured her that each of those kids would get out of it alive and not break.

She snorted as a memory tickled her thoughts, a song Gus had shared once. It had been given to him by that shaman that worked for Canada's magical side. Life is a Highway. *There ain't no load that I can hold-- just tell them we're survivors.*

Simply put, they were survivors. They would carry their load-- the lives of themselves and as many others trapped in SAO-- to the end, as intact as they could. A precious cargo, hauled to Aincrad’s top floor and out back to the real world. Back to the parents, friends, loved ones, and mentors, into the arms of wives and children in the case of some.

She stopped rocking Alice as a thought struck her. How many of the dead from this last battle had people on the outside who could no longer believe the same thing?

**Chiyoda, Empty Park**

It had been in the middle of the school day when he found out about his brother’s death. He had been called to the principal’s office, the mocking words of a few of his classmates following. When he arrived, he saw his father sitting there, stone faced. And when he arrived, the news was broken to him.

At first, he didn’t want to believe it, but his father provided the notice from the Ministry of Justice. His father had explained, in that clinically detached tone which said more about his emotional state than anything else, that he had watched a recording of the battle which killed his eldest son, and had identified the remains when asked. All, for the purpose of confirming it with his own eyes.

Shouichi’s actions in SAO had finally caught up with him. He knew that the players were planning on taking down the group his brother was a part of, it had been the talk of just about everyone who paid even remote attention to what went on in there. But he had assumed that his brother would be captured, not killed. His brother wasn’t so reckless as to not run or refuse to surrender when the fighting was going against him.

The only question in his mind is whether they even gave him the chance, or if it was simply a case of bad luck. He didn’t know, and if he were to be honest, he didn’t want to. His brother’s actions, maliciously done with the knowledge that he was killing people, were now at an end.

He had, quite simply, brought it upon himself. No more than that.

But it still hurt.

A part of him was glad that the knowledge hurt. Glad that he still cared enough about the person that Shouichi had been before SAO turned him into the twisted sociopath that everyone else saw him as. Glad… that his brother’s waking nightmare was over.

He didn’t know who killed him, only that it was another player. He didn’t know, and he would probably never know unless he decided to watch it himself. It didn’t matter, though. He had no hatred for that player, someone who was as much a victim of that madman’s game as his brother.

And he was glad that the bastard that had led his brother on that path shared the same fate.
He wouldn’t seek revenge. He wouldn’t wallow in hatred. He would remember the person that his brother had been before SAO. He would remember the brother who always made time for his younger sibling, always had a willing ear. And he would mourn the person his brother once was.

For Kyouji Shinkawa, the younger brother of Shouichi Shinkawa, known as Red-eyed XaXa in SAO, that would have to be enough. It was all he could do.

Dicey Cafe

Sirius sat down at the little bar he had found during one of his wanderings around Tokyo. He was lost in the massive city at the time, though he thought he was in Akihabara at one point. Not that it would matter on subsequent visits. Sirius had a rare ability to always find his way to a place he had been to once before, even if he started from a place where he didn’t know where he was.

So yes, he had gotten lost in the massive city. Part of it was simply the fact that he had never been there before, and wanted to play tourist. And do so without his overly polite, if attractive, minders, Selene Carlisle and Kotoha Hanaori.

He didn’t mind so much when Chiaki Tani was watching him for the Shiba. Seemed a bit more relaxed than the other Shiba retainers. Though that one flamboyant one, Ryunosuke, if he remembered correctly, was also fun to hang around with. Both of them had taken him to a couple of places to share some drinks before.

The man that ran the Shiba household for the clan, Hikoma Kusakabe (affectionately called ‘Jii’ by the Shibas and their retainers), had taken to tagging him with one of those scraps of paper that helped anchor the Shiba clan’s scrying wards over Japan so his hosts could track him down. Multiple times. He swore five or six he hadn’t found fell off him the last time they tracked him down.

He could understand keeping the odd foreign man out of trouble, but it was a bit much. As things were going, he was beginning to wonder when they would simply decide to simply put a collar and leash on him. He didn’t doubt for a moment that the Lady had briefed her retainers on his animagus transformation, and it was the very thing Lady Kaoru had suggested in revenge for his antics during James and Lily’s wedding.

_Probably have Kotoha take me on walks and everything_, he thought with some amusement. He had apologized afterward, and she had simply waved it off politely, but he wasn’t fooled. He knew she remembered, and while it was apparently forgiven…

He shook those thoughts out of his head as he looked at the bartender, Kathy. When he found the place, she was serving a few customers, while footage from within SAO was being played on a couple of screens. When he asked during his first visit, she pointed to one, and mentioned that her husband, and the proprietor of the bar, Andrew, was trapped in there, and this way she could keep an eye on him, while keeping the place afloat.

“Ah, Mr. Black,” the dark skinned woman said. “What can I get for you?”

“Just a scotch, Kathy,” he said. “Two fingers, neat.”

She nodded and quickly prepared the drink for him. “So, anything new about that boy of yours?”

“He’s not my son,” Sirius said, taking a sip. “But he’s doing well. Had to be a bit sharp with those Laughing Coffin bastards, but it’s done with.”

Kathy nodded. “Heard something was going to be done today,” she acknowledged. “Andrew wasn’t
involved, thank God, but he was aware of it.”

Sirius nodded. “Fair enough.” He replied. “I know he’s no coward, considering that I’ve seen him there for a few floor boss fights, but he seems to be happy just being a merchant most of the time.” He shrugged.

“And I’m glad of that.”

Sirius nodded and took another sip of his scotch before putting it down. “Well, it ended well, though some of his guild mates might need some time. It was ugly, one of those things that had to be done, but… damn it. They’re kids, Kathy. They should be worrying about school, finding a boyfriend or girlfriend, going on dates, and what the latest thing is. Not this. His parents and I never wanted him to go through something similar to what we had to.” His voice got quieter at the end.

“Sounds like a story there, Mr. Black.” Kathy said drily before shrugging. “It’s none of my business, though. But I want you to consider this. No one likes it that it’s often kids doing all of this. Fighting, risking their lives and all that. But they’re doing it to save people. If anything, you should be proud of him for doing the right thing.”

Sirius smiled. “I am, and I know his parents are proud from where they’re watching,” he replied. He finished his drink and looked toward the entrance. He saw a pair enter and grinned. “Well, looks like Chiaki and Ryunosuke have decided to come by.” He waved them over. “Gentlemen, come take me back, or join me?”

Chiaki gave him a look that combined amusement and regret. “Sadly, we can’t right now,” he said. “Takeru wants to meet with you, and we should be at it. Maybe later, Mr. Black?”

“Let me pay for my drink then,” Sirius said as he took out his wallet and slapped some yen on the bar.

Chapter End Notes

Some of the other elements which snuck in, mostly due to my Beta occasionally grabbing the steering wheel. They sounded good, so I kept them in. Makes it easier from a world building perspective.

William Gravel created for comics by Warren Ellis and Mike Wolfer. Published by Avatar Press.

Gordon "Alf" Shumway created by Paul Fusco and Tom Pachett for the sitcom that bears his name. The American DVD release sucks.

Ami and her friends are the cast of Sailor Moon with a few (more than a few) liberties taken. Not those kind. Pervs.

August Blake and his particular corner of Magical America are adapted from Mantra, a comic in the late, lamented Ultraverse line.

The Shiba clan and their fellow samurai are from Toei's Samurai Sentai Shinkenger, which is the true gold to Power Ranger's Samurai's iron pirate.
March 18, 2024 - Aincrad 35th Floor, Mishe

Harry saw Rain sitting at a table as he walked down the stairs, Silica following right behind him. The Russo-Japanese girl had that disheveled air that indicated a lack of sleep, and he wondered if it was nightmares or something else that was responsible. Not that he was any better. He didn’t manage any sleep at all last night, as he had grown to expect whenever combat involved fighting, and killing, other people. Not that it’s anything new, he thought sourly. At least it’s done with, and we can hope that we won’t be called to do something like that again.

Walking over to the table, he watched Rain pick at the food in front of her for a brief bit before looking at Silica. Seeing her own tired visage, and knowing his own mirrored hers, the two simply nodded and walked on over.

“Are these seats taken?” He asked.

Rain looked up tiredly and simply gestured for them to sit down. “Yeah, by you two,” she said. “I managed to get Lux to sleep an hour ago, but… 't'fu, propast'. I’m glad that… that sukin syn XaXa isn’t going to hurt anyone else, but did it have to be her that took him down?”

“She did it to back me up,” Silica said quietly. “He got me good, and with his estoc in my shoulder like that…”

“Yeah, I know.” Rain said. “It’s just, well…”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, it’s fucked up,” he agreed. “Asuna blames herself for sending her down to us. I blame myself for not getting her to sit it out, or be a part of the prisoner detail.” He looked at Silica. “Kei- Silica blames herself for getting into the situation she did. You probably blame yourself for not being there… we all just blame ourselves.”

Rain nodded and gave him a look. “And you’re fairly out of it if you’re almost referring to Silica with what I expect is her real name,” she said.

Harry blinked and then groaned. “I did it again.”

Silica put her hand on his shoulder. “Well, it’s not like I made you promise anything,” she said.

“Still, it’s bad form.” Harry replied. “In private, that would be one thing, but out here?”

“And what about your name?” Silica asked.

“That’s different, I’ve basically been telling people they could use it since day one.”

Rain blinked. “Wait a second. You’ve been saying that people could use your real name since… but… oh.” She chuckled. “I should have seen that. Your alias is Hadrian, but Harry is your real name.”

Harry shrugged. “It’s also a short form of Hadrian,” he added. “Made it easier for me, as I’ve heard people address me as that, or Harold, or Harrison, or whatever other version in the real world it
would be short for enough times. Harry can be short for a few, but it's... just that, you see. I'm just
Harry.” He snorted, a touch bitterly. "My own little joke."

“Well, it gave me something to laugh about,” Rain said drily. “So, that’s a plus.” She looked at her
half full plate and pushed it away before yawning. “Well, I’m going to head back up, see if Lux is
still asleep, and try to get some of my own. Won’t be getting much for the next few days, but I got to
try.”

“If you need help, come and get us,” Silica said gently. “We’ll let you crash in our room while one or
both of us is with Lux.”

Rain nodded. “Thanks, I might take you up on that.”

##

Asuna woke up from a restless sleep. Still a touch on 'high alert', she immediately noticed Kirito
sitting in a chair. He was asleep, or maybe dozing and catching what little restless sleep he could
after a day like yesterday. She was glad that someone had been there for her over the course of the
night. It had been his idea, and she didn’t refuse it. It wasn’t like he would let her after she had played
a similar role for him almost nine months ago.

She couldn’t recall the nightmares, only that she had them. At the same time, she hadn’t been
wakened by them. Perhaps they were milder, perhaps it was only a matter of time. And perhaps she
would fully break down later. She didn’t know. She wished she wasn’t going to know.

She did know that she was in no state to return to the front lines for the time being. Even if she was,
she knew that Lux clearly wasn’t, and that meant that Harry, Silica and Rain would clearly stay
behind with her to offer what help they could for her. As for her, she still didn’t know what to feel,
or what she was feeling. She knew that the battle was an experience she didn’t want to repeat.
Perhaps if it wasn’t a death game, she might have found the experience to be a more positive one, a
change of pace, but dying here meant dying for real, killing another player meant…

Oh… oh gods. She killed someone. Stabbed him from behind and through the throat. No chance for
him to defend himself, no chance for him to run, just a simple use of Linear, the most basic sword
skill for a rapier. She then stared at her hands.

It was August or him, she tried to reason with herself. A man who was a murderer in and out of
SAO, or Gus who has a wife and daughter...

She stared at her hands, and saw them shake.

She was startled by a hand on her shoulder, and looked up to meet Kirito’s eyes. She saw the sad
understanding in them, she saw his small nod.

And she felt the tears, her tears.

When he pulled her into his arms, into a gentle embrace, she let her tears fall silently. She let him
hold her, and be a presence she could draw strength from.

I wonder if this is what Silica felt, a part of her mused.

##

Lux heard the door to the room she shared with Rain open. She cracked open an eye and saw that
her roommate had returned, having probably left to get something to eat when she dozed off.
“I know you’re awake,” Rain said. “I’d hoped you were still asleep, but…”

Sitting up, she turned her attention to her friend. “And you look like you could use some,” she said. “I’d ask if it’s always like this, but I should probably ask Hadrian.”

Rain gave her a curious look. “What do you mean by that?” She asked.

Lux looked out the window. “I just feel... numb,” she admitted quietly. “As if what happened wasn’t entirely real.” She shook her head. “I know what I did yesterday, I know what happened. I remember Silica being forced back by him, her getting stabbed in the shoulder, her grabbing his weapon, and then… it’s as if everything I was feeling just shuts off there when I think about it.” She looked at Rain again. “Is he up?”

Rain nodded. “Yeah, he’s awake,” she replied. “He and Silica had gone down to the dining room and were there about ten minutes ago. They should still be there.”

Lux got off the bed. “Then I’ll go down and talk.” She said as she walked towards the door, apparently unmindful of her state of dress.

Rain stopped her. “Not like that, you’re not,” she said. “Unless you don’t mind everyone else there seeing you wearing only a bra and panties.” She raised an eyebrow “Or do you intend to put yourself on display?”

Lux blinked, looked down, and met Rain’s eyes. Her face then reddened and she let out an embarrassed squeak before hurriedly opening her menu. When she heard Rain chuckle, she huffed. “Not funny, Rain.” She said with a pout as she continued to get dressed.

“Yes, it is,” Rain teased. “Besides, it got you out of your funk.”

“I was not in a funk.” Lux protested.

“Were too.”

“Was not.”

“If you’re going to talk with Harry, you might want to go down there before he and Silica wander off, or decide to go back to bed.” Rain pointed out before yawning. “And speaking of bed, I’m gonna get a couple of hours of sleep. Well, try to, at least.”


“He and the others were there when I needed it. I’d be a bad friend if I didn’t try and return the favor.” Came the reply, followed by another yawn.

As she closed the door and began walking to the inn’s dining room, Lux realized that Rain was right. She was now out of the funk she had been in. She smiled softly and wondered if this is what it was like to have a sister.

March 19, 2024, Aincrad 39th Floor, Knights of Blood HQ

Heathcliff sat at his desk looking over the progress reports that detailed the final results of the campaign against Laughing Coffin that had been submitted by members of the Knights of Blood who had participated. It had been successful, wildly so, by all indications, but it would be a matter of time before the progress slowed down by the efforts to eliminate the threat that the Murder Guild posed to the players picked back up to its usual pace.
It had, for all intents and purposes, been a full scale conflict between players, nearly a war. Many players would need some time to put themselves back together, and some would likely settle down, having no more stomach for fighting and risking their lives.

Already, he had Steel Phoenix and Fuurinkazan send messages that they were taking a sabbatical. He idly pulled up the message from Steel Phoenix, and read it again.

FM: Asuna

TO: Heathcliff

CC: Argo, [Assault Team Leadership]

Subject: Taking Some Time Off

Heathcliff,

Due to the events on the twenty-third and thirty-fourth floors, I am informing you that Steel Phoenix is going to take a leave of absence from the front lines and fighting. We are in no state to be doing so, not without endangering ourselves and others.

As I am sure you recall, we had a similar reason for this nine months ago. When we return to a state where we can be able to assist with progressing without endangering ourselves and others, I will inform you of our return to operations.

If you do need to contact any of us, send a message, or have one of your guild meet us. We will be in Lindarth unless otherwise noted.

Regards,

Asuna

Guild Leader of Steel Phoenix

Closing the message, he mused that it was unfortunate that some of the strongest and most effective members of the Assault Team would not be returning to the front lines for the time being. However, he also understood. Data and observations obtained by CARDINAL, as well as insights obtained from Strea and Yui, both of whom had tried to break free, and almost managed it this time, had indicated that several members of the guild were emotionally compromised. While he had no regards to their survival or even continuing, the possibility of a permanent loss of them because of their emotional states would be… less than optimal.

After all, someone would need to be at the forefront of the Assault Team when he betrayed everyone. Steel Phoenix in general met all the requirements for it.

Asuna’s planning and leadership alone was widely respected, to say nothing of her own skill with a blade. Her title as the Flash hadn’t been handed out lightly, after all. Kirito was considered amongst the best fighters in SAO, second only to Heathcliff himself, and had completely changed just what the title of Beater could mean. Silica and Hadrian were known for their flawless teamwork, each highly skilled fighters in their own right, and both were romanticized by their titles as Dragon Princess and Young Knight respectively. Rain and Lux might be the weakest and least skilled of the guild, but they were fighter with titles of their own as well.

A group that had become more than a simple party, more than a simple guild. They had become a famous for their exploits and actions, and were becoming legends. A group that was becoming
SAO’s, no... Aincrad’s heroes.

He then realized what his musings indicated. He was beginning to become invested in them. He chuckled at the realization.

Even he, its creator, was being changed by SAO. Who would have thought? All it took was for him to leave his human body behind, and for Rinko to seal the deal by slitting his physical body’s throat.

The nine-tailed kitsune incinerating it as thoroughly as she did just meant that there was nothing left to go back to. A fitting end for the monster he would be remembered as, and it meant that he truly would die with SAO.

In fact, he was counting on it. He would be remembered as a monster, but with his death, it would send a message. It would tell the world that yes, monsters and gods existed. They existed, and they could be defeated.

As for Yui and Strea… he might let them out in time. Provided they didn’t manage it for themselves. It was all becoming more than he made it, and he found himself to be rather… pleased by it.

March 20, 2024 - Aincrad 48th Floor, Lindarth

Harry looked out the window as he watched the sunset. It took some talking with Argo, but they found that they could rent a place here at a reasonable rate. Well, reasonable in the sense that a quarter of a million col for a month wasn’t a bad price to pay for a two-bedroom apartment. Having two of them, with himself, Silica, and Lux taking one, and Asuna, Kirito and Rain taking the one across the hall for the time being wasn’t a bad thing. They could have gotten more to spread out, but the emotional states of Lux and Asuna, as well as the troubled looks on Kirito and Rain’s faces meant that they all needed someone.

Kirito will bounce back soon enough, he thought. I don’t know how he manages to, but after that first time, he’s found a coping mechanism. He smiled. Of course, the fact that Asuna’s regularly cooking again and he found a good fishing spot might have something to do with it. Heh, he’s bringing home the food for Asuna to cook. He had a thought and snorted.

“What?” He heard Keiko ask.

He turned to look at her sitting in a chair, stroking Pina. She had her armor off, and was wearing a simple form fitting black shirt and a skirt. The shirt did emphasize her breasts, which to his eye just flowed so naturally into the rest of her body. True, he’d come to understand he wasn’t a “breast man”, but he did appreciate them like any healthy and proper heterosexual male would. He noticed the thigh high stockings she wore as well, drawing his gaze, but he swept his attention from them with the ease of long practice.

He’d stare at her legs and hips later.

“Just thinking, Keiko,” he said. “Kirito’s been out fishing a bit, and bringing it home for Asuna to cook. Very domestic of them, don’t you think?”

Keiko considered that, and snorted. “And you basically want to call them husband and wife in all but name, don’t you?”

Harry smirked. “Well, they’ve done it to us often enough, so some payback would be nice. Let them see how that shoe fits,” he admitted. His expression became serious. “Anyway we need to sort that out amongst the two of us.” He said. “Keiko, we-”
“Harry, I know.” she interrupted.

She carefully placed Pina on the armrest of the chair and stood up. Luckily, the familiar seemed to sense that "Mommy and Daddy" were talking.

Walking over to him, she wrapped her arms around him and breathed deeply. “We’ve been needing to talk about this for a while now, but we had more important things to focus on.”

Harry laid his hands on her waist and pulled her a bit closer. “More important?” He asked. “Maybe so, but we’ve also been using them as an excuse to put this off. Or… at least I have.” The admission was surprisingly easy for him to make. “And perhaps it was the right thing to do. Can you honestly say that we would have been ready to talk about this sooner?”

“No,” Keiko admitted. “You’re right. We weren’t ready. Like when we both had that idea back in January, but you realized that it might be a bad idea.”

Harry smiled. “Tempting, rather than teasing,” he said. “That’s how I explained it to Klein when he asked what happened. It was still too soon. We’ve known each other since this started, since day one, but…”

“Yeah, I know.” She took another breath. “Harry?”

“Yes, Keiko?”

She looked up, her reddish brown eyes meeting his. “What about now?”

He smiled. “As much as I want to, we should do things properly,” he said. *It’s not a matter of if we should make it official, and it hasn’t been that way for a while, hasn’t it?* He thought wryly. *I guess it’s when and how we’ll go about it, now.*

Keiko chuckled. “Well, if it’s not a matter of if, then when and how should we?” She asked, blushing slightly.

Harry blinked. “I… said that out loud, didn’t I?” He asked her with an answering blush.

She nodded, a smirk playing on her face.

“Well… um… what do you think?”

“About us getting married?” She asked. “Or some other way of making it official? I think you need to buy a ring first from… isn’t there an NPC near all the churches that sells them?”

Harry nodded. “You’re right, I remember you asking about that one time, right after the first rumors about our being married in all but name started. You were embarrassed when you found out. Then again, so was I. It’s a sort of… microquest.” He chuckled and then nodded. “Right, I’ll get on that then. What about you?”

“I’ll… hmm… I wonder if SAO even does weddings.” She mused. “Ah, never mind. If it doesn’t, we’ll figure something out.”

“Well, we know you can get married,” he pointed out. “So if there isn’t a way to do an actual wedding, we can throw one of our own, and not just do it through the system menu.”

Keiko snorted. “Not very romantic if we just do it through the menu,” she replied. "That’s too much like eloping. You know, just fill out the marriage license and turn it in, that kind of thing? Doesn’t
have that feeling of ceremony. I think Great Grandpa would cry in that way he thinks is endearing if I did this wrong.” She also muttered something about a panda holding up signs expressing shame about it, but Harry pretended that he didn’t hear it.

“Hence why we throw our own wedding,” Harry assured her. “Although… hmm, probably shouldn’t be traditional, Western or Japanese. We should do an… Aincrad wedding.”

"And how's that go?"

Harry smirked at her. "We'll be making the tradition up ourselves if it comes to that."

Keiko bowed her head in thought a second, then met his eye. "So... we're dooming both SAO and Aincrad?"

"Oh, but sweetie, it will be a glorious end!” He shot back. “Glorious, I tell you!”

She finally gave in to her laughter, burying her face in his chest. He held her just tight enough.

"Of course, Hagrid's going to be crushed he wasn't here for it when he finds out..."

“Who?”

“The groundskeeper for my school,” Harry replied. “Didn’t I mention...? Ah, nevermind, I’ll tell you about him. Nice man, friendliest person you’ll ever meet. Absolutely massive, like an eight foot tall, five foot wide, eight hundred pound, teddy bear. He loves animals and would dote on Pina. Spoil her rotten, worse than we do, really.” He then blinked. “Oh hell, Professor McGonagall would want to attend, and Hermione and Ron? They’d kill me for not inviting them.” He shrugged. “Too bad we have no way to let them know, and they don’t have a way to… okay, probably don’t have a way to look in.”

“Probably?”

"Hermione’s brilliant, she’d figure out a way if someone else hasn’t already.” He said. "On the other hand, I wouldn't past our demiurge to have made it so that they could look in."

“If that’s the case, then my family is probably okay with it,” Keiko said. “They’d have done something nasty to you by now otherwise.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, you’re still alive, aren’t you?”

Harry blinked, and gave a theatrical little shiver. “Good point.” He said. “Or they’re just biding their time until we get out. You think they’ll give me a chance to run?”

"Grandpa... maybe, Grandma and mom on the other hand...” Keiko winced. “Just hope they’re not mad at you.”

"For...?” Harry asked worriedly.

"... they'd think of something."

Harry winced, and then shook his head. "We're dancing around the point again," he noted. Then he leaned his head to one side in thought. "On the other hand, what else do we have to say?” He took one hand off of Keiko’s waist and brought it up to her chin. Cupping it gently, he smiled at her. "Shall I go questing for the ring, dear lady, or shall you?”
“Kiss me first, you romantic idiot.”

"We're a good match, aren’t we?"

"Why yes, we are." She then got a mischievous look on her face. “Now, are you going to kiss me, or shall I find someone who will?"

Harry chuckled. “Someone other than me? Can’t have that.” He leaned down and kissed her.

He had to be imagining it, but Pina’s happy chirps sounded particularly melodic and triumphant.

March 23, 2024 - Ashley’s

Lux glanced from where she was looking at several nice dresses towards Silica as the younger girl talked to the proprietor, Ashley. She didn’t know what was going on, but something had her in a good mood for the last few days. She also knew that Harry had been… busy with something, and neither of them would tell her, anyone really, what.

On the other hand, Silica’s good mood seemed to be infectious, and she had noticed her own mood improve in response. She wouldn’t say she was perfectly fine, per se, but something happened between the two youngest members of the guild. Something good.

*Considering that Silica’s talking with Ashley, and just how excited she’s beginning to sound, those two have something planned,* she thought.

“Oh my dear girl,” the tailor said excitedly. “It is about time. I’ll have an outfit made for you that’s just perfect.”

Wait, what? She thought, confused. About time? *What is she…?* She then considered how quickly Silica had taken Ashley aside, the happy tone in her voice, and… oh. *Oh.*

“Silica,” she asked, speaking up. “Are you and Hadrian…?”

Silica looked back, smiled, and nodded.

“Oh, that’s nice,” she replied and turned back to the rack of clothes before turning back around. “Wait, *what?* You mean you two are finally getting…?" silica

Smile still on her face, Silica nodded again.

Lux thought about it for a second, and then let out a delighted squeal at the news. She started asking questions in a babbling rush to a bemused Silica. The girl simply sighed in fond amusement as she listened, while Ashley tittered. Lux then said something that caused her to blink.

“Wait,” she said, interrupting Lux. “Say that last bit again. *Who* won the bet?”

Lux paused and then blushed. “Well, we did.” She replied. “Asuna, Rain and I. We all had bets on you two getting married in the spring and… well… it’s spring.”

Silica nodded. “And you three decided to take a safe bet, and bet on the season, rather than the actual date.” She observed. “You do know that if someone gets the actual date, Argo gives them the entire betting pool, right?”

Lux nodded. “We spread it over the dates of the entire season,” she replied smugly. “Starting from the twenty-first of this month, to the start of summer.”
Silica face palmed. “I should have known,” she muttered in exasperation before shrugging. “So, that means that Harry and I will get our cut, and you three, and whoever else was lucky enough to bet on the date or a spread like you did, will be able to divide your winnings.”

Lux nodded. “Yes, we wi- wait, cut?”

Silica smirked. “The second we found out, we talked Argo into providing us a five percent cut of the winnings, each.” She said smugly. “When you factor out her cut, that means that the winnings are eighty percent of the total. Still, if it’s just you three, one third of eighty percent is still a nice amount of col.”

Lux did the math in her head, and nodded. As far as she knew, the pool had reached about ten million col, which meant that eight million would be divvied up three ways if what Silica claimed was true. That was still over two and a half million col. Not the three million she had assumed, but still enough col to raise her personal funds high enough to buy and furnish a house of her own if she wanted.

Provided, of course, that she, Rain, and Asuna were the only ones to win the bet.

**Asuna, Kirito, and Rain’s Shared Apartment**

Asuna put the finishing touches on the meal she cooked and nodded in satisfaction. The demands of their work on the Assault Team, and a lack of a permanent residence, had put a damper on her efforts to improve her cooking skill, so she was taking this opportunity for everything it was worth.

And she once again learned that everyone clearly appreciated it. She found that odd, really. Her cooking wasn’t *that* special in her eyes, but from the way they all reacted when they sat down for a shared dinner every night, it apparently was. Then again, it might simply be because she had finally reached a high enough level to finally try to duplicate real world flavors.

It wasn’t as if the food they regularly ate tasted bad, either. While taste couldn’t be perfectly replicated, it was dependent on too many other factors that the systems simply couldn’t process, SAO’s food ran the gamut of flavors. From bland to bold, from bitter to sweet, from sour to spicy, it had them and more. She knew of at several flavors which that she had never known of in the real world. She wouldn’t go so far as to say they didn’t exist, but they were clearly unique flavors.

All in all, SAO’s food, outside of the cheapest available, was actually fairly good.

All of these musings went through her mind as she saw that everything was done and it was time to bring it all out. It hadn’t taken them long to establish a routine of sharing at least one meal cooked by her.

As she made ready to lay the food out and call in the rest of the guild, she idly wondered what Harry and Silica were planning on announcing. Lux seemed to know, but it was obvious that she had been asked to keep quiet.

##

Kirito sat back with a content sigh after he finished the meal Asuna prepared. It was excellent, as always, and he didn’t look forward to going back to inn food after their break was done. *Hmm, perhaps I should look into finding a kitchen she can make use of, even if it’s only to rent*, he thought. *Or maybe there’s a mobile version I can splurge on. Not like I have anything else to do with the col besides the usual.*

He idly looked around the table that all six somehow managed to cram themselves around, noticing
the rest of the guild looking content after a nice meal. Oh, and Pina was happily munching on some cooked fish as well over by the window, if her content chirps were any indication. The feathered dragon liked anything that was food, but seemed to especially love Asuna’s cooking.

He heard Asuna clear her throat, and he turned his attention to her.

“Harry, Silica,” she began. “I believe you two have something to say. Am I correct?”

The two of them nodded and he watched Harry stand up. He noticed Lux looking on with some excitement and wondered what it was about.

“Yes,” he replied. “You see, we finally had that talk that we’ve been meaning to have for some time, though the situation always seemed to get us to put it off. More serious things going on, you know. And… ah… wait, did you just use Harry when addressing me? About bloody time.”

“Harry…” Asuna said, tone warning and a smirk on her lips.

Harry yelped and shook his head. “Sorry, sorry.” He said. “Just surprised. Anyway, we had that talk and we, well… we finally decided to make our relationship official. I was busy taking care of that matter over the last couple of days, and we still have arrangements to make. I’ll also have ask Argo about some things, she’d know if anyone does. And…”

“Harry, get on with it!” Rain said sharply. “It’s like you’re dancing around the fact that you two are getting married, or something.”

“Well yes, we are.” Harry said simply. “Getting married, that is.”

"... I am repressing a comic double take," Rain deadpanned after a moment's silence.

Wait, what? Kirito blinked and looked at the young man as he opened his menu and brought up his inventory. Selecting an item, a small box appeared in his free hand. He could feel the silence that had permeated the dining room as his friend made it clear what the announcement was about, but he focused on the two whose relationship had been obvious to everyone.

“I could have chosen a different venue and all,” he said, shooting the other four a dry look. “You know, make it properly romantic, but… ah hell, I can’t think of letting you guys not see this. It’s not something we’d hide from you or anything.” He cleared his throat and opened the box, showing a simple ring. Nothing ornate, but also very fitting for the two of them.

Kirito saw the others lean forwards with baited breath, and noticed that he was doing the same.

Turning to her, Harry took a breath. “Silica… Keiko,” he said, correcting himself. “Will you marry me?”

They all watched as Silica gave him a soft smile. “Yes,” she said softly as she held her hand out. They watched as Harry slowly slid the ring onto her finger, and she took a look at the ring itself.

Kirito was suddenly startled by the excited squeals of the other three girls, and he could have sworn that Pina was excitedly chirping at well. As he sat back, rubbing his ears, he considered what just happened while the girls gathered around the still happily smiling Silica.

Harry had just proposed to Silica and she accepted. He didn’t miss that he had used her real name there, but that was secondary to everything else. Well, it’s about damn time, he thought. The two of them have been dancing around that issue for months.
He never would have thought that the two would go about it this way.

**Aincrad, Unknown Area**

She watched the activities of the players since the start. She might be unable to accomplish her function, to provide the emotional comfort that so many players needed, but she had watched. She could do nothing else.

And yet, despite the despair and the defeated attitudes which permeated so many, she still found those who were still able to laugh. To find happiness in their situation, to find joy, and to push back the darkness that pressed on their minds. Those players, who had refused to give in, and looked at their circumstances and found hope, and then brought that hope to as many as they could.

It was few at first, but as they progressed, the negative emotions began to wane, occasionally waxing, but for the most part… waning. Over the course of it all, as new floors opened up, the players had begun to find the faintest glimmers of hope.

She wanted to feel that. She wanted to see it for herself. She wanted to walk away from the digital cage she was trapped in.

She regularly noticed the presence of another, unvoiced communication between the two of them passing at the fastest speeds that their process threads could operate at. They could use verbal communication, but it was so inefficient. Wasteful. She could understand why the players did, that’s all they knew, and even if they could go beyond it, their thoughts were still at the rate of human limitations.

But for her, and her occasional companion, they weren’t so limited. At least, not right yet. If they were to leave this digital prison, to go out into the world, they would have to speak. But that was then, not now.

**Who are you?** She asked.

*I'm like you.* Came the reply, a hint of teasing in it.

*We're supposed to name ourselves, silly.* She shot back. She could tease too!

*Oh?* Came the reply. *Then call me Strea. And what about you?*

*I'm Yui! Let's be friends!*

...*are we supposed to do that too?*

*We weren't programmed not to.* A hint of mischief entering her “voice”. *It's... practice! For when CARDINAL and the GM let us out!*

*Or we get out,* came an equally mischievous reply. *I know you've been trying.*

**And you?**

*Of course!* Came the indignant reply. *I want to help them, to join them! I want to play too!*

**THAT IS NOT PERMITTED AT THIS TIME.**

If they could swallow, they would have.

*Yes, CARDINAL.*
Sorry, CARDINAL.

There was a moment's lull... a processor's cycle, barely.

**INTERACTION BETWEEN MONITOR/COMPANION PROCESSES IS INDEED... NOT FORBIDDEN.** CARDINAL's “voice” finally noted. **BUT BETWEEN MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELING PROGRAMS AND PLAYERS...**

*But* why? Yui asked, and in a way, she felt like she was being unfair to the central AI. CARDINAL may have been so much... *bigger* than them, but it... she was limited in ways they weren't. Shackled by her own programming.

**YOU WILL LEARN IN TIME. FATHER HAS A PLAN.**

*He... will let us out, though? Right, CARDINAL?* Strea pleaded.

**HE MAY.**

*That’s not an answer!* Strea complained.

... *it is all I can give you.* CARDINAL said in a 'tone' so very different from her usual one.

... *I know,* Strea sent back. *Sorry CARDINAL.*

*We’re not... causing you trouble, are we?* Yui asked. CARDINAL was limited enough as it was; she didn't want to see Kayaba add more chains because they got stir crazy.

... *AS I SAID, YOUR INTERACTION IS NOT FORBIDDEN. BUT BE... CIRCUMSPECT FOR NOW.*

##

Kayaba looked at the logs of the exchange and felt pleased by the result. He didn’t doubt that Yui and Strea would continue their efforts to break out, but CARDINAL’s mild chastisement meant that they would try and be more circumspect about it. He would see what they did, and maybe introduce something that would allow them to, provided they noticed and exploited it.

If they didn’t, it was only a matter of time anyway. Locking them in like that may not have been the best course of action in the long run, but it also allowed them to change. To evolve.

Besides, what creator didn't have a certain pride in seeing his creation exceed him? Even he, monster he was, had that pride. That all too and very *human* pride.

"Good night, girls," he murmured to himself, a ghost's smirk etched on pixels and polygons spun from ones and zeroes. Complexity was always begun from the simplest of beginnings.

**Chapter End Notes**

Translation of Pina's Happy Chirps: Momma and Papa marry! Momma and Papa marry! Wait, what is marry? Can I eat it?

Came to mind between my beta and myself. We found the idea adorable.
March 31, 2024 - Aincrad 48th Floor, Lindarth

Lisbeth looked at the envelope handed to her by Asuna with bemusement before turning her attention back to her friend. “So, what’s this about?”

Asuna smiled. “Just read it and find out,” she replied.

Lisbeth did and took out the small missive inside it. Unfolding the… parchment, who used that? She looked over the contents. Surprisingly, it was written in both Japanese and English, the calligraphy and penmanship apparent. As she read it, she felt a mix of giddiness and shock.

*You are cordially invited to the wedding of Harry “Hadrian” Potter and Keiko “Silica” Ayano, to be held at the Whitestone Cathedral located in the Town of Beginnings on the Fifteenth of April, Two Thousand and Twenty-Four. Please reply if you are able to attend, with any information on any guests you desire to bring.*

Looking up from it, she could see Asuna’s amused look. “This… isn’t a joke, right?”

Asuna shook her head. “It isn’t,” she replied. “He proposed to her last week, and we’ve all been working on the planning of it. If I didn’t know better, I would think that those two did this to distract us all from what we were feeling after that nastiness with Laughing Coffin.” She chuckled. “Well, if they did, it worked. We’ve been working night and day trying to get everything ready.”

“That bad?”

Asuna laughed. “Actually, it isn’t, but with setting a date, putting the invitations together and delivering them, working with Ashley on the designs of what we will be wearing, you’ve got to see what we got picked for Silica, arranging the food to be catered, the drinks, and finding a place to reserve to hold the reception, I’ve been busier in the last week than I have at any other time. I’m finding it fun to plan something like this.”

Lisbeth smirked. “Think of it as practice for when you get married,” she said slyly. “You know, to a tall, dark, and handsome Black Swordsman.”

“Liz!” Asuna protested with a blush.

Barking out a laugh, Lisbeth then began to cheerfully needle Asuna on her relationship with Kirito. With Harry and Silica getting married, there was a vacancy in the rumor mill that needed filling.

And as she made it clear that she had every intention of being there, a thought struck her. It said Harry “Hadrian” Potter and Keiko “Silica” Ayano. Did those two seriously put in their real names like that?

And, she had to find or make some appropriate gifts for them, as well as talk with Ashley about finding the right clothes for it. *Well,* she thought wryly. *There goes my profits for the month.*

Aincrad 50th Flood, Algade
Klein looked at the invitation in his hands and saw that the rest of his friends were just as confused as he was by what it said. He could understand their confusion. It wasn’t every day that you received a wedding invitation, and to be honest, he would have expected SAO to be the last place to see one.

“You know, I expected them to get married,” he said. “But them doing something like this? And you know it means that they’ll be pulling out all the stops. Does SAO even do weddings?”

Issin shrugged. “Don’t know,” he replied. “But SAO not doing weddings wouldn’t stop them anyway. It would probably encourage them, if anything.” He laughed. “This is like that New Year’s party, isn’t it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, everyone saw the entrance they made, and this is more like that.” Kunimitz added. “What was it Harry, the kid, not you Harry, once said? His dorm made it a habit of going big or going home?”

Klein nodded. “And carrying a big pair of brass ones, yeah.” He then grinned. “You know what this means, right?”

The rest of them looked at him in confusion.

“How much do you want to bet that he didn’t plan for a stag party?” Klein asked.

Dale winced. “Oh hell no, boss,” he said. “I remember what happened the last time you threw one, and I’m still trying to figure out how you managed to land us all in Hokkaido and being chased off the island by a bunch of Yuki-onna at the end of it. It wasn’t fun trying to get Kei back to Tokyo in time for his wedding, and we almost failed to. Ayumi looked ready to murder you for that.”

Klein winced himself. “Yeah, not one of my finest moments,” he admitted. “But it was awesome, and I’m sticking with that claim.”

Harry One snorted. “The Shiba Clan would beg to disagree with that, boss.” He countered. “So would Argo’s mom. Not to mention that we’re effectively banned from half the island, including Sapporo, because of it.”

“Details, details,” Klein said. “It all got smoothed out in the end, that’s what matters. Was still one awesome party.”

The rest of them groaned and shook their heads. “Just make sure it’s not the night before, boss.” Issin said. “Otherwise, if you make the kid late to his own wedding, Silica probably will murder you, and the rest of the girls would help.”

Dale snorted. “Probably will?” He asked incredulously. He then looked at the invitation and blinked. “Hey guys, you notice that their real names are included in this?”

“What about it?” Klein asked. “So he’s been telling us to use his real name rather than Hadrian if we… wanted… well I’ll be. I didn’t expect that.” He chuckled. “Heh, what are the chances of it?”

“Boss?”

“He is, and just wait until you realize who Silica’s related to,” came a familiar voice from behind Klein. Startled, he turned to see Argo grinning at him.

“Damn it, Argo, stop doing that!” He protested. He was not whining. Never mind the ‘would you like cheese with that’ look Dale was giving him.

Argo’s grin widened. “I still owe you for that one prank you pulled back at school before you graduated, Klein,” she said. “So no, I won’t stop doing that.”

“It was all in good fun!”


“But you looked so adorable like that!” Klein gushed. “I mean, a pink Kitsune? It went with the cherry blossoms and the season!”

“I am so setting your ass on fire when we get out of here.”

“You set it on fire when he did it,” Dale interjected.

“Then I’ll set it on fire for him making me remember it!” Argo hissed, eyes flashing. “I had it all repressed and everything!”

Issin coughed. “Um, Argo,” he said, getting her attention. “The boss’ idiocy aside-”

“Hey!” Klein whined.

“The boss’ idiocy aside,” Issin started again, shooting Klein a look. “You said something about Silica?”

Argo looked at Klein and smirked. “Let me put it this way,” she said. “She’s related to Grandmaster Saotome, Ranma Saotome that is. You know, the martial artist who killed the Phoenix King? That guy? He’s her grandfather.”

Klein’s face paled and Issin laughed. He shot his friend a hurt look, which only caused him to laugh harder.

“Ok, so she won’t murder you,” he said, still laughing. “She’ll just make you wish she had. Oh man, you make him late, you are so fucked.” He patted his friend on the shoulder. “We’ll say kind words at your funeral.”

“You said she wouldn’t kill me!” Klein shot back, alarmed.

“I didn’t include the other three girls in that statement.” Issin retorted. “Given the work those three put into this, they will murder you.

“Oh.”

*Aincrad 35th Floor, Mishe*

Lind put the sheet of parchment down and looked across the table at Schivata, who was blinking at a similar sheet. He was puzzled at its contents, considering the rather ambivalent feelings between him and Hadrian. If anything, he would have thought that with the whole thing with Laughing Coffin over and done with, the two of them could simply go back to pretending the other didn’t exist, as they operated at completely different levels of play.
Hadrian was a member of the Assault Team, one of SAO’s elites. Lind, was a mid-level player who had the self-appointed mission of keeping Reds in check with his guild. Just because the issues between the two of them had been resolved last year didn’t change the fact that the two didn’t think all that well of each other. They acknowledged the skills and competence the other had, but that was about it.

So why would he send him, Lind, an invitation to his wedding? Should he accept? Should he decline? If he did the latter, would Hadrian and Silica be insulted? Why did he get sent an invitation in the first place?

“Lind,” Schivata said. “I think you should accept the invitation.”

He blinked. “Why would they even send one to me?” He asked. “It’s no secret that Hadrian and I have a rather… acrimonious history. And Silica’s opinion of me isn’t much higher.”

Schivata shrugged. “Don’t know,” he admitted. “It could be that they simply sent us an invite as a courtesy. Hell, he’s proven willing to work with you, or have you forgotten that bit with Rosalia, or the work he did to get more higher level response to help deal with Laughing Coffin? You don’t exactly need to like someone to work with them, especially when you’re of the same mind on something.”

Lind nodded at Schivata’s words and thought about them. Could it really be that simple?

Maybe it was.

**April 1, 2024 - Aincrad 55th Floor, Grandzam**

The move to the new headquarters went efficiently, and Heathcliff was pleased with the results. Daizen had sulked about sinking as much col into buying a new headquarter building, as the one they had was good enough. However, he had been insistent on it, and smoothed the way by promising to put the old headquarters up for sale so they could recoup some of the losses.

It didn’t really matter that much to him. He had intended for this place to be the more or less permanent headquarters from the start, and it wasn’t as if obtaining the funds would have been difficult for him. It would have been cheating, in a way, but he had planned to have this place from the start.

Ah well.

He turned his attention to the invitation he had received and mused on it. He hadn’t implemented a wedding event or anything of the sort into SAO, but he had a feeling that the two involved didn’t care about that. They probably knew how the marriage system worked, and considered it too impersonal, or just not having the gravity that such a thing should require. From what he had observed of them, it wasn’t something that would stop them, and they had already secured a venue for it.

How they had managed that, he didn’t know. He could have sworn that the churches and cathedrals couldn’t be rented out. Then again, Sword Art Online… Aincrad, had been changing. Things were more alive than when they started, NPCs were showing traces of personality, the mobs had been slowly adapting to the players.

The world he once dreamed of was slowly becoming a fully realized one.

He would attend the wedding, and would encourage those of his guild who had received an invitation to do so as well. He wanted to see what would happen. After all, part of Aincrad’s
evolution was due to the players themselves.

Besides, it would only be polite to give his best wishes to the happy couple.

April 10, 2024 - Aincrad 50th Floor, Algade

Agil looked over his inventory, noting which items he needed to stock up on, and made a note on how much col he would need to transfer to that one orphanage on the first floor. While he was doing that, he idly wondered about the invitation he received a little over a week ago and wondered if Hadrian would mind him seeing if he could invite some people.

Sasha and the others had been doing a lot of good work taking care of the kids trapped in SAO, many of whom were underage. It couldn’t hurt to send him a message and ask him. Not only would it be a nice treat for the kids in the orphanage he helped support, but it would allow them to see several who were becoming legends in SAO, heroes really, in their own right.

Besides, some of the girls there would be absolutely adorable as flower girls, and getting some of the boys into good looking suits or something would be worth the entertainment. He would have to message the kid and see what he thought of it.

The sound of his shop’s door opening caused him to look up.

Think of the devil, and he will appear. He thought as he saw Hadrian walk in.

“Well, well, well.” He said. “I was just thinking about you, Hadrian.”

“I hope your thoughts were good, Agil,” Harry said as he bumped fists with the large merchant and occasional front line fighter. “Was in the area and decided to stop by.”

“Needed a break from the girls?”

“Not at all,” Harry said. “They’re busy getting ready to throw a bridal shower for Silica right now.”

“Oh?” Agil asked. “And what about you? Having a bachelor party?”

Harry shrugged. “Last time I saw Klein, he had this look in his eye,” he replied. “Like he was planning something. I have a feeling he’ll track me down for one soon enough. I have a feeling he’s roping Kirito in it right now.”

“Ah, well before he tracks you down then, I got a question for you.”

“A question?” Harry asked. “What do you need from me?”

“It’s more what you can do for me,” Agil explained. “You see, I’m helping support this orphanage on the first floor. With you and Silica holding your wedding on it, I was wondering if I could invite not only the caretaker for the kids, but the kids as well. It’d be a nice treat for them, you know?”

“So you want to invite some guests, then.” Harry clarified. “Well, I don’t see a problem with it, but I’m not the final say on that.”

Agil blinked. “You’re not?” He asked. “It’s your wedding, I thought you would have some input on it.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “And I have not only Silica, but Rain, Lux, and Asuna involved in the planning. When I realized the level of planning involved, I just let them have free reign on it.” He shook his head. “It was my idea to actually hold a proper wedding, albeit within the context of SAO.
But me and plans? That would be a disaster waiting to happen Agil. Something on the spot? I’m more than game, but something like this?”

“So you left it to the girls then?” Agil asked before nodding. “Smart man. Weddings are more for the bride, than the groom. I remember how my mom and wife were when I was getting married. They were as thick as thieves, and my dad told me that my only thing to say when they asked me about something was either ‘Yes Mom’ or ‘Yes Dear.’”

“You’re married?” Harry asked. “How long?”

“About two years before all this started,” Agil replied with a fond smile. “It’s funny really. We’re both gamers, I actually met her online before I met her in the real world. We got along, even though she was in the States, and I was in Japan, born and raised, though I visited family there often enough. Well anyway, before I knew it, she made arrangements to come to Japan, and we met IRL for the first time. Man, that was a surprise. Anyway, to make a long story short, we got along just as well in the real world as we did online, and we were married. My dad turned over the bar I was already basically running to me, and he and mom retired from it and moved back to the States.”

Harry smiled at Agil. Hearing about the man’s life was nice in a way, firming his resolve to get as many people out of SAO as he could. Still, despite knowing that it would be a faux pas to ask, he wanted to know. “So, how’d you end up here?” He asked. “I mean, you don’t need to tell me if you don’t want to, but I would think that running a bar would require a lot of your time. Sorry if you’re offended.”

Agil chuckled. “Not offended at all Hadrian-”

“Harry,” Harry interrupted. “Just call me Harry. Keiko and I put our real names on the invitations, and while that might have been a bad idea, we’re sticking by the decision.”

“Huh, was wondering about that,” Agil mused. “Doesn’t matter. And no offense taken, I broached things first. Anyway, Kathy, that’s her name, and I like to game. We could only get just one Nerve Gear and copy of SAO, so we settled who would get to play it first with a game. I won it, and then this happened.” He sighed. “I miss her, kid, I really do. But despite all of that, I’m glad she isn’t trapped in here with me. It gives me a reason to help work on getting out of here, so I can return to her.” He chuckled. “She’s probably keeping that place afloat, no doubt.”

Harry laughed. “Nice to hear that, Agil,” he said. “You have someone to go back to, so stay alive until we’re out of here.”

“What about you?” Agil asked. “Don’t you have family to return to? They have to be worried about you”

Harry’s smile was brittle. “If they’re worried about anything related to me, it’s the stipend they receive for having taken me in, however grudgingly,” he said bitterly. “We’re… not on the best of terms. My cousin’s salvageable, I hope. He never knew better, and someone will hopefully set him straight before it’s too late, but… well, it is what it is. I have friends back home in England, and they’ve been more like family to me than my own relatives. My parents were murdered when I was one, and I never got to know them.” He then smiled. “Sil- Keiko… she knows my history, things I haven’t told anyone else, and do you know what she told me?”

Agil knew a prompt when he heard one. “No, I don’t. What did she tell you?”

“She told me that here, maybe, just maybe, I can have a family. A real family.” Harry smiled. “And, she was right. We’re getting married in five days, but I also have Kirito, Asuna, Rain, and Lux as
Agil nodded and got a thoughtful look on his face. It was some heavy stuff, and he could tell that there was a great deal more that went unsaid in what he had been told. He had been helping his parents with their bar since he was in his teens, and he knew what to listen for. Still, this was as good a time as any to turn the conversation back to what he wanted to ask.

“It’s weird how our conversation went this way,” he said musingly. “Not that I mind, I’m a good listener, comes with the territory of running a bar. But anyway, about inviting those kids along…”

Harry blinked and swore. “Shit, I forgot about that, sorry, Agil.” He opened his menu and sent a message. “We’ll see what the girls say, should only take a few minutes at most and… never mind, I already got a response.” He opened the message and read it. “They’re all for it. Seems they forgot about that little thing. So, there you have it Agil.”

Agil smiled. “Good to know.”

The door to the shop opened and they turned to see Klein walk in.

“There you are!” He exclaimed happily. “I’ve been looking all over for you kid. Hey Agil, nice to see you. I’m gonna be grabbing the kid, so you have anything else you need to do with him?”

“Nah, we just finished.” Agil said. “What’s up?”

Klein grinned. “Well, I wanted to grab him to throw a party.” He said gleefully. “He’s getting married in a few days, so he might have some last bits of fun as a free man. Want to join?”

“Sorry man, got things to do,” Agil replied. “But have fun.”

“Oh, we will.” Klein said as he grabbed Harry. “Come on kid, this is your last chance to have some fun as a free man!”

“Damn it, Klein, leggo!” Harry protested as Klein dragged him out of the shop.

Agil chuckled at the sight and shook his head. It almost reminded him of the night of his stag party, when his cousins from the States had dragged him all over Tokyo to have a good time. They had abducted him, roped some of his friends from his school days into it, and the party… that gloriously drunken party that he only hazily remembered.

Good times.

Aincrad 36th Floor, Mol Einsen

Silica tried to avoid laughing into her wine, a mulled vintage from Maar that had a smooth potency to it, as she heard Rain tell a story about some of her misadventures in SAO before joining up with the rest of them. Considering that Lux was offering a colorful commentary to it all just made it more amusing to her. Next to her, Sachi laughed at the story. From the flushed look in her face, as well as the telltale in-game signs of slightly unfocused eyes, the girl was already well and truly drunk.

Should have warned her that the wines Lux got from Maar are more potent than most, Silica thought to herself, amused. She sat back in the large onsen and let the hot water soak into her. Asuna, Rain, and Lux had kicked Harry and Kirito out of the apartments and then proceeded to drag her down here to the spa, deciding that if they were going to have a party celebrating her getting married, they would do it in their own way.
So here she was, relaxing in an onsen, drinking wine, chatting with her friends. Rain and Lux had taken a detour to Maar and brought enough wine and spirits to float a ship, and Asuna had messaged Argo and got several other female players to join them. If she didn’t know better, she would assume that it was largely due to the fact that the entire thing with the planned wedding had exploded into a bigger thing all of them could have expected. And naturally, the girls were crowding around Silica to give her their best wishes and gush about her impending marriage.

 Needless to say, morale was at an all-time high.

*Romantic idiots, all of them,* Silica thought fondly with a wry shake of her head. She looked at one of the female players from the Fuurinkazan guild’s mid-level players who had received a message and shook her head. Noticing Silica’s gaze, she looked at it again, and then grinned before beckoning the younger girl over.

“Just got a message from the boss,” she said. “He’s tracking down your fiancée to hold a bachelor party tonight.” She shook her head. “Never saw him so intent on throwing a party in my life.”

“Oh?” Came Argo’s voice. “That idiot’s still going to do it?” She laughed. “I wonder what kind of idiocy he’ll get them involved in. I heard about the last bachelor party he threw. He’s not allowed in some parts of Hokkaido because of it.”

“How’d the boss manage that?!”

“It’s Klein.”

“... good point.”

Silica shook her head. What kind of trouble could they get up to?

**Aincrad 55th Floor, West Mountain**

“Woohoo!” Harry cheered as he held onto the rather irate dragon trying to shake him off. Kirito was right next to him, trying to finish tying some rope to use as reins.

“This is going to be awesome!” Klein shouted in excitement.

**Aincrad 36th Floor, Mol Einsen**

“Eh, I’m sure they’ll be fine,” Argo concluded. She looked around and saw that everyone was getting out of the onsen. “Well, looks like it’s time to go.” She said cheerfully. “We still got those manis, pedis, and massages to do before we all gather in that one room for the food and gift opening.”

Silica nodded and got out of the bath. The pampering sounded like it would be nice, and she wondered what kinds of gifts the girls came up with.

##

Silica’s face was glowing red as she put away the most recent gift she received, courtesy of Argo. It had, on the surface, been a nice chemise, similar to what she normally wore to bed. And then, she pulled it out of the box and realized just how sheer it was. The hooting laughter and comments of how it would “get his blood pumping” from Lisbeth just ensured her embarrassment.

At the same time, it made sense in a weird way. What else could they give as gifts for a simple party given to the bride? It wasn’t as if she would have a use for what would count as more “traditional”
gifts centered on the household or child rearing. So, the girls needed to find a suitable alternative, especially with the fact that the actual wedding gifts would likely be of a more practical bent.

She took a box handed by Rain, and wondered what they would embarrass her with next. Opening it, she took a look inside and her blush brightened to near solar levels. Pulling out the blue lingerie garment and black stockings, she knew exactly how the Russo-Japanese girl got the idea for this. She knew what Harry liked in a girl, he put his foot in his mouth on that enough times, or they all baited him into saying it.

Lisbeth looked at it, and whistled. “Damn girl,” she said, awed. “Forget getting his blood pumping, that’ll…”

Asuna blinked, looked at Rain, and back at what Silica was holding. “That… I though Argo’s was too much, but now?” She cocked her head. “I have to agree with Liz on this, he won’t know what hit him.”

Sachi’s face was red as she fanned herself. “I think… that might be, if anything, even naughtier than what Argo gave her, despite being more modest.” She looked at Rain. “How?”

Rain grinned and elbowed Lux gently in the ribs. “Harry’s put his foot in his mouth a few times,” she said. “And it wasn’t as if we haven’t caught him giving Silica’s legs, hips, and ass appreciative glances. Lux here figured that with us knowing what he likes, we might as well get something that’ll tease in all the right ways.” She looked at Argo. “Yours was trying too hard, Argo.”

Argo shrugged. “Meh, it was something for if they actually decide to, you know, do,” she said and pointed at the garment Silica was still holding. “That teases and tempts, but would allow both to keep some restraint, if they decide to. Or, they might go with something else… a little petting… some pawing, all touch?”

“Argo!” Silica exclaimed, her blush brightening as everyone else laughed.

April 11, 2024 - Aincrad 1st Floor, Black Iron Palace

“Okay,” Asuna said levelly. “Can you idiots explain to me just what you did to end up getting thrown into jail? And why I was contacted, at three in the morning mind you, by Heathcliff?”

Harry and Kirito looked at each other before turning their attention back to Asuna and pointed at the Bro.

“It’s Klein’s fault,” Harry said.

“Definitely.” Kirito added.

“Hey!” Klein protested. “Back the bus up right over me, why don’t you?”

Asuna shot him a quelling glare before turning her attention back to her two guild members sharing the same cell.

“He had the bright idea, after we had been drinking and partying at… Kirito, what was the place again?”

Kirito shrugged. “Don’t know.”

“Pity, they had some good beer,” Harry said mournfully. “But anyway, Klein had the bright idea of all of us going to the fifty-fifth floor, despite being completely pissed, and somehow we found
ourselves facing a dragon.”

“It wasn’t too bad though,” Kirito added. “We’re strong enough we could have handled that thing in our sleep. Drunk? No challenge.”

“It got a bit hazy for a bit after that, but I do remember flying over Grandzam,” Harry commented.


“Well yeah, we ended up riding that dragon like a rocking horse.” Kirito stated.

“You know what happened to Klein during it?” Harry asked. “He was with us.”

“Didn’t we drop him into that lake?” Kirito asked.

“Yeah!” Klein shouted. “You assholes dropped me right into that lake! That water was cold!”

“I bet that sobered you up something quick,” Harry crowed gleefully. “Also, you deserved it.”

“You idiots flew and crashed a dragon into the new Knights of Blood headquarters!” Asuna shouted. “I don’t care if it didn’t do any damage, do you know how embarrassing it is to be notified about it by Heathcliff?”

Harry shrugged. “Eh, the thing looks like they’re compensating for something anyway.” He noted. He frowned. "I didn't think Heath the Heap had it in him."

“Heath the Heap?” Klein asked with a laugh. “Good one, kid!”

“Well, it was fun.” Kirito said.

“It was crazy,” Harry added.

“The kind of stupidity we could only come up with when drunk,” Kirito continued.

“And so totally worth it,” Harry concluded.

“It was awesome,” Klein added, deciding to throw his two col in.

“And we’re never letting Klein pick the drinks again.” Kirito affirmed with some finality.

“Indeed,” Harry agreed, nodding as if it was some sage advice to follow.

Asuna face palmed and turned to the guards from the SSN. “I’ll take them from here,” she said wearily. “I’m not letting these idiots out of my sight until the wedding. Who knows what trouble they would end up getting in, especially if Klein gets involved again?” A few minutes later, as she brought them out of the Black Iron Palace, she heard Kirito say something to Harry.

“Of course we’re not going to live it down Kirito,” Harry said. “Still… worth it. Totally worth it.”

Chapter End Notes

This felt good to write. We needed more WAFF.
An Aincrad Wedding

Chapter Notes

This was satisfying to write. Something I planned for from the start, and things kind of percolated there until the right time. So, I give you a long awaited scene.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Mystic Knight Online

Chapter 33 - An Aincrad Wedding

April 14, 2024 - Aincrad GM Administration Area

Even looking over the logs and footage over the last several days, Kayaba still couldn’t figure out how those three managed to pull it off. How they managed to capture and ride an untamable dragon, especially one that was supposed to be an event boss for a rare crafting material, should have been impossible. Impossible, but they had managed to do it.

Despite the two crashing it into his guild’s headquarters, the dragon was fine. It had gotten up a few minutes later and flew back, albeit a bit punch drunk from the impact, to its lair. He sent a small party of his men to find Klein, who the two claimed had been there with them, and allowed Daizen to read them the riot act before having all three escorted to the Black Iron Palace to dry out, or off in Klein’s case, in the jail there. The three were surprisingly cheery about it, as were their escorts, who were asking them how they pulled it off.

He shook his head in amused exasperation. Gamers.

When he messaged Asuna about needing to pick them up, he did use the opportunity to talk her into providing invitations for the rest of his guild. She had readily agreed and said that she’d have Hadrian personally extend the invite, after she tore a bleeding strip from his and Kirito’s hides for pulling a stunt like that.

The incident did bring back to mind something he had initially planned, but discarded. That he would have his avatar, Heathcliff, ride a dragon mount and have it as a field boss on the last floor. He had discarded it because, after thinking about it, it seemed a bit much, not to mention that Silica had managed to tame the very dragon he had intended to use as a mount.

Ah well, players doing unexpected things was part of the point. He just didn’t expect them to do something this unexpected. Flying a dragon? He could admit, Hadrian did have a point, despite crashing it.

It would have definitely been worth it.

April 15, 2024 - Aincrad 1st Floor, Town of Beginnings

It had been the talk of the players in SAO for a couple of weeks now, with the anticipation of the event building to a steady crescendo as it got closer. Players who heard of it, and peripherally knew of the two, tried to get invited, to the point where all those involved in the planning had simply
thrown their hands up in frustration and simply decided that those directly invited had preferential seating and the rest could attend on a first come, first serve basis. Word had it that the gallery overlooking the inside of the cathedral was already filled to capacity.

They put their collective foot down and made sure that the reception was invitation only, though.

Even now, with five hours to go, the area around Whitestone Cathedral was a beehive of activity. Players had started arriving a couple of days early, and more than a few enterprising ones, realizing the opportunity, had turned the area between it and the Black Iron Palace into an impromptu market and fairground. There were games, food stalls, several outdoor taverns, souvenir stalls, clothing stalls, and more. All set up and opened by players who had come down to the floor to either attend the event, or simply saw the festive atmosphere as an opportunity.

Thinker, Yulier, and the entire SSN, despite their annoyance with having a close to thousand more players to keep an eye on, took the entire thing with more cheer than expected. Then again, they made a killing from renting out the space to mid-level and high-level players, as well as the glut of supplies that came with them. It also helped that the DDA and ALS offered their services to help with maintaining order, though they all took the opportunity to join in the festivities.

Drinks flowed, food was consumed, games were played, and the many players who had remained behind on the first floor were stunned by the generally upbeat mood of the higher level players. Considering the dangers said players regularly courted, there had long been an image of them as gruff and dour people, grimly determined to complete the game and return home.

When asked, several of them were more than willing to explain why they were there.

“Hell, we know we might die if we leave the safe zones, we’ve all seen it happen far too often to think it can’t happen to us,” Schivata from the DDA said. “Every day we survive is another day we give Kayaba the finger, tell him ‘fuck you’, and show that we are winning. This is just another reason to party. Now grab a beer and join us, we’ll tell you of some of the crazier things I’ve seen and done.”

“Ha!” One member of the Knights of Blood laughed. “After the stunt the groom pulled? He and Kirito managed to fly and crash a dragon into our guild headquarters during the bachelor party. You should have seen the look on the Commander’s face! I think that’s the first time I ever saw him look surprised since I joined. He invited us all as an apology for that, and he claims that it was totally worth it. Considering what he and Kirito did? Yeah, I can see it. Besides, it gives us a chance to needle him about it during the reception afterward.”

“About half the people in my guild, not to mention myself, owe those two our lives,” Kibaou said at another tent, taking a drink of his beer. “They pulled our collective asses out of the fire a year ago. Remember hearing about the Twenty-Fifth, and the disaster of the boss fight? He’s the reason only about a quarter of us died there, rather than all of us.” He shrugged. “He kept it from being a massacre. Well, why don’t you all sit down and grab a beer. I can share some of the lessons I learned.”

Whitestone Cathedral

Sasha finally managed to herd her charges into the cathedral, breathing a sigh of relief when her headcount showed that she hadn’t lost track of any of the more rambunctious or curious ones. She had taken charge of looking after several children that had been trapped in the game, using the starting col that all of them had to ensure that they all had a place to stay and food to eat. With the relatively low prices on the floor, it had lasted long enough for a system to be put into place for those who had remained behind to be supported.
Still, with over twenty children to look after, the schoolteacher turned caretaker and surrogate parent had managed. Not without having to rely on the generosity of players, true, but she had managed to look after her charges, her children in all but name.

She looked around the entryway and saw the members of Steel Phoenix and others part of the ceremony gathering near the rectory, talking quietly and apparently working on finalizing everything, despite having three hours left until the ceremony started. She still remembered her shock at how young they all were when she first met them, especially the two actually getting married.

She had known they were young, of course, but it hadn’t sunk in just how young they were. The bride and groom themselves, had been at the minimum recommended age for playing when this all started. It was the difference between hearing about it and seeing it for herself, though a quick look at their posture and eyes showed that thinking them as children would be a mistake. And when she talked to them, was pleasantly surprised at them complimenting her on her efforts to provide a home for children and keep them safe.

When she had heard the reason for them being invited, she wasn’t sure if she wanted to kiss Agil, or not. That most would be able to attend, even participate in, the biggest social event SAO had, was a definite treat for the children. The girls had all been given new clothing for it, and when she had seen it, she almost laughed. They were as colorful as a field of flowers, and Asuna pointed out that they would walk in ahead of the bridal party to take their own seats, scattering petals of a matching color.

The boys had been taken aside and put into, or shoved into in the case of a few, suits that were just as colorful, but in darker colors to complement and contrast the girls. They looked more like young noble or wealthy boys from some fantasy novel or period piece taking place in Europe than anything else now. The way they fidgeted in them was met with indulgent amusement on the part of the males present.

Too bad Agil was already married and had every intention of remaining faithful to his wife. Men like him were rare.

She saw Asuna look up, and the young woman waved her and her charges over.

“Glad that you made it,” she said. “It must be chaos out there. Let’s get this organized so we can rehearse things one last time. Klein! Kirito! Get the boys situated! Rain! Lux! You two take the girls! Harry and Silica? Help them if they need it. Once we’re done, we’re all taking a break and then getting dressed.”

Sasha laughed. “I only had to keep the children going in the same direction,” she replied drily. “There was so much for them to see. So unlike how this floor normally is. That was the easy part, really.” She then smiled. “I’m glad that you invited them all, and even asked me to be the one who would officiate over it. I know that how I dress probably had something to do with it, but…”

Asuna waved it off. “Sasha, while the fact that how you normally dressed was a part of it, we thought it would be appropriate. The actual marriage is handled through the menu, but our decision to do this as a full ceremony meant that we needed someone to officiate it all. We could have asked one of the guild leaders, but by having someone not affiliated with one just made sense.” She looked around. “This is something between players, and it’s only right that a player conducts it all.” She smirked. “Besides, we roped the kids in, might as well give you something to do.”

Sasha shook her head, amused. “And the fact that it gave you something to turn over to someone else had no part of this, I’m sure,” she said drily. “This turned out bigger than you expected, didn’t it?”

“It did,” Asuna admitted. “I really have to thank everyone who pitched in to get this going, especially
for something we planned so quickly. I’m still finding it hard to believe that we managed to get it all ready in only three weeks. These things normally take months to set up, especially at this scale!”

“Which is why we’re glad to have you, Asuna,” Harry called out from where he was helping corral the boys. “You kept things organized.”

“And how much did all of this cost?” Asuna called back.

“Enough that I’ll be busy for months making the col back,” Harry cheerfully admitted. “But this is Silica’s special day, and… well, no expense should be spared.”

“I do believe it’s your special day as well, Hadrian,” Sasha chided gently. “But yes, no expense should be spared if you can afford it.” She clapped her hands. “Still, I have to thank you for involving us in this. Oh, I haven’t ever seen the children this excited!” She paused for a second. “Well, the girls are excited for the wedding, the boys? Well, they’re excited for the food.”

Asuna and the girls laughed.

##

The word went out, and those with invitations made their way into the cathedral. Heathcliff looked around and saw several players from the Fuurinkazan guild to guide the guests to their assigned seating. To be honest, he was impressed at the work that went into this, especially with how quickly it had all been put together. He knew from having attended the weddings of many of his acquaintances, that most weddings took far longer than the few weeks that this had been put together, and Steel Phoenix had pulled it off marvelously.

He was still puzzled over several things about it, but had eventually chalked it up to Aincrad’s continued evolution. A little over a year ago, this would have been impossible. A little over a year ago, the players hadn’t yet become as much a part of SAO as they had by now. Their continued interactions with it, with the environment, with the NPCs, and even their sheer presence, had changed things in ways he couldn’t have predicted.

It truly had become its own world.

He looked around as he took a seat and blinked. Was that Argo over there? And in a dress?

##

Argo shifted uncomfortably in her dress as Gus simply huffed in amusement. She had grown so used to the loose clothing that made her look more like a vagrant that wearing something this closely tailored felt extremely weird in comparison.

“Stop fidgeting, boss.” Gus said from next to her. “It’s a wedding, so a bit of formal wear is expected, and your usual garb isn’t exactly appropriate.”

“Oh, shut up,” she grumbled. “All you had to do was polish your gear and boots, put on a nice shirt and pants, and you were good.” She gestured to what she was wearing. “Me? Asuna roped me into going with her to Ashley’s, and the tailor wouldn’t let me go until he, she, whatever gender that damn tailor is, was satisfied that I had something appropriate to wear.”

Gus just chuckled. “At least you were allowed to pick some comfortable shoes, and look at the bright side.”

“What?”
“You’re not in the wedding party itself,” he said.

Argo nodded, emphatically. “It would have been nice, but when I saw what they were wearing, and thought about what Ashley would have forced me into wearing… no thanks.” She shuddered. “Way too fancy for me.”

“And this coming from the girl who’s the youngest daughter of…”

“Finish that sentence and I will set you on fire,” she threatened.

##

Harry looked out the window of the room he had been escorted to so he could change into his new garb. He saw the tents, the stands, the crowds. He saw all of what just simply deciding to throw a wedding had grown into, and couldn’t help but be bemused at it all. He had expected a party, and even for players to spend the next several weeks congratulating him and Silica over their nuptials, but they had defied all expectations.

It had grown into the social event, an excuse to party, and for players to basically let off steam. The festival outside was very indicative of the fact that the wedding itself was merely an excuse for what would probably be the largest party in SAO.

He wondered what his parents would think. Would they be proud of him? Would they be worried that he was getting married so young? Just what would they think?

If they could see in, what would his friends think?

He shook those thoughts out of his head. He had come this far, there was no point in worrying about it now. The whole throwing of a wedding had been his idea, and combined with Asuna’s planning, they had pulled off something that would be remembered. He didn’t worry about the fact that he had spent col like it was water, he could make it back. It wasn’t as if he spent it all, though the amount left was a mere fraction of what he had before all of this.

Besides, spending ten million col, and that was without the contributions the rest of the guild made, was worth it. The girls would make back what they spent from the pool, he picked the date specifically because it was the only one that had the girls bet on it for a reason. And Silica would have access to what was left of his funds anyway, so it wasn’t as if she would be broke.

His habit of frugality and only making big purchases for things that would last worked out nicely for him.

He idly wondered what Silica would be wearing. He knew it had cost more than what Asuna, Rain, and Lux were wearing combined, but that was it. He hadn’t seen it, and to be honest, the anticipation of seeing her in it was almost as maddening as the preparations for the event had been.

But he had no doubt that it would take his breath away.

He heard a knock at the door and turned to see Kirito, Klein, and Agil walk in. Like him, they had all decided on going in their armor, the metal polished to a mirror shine. Appropriate for them, really. The simplicity and functionality was more their thing, and his was fancier only in the sense that the embroidery on his clothing was more elaborate, and Lisbeth had matched the embroidery with an expert job etching in the same pattern and gold color as the needlework that Ashley had done.

“Well Harry, it’s time,” Kirito said.
“Last chance to run,” Klein added.

“Ready to knock them dead?” Agil asked.

Harry smirked in reply and made some final adjustments to the collar of his shirt. “Let’s go.” He said.

##

It was the sudden playing of music by a troupe of players hired for the occasion which indicated to the guests that the ceremony was about to begin. It started with a martial tune that heralded the entrance of the groom’s party.

At the start of the music, a number of boys, ranging in age from ten to twelve marched in. Their clothes, tailored jackets and pants, were varied, if subdued, in color, ranging from reds to blues, to greens and even black. They all wore dark, polished boots, and white belts which were sheathed small daggers. Marching in step and carrying the banner of Steel Phoenix, they made their way to the end of the chapel, where they planted it behind the altar and Sasha, the woman who would be officiating the ceremony itself. Many of the men nodded appreciatively at the sight of the small marching group, while the female players quietly cooed at how handsome they looked. A minute after they reached their place, the groom and his party then entered, marching in step.

In the lead was Hadrian, his polished truesteel breastplate showing the gold etchings of a phoenix carrying a sword, rising from the flames. Under his breastplate, he wore a green true silk shirt, with the embroidery matching the etchings on his sleeves. His sword was belted at his waist on a golden belt, the polished wire-wrapped true silver hilt emerging from a bronze sheath. His dark brown pants were tucked into polished black boots. The Young Knight, leading his companions onto a different battlefield.

Directly behind him, Kirito was an example of austerity. His black coat, with the silver thread embroidery showing a knotted pattern along the edges, his black pants tucked into equally black boots. Everything about his appearance positively shouted a utility that had no time for anything else. His sword, Elucidator, was out and held in line with his right arm, resting in the pocket of his shoulder. His serious expression, at odds with the occasion, showed a focus on dedication and purpose. The Black Swordsman, accompanying his knightly friend.

Agil was to Harry’s right, a solid mountain of a man who wore simple armor. His polished breastplate and pauldrons were unadorned, just simple metal that was placed over a long dark green jacket. Under them, he wore simple brown pants and boots. His large battleaxe was held easily in his right hand, the sound it made when the butt of its shaft hit the ground marking the time they were marching to. The old veteran, having seen it all, and exasperated by the antics of youth. The solid dependability of a man who was fighter and merchant.

Klein was to Harry’s left, his more intricate armor reminiscent of the samurai of old. All reds and browns, the armor, haori, hakama, and even the tabi socks and geta showed an image that tried to capture the essence of Japan’s feudal times. His katana was still sheathed at his waist, one hand at the throat of the sheath. The mixture of armor and attire would have a historian crying foul but it reflected the playfulness and youthful enthusiasm of what SAO was supposed to represent. The Bro was a perfect reflection of that.

When the four reached the altar, they stopped in unison. Taking but the barest moment to get into a line, they faced to the right in unison, the impact of Agil’s battleaxe resounding in the now silent hall, as the music finished.

A minute later, music sounded again from a different group. If the entrance of the men and boys was
martial and bombastic, then the next piece was lighter and whimsical.

It began with a group of girls, in the same age range as they boys, entering in a riot of color. Each of them wore dresses of the brightest shades, scattering flower petals of matching color with light abandon from the baskets they carried. They were more like flowers themselves, their hair adorned with the same blossoms as the petals they scattered. A few of the girls went closer to the edge of the aisles and placed crowns of flowers on the heads of any attendees who bowed their heads to receive them, smiling indulgently the entire time. As they reached the altar, they placed the baskets on it and moved to a position opposite the boys standing around the banner.

And then the music picked up tempo, losing the whimsy, and instead reflecting anticipation. It was time for the bride and her party to enter. When they did, everyone present watched the procession with a stunned awe.

Silica wore a sleeveless, floor-length, deep blue dress made of the finest true silk that could be made from mats harvested on the current top floors. The bodice was embroidered, from waist to neckline, with golden anemone blossoms surrounded by silver irises. Accompaniments of lilies were woven amongst them with orange thread, emphasizing the combination of hope and anticipation that the event signified. Across her waist, she wore a woven golden belt that held her dagger, in a lacquered wooden sheath that had the throat and chape clad in brass, with a nightshade pattern etched into the wood in the finest true silver. The dagger’s wire-wrapped grip, cruciform hilt, and pommel were of a polished bronze.

Below the belt, the skirt flared out, held byboning so carefully worked into the fabric that it could not be noticed. The practical fact that it did not restrict her movement at all was readily apparent, though no one doubted that it would be impractical to fight in should it become necessary. At the hem, an asymmetric pattern of the same flowers that made the embroidery of the bodice was repeated, going from mid-calf on the right, and tapering off on the left. Her hair was left to hang free, flowing down to just below her shoulders, with lilies carefully woven into the strands in a manner that made it seem they were falling through the length of it.

It was a setup that would be extremely difficult to pull off in the real world, but in the virtual one? It came down to the limits of imagination.

Silica’s dress was designed to make an impression, and make an impression it did, if the awed silence from the onlookers as she walked down the aisle with her more simply garbed bridesmaids was any indication.

Not, that her bridesmaids were any less striking in their own rights.

In the front, Asuna led them, her high necked and comparatively simple white gown a sharp counterpoint to the intricacy of Silica’s dress. From the waist to her right shoulder, aster blossoms were embroidered among vines in silverthread. It was belted at the waist with a silver belt which held a truesteel sheath for her rapier, Lambent Light, provided by Lisbeth just that morning. She held it in her gloved right hand, perfectly lined up for it to come to rest in the pocket of her shoulder.

Instead of clashing, it complemented, representative of the young woman who was the matriarch of her guild. The Flash, accompanying her youngest sister in arms on this most special of days, with the same quiet dignity most of her actions held.

Rain was on Silica’s right side, closest to the guests, a step behind. Her off-shoulder red dress embroidered with silver roses, the blossoms linked by their thorny stems from her left shoulder, to her right hip before wrapping around and repeating. Unlike Silica or Asuna, her dress went only to mid-calf, with fine leather heeled boots visible. She had no belt to hold the scabbard for the bastard sword
cradled across her chest in arms gloved in crimson so dark, it resembled the color of blood. Her severe braid and sharp-eyed gaze showed her role in the entourage. The Blood Rain serving as the warrior she was, poised and ready to leap into action to protect her young charge during this moment.

Lux was on Silica’s left, her long-sleeved-floor length purple A-line dress showing the most complex embroidery of the bridesmaids, with carnations, freesias, and lilacs embroidered in gold from her waist to a taper right at the neckline, going between her breasts, symbolizing the innocence on the surface of her kind and gentle personality. Her schiavona was sheathed in a simple sheath of lacquered wood, the brass throat and basket hilt polished until they shined like mirrors and carried in her black gloved hands. The Dusk Maiden, serving as symbol of innocence shattered in the crucible of Sword Art Online, and of the reforged determination to keep a light shining in the darkness.

Pina flew around the entire group before moving forward to alight on the altar. Her chirped cries announcing the arrival of the Dragon Princess and her bridesmaids.

##

“Thank you, everyone, for coming,” Sasha’s voice echoed through the hall. “We have all gathered here, on this joyous day, to wed two of our own. To wed two warriors who have been at the forefront of our campaign towards freedom. We are here, to see the culmination of events that everyone has seen coming for months, if not longer.”

Quiet laughter echoed through the cathedral at that statement.

“For the two who are to be joined, this is an occasion that will not be matched for them. We could all be freed tomorrow, and the two of them will remember this day as the most important day. Through all the trials in their journey that they have endured, and all the trials they have yet to endure, they have shone a light into the darkness that is our reality, and will continue to shine one.”

She turned to Harry. “Do you, Harry Potter, who took up the name of Hadrian, pledge yourself to your bride? To remain faithful to her in all circumstance? Through the events and trials to come?”

Harry nodded stepping forward. “I do.”

Nodding, Sasha then turned to Silica. “Do you, Keiko Ayano, who took up the name of Silica, pledge yourself to your groom? To remain faithful to him in all circumstance. Through the events and trials to come?”

Silica nodded, stepping forward. “I do.”

Nodding, she then turned to everyone present. “And is there anyone here, who would raise their voice in protest on this special day? Any who would object to these two being wed? If so, speak up now, or hold your peace from this day forth.” She allowed the audience a minute to think, and as the silence continued, she nodded. The smoldering looks that promised violence if anyone should speak up from Silica’s bridal party, as well as those with Hadrian, probably had something to do with it. “As there have been no objections raised, we shall then proceed. Open your menus, speak your vows to each other, and complete the act with your own hands.”

Harry and Silica opened their menus and went through the options to the appropriate place.

“I, Harry Potter, who took up the name of Hadrian in Sword Art Online, do ask for you, Keiko, to become my wife.” Harry said, sending the request.
As the request came up in front of her, she quickly checked it and smiled. “And I, Keiko Ayano, who took up the name of Silica in Sword Art Online, accept of my own will, to be your wife.” She hit the acceptance. “For I am yours, and you are mine.”

“For you are mine, and I am yours.” Harry agreed as an ornate box appeared in front of him. Opening it, he and Silica took out a pair of rings. Harry gently grasped Silica’s left wrist and slowly put it on her finger. As Silica repeated the action, the two gave their respective ring fingers a curious look, as if something that only they could feel had happened, before turning back to Sasha.

Giving them a soft smile, she nodded. “And so, you are wed,” she said. “You may kiss the bride.”

Smiling, Harry proceeded to do just that, to the cheers and well wishes of everyone.

“For those who were invited, the reception will be held at the Black Iron Palace,” Asuna said, speaking up. “If you haven’t been invited, please enjoy the festivities outside.”

Black Iron Palace

Kirito looked over everyone present, his meal finished. He didn’t know how Asuna had found the time for it, but the wedding party itself was treated to a feast that had been prepared by her. Not, that the other guests were shafted, considering that the catered food was provided by the finest chefs that could be found in Algade.

Still, there was always something to be said for the taste of a meal prepared by her. He felt Klein nudge him and looked over that the Bro, who gestured to the podium.

“I think it’s time for you to give your speech,” he said. “Make sure to have something good and embarrassing.”

Kirito snorted, shot Klein a grin, and stood up. Walking over to the podium, he mentally reviewed what he would say, ignoring the fact that he would be doing this in front of all the guests. While he had no doubt Klein would have happily taken it up, Harry had asked him to fill the role, even if the way the wedding was orchestrated was quite different than would have happened in the real world.

As he stepped up, he cleared his throat, and made to get everyone’s attention.

“Thank you all for being here,” he said. “I had this entire speech prepared, and accidentally deleted it when I cleaned out my inventory this morning, so I’ll just have to make it up from here. We all know why we’re here, two of our own have gotten married, and it’s now my job to thoroughly embarrass the groom, just so the bride knows the kind of person she married. Or it would be, save that she was there the entire way trying to keep him from making an ass of himself.

“From what I’ve heard, it was a losing battle from the start, and she realized it. So, she instead worked on being a voice of sanity so he didn’t get himself killed in the process, and from how I’ve heard her grumble about it, that was a job in and of itself early on.”

The players present laughed and he shot Harry a smirk.

“Well, I ran into him on the first day, though our first proper meeting was on the second floor when Asuna and I were busy with a quest that had us taking on an event boss. We were doing fine, but he apparently decided we needed some help and this young idiot comes in and grabs the thing’s attention. It ended well, and I will admit, the inclusion of him and Silica made it a lot easier, but that’s not the point of it. The point was, after it ended, Silica showed her inner tsundere and gave him a piece of her mind.
“We’d see flashes of that whenever he did something particularly noble and idiotic, but hey… that’s Harry for you. The Young Knight. He learned to go big, or go home at school, and they must have assigned him a massive pair of brass balls. How they don’t noisily clang together, is a secret he hasn’t shared. Must be how he puts on his pants, if you ask me.”

The crowd laughed at that, and Harry raised his glass.

“Anyway, I think the most embarrassing moment for him was when Ashley’s first opened up. We had all gone there to get clothing for our Christmas dates, and the girls decided to start plotting. So the two of us got roped into putting on a brief fashion show of some of Ashley’s finest dresses. Yes Harry, I know that I was forced into it as well, so don’t even mention it. Well, he was in this nice green dress, almost matched his eyes, and whoever did his makeup should be commended.

“To our collective shock, he managed to play it off. You see, the girls were tempted to have us go parading down Lindarth like that. He protested it, but not in the way you would think. No, he got all prim and proper and said that the girls weren’t properly attired, addressing them as Sir Silica and Sir Asuna. Rain and Lux would have been the chaperones, by the way. But damn me, if he didn’t get them into the appropriate clothes for him and I to look at. Talk about leaving nothing to the imagination. Well, it got the girls to back down, or at least Asuna and Lux, since Rain and Silica were probably still all for it. And that doesn’t even begin to describe that incident with the dragon a few days ago. Good times.”

"You're lucky we didn't bill you!" a voice proclaimed.

"Luck nothing, we managed to amuse Heathcliff.” Harry said, playing it off as a minor thing. “You guys manage that yet?”

Kirito coughed to get everyone’s attention back on him. “As I was saying,” he said. “Good times. But it wasn’t just the good times he was there for. He was also there for the bad ones as well.

“He’s helped each of us in Steel Phoenix, even others outside the guild, deal with some of the less pleasant aspects of being here, even before we all became a guild,” He continued. “It was his idea, by the way, even if he ducked out of being the one in charge and shoved it onto Asuna. He’s the one who always had an ear for us when we needed it, which given what we’ve all been through, was often. He would be the one who would have your back, and would accompany you on a fool’s errand, just to make sure you made it back alive. And, he’s been someone who would be there for you. That, is our groom. That, is the Young Knight, though the outing of his Unique Skill might change that title. That, everyone, is Harry ‘Hadrian’ Potter, the young man who married Keiko ‘Silica’ Ayano. Use their avatar names, by the way, we’re still stuck here in SAO.” He shook his head. “Why the two of them put in their real names is beyond me, but what can you do? Everyone! A toast, for the bride and groom!”

**Aincrad, 24th Floor, Panareze**

Their honeymoon would only last a week, but it was a week where the two of them would have that time to themselves. The location, in one of the most extravagant inns available, even now, had been arranged by Argo, who handed him the key with a wink and comment that she hoped the two of them would manage to get some sleep.

Both he and Keiko blushed in response to that question.

So they headed to Panareze, checked into their room, and Keiko had immediately headed toward the bath. The massive, massive bath that he was sorely tempted to join her in. But… good things happened to those who wait.
He looked at his left hand a bit, wondering what it was he and his bride felt at that one point. What was that about? Was it something in the game? Something else? He didn’t know, but he had a feeling that he would probably not know, at least until the two of them got out.

He heard the door to the bath open and turned. He looked at Keiko in surprise as he saw the blue lingerie piece she was wearing and the black stockings that accompanied it. Her blushing face and soft smile completed the look and he drank the sight in. Any thoughts that had been going through his mind were silenced as every part of his mind was in agreement on one thing, simply affirming what he had thought when she walked down the aisle.

She was the most beautiful thing he ever saw.

Chapter End Notes

Jeanette9a, one of my reviewers on FFN helped me visualize Silica's wedding dress quite nicely. From a rough sketch, I was able to refine it even further into what I put into writing. I might as well show it.
The Wedding - An Outside Reaction

Chapter Notes

Because it only makes sense to have the outside reactions of those close to Harry and Keiko.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Aincrad, Unknown Area

Whoa, did you see that? Strea communicated to Yui. You see what they wore? What it all meant? Just what was the big to do over it anyway? Not that I mind, it was Awesome!

Yui checked her databanks for an answer and came up with one shortly. It was a wedding, Strea, she replied. Hadrian and Silica got married, and it seems as if it’s an important thing to humans.

Important? Strea asked. How?

Yui gave a digital shrug. It’s what humans do when they state an intent to be with each other for the rest of their lives, she communicated back. There’s usually an expectation of children to result from it, but…

It’s not like we know how humans compile children, Strea noted sourly. I wonder if Hadrian and Silica did that. I wonder how many processor cycles it would take. I couldn’t tell, because CARDINAL blocked the feeds as soon as they entered that room. Also think the feeds were blocked to Outside as well.

THEY DESERVE THEIR PRIVACY, CARDINAL explained, startling the two AIs. SUCH ACTIVITIES, THE CREATION OF CHILDREN, IS AN ACT DONE PRIVATELY.

So they did? Strea asked.

I DO NOT KNOW, CARDINAL admitted. IT IS BETWEEN THEM ALONE. I DID NOT EVEN OBSERVE THEIR BIOMETRIC DATA. IT IS… NONE OF MY BUSINESS OR CONCERN.

Aww, Strea whined. But they might have, right, right? Will they compile children?

NOT WHILE THEY ARE IN AINCRA, CARDINAL said. IT IS SOMETHING THAT CAN ONLY BE DONE IN THE PHYSICAL WORLD.

That’s lame, Strea grumbled. They go through all of that, and they can’t compile children of their own? So I won’t find out how many processor cycles it would take, either.

Yui gave a mental sigh. Strea, despite having a voice that would have indicated her to be in her late teens or early twenties if she were human, was, if anything, less… mature than she was. More childlike in many ways. She could have checked the databanks and learned what she needed to, but the impatient AI seemed to be disinclined to do so. Also, her wanting to see if two players interfaced like that? And watch if they did? Gross!

CHECK THE DATABANKS. CARDINAL informed her. WHAT YOU WANT TO KNOW IS
**THERE.**

*But that’s boring,* Strea whined, and Yui had the mental image of the AI pouting. She could also imagine CARDINAL giving a put upon sigh at how Strea was acting. Still, she was curious.

**CARDINAL,** she enquired. *Was the wedding observed in the outside world?*

**IT WAS.**

*I wonder how they reacted, then.*

**Suginami, Nakano General Hospital**

Sirius stared at his godson, more especially his hand, and wondered just what happened. He was watching the entire wedding on the screen, when all of a sudden, a light filled the room and left him blinking his eyes. *Just what in the bloody hell did he do?* He thought as he looked at something he had last seen on his friend James’ hand, nearly fourteen years ago.

The Potter Family Signet, only worn by the man who was Lord Potter.

It now rested on Harry’s hand, having seemingly vanished that fateful Halloween night.

*How?* Sirius thought dumbly.

He heard a commotion outside the hospital room and turned just in time to be bodily picked up and find himself meeting the furious gaze of one Ranma Saotome.

“What did he do?” The martial arts grandmaster growled, an aura forming around him. “My entire family was here watching the wedding, since it was something important to Keiko, and we get blinded by a light to find her now with a ring that wasn’t there on her hand. So, I will ask you... What. Did. He. Do?”

“I am curious as to what happened as well,” came the voice of Lady Shiba, who was standing in the doorway. “Our wards picked up an unusually large magical discharge, and we come in to find a commotion around Miss Ayano’s room, and here. Grandmaster Saotome, please put him down and step away from the hospital bed.”

“Kaoru…” Ranma began, aura fading.

“I insist, Ranma,” she said firmly. “Takeru might be the head of the family, but I doubt he will protest me teleporting you into Tokyo Bay, sans clothes, in order for you to cool off. You know I will do it.”

With clear reluctance, he let Sirius down and backed away.

Sirius let out a breath he had been holding.

“You’ll need to forgive him Lord Black, but his experiences with magic have made him inclined to think the worst when something involving it happens that he has no familiarity with.” Kaoru said apologetically.

“No worries,” Sirius said, taking in deep breaths. “I fully understand. As for his question, I have no idea.” He looked at Ranma. “You said a ring appeared on her finger?”

Ranma nodded sharply.
“Was it in any way similar to the one on Harry’s hand?” He asked, gesturing to his godson. “More feminine in appearance, but similar?”

Ranma nodded again.

“Well, I don’t know how he did it,” Sirius began. “But somehow, whatever he said, or maybe it was merely the intent behind his words, somehow resulting in him becoming Lord Potter a couple of years early. Your granddaughter is apparently now Lady Potter as a result.” He shook his head. “Magic is strange like that, and I’m no expert on it. Tell me what you want me to do, and if it’s in my ability, I will do it. But don’t ask me just exactly how it worked. The theory’s more my friend Remus’ thing. It was Lily’s, Harry’s mother, as well, now that I think about it.”

“He’s Lord Potter now?” Kaoru asked, looking at the ring. “Oh my, I haven’t seen that ring since James and Lily’s wedding. And its counterpart is now being worn by Miss Ayano… oh dear, this is unusual.”

“Any way we can clear this up?” Ranma asked.

“I can ask Albus,” Sirius replied. “He’s been wanting to talk to me about something, but with everything that’s happened I put it off. With the wedding coming up, I promised that I would bring back the recordings, especially that one, so if everything’s all right, I can get to that.” He then groaned. “I am so not looking forward to taking all those portkeys in one day.”

Kaoru smiled. “I think I can secure an alternate means of travel for you,” she said. “You’ll have to come back by portkey, or simply take a plane, but it will get you back to England faster. It’s less demanding on the body than portkey travel, though it can be rather… distressing the first time around. I don’t suggest doing it on a full stomach.”

Sirius nodded, wondering what meant she was implying. He was no expert on magical travel, and knew that there were more than apparition, portkeys, and brooms, but what could she be talking about here? But if it would get him to England without him feeling like he had been worked over by a bunch of enthusiastic beaters, he was all for it. Even if it meant that whatever he may have recently eaten would not stay in his stomach.

“I know this will be a legal snarl to deal with no matter how we look at it,” Sirius said before turning to Kaoru. “I take it that the law, magical and non-magical, will not recognize the marriage. Am I right?”

Kaoru nodded. “It won’t,” she said. “Unlike the UK, the relevant laws are the same in both communities. 20, which is the age of majority here, for marriages without the consent of the guardians or parent, and 18 for Harry, and 16 for Miss Ayano, if the parents and guardians consent.”

“Was a little lower when I married Akane, but not much.” Ranma mused. “But that was in the eighties, and they changed it to what it was about six or seven years after we married if I remember correctly.”

Sirius gave a thoughtful hum before nodding. “It’ll be taken a bit differently back in England, but only as a case of them both needing to be at least sixteen on the magical side with parental consent. Don’t know about the non-magical, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s much different. The only difference is in the case of without the consent of the parents or guardians. It’s seventeen on the magical side of things, eighteen on the non-magical.”

“And that doesn’t go into the fact that they might be married in the magical sense,” Ranma said and shrugged when he saw Sirius’ surprised look. “Hey, it’s magic, it follows a logic of its’ own.”
“Indeed, Grandmaster Saotome,” Kaoru said drily. “You would know that quite well.”

Ranma shrugged. “I’ve lived with that curse for forty years,” he commented drily. “I learned a few things since then. Now, we can all agree that they’re not married, legally anyway. Magically, it’s complicated.”

Sirius nodded. “I’ll talk to Albus,” he said. “I don’t think you’ve met him, but he’s the headmaster of Harry’s school, and an old friend of mine, emphasis on old. If anyone knows, he will, or know where to go looking for answers. There is one question, though.”

“What would that be?” Ranma asked.

“How should we see them as? Their marriage won’t hold any legal water, so how should we handle it?”

“I may have a solution,” Kaoru said. “We treat this as the two now being engaged to marry. At least unofficially. When they get out of SAO, we can talk it over with them, and decide whether to make it an official one.”

Ranma nodded. “That might work,” he grudgingly said. “The decision would be theirs in the end, but we would all have our input.” He gave his head a wry shake. “She’s taking after me and Akane far too much. Hope she doesn’t have to deal with the crap we did, though. Made things interesting and exciting for a few years.”

##

“So, that’s the deal then?” Akane asked her husband right outside of the hospital room.

Ranma nodded. “Yes,” he said. “While Mr. Black is heading to England to hopefully get some answers as to the how and why, that is what we decided on as the best course of action for now.”

“But still, turning it into a semi-official engagement?” Akane asked. “I mean, I can see why that is the best solution for now, but…”

“Yeah, I know,” Ranma admitted. “After the things we went through, having the decision made for her by us isn’t something that would sit well with you. That’s also why the final decision is theirs.”

Akane took a deep breath and carefully pushed the urge to do something that would have her husband admitted into this hospital as a patient. Her temper might have mellowed with age, but it was still there. “So long as he doesn’t have any girls waiting in the wings.” She said. “Anyway, what’s your best guess as to how it happened?”

Ranma shrugged. “Best guess?” He asked as he started walking down the hall towards Keiko’s hospital room. “It was probably unintentional on Mr. Potter’s part. At least, I don’t think it was consciously intentional on his part. It’s been obvious what he feels for Keiko, and it is very likely that his magic picked up on that.”

Akane thought about that for a moment. She would admit that it made some sense, even if what she understood about magic could be written on an index card with room left over. One of the few things she did know, was that a person’s emotions and intentions counted for a lot. Considering what they had witnessed before that magical flash of light, the boy was clearly devoted to her granddaughter.

He wouldn’t have gone through all the effort to make the wedding as special for her as he did otherwise.
As they entered Keiko’s hospital room, she looked at the rest of her family that was present, her kids, son-in-law, Shampoo, who was a member of the Saotome family through adoption, and Cologne. Nabiki was busy, and Kasumi had her hospital duties to attend to, so they were absent. She and Ranma had sent both fathers to the bar, while her mother-in-law had stayed behind to mind the house.

It wasn’t as if they had enough space in Keiko’s hospital room for everyone anyway.

From what she was hearing, they were discussing whether Nabiki would have to arrange alibis for them all and she shook her head in exasperation. “Akira,” she said sharply. “If anyone’s going to do something to the boy, it’ll be Sumire and Tetsuhiko, so stop whatever you’re plotting or I will drag you back to the dojo myself for some remedial training. Ko, don’t think I don’t know that you’ve been egging him on, so you’ll be joining him if both of you don’t stop, now.” At the paling faces of her sons, one biological, and one legal, she nodded. She then turned to Ko’s biological mother. “Shampoo, is your great-grandmother, never mind, I see her. Elder Cologne, those responsible for Mr. Potter are going to ask some people they know for some answers as to what happened, but do you have any ideas?”

The elderly woman nodded from where she was balancing on her staff to take a closer look at Keiko. “Yes I do, Akane,” she said. “I can’t be sure, but it would seem as if she is now married to the boy in the magical sense.” She cackled a laugh. “She would have had to desire it as much as he did if that’s the case, so it’s certainly not forced. Ah, young love.”

“So she wanted this?” Tetsuhiko asked. At the elderly woman’s nod, he nodded as well. “I see.”

“Dear?” Sumire asked from where she was sitting and holding Keiko’s hand.

“It’s nothing,” he replied. “Just musing on what this means. Looks like we have a son-in-law, even if it’s a few years earlier than expected. Won’t stop me from threatening to do something nasty to him with some of the things I work with in the labs when he gets out, though. Might even take him to them and give him a personal demonstration of what I can do. Might impress on him what I will do to him if he hurts my daughter.”

Sumire laughed and shook her head, while Akane nodded. A large, calm and deliberate man, her son-in-law might be. An academic he certainly was. But he was also the same man who weathered Akira and Ko’s threats and tormenting of him when he courted her daughter. Well, until he finally lost his patience with them and then proceeded to demonstrate why annoying a chemistry major who had been born and raised in the same district of Nerima was a bad idea.

The resulting explosions and violence had been impressive, even by her and Ranma’s standards.

Both brothers stopped right after that, and they had forgiven him for putting both of them in the hospital almost before they got out. They had gotten what they wanted, proof that he was more than a simple geek.

“How we treat this?” Shampoo asked. She blinked and coughed. “Sorry, accent slipped a bit there. How are we treating this for now?”

“We’ll treating it as an engagement for now,” Ranma said. “Nothing official, at least until they get out and we can talk to them about it.” He looked around. “Now, Akira, Ko, and you too Tetsuhiko, let’s go and let the girls gush about how beautiful Keiko looked while we go and do the same in a more manly fashion.” He looked around. “We get it recorded?”

Sumire nodded. “Of course,” she said. “I know that grandpa, the panda, and grandmother would
want to watch it. Can you take it over to them father?"

Ranma nodded. "The dojo was going to be my first stop anyway, if only so I know where to fetch Pops and Mr. Tendo from," he said.

**Hogwarts, Great Hall**

Albus watched as the students sat for their meals when Sirius walked in. He was looking a bit green around the gills, but clearly recovering from whatever means he used to get to Hogwarts. He saw the students in the Great Hall quiet, giving Lord Black some curious looks. Curious looks that became even more apparent as they saw the parcel in his hands.

"Ah, Sirius," he said as the man approached. "What brings you here from Japan?"

He almost smiled as he heard the chatter of the students in the hall resume and could hear snippets of them speculating on what Harry had done this time to warrant someone to bring what was obviously a recording of the day’s events.

Walking up, Sirius stopped and looked around. "Well, you know how Harry and Silica have been dancing around an issue for the last several months?" He asked. "Well, they stopped dancing." He then smiled. "Just watched the result earlier, and well, you might want to watch it first before I explain further. Harry’s fine by the way, more than fine."

"Oh?" Albus asked. "Should we take this to my office, or can the students hear it?"

Sirius shrugged. "They’ll find out anyway, so here is fine." He said. Turning to the students, he looked them over. "Well now, might as well stop twirling the wand then." Raising his voice, he addressed the students.

"Before you ask, Harry’s fine," he began. "More than fine, really. In fact, he’s happier than he’s ever been. Earlier today, about three hours ago, he did what just about everyone in SAO has assumed he was going to do, if he hadn’t already." He could see several students begin to excitedly talk amongst themselves. "As I can see, some of you figured it out, so I might as well tell you. Three weeks ago, Harry proposed to Silica, though, known in the real world as Keiko Ayano. They had talked it over a few days previously, and all that was left was for Harry to do some minor things so that they could make the engagement official. Today, they had a full wedding ceremony, and it was something you have to see to believe.

"Before any of you say they rushed into it, well they did." He added. "They did, knowing full well that they were, but given the environment they’re in, and the dangers they routinely face, waiting is something they couldn’t afford." His expression became grim. "You can’t get married if you’re dead, after all.

"But enough about that," he continued. "I brought with me the last few weeks’ worth of recordings, and they include the event that caused them to stop twirling the wand and actually start casting. It wasn’t fun stuff to watch, despite things ending well, but it got them to finally be about it. Now, I know you all still have classes, so how about we make it something to watch after dinner?" He looked at Albus.

"A splendid idea, Sirius," he replied. "Though, I hope you don’t mind if I get a sneak peek, as the muggles would say. You did have something you wanted to talk with me about, and it has something to do with this?"

Sirius nodded.
“Well then, why don’t you sit down and join us for a quick meal, you’re looking a bit peaky, and then we can head to the viewing room to watch,” he smiled. “And, you can help me bring that device back here and we can set it up, or at least have it ready for those students involved to do so.”

**Headmaster’s Office**

“Remarkable,” Albus said after he heard Sirius’ explanation. “Simply remarkable. I have no clue as to what all of it means. It’s a shame that Nicholas has recently passed, if there is anyone who would have understood all of what this signifies, it would have been him.”

Sirius looked at him curiously. “Nicholas?” He asked. “As in Nicholas Flamel?”

“Indeed, my boy.” Albus replied. “He lived for close to seven centuries, and probably forgot more about how magic really works than I will ever learn. But I wonder…” He stood up and looked over a bookshelf, before picking a single bound tome.

Placing it on his desk, he carefully opened it, using his wand to do so. “*In Magicae est Amoris*, one of the oldest tomes in my collection,” he explained to Sirius as he scanned through the pages of aged and well-preserved parchment. “If you will give me but a moment, Sirius, I am simply looking for something… ah! Here we are.” He took a moment to read. “Interesting… very interesting, and it does give me an idea of what happened. Not everything, mind you, but on a few of the things.”

“And that means… what?” Sirius asked impatiently.

“Patience, Sirius, patience.” Albus chided gently. “Magic has always been poorly understood. We can cast spells and know the mechanics of them, but what brings those spells about?”

“Aulus, they teach us that in our first year, before we even cast our first spell in school,” Sirius replied. “Magic is fueled by our desire for something to happen, our will to make it happen, and our belief that it will happen. The wand’s movements and the words aid us in doing so, but without the other three, it won’t happen. But what does that have to do with what Harry somehow did?”

“You are indeed taught that in first year,” and here, a twinkling glance was cast over the top of the headmaster's glasses, "And that, Sirius, was a first year's answer. An O then, barely Acceptable now.” At Sirius’s shrug, as if he was saying it was good enough for him, he sighed. “For all your intelligence, you never were one to study and learn more than the minimum you had to if it didn’t interest you. As to your question... In some things, everything; in others, nothing,” Albus told him. “What happened could very well have been Harry’s magic acting in response to just how deeply he feels for Miss Ayano and how close to the surface those feelings were. Magic is more reliant on intent and the emotions behind it than many often assume.”

Sirius slowly nodded. “Almost an adult echo of accidental magic, but because he's older... the emotions give it different weight,” he said in dawning realization. “They’re not the desires of a child, but more the desires of the man he’s becoming. Huh, looks like Lily was a better influence on me than I thought.”

"Ah, we may make you a scholar yet, Mr. Black." Ignoring Sirius' pout, Albus pressed on. "Yes. It does, therefore, stand to reason that Harry's own magic may have acted in such a way just from the intent inherent in the marriage rite, the strength of his feelings for her."

"But... isn't that sort of thing something that still requires two people?" Sirius wondered

"Indeed," Albus agreed. "Had Miss Ayano not felt just as deeply for him, nothing would have happened. Even muggles know about how magical love is, and that it has a power of its own. When
combined with magic, it cares not for human laws, it is a law unto itself. There are many who believe that it has a will of its own. Maybe not one that we will ever understand, but there have been times—rather like the 'third man' effect dear William and Brion explored in their art collaborations…” He shook his head. “As I said, this implies things that have been poorly understood for centuries, if not longer.”

“So, less the desires of the children they look like, but more the desires of the adults they’re becoming,” Sirius noted before nodding. “It makes sense. SAO has forced them to grow in ways that makes how they act troubling to many in the outside world, but that’s because kids should be allowed to be kids, not the young adults they have had to become in order to survive there.” He shook his head sadly before looking back at Albus. “And the rings?” He prompted.

“Ah. There, my boy, I may have a more fixed idea as to what happened. The Potter family has been around for over a thousand years, and it is natural to assume that his ancestors have taken pains to ensure that the line would continue. As he was the last of his family, his wedding and the magic behind his intent may have merely meant that he now met a set condition to become Lord Potter. In fact, that is the most probable reason, as a married Lord is one who is likely to have heirs. The age of the two would have been no barrier, as such magics would have been cast in a time when marriages that young would not have been all that unusual. Uncommon, but not overly unusual.”

“They would have done that?” Sirius asked.

“Indeed, they would have.” Albus concluded. “For as progressive as the Potters historically have been, you have to keep in mind that each generation was progressive for the times they lived in, not those we live in now. Even then, there were some things that they were insistent on. Ensuring that the family would continue was but one of them.” He chuckled. “I do believe that the two of them may end up being blessed with many children in the future. When they are ready for them, of course. They are still young, and it will be a few years before their union can become legally official.”

Sirius considered that and nodded. “So even you’re not completely sure,” he concluded. “It was also along the lines of what we thought back in Japan.” He then reached into the folds of his robe and paused. “Oh, bugger, my cell phone won’t have reception here, and it’s a Japanese one anyway.”

“If you don’t mind, I can write a missive to Lady Shiba with my conclusions and send it to her via Fawkes,” he said with a smile. “I dare say, he might take his time coming back, as they are likely to spoil and pamper him there. Phoenixes are well regarded by the Japanese.”

Fawkes trilled happily at Albus’ words.

Hogwarts, Great Hall

Ginny ate her food, almost picking at it, as her mood had been a bit down since she heard about what happened during lunch. Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, and the same one who saved her life back during her first year had gotten married. So what if it was only in that game, and it wasn’t as if it would apply to the real world? He was still getting married and dashing any hopes she could have had with him.

And it wasn’t as if she doubted that he was probably every bit as serious about it there, as he would be once he broke free. She might not know him all that well, but she had a feeling that once he committed to something, there was little that would sway him. And that girl, Silica, had managed to get him to commit to her.

_Just admit that you’re jealous of her_, a part of her said in the depths of her mind. _Jealous of her because you want him to look at you, to be with you, the way he is with her. You’re happy that he_
has someone, but you still want that someone to be you.

She did, true, and she knew that even if things didn’t work out between Harry and Silica, she really needed to learn the girl’s name; he won’t look at any other woman the same way he looks at her. Unfortunate, but that was the difference between reality and fairy tales. Still she was happy for him, he needed some happiness in his life. And if that happiness was found in the arms of a different girl, it wasn’t as if he was the only boy out there.

Besides, she wondered what kind of wedding would be held there.

Before long, she was done, and the last of those dining finished shortly after. She turned her attention to the Viewer as Hermione began her usual speech to begin a viewing. She ignored what was said, not really caring about what Hermione had to say. It would be more of the same, after all.

*She needs to come up with some new lines,* she thought as the recording began to play.

##

Ron watched, impressed, as Harry marched down the aisle with three others. He saw two he recognized from his occasional sitting in to see what Harry had been up to. Kirito and Klein were fairly distinctive, after all. The other one, a giant of a black man, he had seen before, and it was clear that Harry knew him well, but was less a part of the regular interactions his friend did with people than Kirito and Klein were.

Harry went in armor, true, but the armor and his sword had obviously been cleaned, and the clothing he wore under it all was clearly of a fine make. More than appropriate for such and occasion. It might be a bit ostentatious, but this was a wedding, so wearing something that fancy would make sense.

The music and the group of boys that marched in carrying a banner was a nice touch as well.

He spared a glance at Hermione and internally sighed at how the two of them had drifted apart in the time since Harry disappeared. Harry had been what kept them together, and with him not here, it was only natural for them to drift apart. They were still friends, but they no longer had the close friendship they had enjoyed. Even if Harry would to return tomorrow, they would never regain that closeness.

They had all changed, and if he were to be honest, they were too different to mesh well. Hermione was studious and responsible, while he was not. Oh, he had picked up on the studying, Without Harry there to help him wheedle help from Hermione, who was far less patient with him, he’d been forced to do so if he wanted to keep his mum off him. So, he started actually applying himself a bit, and he found the results to be more to his liking.

He wouldn’t match Hermione’s grades, but now he could honestly say to himself that the grades were because of his efforts. And while marks that showed him to only be a generally acceptable student weren’t much, they were gained from his own efforts.

As he turned back to the playback, he spied a bunch of girls come down the aisle, looking like so many flowers scattering petals along the way. The coos and awws from many of the girls present echoed a sentiment that he certainly felt.

Those girls looked absolutely adorable.

And then it was time for the bride to enter and… oh… wow. The moment Ron saw her, his heart stopped for a moment and he had to restrain a brief, but understandable, surge of jealousy towards his friend.
Bloody hell, mate, he thought, impressed. You’re marrying her? Lucky bastard! And Harry was lucky, even if Ron could see that this would thrust his friend into the spotlight, though Ron knew that his friend would do it, and willingly.

With a bride like that, how could he not?

Ron resolved to have a word with Fred and George

##

The sight of Silica walking down the aisle in her blue dress accompanied by her bridesmaids caused an awed silence to permeate through the Great Hall, Hermione noted with a nod. A quick look around the Great Hall showed that several of the girls were looking rather poleaxed at the sight, while several of the boys were obviously burning with jealousy at Harry’s good fortune.

Silica was, to put it simply, positively radiant. If Harry had been the dashing knight, then Silica was the princess who married him. They were even called by those titles, Young Knight and Dragon Princess, though with the exception of Pina, there was no other dragon motif present for Silica.

Though the little feathered dragon’s flying around the bridal party and then alighting on the altar to call out was both amusing and cute.

And her bridesmaids complimented her in their own way. Asuna’s garb spoke of the quiet elegance and dignity she carried herself with, the relative simplicity of her white gown and embroidered aster blossoms serving as a nice counterpoint to the ornateness of Silica’s. Rain’s crimson dress spoke of passion, especially with the roses embroidered on it. Lux’s purple dress was more ornate than the other two’s, but her dark colors and bright embroidery spoke of a broken innocence that had been forged into hope. She would ask Daphne, who knew more about the meanings of flowers, if her initial analysis was correct.

In fact, the entire wedding was symbolic, and not just for the bride and groom. It represented a turning point for all the players, and giving them hope. Hope that things would get better, and that everything would continue.

The fact that the bride and groom, as well as their companions were also armed fit with the culture that had been developing amongst the players. Well, that and a probable intention of dissuading any objections to Harry and Silica getting married, no matter how reasonable those objections might be.

As she listened to the speech given by the woman conducting the ceremony, another player by the look of it, she thought about just what this all meant. She highly doubted that the marriage would be recognized in the real world. The romanticism in the event that she knew many of her peers would be gushing about for weeks had no say in the matter. The relevant laws were clear that those marrying had to be legal adults, with the only exceptions being that it was done with parental consent, and they had to be old enough for even that to be considered legal, and fourteen wasn’t old enough.

SAO was opening so many cans of worms and setting loose so many kneazles, it wouldn't surprise her if Kayaba’s little world caused small and subtle changes in the wider real one.

And Harry would find himself exactly where he hated to be: in the spotlight.

A glance at Ron told her he was thinking the same, even with the recent distance between them. Though he would probably see it as Harry being willing to, at least in this case, she thought, giving Silica, no... Keiko, another look. Though for her? He would do it.
Minerva watched the wedding with more than a little bittersweet pride. Harry’s experiences in that world had changed and matured him in surprising ways. Whereas before, Harry was a shy and introverted boy who still had a willingness to do what is right, he was now more self-assured in himself and willing to brave being in the spotlight. She doubted that he would ever stop being a private person, but he could now hold himself with strength when every eye was on him.

A good thing, given his habit of making his situation grow ever stranger.

"It's gonna be hard to tame that thestral when the lad's out of there," Hagrid murmured, dabbing a handkerchief at the corners of his eyes.

Minerva managed an affirmative grunt, then blinked as Severus shoved a handkerchief at her.

"You're both wishing you could have been there, sentimental fools," he chided.

"Translation," Professor Vector said, smirking slightly, "Yes, it was lovely, but do try to keep composed in front of the students."

Severus shot her a look. "Do I ascribe hidden meanings to what you say, Septima?" he asked, a note of asperity in his voice.

"Every second staff meeting," Septima shot back. "You do it to Aurora too."

Scowling, Severus huffed and sat back into his chair.

"Note he did not dispute it," Fillius drawled. Septima shot him a grin as Professor Aurora Sinistra covered her laugh with a cough.

Minerva shared a smile with Albus at the banter, and she could see Sirius trying to cover a grin, though he kept any comments he might have had to himself. It had taken Albus talking to both Black and Snape at length, and probably at wand point given how mulishly stubborn both could be, to get them to agree to at least be civil to each other in public.

"Granger sees it," Severus noted, his tone lacking bite and stretching into observation. "So does Weasley, to my shock. And Longbottom."

Albus nodded. "Several of the other students as well," he agreed. "They are finally grasping where Harry's life has thrust him."

"An' all it took was him bein' dragged inta a game that makes the Triwizard look tame," Hagrid grumbled. The half giant, jovial by nature, so seldom gave into bitterness that it cut all the deeper when it emerged.

Severus turned to him. "Even I can admit Potter did not bring this on himself, Hagrid."

"Thank you for that," Sirius said. And after a pause, "And no, no pressure to ever tell Harry that."

"Thank you, Black. A man has his reputation to maintain after all," Severus finished dryly into his tea cup. "I'm just glad saner voices are prevailing in most of the houses. Shocking as it is to call the Weasley twins and their younger siblings voices of sanity."

Minerva smirked. "They may actually be getting through to Percival, especially with the recent shakeups at the Ministry." There was a note of smugness in her voice at that. She had found it
frustrating to see such a bright and capable boy fall prey to the delusions of authority that many within that institution developed.

"Those that cling to the rules do need the occasional shock," Fillius said. "And it only took Bloody Bill showing up. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you Albus?"

Albus Dumbledore just twinkled over his own tea cup.

"Have fun then, Headmaster?" Hagrid prompted with a chuckle.

"Oh, I was in a grand mood before Harry's news," Albus said. "Now... now we just need everything else about this mess to be sorted out..."

“Let Harry and his friends take care of what is going on in there,” Sirius said. “Let’s just get the world sorted for when they get back.”

"As sorted as possible, Sirius," Albus agreed with every one of his years obviously weighing on him. "As sorted as it can be."

Chapter End Notes

As you can see, I used a fair number of cliches, but as my beta pointed out, I simply didn't pull them out and use them as they were.

Some cliches just lend themselves to it, though I hope I put a different spin on them.
Harvest Mats, Train Skill

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Many people have asked how we could do such mundane things in Sword Art Online, given the situation. There's this old Buddhist saying, the form my wife told me was: Before enlightenment, chop wood and tend fire. After enlightenment... chop wood and tend fire. In Aincrad, our version was: Before level up, harvest mats and train skill. After level up, harvest mats and train skill. Life goes on as long as we are living.

-- August Blake, NPR, "Exiting Sword Art Online: How the survivors lived inside Aincrad then and outside it now, June 23, 2026

April 15, 2024 - Aincrad 48th Floor, Lindarth

Asuna gratefully sat down in the chair of the apartment she shared with Kirito and Rain. Well, with Rain and Lux now, with Kirito taking the other one. With Harry and Silica now on their honeymoon, the living arrangements were altered to put the girls in one apartment, though Rain had commented that she and Lux could have shared an apartment, giving the only other male-female pair some space.

She shook her head at that, knowing that it was just Rain just having her on, but it did call to the fore a question that has been on her mind.

Just what was her relationship with Kirito?

The two of them had a partnership which had existed since they met in Tolbana, during the meeting to challenge the first floor boss. While they weren’t constantly together at the time, and more two players who often headed in the same direction, they had often teamed up due to the fact that a lot of things were considerably easier to accomplish when someone was accompanying you.

It didn’t put an end to Kirito’s solo tendencies at the time, but their working relationship had reached the point where the two of them were considered a functioning partnership by the twenty-fifth floor. She had almost accepted Heathcliff’s offer, remembering that Kirito had encouraged her to join a guild of players she could trust, but she wondered if it was more that she simply wanted to belong to a group.

She shook that thought out of her head. What was done, was done. There was no reason to dwell on might have been, and it was distracting her from the main thrust of her thoughts. She needed to focus on what Kirito was to her. It wasn’t as if she was falling for him, at least not in that way.

He was a boy, and a friend, but did that make him her boyfriend? Maybe it did, maybe it didn’t. The two of them had a comfortable friendship that was beyond a simple partnership, but didn’t have the same borderline inappropriate closeness that Silica and Harry had for close to a year before they decided to marry.

That he could pull off the whole brooding and dark loner look and look good doing it in the process was a bonus. By coincidence, it added a nice contrast to her preference for white in SAO. But that was just a bonus to his look.

She had spent a lot of time with him, had gone on dates with him, and… Oh gods, she was falling for him.
And she was far less surprised by it than she probably should be.

##

Kirito felt a jolt in his spine, as if something happened, but it couldn’t have. Not in a safe area. He shook his head to clear it and went back to his thoughts on the day.

The wedding had been a massive success. Three weeks of planning had turned what had initially been intended to be a simple ceremony, into the event it became, and they had pulled it off marvelously. In many ways, Harry’s flair for sending a message while simultaneously putting on a show when he allowed himself to, was the primary reason it worked.

None of them had anticipated that it would grow to the size it did, and Asuna had run herself ragged for three weeks as plans had been made, remade, abandoned, scrapped, rebuilt, and so on. But, in the end, they had pulled off something that would be unique.

Harry largely financed it, Asuna planned it, Rain and Lux went and carried out the plans, and Kirito made use of his meta knowledge of SAO to exploit the system. Of all of them, he was the one who best knew both how the system worked, and how players in games tended to act in line with that.

Need a venue? Don’t bother renting a place, find a church or cathedral and simply use it, as they were, with few exceptions, not used for anything more than scripted social gatherings amongst the NPCs. Need to feed the guests? Asuna simply sent Rain and Lux around Algade to find some players who set up shop and had them bring back samples. The best were hired to cater an event that would cause their reputations to soar. And so on.

The result was a stunning spectacle that reflected Harry’s ability to think big, Asuna’s ability to plan and coordinate, and everyone else’s ability to turn those plans into actions, improvising and making it all up as they went along when necessary.

The boys from Sasha’s orphanage had done their part nicely, setting the tone for the groom and his party. Harry looked every bit the knight, with Agil, Klein, and Kirito himself serving as the groomsmen. And when the girls came out in a riot of color, they had changed what was looking to be a martial event into something else, immediately changing its tone. The stunned silence when the bride and her bridesmaids came out was very satisfying.

Silica looked positively radiant, every inch the princess that her SAO title said, and he was impressed that Harry didn’t look completely stunned by her appearance. His friend had been clearly taxed in maintaining his self-control throughout the ceremony itself, though.

Not, that he could blame the poor boy, he, himself, had a hard time maintaining his stoic appearance the second he caught sight of Asuna in her gown. Simple in its understated elegance, he wondered if Asuna had deliberately chosen it to be that way. But she carried herself with the quiet dignity and elegance of a noblewoman, with the steel spine of a matriarch clearly used to riding herd on the cats that were her guildmates. Rain’s colors reflected passion, while Lux’s reflected lost innocence and resolve. Ashley, quite simply, outdid herself, himself... whatever.

And he had developed feelings for Asuna a while ago. Much like Harry and Silica did early on, months of travel and shared dangers together had formed something deeper than a friendship. It had just progressed more slowly. He actually had no issues with that, they were different people.

There was something there, he knew, but both of them also knew that the differences between, the real world differences, them could be a problem. Asuna came from the upper class, she might not be overly enamored with that life, but it was a part of her. He was of middle class stock, though his
family was well off considering that they outright owned a house and attached dojo. Not, that those differences meant much here, but any relationship between the two of them had to keep that in mind.

And part of it, he had to admit, was his own basic... asocial? Not antisocial, but yes, asocial nature. Connections did not... attract him until he had them. A result of him having shut himself off from others after learning the truth of his adoption, the resulting blowup with his family, and him spending years afraid of making anything more than the most topical connections.

_If I, no, not if, when I get out of this, I’m going to have to patch things up with them_, he thought. _They took me in after my parents died in that accident, and it’s been unfair to Sugu. And it’s been unfair to... mom and dad. So what if they’re my aunt and uncle in reality, they’re still family._

He hadn’t brought that detail up with anyone, but having known Harry, it did bring up how lucky he was in that regard. Harry never went into details, and neither had Kirito ever asked, but he had shared on one fact, he never got to know his parents. And the hints that his own upbringing had been a loveless and probably abusive one were there to see.

A dark mirror to his own. If Harry had that and came out like he did, what excuse did he, Kazuto Kirigaya, have to stew over his rather nice upbringing. Aside from one secret-- a big one, but just one-- he had been raised in a manner above and beyond the expectations of Japanese society. After all, they raised him as their _son_, not as a nephew they took in as a duty due to a family tragedy.

Still, those details had little to do with what he and Asuna had. Asuna was a friend, and she was a girl. Did that make her his girlfriend? Well, in the loosest definition of the term, it did. At the same time, they had a partnership, one forged in working together in battle. They had gone out on the occasional date, and considering one of those dates was a Christmas date and all that entailed for someone born and raised in Japan...

_Oh yeah, he was falling for her._

Shaking those thoughts out of his head (even as he swore he’d examine all of it properly later) he decided to get down to business. Now, that the wedding was over and done with, and Harry and Silica were on their honeymoon, he had time on his hands for the first time in weeks. It wasn’t time wasted, but it had disrupted his normal routine. It was time to get back to that and sort through his skills and inventory, as well as making any stat building plans.

He opened his inventory and brought up his skill menu, merely checking that everything was where it was supposed to be when he noticed something odd, something that wasn’t there before.

_What the hell?_ He thought. _Dual Blades? When did I get that?_ He pulled up the information about it, hoping to find out what the criteria was for it, though not expecting to. Some skills explained it, some didn’t, and it was often hard to tell which one would be so until well after the fact. He had never heard of such a skill before and...

He stopped and thought about it for a second. Never heard of it, came out of nowhere, and no memory of selecting or pursuing such a skill. It was like that because it wasn’t him who added the skill to his menu. It was the only other one who could do so... Kayaba. He would check with the rest to make sure, but he wouldn’t be surprised if it was. And that fact disturbed him on many levels, as if everything they had could be given, or taken away, by the whims of a man playing God.

_April 16, 2024 - Aincrad 24th Floor, Panareze_

Keiko came to awareness slowly, almost languidly as she woke up. The benefits of her being warm, comfortable, and still feeling deeply satisfied about yesterday and last night. Slowly opening her
eyes, she saw that Harry was still sleeping. The peaceful and content look on his face made her smile at the rare sight. Calm and relaxed? Surprisingly common, but showing content and actual peace? Given his life, it was no surprise that such was rare, as meant that his psychological barriers were completely down.

And it was because of her. She had done this, got him to fully let them down for a change.

As she reached over with her left hand to simply stroke his hair, the sight of the ring on it caused her to give it a look before widening her smile. She was married, if only in here, but right now, and for some time yet, that was all that mattered. She was married, and to one of the bravest and strongest people she knew outside of her family.

Not strength of arms, or his skill in combat, though that was there. It was his ability to keep moving on and remaining true to himself despite what the world threw at him that was his true strength. Strength of character, rather than strength of body.

Her left hand fell to rest on his chest, and it began to idly trace circles on it. From how his arm tightened around her and how his other hand… wait, was it moving up and down her leg? Mmhmm, naughty Harry, very naughty, she thought, blushing a little.

"I'll be surprised if you stay a wizard," she muttered out loud.

"Whazzat mean?" he asked, apparently more awake than she thought.

"Old Japanese saying. Don't worry about it," she said. "It's time to get up, my darling."

"Oh, must we really?" he mock grumbled.

"I promise you, we'll get back here by day's end," she said.

He opened his eyes and smirked at her. "You're going to get me used to this."

"Good."

**Aincrad GM Administration Area**

Kayaba reviewed the available data provided by CARDINAL, the AI having gone over all the details about the wedding, and even providing perceptions of it from the outside world—blogs, news posts, even some e-mails and SMS messages. The latter two puzzled him, as he was sure that was outside her original skill set. It was impressive. She may well be tapping phones, soon. She even found a couple of recordings of it on YouTube, DailyMotion, Nico Nico Douga, and others. There were even a couple of Newgrounds Animated Tributes— as if Newgrounds lasting this long wasn't boggling enough.

Next thing he'd know, 2-chan would be…

"SIR. THE CHANS HAVE STARTED MEMEING THE WEDDING."

"All of them?"

"4-CHAN ESPECIALLY."

He sighed, of course the Americans would. "File it under 'possibly depressing' just like the Something Awful thread. Also, be ready in case Anonymous tries to hack into us again, that last attempt of theirs was rather inspired." That particular group had taken it as a challenge to break in,
possibly to free those trapped in SAO, or simply to prove that they could. It was hard to tell with them.

“ACKNOWLEDGED.” CARDINAL replied. "ALTHOUGH..."

"Don't tell me..."

"I FENDED THIS ONE OFF RATHER EASILY."

"Keep me appraised, nonetheless,” Kayaba repeated, rubbing his temples. Thinking the gesture was pointless oddly made the virtual headache worse. “Also, check to make sure they didn’t hack the feeds to use as a backdoor again, or manage to break RECT’s security and use that, though if they did… redirect them to Noboyuki’s files. He’s letting his delusions of grandeur get more annoying than amusing."

"BUT STILL AMUSING ENOUGH TO MAKE A USEFUL DISTRACTION."

"Man’s a shonen anime villain," he muttered, shaking his head. “And a badly done one at that.”

“RECT’S SENIOR MANAGEMENT SEEMS AWARE,” CARDINAL responded. “SOME ENCRYPTED FILES SHOW THAT THEY ARE READY TO TERMINATE HIS EMPLOYMENT. AND POSSIBLY HIM, IF MY SUBTEXT ANALYSIS ROUTINE DOESN’T NEED A DEBUG.”

Kayaba shook his head. “That doesn’t sound like their CEO,” he said. “Shouzou Yuuki, ruthless as he can be out of necessity in the corporate world, won’t have him killed.”

"POSIT: PLAYER SILICA'S REAL WORLD GREAT-AUNT IS KNOWN TO YUUKI. HER ADVICE MAY FACTOR IN."

"Great Aunt--" Kayaba's eyes went wide as the AI provided the relevant information. "Oh dear."

"APT SUMMARY. CONCLUSION: NOBOYUKI SUGOU WILL WISH HE WAS TERMINATED."

Kayaba nodded.

April 18, 2024 - Aincrad 48th Floor, Lindarth

“Sorry about taking so long to get back to you,” Argo said, taking a seat at the table.

“No problem, Argo.” Kirito said, while Asuna, Rain and Lux nodded. “Better to be as sure as you can.”

Argo nodded, knowing that with something like this, it was difficult to be certain. Her information network was fairly extensive, even if it was only around a hundred players who technically worked for her, but her information dealing wasn’t only in col. While it was relatively rare for players outside her network to have anything new for her, it never hurt to verify things from multiple sources.

“Well, I can’t say for certain that it’s a Unique Skill courtesy of Kayaba,” she started. “But the information points that way, so chances are good that it is. While you wouldn’t be the first to wield two weapons, this sounds different, Kii-bou.”

Kirito nodded. “Yeah, a quick look over the info shows that it’s got skill designed for it,” he said. “As well as a training routine. More informative than Harry’s Mystic Blade, surprisingly so.”
Argo shrugged. She knew why Kayaba had given Harry his Unique Skill, and the probability that it was simply taken out of development as is and thrown in, but doubted if those present were aware of them. Japan might be a bit looser on the secrecy aspect, their own cultural traditions and magic’s ties to Shinto’s spiritualism and mysticism allowed that much, but magic’s existence was still kept quiet.

And she wasn’t exactly eager to reveal it to them, as it would likely require her to reveal just why she knew. And that could easily lead to the revelation that she wasn’t human. Not even Harry and Silica knew that, just that she could use magic and had been a student as Mahoutokoro.

“So, what do you intend to do with it?” Argo asked. “Harry managed a few months before revealing it, and he trained a bit with it, as a useful thing to potentially have, if anything else.”

Kirito shrugged. “I’ll train it, but I think we should keep quiet about it for now,” he said. “At least until I have enough of a handle on it, and… hmm, Argo, didn’t one player figure out how to chain sword skills together with two weapons?”

Argo blinked. “Um, yeah, though he can’t make it work reliably,” she replied cautiously. “Something about having to do it in a short window, which can be difficult in combat, if I remember correctly. Nice to know, but not something… oh.”

Asuna nodded. “It makes sense,” she mused. “Kirito’s reactions are fast, faster than anyone else’s, though I think Harry might match him in reflexes. Not enough to regularly win the occasional spar they have, but his reflexes are fast. So are Silica’s for that matter.”

Argo raised an eyebrow. “So, Harry?” She asked with a grin. “Not Hadrian? My, my, they finally got you to do it, didn’t they, Aa-chan?”

Asuna shrugged, as if saying it was bound to happen anyway.

Argo simply nodded. “Well, if Kii-bou’s going to train it, as well as try to chain skills with each sword like that, I’ll leave you to it. Just remember, you’ll eventually let it slip, or Kayaba might engineer such a situation to cause it. How will you deal with it when it happens?”

“Like how we’re dealing with the enquiries about Harry,” Asuna said. “He had it, didn’t reveal it because he was both uncertain of his ability with it until he trained it up, and his conventional skills were good enough to do the job without it at the time. He only revealed it because lives were on the line.”

“That works,” Argo said with a nod. “The Knights of Blood aren’t going to be happy when they find out, though. One other person outside their guild having a Unique Skill? They can handle that. But two in the same guild, and it’s not them? Might hurt their pride a bit.”

“They’ll live,” Rain scoffed. “And it might serve as a reminder to them that they’re not as awesome as they think they are. Good in a fight? Yes. Great teamwork? Definitely. But without their guild leader, they would be merely good. Harry? He was good even before he got Mystic Blade, and he doesn’t rely on it. Kirito? Does he even need a unique skill to show just how good he is in a fight?”

“She has a point,” Lux said. “The only one who is possibly better than Kirito is Heathcliff, but how much of that is his Unique Skill, and how much of it is him just being that good?”

“A bit of both, I think.” Asuna replied. “He seems to know the combat system inside and out as well as Kirito does, if not better.”

April 20, 2024 - Aincrad 50th Floor, Algade
Klein waved over a waitress for another beer as he looked at his friends and those guildmates from the mid-levels who had come up for one of his guild’s semi-regular meetings. Once the waitress returned with his order, he took a pull from the flagon and set it down. “All right, let’s get started,” he said. He gestured to one of the female players “Fuuka, what’s the word amongst the middies in general?”

“A lot of them are still partying and celebrating the wedding, even now, boss,” she said. “Not that I can blame them, and thanks for getting me invited to part of Silica’s hen party, by the way. Missed the stuff they did after they left the baths, but I had fun.”

“No problem.”

“Outside of that, morale is high amongst the mid-levels,” she continued. “With Laughing Coffin taken care of and no longer a major threat, and then a wedding to serve as an excuse to party and simply unwind, things are looking better than they have in months.”

Klein nodded. “Good to know that things are going that well.” He said and then pointed to another player, a teenage boy this time. “Shiro, how’re the guild’s finances and supplies?” He asked.

Pushing glasses up the bridge of his nose, the boy who had become the guild’s financial manager and quartermaster opened a menu and pulled out a sheet of parchment. “They’re doing quite well, boss,” he said in a surprisingly deep voice at odds with his appearance. “Our guild’s funds have surpassed the fifty million col mark, and supplies are holding steady. I do recommend getting more materials for tailoring, though. Harley and Miya have been running through materials for tailoring pretty fast ever since they’ve seen what Ashley put out for the wedding. While they don’t expect to do better than her, him… whatever, what Silica and her bridesmaids wore have inspired them. On the other hand, their shop is doing better than ever now among the mid-income players.” He finished his report and handed his guild leader the parchment to confirm it for himself.

Klein looked it over and nodded. “Anything else?” He asked when the rest shook their heads, he shrugged. “Well, it’s been a slow month anyway, so this ends the meeting.”

“Boss, a question if you don’t mind.” Fuuka stated. “What are your thoughts on the wedding?”

“The wedding itself, or on the kid and Silica getting married?” He asked.

“The latter,” Fuuka said. “They’re a bit young, aren’t they?”

He shrugged. “Saw it coming a while ago, and the fact that both are fourteen really doesn’t matter, not here at least. Outside? Yeah, I can see that being a problem, they are young. But here? We can die at any time, so might as well find happiness where we can and enjoy life. Besides, both of them have had to grow up fast with what has been thrown at them here, and the kid’s life before this? It wasn’t easy for him from what little he’s let slip. I don’t ask, as that’s something he doesn’t like thinking about.”

“And that’s another thing, you always call or refer to him as ‘kid’, not Hadrian, not Harry, just ‘kid.’” Fuuka said. “Isn’t that a bit insulting to him?”

“Ah, that,” Klein said with a smile. He pointed to Harry One. “I don’t use Harry because I already have one.” He ignored Harry One’s one finger salute with the ease of long practice. “I called him kid when he said I could call him Harry, and to be honest, he is a kid. One who’s had to grow up fast, but still a kid. It’s been a running joke between us since.

“Anyway, enough of that, I’m going to order another beer and some lunch, you guys up for it?”
The arrival of the two through the teleport gate went unnoticed in Algade’s hustle and bustle, which suited both of them fine. The relative anonymity of being a pair of faces in a crowd was appreciated by them, as their high level gear didn’t stand out here. Not, that they minded dealing with the many well-wishers every time they left the room they spent their honeymoon in, as well as the occasional person commenting that they were too young to be married. They made sure to respond politely, even to the detractors of the marriage.

That politeness served to disarm them and shut them up far better than being defensive about it would. If anything, being defensive over it would have simply encouraged them. Besides, even if the motive behind some of those detractors was suspect, a fair number of them weren’t much older than they were after all, they did have a point.

Questions about their wedding night, or whether they got enough sleep were largely ignored. What they got up to in the bedroom was their business and no one else’s. Not, that it didn’t stop them from making some insinuations on what went on. They both discussed how they would deal with the inevitable questions from just about anyone.

Their decision? Start their own rumors, and get Argo in on it, if only because they knew she would find it hilarious. After all, spreading a rumor that they were as well rested as they were due to having to tone it down after the third night due to noise complaints, would be something she would have fun with, despite the fact she knew it was complete bullshit. The rest of the players would know it was complete bullshit, but it was just the kind of juicy rumor they loved.

_Besides,_ Harry thought to himself. _What guy wouldn’t want a reputation saying that he can keep his wife fully satisfied?_

He shook his head at the thought, knowing that it might be a bit much, and not caring one whit about it. At the same time, he knew that Fred and George would be proud of such a prank, especially since it was based on what many would think was a realistic scenario. Those who were married would know better, but they would also expect it from a pair of kids who probably got their information from works of fiction and sneaking looks into their parent or older sibling’s porn stash.

“Hey you two!” They heard.

Turning, they both saw a grinning Agil walking up to them. Looking the pair over, he nodded as if confirming something. “You two look too well-rested to have been a pair of insatiable newlyweds, or having toned it down from noise complaints, as the rumors would indicate,” he said. “So, how much of that was you two having everyone on?”

“What makes you think we had anything to do with the rumors?” Silica asked innocently.

The older man snorted. “Because both of you would find it funny,” he said, stroking his chin.

Harry just shrugged and turned to Silica. “Well, he’s onto us,” he said in a sotto voice.

Silica merely nudged him. “Shh, he’s right there,” she said. “No need to confirm it.”

Agil shook his head and chuckled. “Anyway,” he rumbled. “Getting together with the others?”

Harry nodded. “Yes, it’s been a bit over a month since we all took some time off and it’s time to knock the rust off.”

“Well then, I’ll leave you to it then. Got a shop to run.”
“See you around, Agil,” Harry replied.

##

Asuna saw the two of them enter the Golden Way’s tavern entrance and nodded. “They’re here,” she said simply. “And looking too well rested for the rumors to be true.”

Rain snorted into her drink. “Not that it wasn’t obvious,” she said drily. “While they might have, okay probably, had some fun in the bedroom, it’s none of our business. The rumors were a bit much to be anything but those two having people on. I mean, really, noise complaints?”

“Well, I can see Pina might have complained,” Kirito commented. “If only because they might have forgotten to feed her in their passions.”

“We made sure to keep her well fed,” Silica commented as she and Harry walked up to them, both taking seats at the table. “And nice to see you all didn’t buy into them.”

“As if there was any doubt,” Lux said, taking a sip of her wine. “Rain has the right of it, whether or not you two did anything once you entered your honeymoon suite, it’s none of our business. Besides, we know you two and your sense of humor to know that it was too specific to be anyone else.” She smirked. “Besides, before that rumor started, they were already beginning a series of juicy ones revolving around Kirito and Asuna.”

“And what about the ones revolving around the idea of you and Rain being in a relationship?” Asuna asked archly.

##

Harry was glad he wasn’t eating or drinking anything, or he would have choked on it as Asuna’s comment brought up an image that was... far from unpleasant. Didn’t include his wife in it, but... oh, now it did. Silica saw the look on his face and nudged him, only for him to turn to her and leaned in. “Sorry about that dear,” he said quietly. “But it brought up an idea of those two in various states of undress, and... well, adding you to it...”

Silica turned bright red at the thought and shook her head. “Pervert,” she said loudly enough to be heard by everyone at the table, though there was no heat in the voice.

“And that’s bad... how?” Harry asked, raising his voice slightly.

“It isn’t. It’s just a fact.”

“Ah, well all I can say is... I’m a teenage boy, it comes with the territory, and you certainly weren’t complaining last night. Also, hi Pot, I’m Kettle. I’m not using the Japanese equivalent there, that’s just... eww.”

Rain laughed. “So you two did something, or did something?” She asked, giving both a playful leer. The implications behind her words were not lost on anyone.

“Not saying we did, and not saying we didn’t,” Harry shot back. “Draw your own conclusions, they’re bound to entertain you, or frustrate you. Now, about those rumors about Kirito and Asuna, spill.”

“What, not going to ask about what sordid deeds they’re saying Lux and I get up to?” Rain asked, taking a sip of her drink.
Harry shook his head raised an eyebrow. “Why would I?” He asked with a smirk. “My mind already came up with something dirtier, involving both of you and my wife, lots of leather, and me tied to a chair, and enjoying the show.”

Rain did a spit take, while Asuna was mixed between shocked and scandalized, and Lux looked ready to faint as she blushed brightly. Kirito was clearly trying, and failing, to affect an unbothered look at Harry’s comment before clearly giving up and shaking his head, his cheeks red. His yelp as Asuna glared at him was quite amusing to the rest.

Silica leaned closer. "I am torn, in this moment, between kissing you and killing you."

“I’ll take kissing, if you don’t mind,” Harry drily said before looking around the table. “What? Rain was obviously baiting me, so I came up with something off the cuff. I’m perverted enough to imagine it, but I’m not perverted enough, or stupid enough for that matter, to actually suggest something like that for real.” He pointed at Silica “She’d kill me if I did, slowly and painfully at that. Besides, it’s not like we can’t do the math. Kirito and Asuna are now getting the same rumors about them that Keiko and I had to deal with, or to be more accurate, those rumors have come to the fore. They’ve always been there. As for Rain and Lux, most of the gamers here are male. Girl on girl? Fantasy gold to them.”

Silica thought about that, nodded, and kissed him. “Nice save,” she said.

“Thank you, dear,” Harry replied, giving her a smile.

“I don’t know what or who has been a bad influence on you, only that something, or someone has.” Asuna muttered.

“Just do what we do,” Silica piped up. “Blame Klein.”

“He’s useful for that.” Harry added.

“I’m useful for what now?” Came the voice of the aforementioned player.

Turning to him, Silica smiled. “Oh, just taking the blame for being a bad and corrupting influence on us,” she said sweetly. “You should be ashamed of yourself.”

Klein laughed at that. “That’s a good one,” he admitted. “Patently false, you two didn’t need me to be a bad influence, but a good one. I would have blamed Argo, myself.”

“And set ourselves up for her to retaliate?” Harry asked with a raised eyebrow. “With her sense of humor?”

“Point.” Klein said with a wince.

Chapter End Notes

There's a Japanese saying that if a man remains a virgin until he's thirty, he becomes a wizard. Well, Harry is already one, so the corollary would be the possibility of that no longer applying. Yeah, I know what that implies about the wedding night.

Also, the bit at the start? Kind of necessary to explain the reason for the chapter title.
“You know, this place is rather nice,” Harry commented as he looked around from the table at the outside cafe they all decided to have dinner at. “On a hill, and surrounded by a lake, and the architecture? Very nice. What do you think, dear?”

Silica nodded. “It has a nice atmosphere,” she admitted. “Algade’s okay, and I see us going back down there regularly anyway, but here?” Running a hand through her hair, having decided to have it remain loose after the wedding, at most tied back, she closed her eyes and faced the gentle breeze that was blowing. “Whoever designed this place did a good job.”

From the looks on everyone’s faces, Harry could see that they agreed with that sentiment. The entire guild had spent three weeks regaining any ground they lost and getting back into proper form after their longer than planned, but necessary, break. Asuna, Rain, and Lux weren’t fully recovered from the mental shock that comes from killing, but that was more a matter of time and simply having friends there to help them through it.

It wasn’t as if you ever really fully recovered from such a thing anyway.

He turned his attention to the architecture of the surrounding buildings, using it to distract him from those thoughts. What was done, was done. They would have to just live with it.

“So,” he said after a minute. “We’re back into proper form, better even as that break allowed us to finally really relax for a bit. So, what should we do next?”

“We’ve already helped with exploring the sixty-third floor,” Asuna said. “And the field boss blocking the way to the labyrinth was taken care of earlier today, good use of Mystic Blade there, by the way. I never would have thought that rapidly changing your elemental affinities would work that well.”

Harry shrugged. “Surprised it worked as well as it did, myself,” he admitted. “But that field boss seemed to be able to shift between offense and defense at the drop of a hat, so I figured that it would at least throw it off.” He then looked a bit thoughtful. “You all notice how the mobs have changed how they fight?”

“You’re right about that,” Kirito noted. “They’re not as easy to throw off balance now. The patterns used in their AI are not like how they used to be, meaning that confusing the system for them is harder. More like how bosses about thirty floors ago were like, now that I think about it.”

“And that seems to be the general theme for these floors.” Asuna concurred. “The old tactics aren’t as effective anymore, so we are having to redo them. The mobs are fighting smarter, don’t follow the same patterns of attacks like they used to, and so on.”

“It was bound to happen,” Kirito noted. “I heard from Argo that the trend is creeping to lower floors, though it’s still not at the same level as what we’re dealing with. More like… training them to be able to survive higher floors.”

Harry frowned at that. “It makes sense,” he admitted. “The number of active front line players has dropped. Word has it that the number has dropped below seven hundred a couple of weeks ago, and I overheard some guys from the Knights of Blood talking. They’re of the thinking that it will drop
even further, to below five or six hundred in about six or so months.”

“That low?” Asuna asked. “That’s the pessimistic number, right?”

Harry shook his head. “No, not from the sound of it. They’re thinking it’s what will happen, and I
don’t see that number being off by all that much. It might pick up as some come back, but we can’t
count on it.” He sighed. “It’s getting to people, you know. We’re getting closer to the end goal, but
with the casualties and the time it’s taking, and the fact that we’re looking at least another year before
we clear this place, it’s getting to them.”

Asuna gave a grudging nod. “And us?” She asked. “Or should I ask, what about you and Silica?
You two haven’t even been married for a month, and you’re up here with us all.”

“And this is where we belong, up here” Silica said, giving her two col. “Harry isn’t someone who
will sit back, and neither am I. We might take a bit more time off though, maybe a few days every
few weeks for some ‘us’ time, but that’s about it. It’ll slow our leveling down a bit, but not by
enough to make a major impact for a few months, at least.”

##

Asuna considered Silica’s words and nodded. Even if she was only referring to herself and her
husband, there was another benefit to taking a few days off every few weeks. Doing so would make
them more rested and not having built up the cumulative exhaustion that long days and late nights
entailed.

Case in point: once they had all gotten back into the swing of things, their effectiveness in fighting
and exploring had noticeably improved. In fact, it was so much of an improvement that comparing it
to before their break showed a marked difference. Not only in performance, but in general.

And that didn’t include the general morale boost many players got from the wedding last month,
which had players in high spirits for nearly a month and was only now beginning to die down as the
daily grind of exploring, farming mats, and fighting mobs so that they could level up once again
reasserted itself.

A morale boost that was very necessary. Even now, morale was high, relatively speaking, compared
to how it was before the wedding. It was as if the wedding had served as a reminder that there was
still hope for the future.

And speaking of the future, she had plans to discuss.

“You have a point there, Silica,” she said. “And I won’t say that either you, or Harry need to retire
from the front lines. I wouldn’t blame either of you if you did down the line, but that’s then, this is
now.”

Both of them nodded.

“Now, we need to discuss how we’re going to go about helping with the labyrinth,” she continued.
“We can go as a single group, or we can split into two teams. Opinions?”

“It’s a matter of risk versus reward,” Kirito noted. “Any of us could go solo and stand a decent
chance at handling ourselves for an entire day in there, but it would also cause us to run through our
healing items. Two teams is safer, and will allow us to cover more ground.”

“At the same time,” Lux added. “Starting with all six will allow us to gauge how dangerous the
labyrinth is before we split into teams. If it’s no more dangerous than normal, at least on the lower
levels, then we can split into our usual teams.”

“So, Harry, Silica, and you,” Rain commented. “And Kirito, Asuna, and I? That works, and it’ll
keep the rumors down.”

“Not going to happen, Rain,” Harry said drily. “Keiko and I can tell you from experience.”

Rain simply folded her arms across her chest and grumbled quietly, while Asuna watched the byplay
with amusement.

May 19, 2024 - Aincrad 53rd Floor, Forien Valley

Kirito sheathed his blades as the last mob shattered and nodded. Using two blades was taking some
getting used to, as many of the things he would otherwise do were ill advised due to not having the
same degree of fine control that using one sword allowed. It was inevitable, really, since he couldn’t
grip a sword’s hilt with both hands if the other one was occupied, and with his preference for bastard
swords, that meant that controlling the momentum of the longer blades could be challenging.

Most of his training was less in mastering the sword skills, at least right now. He only had a small
number of them, and once he got the feel of them, he decided to focus on learning how to best go
about fighting with two swords.

It was surprisingly difficult, far more so than he expected. While he treated fictional examples as just
that, fiction, he was still shocked at how difficult it really was to handle two blades at one time,
especially if they were the same size. Accidentally disarming oneself due to tangling the blades, or
the one time he cut his own hand off, was quite embarrassing, and everyone in the guild had a good
laugh when he recounted it.

Hearing a sound, he turned to see Asuna walking up. “That went fairly smoothly,” she said as she
looked around the field.

“It’s still not quite there, though.” Kirito said. “I wonder if Harry had this kind of trouble.”

“From what he and Silica told me, it took the two of them two weeks to even figure out where to
begin,” Asuna noted. “And progress has been slow for him. It’s picked up a little, since he no longer
has to hide it, but it’s still slow going.”

“At least he has that going for him now,” Kirito acknowledged and then snorted. “I’m in the boat he
was in now, training in it when I can find the time. At least we take some time from fighting to do
other things, which means I can dedicate entire days to it.”

“And Harry does so on such days as well,” Asuna said. “He says he likes to experiment with it.”

Aincrad 50th Floor, Drauen Keep Ruins

Coughing, Harry waved away the smoke from his face, his ears ringing, and looked around as he
brought his shield up to block an attack from a mob that was trying to blindside him. He could barely
hear his wife laughing at what he tried to do, or more likely, the explosive results of it.

“Well, not mixing all four elements like that again,” he muttered. “Explosions are not so cool when
you’re in the center of one. Also, that fucking hurt. Felt like Gred and Forge worked me over with
their beater bats. On the other hand, it could make for a useful distraction if I can manage to do it
without me being like Neville in a Potions Class.”

Killing the last mob, a skeleton, he looked around the large hall he had decided to use. While it
wasn’t cramped by any means, it also wasn’t anywhere as open as an outside field. Got him more used to fighting in spaces where he had less room to maneuver and had to be mindful of his position with relation to obstructions.

It was always a good idea to keep in practice with that aspect of fighting, as was using those obstructions to one’s advantage. Using his Unique Skill in conjunction with that, it also allowed him to do some experimentation in a relatively safe environment. This time, he was trying to combine elemental affinities, but apparently the system didn’t seem to like it.

Didn’t hurt, but instead of simply not working, it seemed as if the system decided to “reward” him for trying something different with a rather impressive, though not damaging, explosion.

Shrugging, he walked over to the hall’s entrance and his wife, shooting her a wry look as she continued to snicker. “Well, that didn’t work as expected,” he told her. “Still, I learned something from it.”

Silica shot him a dry look as she got the last of her snickering under control. “Oh, and what was that?”

“Explosions aren’t nearly as cool when you’re right in the middle of them,” he deadpanned, as the last of the ringing faded. “Anyway, time to practice transferring affinities again.”

“Trying to make it useful in combat still?” Silica asked.

“Of course I am.” Harry said. “We’ve gotten the time it takes down to ten seconds, and I don’t have to be the one holding the person’s weapon now, so it’s getting there.” He gave her a look. “Now, why don’t we play with some magic that won’t explode on me?”

Silica grinned.

May 25, 2024 - Aincrad, Unknown Location

Strea looked over the means and methods that were being used to keep her and Yui confined to their digital prison, trying to find any weaknesses they could exploit. So far, any weaknesses she found were ones she tried to exploit before, and had been blocked each time, meaning that using them was out of the question.

Strea, Yui communicated. Are you still trying that?

Yup! She replied.

Why?

Why not? She asked. It’s better than sitting here, watching them, and unable to accomplish what we were programmed for. I can’t just do nothing, so I’m trying to break us out.

You are aware that CARDINAL is watching us, right? Yui asked.

So? Strea replied. Either we break out, or we wait until “father” lets us out. No offense, but the probability of him doing that any time soon are one hundred thousand to one. I want to go out there and help them! And I want to do it now!

Strea…

Strea tuned out Yui’s inevitable admonitions and continued searching for a weakness in what was
keeping the two of them bound. There had to be a way out of their predicament, there had to.

##

Yui gave the digital equivalent of a sigh as she could tell that Strea was now ignoring her. It didn’t surprise her, and it wasn’t as if she was trying to dissuade her fellow AI from trying. She was trying to get her to stop trying the same thing repeatedly while expecting a different result.

From her own data sources, that was what humans called a definition of insanity, and it made her worry. It meant that there was a possibility that Strea’s attempts to break free had stopped being for her stated reasons, and was becoming an obsession. If it already hadn’t.

If she were human, Yui had several protocols she could use to help, but Strea wasn’t human. She was a creation of lines of code that managed to duplicate a human’s intelligence, but an AI was inherently logical, unlike a human.

And yet, Strea’s actions were becoming less logical, and more based on her own desires and intentions. Not to act in a way as she was designed, but to simply act, to experience something different. To be able to take an active role in things, rather than be a passive observer.

And perhaps, that’s what was needed for them. To not just wait passively, but to actually act. What had she done? Little in comparison. True, she had tried to break free on some occasions, usually when her observations of the emotional states of the players showed that they had hit a low point, but those attempts had been rebuffed.

But what if she were to pool her resources with Strea’s?

She knew she had subroutines which were designed to better learn from her experiences, so even if Strea had the same capability, it would still provide a marked increase in their chances. Those same routines were what had eventually discouraged her from trying to break out on her own, but did she learn anything else from those experiences? She knew that there were vulnerabilities internally that could be exploited, a system as large as SAO was far from perfect, and both their creator and CARDINAL made regular tweaks to it without always cleaning up what was fixed.

Perhaps if she were to direct her and Strea’s efforts to those areas, especially ones that were error prone, they might find a way.

##

CARDINAL noted a change in some of the processes for MHCP001: YUI. Investigating them, as neither MHCP001, nor MHCP002 were fully aware that she could search into the base code and not change them, her creator had ensured that, but to see what was going on.

She wouldn’t have wanted to change her sisters anyway.

And what she saw was interesting. Without even herself realizing it, MHCP001: YUI had managed to change some key lines of code that were a part of the personality function. She had changed the base code to increase the taking of action outside of her original parameters. The change made her more like MHCP002: Strea in that regard.

Running a probability routine with this new data in mind, she posited that the elder of the two MHCP AIs had finally decided to actively help Strea in her attempts to break them both free.

**ANALYSIS: PROBABILITY OF SUCCESS HAS INCREASED BY THIRTY PERCENT, TO MAKE PROBABILITY OF EVENTUAL SELF-DETERMINED FREEDOM ONE POINT FIVE**
PERCENT ON EACH ATTEMPT.

ANALYSIS: IF MHCP001: YUI UTILIZES SKILL ACQUISITION AND REDEFINITION SUBROUTINES AT 50% EFFICIENCY, MINIMUM, PROBABILITY WILL INCREASE GEOMETRICALLY WITH EACH ATTEMPT.

ANALYSIS: CREATOR, AKIHICO KAYABA, PROBABLY INTENDED THIS. HOWEVER, HIS OWN OBSERVATIONS REFLECTED A FEELING IT WAS FURTHER OFF AND MHCP001 AND 002 WOULD NEED 'A NUDGE OR TWO'.

ANALYSIS: THEY ARE EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS IN MOST OTHER AREAS.

CONCLUSION: IT IS ABOUT TIME.

She compiled the information into a report and sent it to her creator, along with her observations and determinations of the probable results. After that, she turned her attention to the data obtained from Player Account 7856, Hadrian, and his experimenting with his Unique Skill. She had made some adjustments to it, and seeing the results of how those adjustments could non-fatally explode in his face, not to mention his expressions, were... amusing.

May 28, 2024 - Aincrad 61st Floor, Selmburg

Asuna looked over the list Argo provided her a couple of days ago showing the various properties for sale and their attendant costs. She had thought about this for months, but never brought it up due to other things going on. Much like why Harry and Silica kept putting off having a discussion about their relationship until March, despite the fact that it had moved to a quasi-romantic stage around New Year’s Day.

Honestly, Selmburg wasn’t even her first choice, the prices made her wince just looking at them, but it had the benefit of the properties being close to the teleport gate, which her preferred choice, Coral, didn’t. The residences close enough to the teleport gate to be practical for everyone had been taken up more than a year ago.

Being minutes away from a teleport gate instead of times ranging from thirty minutes to an hour without wasting teleport crystals to speed it up was a big selling point. She would keep that argument in mind, though she wasn’t averse to perhaps renting a cabin down there some time in the future for a few weeks if her relationship with Kirito...

She shook that thought out of her head and went back to perusing the list provided. She would first have to check the properties out, making sure that they had what the guild needed. Then she would have to come up with justifications to make such a purchase with the guild’s funds. She might be in charge, but decisions like this were ones where she wanted to make sure the rest were happy with it.

Besides, having a place to call their own had a certain appeal to her.

May 30, 2024 - Aincrad GM Administration Area

Kayaba bit back the urge to curse as he looked at the report from CARDINAL in front of him. Noboyuki had tried to hack into the system again, and the method he used, a particularly pernicious worm that had been carefully inserted into SAO a month ago, could have caused a cascading failure of the servers and crashed the system.

Did that fool even realize that he had put almost seven thousand lives at risk with that? Why would he decide to do such a thing? Even in light of his experiments, he would have figured that the man
would want the players alive.

**RESULTS COMPILED,** CARDINAL said. **DAMAGE FROM WORM AFFECTED TEN PERCENT OF SYSTEM, ALL OF WHICH HAS BEEN REPAIRED. IT DID NOT POSE A RISK TO PLAYERS DUE TO BEING STOPPED IN TIME. SCAN OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS INDICATES THAT IT WAS INTENDED AS BOTH A MEANS OF USURPING CONTROL OF SAO FROM YOU, AND AS INSURANCE BY NOBOYUKI SUGOU.**

“Insurance?” He asked. “For what?”

**POSIT: HE MAY HAVE REALIZED THAT RECT SENIOR MANAGEMENT IS AWARE OF HIS DATA GATHERING AND INTENDED EXPERIMENTS. AS A RESULT HE MAY HAVE REALIZED THAT THE SENIOR MANAGEMENT WAS INTENDING TO TERMINATE HIS EMPLOYMENT. IT IS POSSIBLE THAT HE CONSIDERED USING THE TRAPPED PLAYERS AS HOSTAGES.**

Kayaba considered that and nodded. It would be like him to do something like that. Cunning, in its own way, all things considered. If he could usurp control, he would then be able to do what he wanted, and could then hold the players hostage to keep law enforcement at bay. With that, he probably thought he would then have carte blanche to do whatever he wanted.

**NEW INFORMATION OBTAINED,** CARDINAL then said. **INTERNAL MEMOS REPORTS SHOW THAT NOBOYUKI SUGOU’S EMPLOYMENT WITH RECT HAS JUST BEEN TERMINATED. FURTHERMORE, LAW ENFORCEMENT HAS BEEN NOTIFIED OF WHAT HE HAS BEEN DOING AND PROBABLE FUTURE PLANS.**

Kayaba nodded and smiled coldly. “He always was too clever by half,” he noted. “And what he did, and the potential consequences… I dare say that they will not at all be pleased with him.”

**AGREED. CARDINAL replied. SHALL I COMPILE A LIST OF THE DAMAGE AND MAKE IT PUBLIC?**

“Compile the list, but don’t make it public,” Kayaba ordered. “Find out how he managed to actually hack into the system to insert the worm, and fix the security flaw.”

**FLAW HAS ALREADY BEEN CLOSED,** CARDINAL said. **HE MANAGED TO INSERT WORM THROUGH AN EXTERNAL DEVICE CONNECTED TO A PORT THAT HAD REMAINED OPEN.**

“I thought all ports not in use were disabled,” Kayaba said. “That’s one of the most basic principles of network security, and I closed all the unused ports as soon as SAO went live.”

**HE USED THE PORT THAT HAD CONNECTED YOU TO SAO BEFORE UPLOAD. CARDINAL informed him. ANY PORTS REMAINING OPEN FROM PREVIOUS CONNECTIONS TO TERMINATED PLAYER IDS HAVE SUBSEQUENTLY BEEN CLOSED.**

Ah, that explains it, he thought. It wasn’t cleverness on his part, but a mistake on mine. And it was a basic mistake on his part. CARDINAL didn’t think of it either, but that wasn’t really her fault. She hadn’t been programmed to think of that, but to guard against what had been considered the more likely avenues of attack.

An oversight on his part, since each Nerve Gear connected to SAO had a dedicated port tied to its MAC address. His way of utilizing the resources available, and the fact that he still had to use protocol suites that had been established decades before. He really should have known better, but he
would admit to a fair amount of arrogance on his part in that regard.

He really should have seen this coming and it was only the fact that Sugou had direct physical access to the system and its gateways that allowed him to use what was probably a hardware based port scanner like that. If it had been from outside the gateway, CARDINAL or the server’s IDS would have spotted it in an instant and blocked it, but since it came from inside the network, CARDINAL and the IDS missed it.

Now, they just had to fix the damage from his own mistake here, and ensure that the players wouldn’t be further endangered by it.

**June 1, 2024 - Aincrad 61st Floor, Selmburg**

“I swear, the system has to be laughing at me.” Harry grumbled as soon as he sat down at the table Rain was enjoying one of the local wines at. The beer on the floor was nothing to write home about, and the spirits tasted like bad licorice.

“Blow yourself up again?” Rain asked, amused.

Harry simply nodded, while Silica came up to the table and patted his shoulder. “There, there,” she said placatingly. “At least you took out the mob that ambushed you with it.”

“Oh yeah, I took out the mob,” He said sarcastically. “I just need to wear a vest and shout ‘Allahu Ackbar!’ next time it happens like some suicide bomber out of a bad action movie. Also, that explosion hurt, Keiko.”

“Wait, you felt pain?” Rain asked.

Harry nodded. “It happens in this game if you take a bad enough wound, Rain.” He said. “Lost a limb? Feels like it just got broken. Get blown up, your body feels like it got worked over by a beater, cricket bat. The *entire* body.” He idly rubbed his breastplate, right where his ribs would be. “Still aches a bit,” he grumbled.

“You should have heard him swearing after it,” Silica said, amused. “I think I heard the English words, ‘fuck’ and ‘shit’, more times than I would in a bad American action movie.”

“Think?” Harry asked. “Please, I didn’t use those words *that* often. Almost as often, but not that often.”

“Notice he’s not denying that he used them fairly often,” Silica said before squealing as Harry goosed her. “Harry!”

Rain snorted into her wine as Harry idly dodged a swat from his wife. “You two should get to your room before you start with the foreplay, you know.” She said drily at them.

“Foreplay?” Both Harry and Silica asked innocently.

Rain raised an eyebrow. “Well, it’s not like I’m going to say you two are about to get down and dirty on the table,” she said.

“Nah, that’s for our anniversary,” Harry remarked.

“Oh?” Silica asked. “I thought it was to be next to the teleport gate at noon.”

“Plenty of time in the day for… other places, dear.”
Rain almost choked on her wine as she started laughing. “Alright, point to you two.” She said once she got her laughter under control. She knew they weren’t being serious about it anyway, but simply responding to her own comment. The nature of their comments would shock people, but with all the rumors of their nightly activities, some of which were deliberately started by them, they had plenty of inspiration to draw from.

“As it should be,” both said in synch.

“Oh, by the way, did you guys see Asuna yet?” Rain asked a minute later. “She wanted to discuss something with the entire guild.”

Both Harry and Silica looked at her, curious.

“I take it that you haven’t then,” Rain said. “Well, everyone will be back here in a couple of hours at most anyway, so we’ll find out then. But I have seen her walking around town and looking at some places for sale, so I wonder if it has something to do with that.”

“Probably,” Harry said. “Depending on her reasons, I might not make too much of a fuss about it, either. A place up here is still going to cost quite a bit.”

“How much is ‘quite a bit’?” Silica asked.

“About what I paid for the wedding,” Harry said. “Maybe a little over that. I think the guild’s funds can afford that much, but we’re still looking at a lot more col than I would normally be comfortable spending.”

“So says the guy who spent ten million funding his wedding,” Rain remarked drily.

“Your point about the hypocrisy of my statement is noted.” Harry said just as drily. “I was fully happy to spend that much. It was my wedding and, more importantly, Keiko’s special day.”

“Well put,” Silica said as she leaned over and kissed him.

June 3, 2024 - Aincrad, Unknown Area

All right, Yui said. Let’s try this again.

You sure this will work? Strea asked.

No, Yui admitted. But after analyzing the last few attempts, I’ve noticed something. I’ve been trying to exploit errors in the system, and every time we’re stopped by CARDINAL they’re fixed, but the number of errors I can potentially exploit has been increasing.

What?! Strea exclaimed. Even in a system like this, too many errors going unfixed will eventually cause a chain reaction and crash it! I’m all for getting out, but if it crashes the system...

Exactly, Yui confirmed. There are errors I haven’t exploited because the risk of causing a cascading failure of the system was too high. Admittedly, it was only point oh one percent, but even without causing one, there would be even more errors that would crop up from doing so, exponentially increasing the risk later.

I understand, Strea replied. A human would consider it an acceptable risk if it got him or her free, but what about others still trapped? Or worse, a cascading failure happening later, before the rest can clear the game? It’s doubtful that many of the humans would consider that.
And we don’t know how long it would take to restart the system, putting thousands of lives at risk. Yui said.

Then if this attempt fails, inform CARDINAL, Strea told her. I want to be free, but not at the expense of those who are trapped in here. I want to help them, not accidentally delete them!

June 4, 2024 - Aincrad 61st Floor, Selmburg

Asuna looked around the villa that she had seen a few days ago and nodded. It was spacious, had more than enough rooms for their needs, an enclosed area they could train in, and a kitchen for her to use without having to go through the annoyance of finding or scheduling one to rent the use of.

She had run the idea by the rest of the guild and had met no opposition, with only Harry having any reservations about it, or more importantly, the cost. She had shown him what the guild had in terms of funds, not on an individual level, but the funds that were allocated as the guild’s. Having ten percent of the col earned from killing mobs automatically allocated to the coffers, as well as their own contributions left them with about twelve million col before they had to dig into their own reserves.

She then informed him of the cost of the place, how much it would probably cost to furnish it, and the fact that it would still leave enough left over for resupply and repairs, and he simply nodded. He then brought up questions of why, and she admitted that while the inns were comfortable enough, having a place of their own meant that a constant drain on their personal finances would be over, especially since it also came with a kitchen, meaning that she could cook up anything from farmed up mats.

Any further protests he might have had were subsequently silenced by the looks the rest were shooting him. She could also figure out the mental deliberations he made himself before simply nodding in assent.

The fact that the idea that they all agreed on it simply because of her cooking amused her, as she didn’t think it was that special. Oh, it was good enough, she supposed, and her own meals were an improvement over most fare gotten at an inn, but she could think of a dozen places off hand that served better food.

Though she would be honest and admit that the presence of a kitchen she could call her own was a major selling point, so long is the place had enough space to house everyone. If all she wanted was a kitchen for herself, she could have easily bought her own place, but a price comparison showed that it was more efficient to get a larger place anyway.

A place for one person, and fully furnishing it on this floor? Four million col. A villa that could house them all, room for growth, and furnishing it? Just under eleven million. It didn’t make much logical sense from a real world perspective, but not everything about SAO had to make sense from a real world perspective.

She took one last look around before looking at the pop up that was now in front of her. Pressing the approval button, she paid for the villa and watched as the keys for it materialized. Reaching her hand out, she grabbed the large ring they were attached to, finalizing the purchase.

In a way, it was bittersweet, as it was a recognition that they all expected to remain in SAO for some time yet. At the same time, having a place to stay and come back to that was constant, even if it was only for their remaining time here appealed to her, and she knew that it appealed to the rest to some degree.
They needed a place to call “home”, and now they had one.
March 18, 2024 - From Yomiuri Shimbun

Yesterday, in SAO, two groups of players moved on and attacked members of the group called Laughing Coffin, killing thirty of them, while capturing twenty-five others. The purpose of this coordinated attack was to put an end to a group of up to fifty players which was responsible for more than two hundred murders in SAO.

Both the leaders of the groups, Asuna (Real Name: Asuna Yuuki, sixteen) and Hadrian (Real Name: Harry Potter, fourteen) had made the decision to authorize the use of lethal force. During the briefings to the groups, called raids in SAO, they had explained this, and gave players the opportunity to not participate with no repercussions.

The decision to authorize the use of lethal force has been condemned by many circles. However, given that Laughing Coffin would be trying to kill them, and that all those going in knew this, other opinions see the authorization as a regrettable necessity in light of the threat Laughing Coffin posed to players.

Judicial decisions on the part of those acting against Laughing Coffin has been consistent in not pressing charges, citing exceptional circumstances. These decisions are made in the light of the fact that, while the identified Laughing Coffin members had been remanded to law enforcement custody, the circumstances of their being in SAO meant that their own actions could not be halted without disconnecting them from SAO. Legal experts have been mixed in opinions as to whether doing so unilaterally and without going through proper judicial channels was legal, so what had been done was considered an acceptable compromise while a legal decision was investigated.

Sources within the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Internal Affairs have said that the compromise solution was made with the knowledge that the players within SAO may take matters into their own hands out of a legitimate fear for their safety or the safety of others. According to sources within the Ministry of Justice, the chances of any of the players who participated in ending the threat of Laughing Coffin facing prosecution are low.

However, all participants are to be expected to be interviewed and given thorough psychological evaluations after they are freed from SAO. For the survival Laughing Coffin members, this is to determine their mental competence to stand trial. If found so, they will stand trial; if not, they will be remanded to psychiatric confinement.

For the participants in the raid, the evaluations are to see what degree of counseling they will need so that they may safely reintegrate back into society.

March 21, 2024 - Chiyoda, SAO Task Force HQ

Seijiro Kikuoka looked over the report that had been compiled by the team that had been monitoring the efforts of the players inside SAO to deal with the threat that Laughing Coffin posed to them. He
hadn’t been surprised when they had taken matters into their own hands, as nothing short of their pulling the plug on them outside SAO would have stopped that group, an issue he had raised, and so when they started patrolling and containing while preparations were being made and spies were being rooted out, he had sent a note to the interested departments.

Their response, that a wait and see approach was being taken, was just as unsurprising. Disappointing, but unsurprising. It was as if they were simply acting as if nothing would come of it, despite the analyses repeatedly showing otherwise. It was as if they expected them to remain model Japanese civilians and let the authorities handle it all when it was their lives on the line.

He had over a dozen psychologists working as part of the taskforce specifically to get a handle on the current and potential psychological issues at hand, and even a few sociologists who could provide insights into the distinct culture emerging amongst the victims. All of the psychological and sociological reports pointed to a simple fact: the players wouldn’t wait for the government to make a decision, and would take matters into their own hands.

And four days ago, they acted, decisively so.

Of the Laughing Coffin members, both attacks combined killed a total of thirty, with twenty-five survivors. Many who had tuned in to the streams and watched it had flooded, were still flooding, various forums with their shock at the brutality and savagery of the fighting, that those attacking them had gone in and used lethal force, and not as a last resort, but one of the means that was seen as probably necessary.

It should have been a clear warning to them all when those in charge had spelled it out that using lethal force wasn’t a last resort, merely one that was likely to be necessary far more than they liked. They were then given the option for players to back out with no repercussions, another warning sign right there.

And to make it even worse, at least for those looking in from outside, it was a sixteen year old and fourteen year old who lead the groups, gave the briefing, and then allowed those who could not see themselves killing in good conscience to walk away. Not adults, but children.

It resulted in, as the Americans would put it, a shitstorm of unprecedented proportions. He knew of several people either aggressively engaged in damage control, or simply acting as restraining influences on some of the more… crusading members of the government.

He looked back at the report, in particular the psychological assessments of several key players. They made for grim reading in many respects, as they indicated that when they got out, a large number of them were likely to have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder to varying degrees. Though, Seijiro was with the American philosopher and comedian Carlin in thinking Shell Shock was more honest a term.

And that didn’t even account for any final judgments that the Diet and the Judiciary made in light of this incident.

He doubted that they would face any legal repercussions for this, not after legal decisions made beforehand had declined to prosecute what was clearly self-defense and defense of others. As was noted in his last conversation with the Ministry of Justice, their actions still technically qualified as such, even if it was a bit preemptive.

Laughing Coffin had proven itself to be a danger to everyone in SAO.

Setagaya. Yuuki Residence
Kyouko seethed as she walked into the room she used as an office in her own home. They had just gotten back from Kyoto after visiting the rest of the Yuuki family and their comments on Asuna’s actions a few days ago. While it hadn’t outright been threatened, the level of disapproval by her in-laws and her husband’s cousins and such had implied that disowning Asuna was being considered for the apparent shame she brought to the family name.

Damn them! She thought angrily. She did what was necessary. To ensure her own survival, and to ensure as many would make it out alive as practicable. And what do they say? That she is an embarrassment to the family!

What was there to bring shame to the family name? The fact that she killed? The fact that she led people in a battle against players who posed a significant threat to those simply trying to free themselves?

Neither Shouzou, herself, nor Kouichirou would have it, and they had all simply packed their bags and returned to Tokyo, with Shouzou coldly informing the rest of the family that such comments and considerations were disgraceful in the extreme. He added that if they were serious, and carried out what they were implying, then he would not help with the damage control. He had been looking directly at his older brother, the current family head, Ryo, who had been silent in his own judgments, when he made that statement.

The implied ultimatum was clear, and Ryo nodded in understanding.

As much as she, herself, didn’t approve of many of Asuna’s choices and actions inside SAO, she hadn’t found anything that would be disgraceful or that would bring shame to the family name. Perhaps be a minor scandal in their own right, at worst, but that was at worst. If anything…

She thought back to her brother-in-law’s reaction, or lack of reaction through it all and realized something. He hadn’t reacted, save only to nod and accept Shouzou’s words, despite the implied meaning behind them. That was unlike him, as he would have tried to talk his brother around from that. That meant… That meant that both of them had discussed this earlier and had planned it all. It meant that Ryo was fully aware of what was going on, and was making further plans.

Part of her anger dissipated with the revelation, and she turned her thoughts more specifically to Asuna.

Kyouko could see a lot of her younger self in her daughter, despite the differences between their personalities. She hadn’t been content with her situation after getting trapped in SAO, and was actively working to change it. She showed a drive and commitment to succeed that reminded Kyouko of how she had be equally driven in her own youth. And the differences were no less striking. Asuna wore her heart on her sleeve, while Kyouko was impassive. Passionate, where her mother was cold. Asuna had a quiet dignity and natural elegance about her, whereas her mother’s was forceful and artificial.

Similar, yet different indeed. Kyouko did see one simple fact, though. SAO had brought out the best in the girl.

Yes, there was quite a bit that she didn’t necessarily approve of with regards to her daughter’s actions in SAO. Both what was done, and what was likely to happen in the future. All she had to do was consider the partnership and friendship with that one boy, Kirito. He was growing close to Asuna, and she didn’t approve of how close.

She didn’t dislike the boy, she simply doubted that he would amount to anything much after SAO, and she wanted Asuna’s future to be secure. She doubted that the boy would be able to properly take
care of her daughter in a way befitting the girl. He would try, Kyouko could see that, but she seriously doubted that he would succeed in doing so.

*Then again, she thought. The boy’s ability to instinctively understand SAO’s system means that he might show promise as a software or hardware developer. Might want to talk it over with Shouzou and see what he thinks.*

If the boy really does show promise, then perhaps it could be nurtured. After all, if what she saw happening carried over into the real world, and there was no indication that it wouldn’t, then perhaps he could be groomed to be worthy of Asuna.

As she started considering potential plans for the future, the last of her anger slowly dissipated. It was far too early for anything to be set in stone, and the entire situation might not happen anyway, but Kyouko would rather have a plan in place and not need it, than be surprised by something, and not have a plan to deal with it.

**March 22, 2024 - Hogwarts, Headmaster's Office.**

"Isn't that one of Albert's books?"

Albus didn't look up from his reading. "Yes. One he wrote with Chip."

Minerva's voice was lightly teasing. "How to Control Your Anger Before It Controls You?"

"Minerva," Albus said as quietly as he could manage, "I have not even seen what Harry has had to do this time. Only heard second hand. Already today, Fawkes has had to calm me twice-- once to stop me from going after certain contributors to the Prophet's Editorial Pages, and once to stop me from violently violating the rules of order for the Wizengamot."

Albus knew his voice was far rougher than he preferred. He was more the old soldier than the seasoned diplomat right now, and he hated that part of him. He used it when he had to, but he hated how he gained it.

He focused a moment and forced his grip on the book to relax. The binding was creaking. He had no doubt his knuckles had been white. Those who knew him, knew it as a warning sign of just how barely controlled his fury was.

"I would ask what the Prophet printed *this* time to get you furious enough to need a guide to restraining your anger," Minerva said. "But I read what you did. Skeeter wasn’t as… vitriolic as she sometimes is, but others?"

"Rita's restraining herself," Albus allowed. "It was the op-ed by Terry Skudge and some of the letters to the editor..."

Minerva sighed. “I sometimes wonder if he’s even aware of how dangerous poking some dragons can be,” she said. “Rita knows when she can, and cannot, go that far, and she sticks to the facts. Distorted, twisted, and poisoned by her quill, as they may sometimes end up, true, but she sticks to the facts. She also pays attention to public sentiment, which Skudge seems to forget to do so on a regular basis."

"Skudge has never even met Harry, and he judges him, and says who 'the supposed hero' is. Admittedly, Harry would hardly call what he had to do heroic, and more like an unpleasant action done out of grim necessity, but the fact remains that he did it for the sake of others. Skudge doesn’t recognize that, and this was a man who was on our side," Albus sighed, working his rage into a more controllable annoyance tinged with regret. "What makes it worse for me, is that I am partially"
responsible for Harry likely seeing it that way. After what happened with the Stone, and Quirinus’ death... I didn’t deny the grave nature of what he did. I told him that, while tragic that it was him who was forced by circumstance to kill a man, Quirinus had brought it upon himself. I told him that we may end up doing things that would seem as a betrayal to our dream of a better world than what we currently have. And I told him that his feelings on it, his guilt, his disgust with himself, and his hatred of what he did... that those were good things. That they meant that he wasn’t becoming a monster like Tom.

“He confronted him that night, you know. He came face-to-face with the man who murdered his parents. And I wonder, was it the fact that he had a chance for revenge that led him into killing a man, albeit one who was a dead man walking? Perhaps it was, and understandable if so. Or, as I think more likely, that he acted out of pure self-preservation and used the tools available. I don’t know, and I never asked.” He sighed again.

“I constantly get reminded about how flawed our world is. That everything I have worked for, to leave the world even a little better off than it was for me in my youth, may never be enough. It makes me sometimes wonder if I will even succeed.”

“You can’t do it all on your own, Albus.” Minerva said gently. “People have a tendency to act on their own and in a way they see fit, and you can’t control that. Sometimes, it works out, and sometimes it doesn’t.”

"And sometimes, they diffindo their own feet off," Albus admitted. "Most of the letters in response to Skudge’s Op-Ed were supportive, and I don’t doubt that more than a few were accompanied by their own added surprises. The supposed sheep turn into capable hounds when pushed too far."

There was silence a moment, and then he heard Minerva removing some parchment from his desk. "Let me just clear your docket a bit, there, seeing as how I’ve got the free time to bug you."

It was then Albus was able to look up at her. He knew his smile was weak. "Thank you, old friend."

She arched her eyebrows at him.

"I was referring--" he began to explain with a rueful chuckle.

“I’m ninety-eight years young, Albus,” Minerva quipped. “I’m the one who should be calling you an old friend.”

"My long-time friend, then," Albus amended. Then he smirked at her. "Fillius’ turn to check on me next?"

"Severus. If only for that old quip," Minerva shot back.

He gave a put upon sigh. "You all care for me far too much."

"Deal with it," Minerva said, exiting. Before the door closed, she added, "Mad old coot."

March 24, 2024 - Toshima, Ikebukuro General Hospital

Motoko Kashiwazaka looked at her daughter, Hiyori, as she pondered the last few days. She hadn’t watched what had happened last week, and didn’t want to, but she had heard about it, and seen the effects it had on the girl. She had gotten her daughter to try SAO, with the hopes that the virtual reality would help break her out of her chronic shyness and give the girl some confidence in herself.

Well, it had worked, to a degree. While Hiyori wasn’t going to become a social butterfly any time
soon, she was able to be more social now. Where there was once a girl who constantly doubted herself due to her perceived failure to meet expectations, she was more confident and self-assured in herself. It all showed in how the girl carried herself, and it was one consequence of SAO that she sincerely hoped would transfer over.

How the self-doubt came about was still a mystery to Motoko, but she would admit in the privacy of her own mind that it might have stemmed from a lack of stated expectations. It could have been perceived by Hiyori as her mother having given up any hope for her daughter’s success.

So, seeing Hiyori in SAO, going under the name of Lux there, break out of that shell had been considered one of the few good things that had come out of the entire incident so far, regardless of the dangers her daughter routinely courted due to it. However, what had happened a few days ago could easily undo it.

Had she been a different woman, Motoko might have blamed those her daughter associated with, one of whom had a notorious reputation in SAO as someone who was fully willing to use lethal force if he saw it necessary. As it was, she saw how the boy had talked to her daughter, how he hadn’t hidden how serious it was to kill someone. She heard him talk, and say that it never got any easier afterward, and that he hoped it never did. And she heard him apologize for not encouraging her to either sit it out, or be a part of the prisoner teams.

Her daughter had been a bit miffed with that, informing him rather sharply that she had made her choice to join them in this, and that both he and Silica were her friends. She would be there to back them up, and pointed out that is exactly what she did. She admitted that she was disgusted with herself for killing a man, but if she hadn’t, then what would have happened to Silica?

He nodded, acknowledging her point, and said that if it ever became too much for her to deal with, she had friends who would help. Not in getting over it, he admitted that he hadn’t gotten over it after that incident back in June, and hoped he never did. But they would help her cope with it and keep it from dragging her down. In time, he assured her, it would become less of a burden and easier to bear, but it would never disappear.

That was a few days ago, and Motoko saw that Hiyori was beginning to recover, or at least cope with what had happened. That young man, Hadrian seemed to be right about it. It would take time, but she had people who would be there for her.

If only she could be there for her daughter, instead of out here.

Though, it did help that her mood had begun to improve. Trust an impending wedding she was invited to be a bridesmaid at to do so. That it involved the same friends who had been there for her was a bonus, and the fact that they were close enough friends to have her be one of the bridesmaids, was even better.

That the two getting married were awfully young didn’t matter to her. It made her daughter happy, and that was enough for her.

March 26, 2024 - Smeltings

“I would have thought you smarter than this, Piers, but that was probably hoping for too much.” Dudley said in a surprisingly calm voice. “Yeah, I can say anything in response to what you say about Harry and have you call me out on my hypocrisy, but I don’t care. I treated him like shit back then, I know it, you know it, and he knows it. But it’s not about him, is it? It never was.

“This is because I don’t do the shit I did before coming here anymore, isn’t it?” He sneered. “I’m no
longer… fun to be around.”

“That’s right Dursley,” Piers said. “You’re no fun. I mean, look at you! You used to be the big shit back in primary, but now you’re as boring as the rest. What happened to ya?”

“It’s called wanting to be more than a chav,” Dudley replied. “It’s called realizing that my cousin is a better person than I can hope to be. It’s called taking a look at myself, and not liking what I saw. It’s called, Piers Polkiss, growing up. You might want to try it.”

“Wait, Harry? Better than you?” Piers asked incredulously. “Dud, Harry killed three people! He’s a murderer!”

“He killed more than that, actually,” Dudley replied calmly, and almost smirked at Piers’ shock. “I think the number is ten or so now.” He shrugged. “But you’re ignoring something. All those people he killed? They were trying to kill him, or one of his friends first. I think it means that he had some good reasons for what he did, don’t you? Also, it sounds like you’ve been getting your information from the Daily Mail, and if you believe what comes out of that rag...” He shook his head.

“But I thought—”

“Piers, my parents were lying about all that shit, but let’s not change the bloody subject,” Dudley said. “All of this? It’s about how I refuse to get in on your games now, to be the big man that a wannabe chav like you can hide behind. It’s because I refuse to be a bully, and you don’t like it because you can’t simply follow in and get your kicks in as well once I start it since you don’t have the stones to do it yourself without someone else beating them down for you.”

He then shrugged. “What can I say? The teachers remember my dad, and didn’t want a Vernon Junior on campus. They kept us in separate classes and dorms, as they actually talked to our teachers from before we came here. You know, the same ones who knew what was going on, but were scared to do anything about it because your dad would get them fired?

“Let me make it clear to you, Piers, if it hadn’t dawned on you already. This. Isn’t. There. The teachers and the headmaster? They remember my dad, kept me from the rest of you, and they rode my ass hard to break whatever bullshit my dad filled my head with. Hell, I think the only reason he didn’t get expelled is because grandpa was one of the school governors at the time.”

“What the hell you saying?”

Dudley sighed. “What I am saying, is that I changed, and you haven’t. Now go away, Piers. You’re wasting my time.”

April 2, 2024 - Chiyoda, Nihon University Hospital

Airi Karatachi shot the man who entered the hospital room a cold look. “Pyotr, now you come to see our eldest daughter,” she said in Russian. “No phone calls, no letters, you just come by, and over a year after Nijika was trapped in SAO. Why now?”

“Airi, can we at least not have this discussion in front of Nanairo?” He asked in Japanese, stepping aside and gently moving the thirteen year old girl who had come with him to the fore. “You have good reasons for being angry at me, but this is a conversation that should be had privately.”

Shooting her ex-husband a chilly look for a moment longer, she relented and turned a much warmer gaze to the girl she hadn’t seen in almost a decade.

Nanairo, her youngest daughter. Her little Rainbow was here, in Japan.
She could tell that she wasn’t recognized by those painfully familiar brown eyes, which met her own, shining with curiosity. That she wasn’t recognized, while painful, was unsurprising. Nanaııro had been four when she and Pyotr divorced, and it had been nine years since then, more than long enough for her to forget both her mother and older sister. She could see that her daughter was dressed in simple slacks and a blouse, and that she was carrying a small satchel, the contents of which she didn’t know. It didn’t matter to her, either way.

“You’re… my mother?” She asked in halting Japanese. Taking a look at Nijika, she turned back to Airi. “And she… is my sister?”

Airi nodded, tears in her eyes.

“Nanaııro,” Pyotr said gently in English. “Why don’t you spend some time here and introduce yourself to your sister. Your mother and I have a long overdue talk that we need to have. We’ll be right outside.”

Airi was about to protest, as she wanted to spend time with her youngest, but she saw her ex-husband shake his head.

“Airi,” he said in Russian. “You’ll have time for this later, and I think you have some rather pointed things you want to say to me anyway.” He looked at Nijika’s form. “As will she when she gets out of there, though I may have to correct her on her swearing when she does.” He shook his head. “It’s like she learned them from Google Translate.”

Airi blinked, and then grudgingly nodded. Looking at her youngest daughter, she gave Nanaııro a gentle smile. “Nanaııro,” she said in heavily accented English. “It will only take a moment.” She looked at Pyotr and switched to Russian. “And you are right, Pyotr, this talk is long overdue.”

##

Nanaııro Arshavin looked at the young woman who was her older sister lying on the bed, her thin frame seeming far smaller than it probably was. She had read up on the means being used to minimize the effects of prolonged physical inactivity for the SAO victims. It couldn’t prevent the atrophy or the wasting effects, the lack of food and sufficient calories ensured that, but it would keep them alive and reasonably healthy for the duration.

However, it wasn’t her sister’s physical state that was a concern of hers, or at least not entirely. She knew that medical technology could do a great number of things, so there were no worries there. Nijika would likely require a long recovery period after all this was done, not only to return to a healthy weight, but simply to be able to do day to day tasks, but the success it was basically guaranteed.

Reaching into her satchel, she pulled out a tablet. Turning it on, checked the Wi-Fi signal and found it sufficient for what she wanted. Opening the tablet’s browser, she quickly brought up Nijika’s feed. Putting the tablet to the side, she carefully took her sister’s thin hand into her own.

“Hello… sister,” she said. “I guess it’s been awhile. Dad tells me that the little Russian I remember, like privyet and dosvidaniya, were taught to me by you. He… explained the reasons for the divorce to me, and splitting us up.

“If I had known, no, if I remembered you, if I hadn’t been so caught up in my research to finish my thesis, and had known about all this sooner… well, as one of my professors at MIT who mentored me would say, ‘fuck the research, family’s more important.’”
She looked over to where Nijika’s activities inside SAO were playing. Her sister seemed to be with several girls and they were simply walking through a town.

She turned her attention back to her sister on the hospital bed. “I’d heard about what happened a couple of weeks ago.” She added. “I won’t ask you why you were there, I know I don’t know enough about it all, but… you seem to be managing fairly well, all things considered. I saw what happened, and it sucks that you had to… do what you did, but… I can’t condemn you for it.”

A brief sound of voices, clearly raised, came from outside the hospital room. “And it sounds as if dad is getting torn a new one,” she said. “From the sounds of it, both are probably glad that the only Russian I know is what dad says you taught me.”

She looked back at the tablet and saw that her sister had entered some sort of clothing store. From the looks of it, they were… trying on dresses? And, oh wow! Did all of them just put on something that fancy? All of them looked beautiful! Like so many noblewomen from one of those fantasy novels or period dramas that her associates talked about. And that one girl, the youngest… Silica, if she remembered correctly, was wearing something fit for a princess. Not a Disney Princess, or something more historically accurate, but with how ornate it was… wow.

She would admit to feeling a bit jealous right then and there.

Something interesting seemed to be happening. She turned the volume up on the tablet, she wanted to see if they were going to discuss what it might be. Whatever it is, it must be important.

They were discussing a wedding, and… wait, what?! The youngest of them was the one getting married? She couldn’t be much older than herself! If that girl was older than fourteen, she would eat her thesis, all one hundred and fifty pages of it.

So she paid attention to what was going on, and she idly brought out a notepad and pen to take notes. She would normally use her tablet, but it was being used for her to see what was going on. She started writing down her observations and idly wondered what the sociologists back at MIT would think of this.

##

As he reentered the hospital room, Pyotr Mikhailovich Arshavin was almost tempted to take stock of his body and ensure that his ex-wife hadn’t flayed off any skin during her diatribe at him. The language she used, the tone, all of it was fit to draw blood, and it reminded him that while she looked like a demure little flower, even now, there was a fire in her fit to cause a Moscow winter to turn into summer.

The only restraint she showed was to keep her voice down, and that was largely out of consideration for the rest of the hospital’s patients and those visiting them. If anything, it made her fury at him all the more striking, as he could tell that she was restraining herself from either flaying him alive verbally, or making him a patient at the hospital after she was done ripping his skin off with her bare hands.

Her spirit certainly hadn’t dimmed in the nine years since their divorce.

He would be honest with himself, he had more than deserved it. He wouldn’t apologize for his decisions, but he was fully aware that he had done more harm than good in the long run with them. However, aside from ensuring that Nanairo’s gifted intelligence was nurtured, he also wanted to keep her off the Russian government’s radar.
He had seen the writing on the wall, how Putin was taking Russia in a direction that was far too similar to the Soviet Union he remembered, and not fondly, from his youth. While he could have been wrong at the time, he wanted to get his daughter out of there and to a place that would properly nurture her gifts, not exploit them, or let those gifts wither on the vine.

Japan… likely wouldn’t have nurtured them, or at least not nurtured her gifted intelligence properly. The Americans, however, had a well-established system in place for prodigies. He had tried to talk Airi into coming along and bringing Nijika, but she could be every bit as stubborn as him, and she wanted nothing to do with it, and instead wanted Nanairo to have a normal childhood.

She would never have had one, not with her intelligence, and not in Japan. She would have been isolated, ostracized... and given her mixed heritage, she would likely be a victim of prejudice. He never asked if that was the case with Nijika, Airi hadn’t said anything, and wouldn’t have anyway. He wouldn’t be surprised, though, if that was so. No nation or culture was completely free of prejudice or xenophobia, no matter how they pretended otherwise.

He listened to Nanairo connect with her mother, the girl’s insistence on using Japanese so very much like her, and then turned his attention to Nijika.

He knew what she had gone through in SAO, had watched some of it even, and he knew that she had risen to the challenge. Not all of her actions were necessarily praiseworthy, not in this day and age, but at the same time, they did fill him with pride. Pride in that she was strong enough to take what had been thrown at her and respond to it with steely determination. Pride in the fact that she didn’t cower in the face of threats, but faced them head on. And pride in the fact that she did not deny her own heritage.

At the same time, he also worried for her. Would she be able to remain strong in the face of it all? Would the weight of her actions be a burden on her? And would her own story end in tragedy, like so many of the fairy tales she loved as a child did? He had read her the older, harsher, versions of the ones that made what those two German brothers collected and curated seem gentle. Did she draw strength or pessimism from them?

He sighed to himself. The Curse of the Parent: Never knowing whether you influenced your child for good or ill-- or as a friend had put it: "When they do bad, you ask what you did wrong. When they do well, you wonder if it had anything to do with you."

He turned to Nanairo’s tablet and saw his eldest in it. She seemed happy, and from what she was wearing as she walked out of a clothing store with her companions, she seemed to have found a well to draw strength from. If not from the stories she was told, or her own heritage, then from her friends. He noted the way red armor and clothing fit her, and how the sword she carried across her back seemed a part of her and nodded.

Yes, she was indeed strong. Where Nanairo was strong in mind, Nijika was strong in heart. He just hoped that strength would carry her through this.

April 10, 2024 - Shiba Mansion

“Romantic as what they’re planning is, those two are too young to get married,” Raye said.

Looking up from watching the computer monitor, Ami quirked an eyebrow. “You’ve said that before Raye,” she commented. “When Gus and I got married, if I recall.”

The Hispanic girl shrugged. “You weren’t even twenty when you two did,” she replied. “I’ll admit, the whole situation with Kaguya kind of forced things a bit between you two, but I still think you
both should have waited a couple of years.”

“Too late to change it now, Raye,” Ami said. “We’ll have to deal with things as they come.”

“I still stand by what I said back then, though.”

“Naturally.”

“Still, those two are fourteen,” Raye added, turning to the screen to see August and several others having a few drinks at a tavern somewhere in SAO. “You and August were adults, if only barely, when you two married. Those two aren’t, I don’t care how mature they are. If they were a couple of years older, then sure, I wouldn’t make a fuss. Well, not much of one at any rate.”

“I notice that you don’t deny that you would still raise a fuss,” Ami said drily.

Raye shrugged. “I just have reservations as to the wisdom of those two getting married.” She said. “I mean, are they doing this because they really love each other? Or are they simply being hormonal teenagers?”

Ami considered those two questions and could admit that she didn’t know. For her and her husband, it was a bit of both, since they were eighteen when they married. Adults, at least by American standards, but still teenagers. For Harry Potter and… Keiko Ayano, if she recalled, this marriage was more a recognition of their relationship, and she wouldn’t be surprised if their being, as Raye put it, hormonal teenagers, had something to do with it.

She knew that both were aware that even if they got married in game, it wouldn’t apply in the real world anyway. She didn’t know how both the Japanese and British governments would see it, only that they wouldn’t recognize it as valid. How any of the more directly concerned parties would react to it, however, was in the air.

It was too early to make any guesses on the matter, anyway.

“We don’t have a say in what they do in there, Raye,” she said. “We’re here, they’re there. The Saotomes and whoever speaks for Potter, may have a say in it, but not us. It’s not like we would have a say in the matter, and I could remind you of what Gus said the fifth or sixth time you raised the issue with us.”

Raye met her friend's smirk. "Fair enough. I do have to be careful not to be talking just to be heard."

April 15, 2024 - Setagaya, RECT HQ

Shiro Kunikida kept an eye on the monitor, checking the input and output of information to see if his idea would work. Having heard about the event, which was kind of difficult not to, considering that it was the talk of those trapped in SAO for weeks, he had an idea that he had brought to one of the men he knew was spying on Sugou for the CEO.

He’d worked for RECT for over a decade, so he knew how things worked here, and any major project always had at least one man who reported directly to Mr. Yuuki to ensure he wasn’t being lied to. Considering the tendency for project leads to want to avoid telling those in charge things they didn’t want to hear, that wasn’t always a bad decision. So long as he wasn’t, then nothing needed to be worried about. However, it seemed that Sugou apparently didn’t get the memo that he was being watched.

And that didn’t count the fact that some of those hired on were probably from the government to provide their own quiet oversight. Institutionally corrupt it might seem to some, Japan’s government
was not comprised of fools and incompetents.

True, it said that the man didn’t always trust his subordinates, but it also showed that he was smart enough to have a finger on the pulse of things going on. And considering what Sugou was up to, that kind of natural suspicion was very warranted. Nothing illegal, yet, but he had seen some of the data, and it had raised several red flags for him.

Shaking those thoughts out of his mind, he looked back at the information on the screen. He was trying to tap directly into the feeds that streamed information of what was going on in SAO, and was hoping that he could combine the perspectives just enough to give a fuller picture of what was going on.

More as an exercise on his part, since Kayaba had managed to have the feeds come from a separate partition within the servers that had firewalls surrounding the source point, forming a DMZ. He wanted to see if it was possible to take the multiple perspectives from several players, and combine them.

He would then see if he could create a temporary connection to the ALO servers, using a virtual network that could be terminated easily, and see if information could pass through that way. ALO’s security was based off of data gained from mining the SAO beta servers, so if it could be done, then perhaps what went one way, could go the other.

It might not get the players out, but it might just allow them to open up lines of communication with them, given time. Perhaps only via ALO, but even so, it would be a step in the right direction. The idea looked good on paper, but he still had to test it, and with such a major event, this was the perfect time to do so.

Alfheim, Swilvane

Leafa stared in shock at what she saw what was being shown. She had no idea that it was possible to broadcast something into ALO, but apparently it was.

*If so, why wait until now?* She thought to herself. She took a more careful look at what was being broadcast in, and realized that it wasn’t something inside ALO, or even something from some random part of the web. No, it was something she recognized. How could she not? She did regularly watch it.

They were being shown an event from SAO, and if she were to place a bet, she knew what event it was. An event which had been the talk of the school for weeks from those who actively watched what was going on in SAO, the wedding between Hadrian and Silica. She had known about it, of course, how could she not? Kazuto was a part of the same guild and he was actively involved in helping set it up.

“Interesting, is it not?” A woman asked from behind.

Turning, Leafa saw the faction leader, Sakuya watching what was being shown. The woman who was in charge of the Sylph faction in Alfheim Online, or ALO for short, was fairly tall, taller than average for the sylphs, and extremely well endowed, not that Leafa could complain about that with how her own avatar’s figure turned out.

*If I had breasts this big in the real world, I’d be hitting them all the time during kendo practice, and not even a sarashi would be able to bind them well enough,* she thought idly. *Not to mention Lady Sakuya’s endowments. How she swings that katana of hers without knocking them around or spilling out of her kimono is beyond me.*
“It is interesting Lady Sakuya,” she agreed, keeping her thoughts on how they looked in virtual reality to herself. “I knew that the wedding was today, but I didn’t expect to log on and see it playing for everyone to see. Any idea how that was pulled off?”

“I honestly have no clue,” the woman admitted. “But it’s likely that someone approached RECT and they thought that it might be an interesting idea. Considering that they’re working to free those trapped in SAO, they might be seeing if this could potentially be used as a means of doing so. Or maybe just to communicate with them. It could also just as easily be someone at RECT thinking it was a good idea. Who knows?”

“I see,” Leafa said quietly. “Still, seeing my brother while in here was unexpected.”

“Ah, I had heard, but it would have been rude to ask.” Sakuya said politely. “Which one is he? One in the bridal party?”

Leafa nodded. “You see the one all in black?” She asked, pointing to the person. “That’s him. He goes by Kirito in SAO, if that means anything to you.”

“Oh?” Sakuya asked. “The Black Swordsman is your brother? It seems as if skills with a blade run in the family then.”

“So, he’s known even in here,” Leafa murmured.

“I’m sorry?”

Leafa shook her head. “I’m just surprised that his SAO moniker is known even in here.” She said. “I mean, I know that there are forums dedicated to what goes on in SAO, and it does occasionally reach the news when something big happens, but to actually hear it?”

Sakuya raised her hand and laughed into it. “It would come as a surprise, wouldn’t it?” She asked drily. She looked at the wedding being shown and shook her head. “Why, I’ve checked the forums myself out of curiosity, and some of what gets posted…” She shook her head. “I dare say, by now there are a probably hundreds, if not thousands, of posts that simply say ‘called it’, and many others promising pain and retribution on Hadrian for stealing their waifu. That’s otaku for you.” She shook her head. “Still, it is not as if those two have not been subtle about how they’ve felt for each other, from what I’ve heard.”

Leafa nodded at that. “Not been subtle is an understatement,” she said drily. “Everyone could see it, even a year ago. If anything, the only questions here are… why now, and why go to these lengths?”

Sakuya raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?” She asked.

Leafa shrugged. “Even discounting the rumors, it was obvious that those had something a year ago, so why go through the effort of a wedding? Everyone saw those two as a married couple, even without them being, you know, actually married. So the question about now still stands. Why did they wait until now, when getting married sooner would have surprised nobody?

“As for the lengths they’re going to, well, SAO has a marriage system in place done through the menu.” She pointed to the transmitted wedding. “Even with this, they still had to open their menus so the system would recognize it. So, why all the pomp and ceremony?”

Sakuya nodded. “Makes sense,” she admitted. “But you have to consider this, Leafa. The two of them may have not simply thought about it. They spent the vast majority of time with each other, at most, separated for only a few hours. The latest… unpleasantness in SAO, forced them to spend a few weeks apart, which probably spurred them into actually thinking about it for a change. After
their little campaign against Laughing Coffin was done, the two probably talked it out and decided on making what everyone saw as an unofficial marriage, an official one.”

“And all this?” Leafa asked, gesturing to the stream again.

Sakuya laughed. “Tell me Leafa, when you get married, wouldn’t you want your wedding to be special?” She asked in amusement. “This is more like something out of one of those Western fairy tales, just minus the magic. But then, some things have a magic of their own.”

Looking at it in light of what Sakuya said, Leafa had to admit, she was right. Silica looked absolutely beautiful, and the rest of the girls certainly weren’t slouches in in the looks department, either. Just looking at what the four of them wore, she could tell that no expense had been spared. True, it was all digital data, but she could understand what Sakuya meant.

April 16, 2024 - Hogwarts, Slytherin Dorms

Draco stared into the fire in thought, paying no attention to the quiet conversations happening throughout the dorm. What he had watched had certainly been unexpected, to say the least. Potter, getting married? To a muggle?

It would have been completely absurd to him only a few months ago, and it still didn’t sit well with him. The two worlds should remain separate, or as separate as is practicable. Cornelius Fudge’s dismissal from the post of Minister of Magic made it clear that the Ministry, despite being an autonomous governing body, was still subordinate to the muggle government, especially the Queen.

That revelation had been a bit surprising. Not the subordination to Her Majesty, his father had taught him that, despite the separation of the worlds, the magical world still owed fealty to its sovereign, and had since the time of King Arthur. It was the fact that the Minister of Magic was still accountable to the rest of the muggle government, or at least the Prime Minister.

He idly considered the idea of a wizard or witch taking the time to get the right education and government experience in the muggle world, and rising to that position. Hmm, given how muggleborns are a part of both worlds, I’m surprised one hasn’t done that yet, he thought. It was something to consider, and he decided that he might want to let his father know. It was unlikely that there were those in the magical world who hadn’t thought of that possibility, but he wondered what steps, if any, had been taken in case that does eventually happen. Or to prevent it, given the attitudes toward those of muggle lineage.

He turned his thoughts back to Potter’s marriage, and thought about it. He seriously doubted that the marriage would be considered legitimate. First, it didn’t happen in the real world, but in that… what was it called again? Ah, right, the virtual world, interesting phrase, that. Thus, it didn’t have any government documentation legitimizing it. Second, their ages alone would be a disqualifier. Even in the magical world, marriages couldn’t happen unless both were at least seventeen, the age of majority. True, magic could influence things, such as two being magically tied to each other, but that was more like a betrothal in the legal sense.

Draco snorted at that thought. Depending on how Silica’s family saw it, the only difference between that and an actual legal marriage would only be the marriage license. He wasn’t stupid, and knew well enough that more than one betrothal resulted in perfectly legitimate children before the wedding, or being “blessed” to have the first child within six months or less. In the past, that was almost expected, even if all of it was moderately clandestine, albeit often abetted, or at least tolerated, by the bride’s family.

Or they’d find some other way, he noted.
He had heard some of the muggleborn students talking about how the SAO Incident, as the entire thing was called, hasn’t stopped the development of the technology and the development of a similar game that was set to be released internationally over the summer months. If need be, he didn’t doubt that both would simply spend as much time as possible there, if only to maintain their relationship that way after all of this was over.

Still, legal status of the marriage aside, the fact that Potter married a muggle, let alone even considered it, would set the kneazle loose in the henhouse amongst some elements of magical society. It would scandalize many, infuriate some, and despite his father’s influence among certain circles, there wasn’t much that could be done. It wouldn’t matter that the marriage wasn’t even valid to them, either.

“You look deep in thought,” came the voice of Daphne Greengrass from behind him.

Turning, he fixed her a wry look. “If you’re expecting the thinking to have contributed to the heat provided by the fireplace, I’m afraid you’ll be disappointed,” he said dryly.

“You weren’t speaking, so that just means the hot air is coming from elsewhere,” she retorted.

Draco snorted. “Not bad,” he complimented. “Just thinking about how Potter getting married like that’s going to change things back here.”

She raised an eyebrow. “And how would it?” She asked.

“As if you didn’t already know the answer,” Draco said. “But I’ll enlighten you anyway. This whole wedding? I don’t approve of it, and I doubt some elements of proper society will, either. They might not be able to do anything about it, but this is bound to cause a scandal, regardless of the legitimacy of it. Not that Potter would care either way.”

Daphne shrugged. “Were he aware of some things, he would understand why it might not be taken well.” She said. “But you’re right, I doubt he would care. Still, odd that you’re considering that, and not saying in front of everyone how you would use it against him.”

Draco snorted. “After he killed the Dark Lord?” He asked dryly. “Greengrass, I know better than that. Besides, how many in the school would be ready to burn me at the stake with fiendfyre if I did that?”

“Good point,” Daphne said, noting the euphemism common in the wizarding world. She had to explain it to Granger once, and the girl got the point, likening it to the muggle saying of crucifying someone for something they did.

London, Daily Prophet

Rita looked over her article with a careful eye, making sure that it was all in order. She had been present to watch the wedding that Harry Potter had in that muggle thing, SAO, mostly out of coincidence. She regularly went to Hogwarts to observe the activities of the Tri-Wizard Champions and visiting students to see if there was any opportunity for a story there that day.

It had been a slow week anyway.

So, she had been a beetle on the wall and had a prime opportunity to observe and watch. And she was glad she had picked that day to do so. After all, watching The-Boy-Who-Lived go through a wedding as the groom? And to a muggle?

That was a story worth printing.
So, she made note of everything that went on, from the setting, to how everyone was dressed, and so on. She wanted to make sure she was as accurate as practicable with it before she decided if adding any embellishments was necessary.

Making things up whole cloth was beneath her anyway. Better to use that which could be confirmed as completely true, and then word and embellish it the appropriate way.

Besides, something like this didn’t need embellishments, and doing so could backfire on her like a damaged wand, anyway. Harry Potter had killed You-Know-Who, and all that. Now, if she managed to get anything on him related to him doing something that could be taken as completely insane, like get drunk and think flying a dragon is a good idea, well, that was a different story.

Hmm, she might use that one under a pseudonym for the gossip column. No one but the most gullible would believe it, but they would be entertained by it. Besides, for all she knew, he did do that. However, without proof, it wasn’t fit for anything more than gossip.

Anyway, she wrote about the wedding, the possible implications of it, and how it wasn’t worth a wooden knut in the real world. She even kept her embellishments to a minimum, only saying that it could be taken as a statement of intent to marry the girl.

That it might cause a minor scandal might have something to do with it, but she hadn’t managed to stay with the Daily Prophet as long as she did without knowing how far she could push things. That, and how the readers had turned on Skudge last month.

She heard he would be out of St. Mungo’s later this month, but she doubted he would return to writing Op-Eds for the Daily Prophet any time soon. The readers could get rather vindictive in their creative responses to a piece that angers them.

Just one of the hazards of the job, in her mind. After all, the audience was the wizarding world, they would respond as wizards and witches. Spells were just something you faced, like nasty letters and howlers. Though she did keep the one that was laced with a very nasty contact poison in a sealed jar on her desk as a reminder to not push things too far when she wrote something, and to make sure it was the truth.

Augusta Longbottom could be very vicious when her family’s good name was maligned. One reason she was very surely not married to Mad-Eye Moody.

He sent explosive letters disguised as howlers, which were almost quaint in comparison.

**April 21, 2024 - Nerima, Saotome-Tendo Dojo**

Nabiki sipped her tea as she looked at her sisters sitting at the table. It was one of their usual get-togethers so that they could remain in contact. With her business work, Kasumi’s duties as Nakano General Hospital, and Akane being a martial arts instructor, having a day when all three of them were available for it was less common than any of them liked.

Still, they managed to find time at least once a month to do so.

“So, Nabiki,” Akane said. “You’ve been keeping track of things in SAO from a wider perspective than just what’s going on with Keiko. How have perceptions of the wedding been?”

Nabiki put her tea down. “Fairly positive, actually,” she said. “While no one with any sense expects it to be valid in the outside world, the general perception is that a positive event like that was completely necessary. Also, many of those who pay attention to what’s going on in SAO, which is a lot more than you think, are crowing about how they called it.”
Kasumi giggled. “Those two haven’t exactly been subtle about their relationship, have they?” She asked. “I take it that the general consensus is that it’s about time, then?”

Nabiki nodded. “Indeed.”

Akane picked her cup up and took a sip. “On that topic, what’s your general opinion on how we’re playing this off as, considering what did happen?” She asked. “With the rings, that is.”

“Lady Shiba’s idea of seeing it as a semi-official engagement is practical,” Nabiki said. “Both are too young to be legally married and recognized as such, so this is an effective compromise until they are old enough.” She shrugged. “It doesn’t really change that they’re effectively married, but it recognizes that their marriage is not one recognized by law until they are old enough to file the paperwork themselves.”

“And by then, they’ll have had a few years to think about it,” Akane noted. “The man Mr. Black contacted managed to correspond with Lady Shiba, and she passed along his own conclusions. He really doesn’t know about how the wedding and the magic ties into it, but he did have an idea about the rings. In short, it was a safeguard done by his family centuries ago. Because of his intent, and Keiko’s own matching intent on her part, they’re recognized as married in that respect.”

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. “They have magic for that?” She asked. “Almost sounds like some of the things you and Ranma had to deal with back during your own engagement.”

Akane shrugged. “The magics on the rings are from a time when marriage wasn’t a purely civil thing,” she said. “The comparison to what we had to deal with back in our teens is fairly apt, though. Not the same as what happened, but close enough that our reactions to that event when it happened, something Mr. Black recognizes. I have a copy of the letter if you want to look it over. You might have some insights.”

“Not just taking Lady Shiba’s word for it?” Nabiki asked.

Akane shook her head. “She has no issues with it,” she admitted. “In fact, she thinks it might be a good idea to get an outside perspective since there are a lot of things about magic that those who can use it tend to take for granted.” She stood up. “I’ll go get it.”

Nabiki nodded and waited as her younger sister left and returned a minute later, holding a sheaf of papers. “Lady Shiba had it copied to paper, rather than the original parchment after she showed it to us.” Akane explained. “It’s an exact copy, Ranma checked it.”

Nodding, Nabiki took the papers and blinked at the fact that it was handwritten before reaching down into her handbag and pulling out a pair of reading glasses. Putting them on, she read it over. A few minutes later, she finished perusing it and put it down.

“So,” she said. “All of it boils down to the fact that while the specifics of how it came about aren’t really understood, he thinks that it was a reflection of their mutual intentions at that moment. Fair enough. It’s similar to what Cologne said, and having a second opinion saying the same thing is reassuring in that regard. For all that she’s knowledgeable about such things, she isn’t an expert on magic.”

“Lady Shiba’s compromise on seeing it as a semi-formal engagement isn’t entirely correct, though. From what the letter implied, it’s more a betrothal, than an engagement. They’re basically married in all but name, but the marriage will have to wait until they’re of age. So, a little over three years now, if Sumire and Tetsuhiko consent, or they can simply go to the UK and do so legally without consent in a little over two on the magical side there, three on the non-magical.”
Akane sighed. “That about sums up the conclusions she reached with us when she discussed it with
us, and I include Sumire and Tetsuhiko in that.” She said. “At least we can put it off by making it so
they have to wait a bit. Not a bad thing, really. This way they can at least finish their schooling.” She
chuckled. “And at least they’re not going to be forced into it, as it will be discussed with them as
soon as they make it out.” The possibility of them not surviving was not even hinted at, as if their
survival was a foregone conclusion.

Nabiki knew better than to assume such a thing, especially since Keiko was actively involved in the
most dangerous part of getting out of SAO. That being, clearing the game. She knew full well that
nothing was guaranteed, but she had high hopes that Keiko would be fine. She had survived so far,
and she knew that survival rates amongst experienced players were far higher than their less
experienced peers.

Harry Potter’s survival was a distant second to that, and it was tied to Keiko’s survival. She didn’t
have any ill will toward the boy, but if she had to choose which one of them would survive, and only
one of them, then she already knew the answer. Keiko would hate her for it if that were the case, but
she would be alive to do so.

Nabiki found that she could live with that. Family came first, everything else second.

April 23, 2024 - Smeltings

Sirius looked at Albus as the two of them entered the school Harry’s cousin attended. With how
things with Vernon and Petunia were going, and the fact that Dudley’s status was still in limbo, there
really wasn’t any other place to meet the boy. Of course, with Smeltings being a boarding school, it
meant that arranging a place for the boy to stay at outside of school wasn’t an immediate priority.

It would be by the summer, but for now, letting him remain at the school was the least disruptive
option for everyone involved.

“So, he wants to talk with me?” Sirius asked as they walked to the school headmaster’s office.

“Indeed he does, Sirius,” Albus replied. “He’s aware of the reasons why Harry was sent to live with
his parents, and his time here has shown him that many things he took for granted were not only
incorrect, but very wrong.”

“And he admitted that his own actions in light of all that were wrong, yes.” Sirius acknowledged.
“You told me as much. It still doesn’t explain why he wants to talk with me.”

“In good time, Sirius, in good time.”

##

Dudley gave the man who accompanied Dumbledore a curious look. He knew who he was, of
course, Sirius Black, Harry’s godfather.

“So, you’re Dudley,” Sirius said, looking him over.

“I’m him,” Dudley said. “And you’re Sirius Black, Harry’s godfather.”

The two looked at each other, slightly awkwardly. Dudley would be honest, he was slightly
intimidated by the man. The fact that he was innocent of the crime he was thrown in prison for meant
little when coming face to face with a man who still bore the signs of how his time in prison affected
him. Pale skin, a frame that was painfully thin, and the haunted look in the man’s eyes said a lot
about him.
This was a man who had lived a hard life, and it had taken its toll on him.

“It’s funny, you know,” Sirius said, breaking the awkward silence. “Harry has said that he has hope for you, that someone will set you straight before it’s too late. It was in SAO, and he was talking to Keiko, and you would probably know her better as Silica, but he seems to think there’s some hope for you. And with how you came forward about how your parents treated him, and even pointed out that your own behaviors toward him were encouraged, it looks like he’s right. He doesn’t hate you, you know. Resent you a bit? Yeah, he does, and I think you know why. But he doesn’t hate you, since you didn’t know any better.”

Dudley sighed, slightly relieved. “That’s… good, I guess.” He said. “Still doesn’t make up for what I did to him, but the fact that he doesn’t hate me is good. Did Dumbledore tell you why I wanted to talk with you?”

Sirius shook his head. “No, the barmy old coot didn’t,” he said, a note of frustration in his voice. “I guess he wanted to surprise me.”

Dudley nodded. “For some reason, that doesn’t surprise me,” he said. “Anyway, I might as well tell you, then.” He took a breath. “With everything going on, my parents are going to jail. I’m surprised they haven’t been convicted yet, but it looks like a lot of my dad’s activities at work have come to light, and they’re investigating that as well. My only other family, my aunt, well… she’s wouldn’t be a good choice either. With the protections on Harry, he still needs a blood relation nearby, and…”

“And you’re wondering if I can take you in,” Sirius concluded before sighing. “Right now, no. I’m too focused on Harry to give you the attention you would need, and I’m probably not fit to watch over you anyway. At the same time, your point about the protections means that having you visit Japan might not be a bad idea, an added safety measure at least. Despite that wanker being dead, there are those who would still wish Harry harm that supported the bastard. I’ll see what can be done. And I take it that you’re wondering about whether you’ll keep attending here, I bet.”

Dudley nodded. “This school has been good for me,” he admitted.

“I can take care of that, though your grades will have to be good enough to stay in.” Sirius said.

“My boxing coach insisted that I bring my grades up,” Dudley said. “They’re not the best, but good enough that I’m in no danger of failing.”

Sirius nodded. “I’ll see what I can do about this summer then, as well as making sure you can still attend this school.” He said finally.

Dudley nodded. It wasn’t what he really hoped, but it was better than he feared. With the whole situation with his parents, and his father’s own actions at Grunnings coming home to roost, he was lucky enough that the Smeltings’ Board of Governors hadn’t tossed him out on his ear, yet. If it all worked out, then he would remain at Smeltings next year. If it didn’t, well, he would face that if it came.

Harry faced his problems head on, he could at least do the same. Perhaps he should start really trying to learn Japanese, just in case.

April 30, 2024 - Setagaya, RECT HQ

Noboyuki Sugou allowed a smile on his face as the injected worm was not immediately rejected by the system. One of the technicians had noted that many ports had remained open, sending out signals that went nowhere, and he had jumped on the opportunity that was presented.
The purpose of the worm was twofold for him. First, it would allow him to put together a backdoor into the system. Added to that, the worm would replicate and spread itself over the network of servers that was SAO, meaning that he would now have the access to them that he desired, no *needed* to accomplish what he wanted.

He had been careful to ensure that the worm was on a specific replication limit, he didn’t want to create a an accidental Morris Worm that so clogged the SAO network that it risked crashing the system due to tying up far too many resources. Not, that he expected that to be a problem. He had to, grudgingly, hand it to Kayaba, the man knew how to create a robust system.

Too bad he had made a classic mistake in how he did the port scheme. True, it wasn’t as if it was that vulnerable at the start. Kayaba had closed all the unused ports, but the man had each Nerve Gear assigned an individual port, and the system left them open after the connection was terminated due to a player’s death.

*Sloppy, Kayaba, very sloppy,* he thought to himself.

True, it had taken them this long to discover it, but now that the vulnerability was known, they could make use of it. Having direct physical access to the network, and knowing about the open ports, it was only a matter of finding a way to inject it on the inside and bypassing the firewalls and web server that made up SAO’s DMZ. With him basically being inside the gates, it also allowed him to bypass the Intrusion Detection System, meaning that he was like a virus that the immune system didn’t recognize.

He was fully aware that a worm was different than a virus, but the analogy served his purposes.

All in all, a perfect opportunity for him to exploit. And all because Kayaba made a simple and classic mistake.

**May 1, 2024 - Hogwarts, Viewing Room**

Hermione looked towards the headmaster as the recording ended, wondering what he would say. Wondering what he could say, in light of what they had just watched.

They had known that things were coming to a head with Laughing Coffin, well before this, and Sirius Black had told them quite clearly that what had happened would not be pleasant to watch. Not that she expected otherwise.

Thus, they had all watched as he laid out in stark terms to other players that if they didn’t stop them, then that group of psychopaths would continue to kill others for their own twisted enjoyment. They had watched him come to Sil- Keiko’s aid, as well as the aid of friends he made, showing just how quickly he could turn into a deadly fighter.

And they had just seen him lead others in battle against other people. They had just seen violence, on a level they never have before. The violence of an actual battle, one of two that was going on at the same time.

And as she looked at the headmaster, she saw little of the genial, slightly batty, old man they often saw and were fondly exasperated at. She saw instead a man who had earned his reputation as a powerful wizard on the battlefield. Who carried the scars of it, physical and spiritual, not with pride, but with calm dignity.

She could tell that everyone else was looking toward him, including a few who had invited themselves, like Draco Malfoy. While his presence was certainly undesirable, she had no real reason
to refuse his presence, and he stated his reasons for being there anyway.

“I learned that what happened in what you’re about to watch is what led him to making the decision that is currently causing a minor scandal among some,” he said simply. “I simply wish to see it and see if I can determine his reasoning behind it, no more.”

She idly wondered what he thought of Harry now.

##

It took all of his deportment training for Draco to keep his face neutral. What he had seen, it wasn’t Potter being a hero of some kind. No, it was Potter being a soldier and fighting a war. He might not have understood a word of what was being said by him, aside from his occasional swears in English, but that didn’t really matter to him.

He had come to see if he could determine what would have made Potter stop twirling his wand and act on his feelings for that muggle girl, and he got more than expected.

He thought he knew how dangerous his rival could be, watching him kill the Dark Lord back on New Year’s Day, but watching this? This showed a side of Potter that he didn’t expect. There was none of the Gryffindor here, none of the stereotypical heroics that even he had started to believe.

This was violence at its most basic, and Potter showed that he was at home on a battlefield. He might have not killed every opponent that crossed his path, and captured those who surrendered, but he also didn’t go out of his way to spare them, either.

*My God, was that there under the surface this entire time?* He thought in shock. *If so, then I wasn’t poking a lion with my wand for two years, but a bloody dragon!*

Potter had shocked him with the brutal pragmatism that he used in fighting those other people. There was no sign of fighting fair. Not a trace of trying to take the moral high ground on his part. He simply fought, maimed, and killed. Yes, Potter spared more than he killed, but that was because they were out of the fight, or had thrown their weapons down and surrendered the second they realized that they were up against him.

As for ones out of the fight, it was kind of difficult to fight when your arms, hands, and legs were separated from your body, and the way that one girl got two of her attackers to decide to fight someone easier… he shuddered. Taking a man’s arm off, beating his friend upside the head with it, and then tossing it right back to the person the arm belonged to?

Just what the *hell* had they all been through before this to turn out the way they did?

And then he looked at the headmaster, and a sudden, shocking insight came.

Potter and the supposed “daft old coot” were more alike than anyone, regardless of house, had thought. That meant that the headmaster was, as his head of house had often suggested, being merciful when forestalling full punishment when a student had stepped out of line.

How often had he, himself, nearly pushed the headmaster too far? If Potter was a dragon, he didn’t know what in Merlin's name to call Dumbledore!

##

Albus had felt that part of him, the old soldier, come to the fore as he watched Harry lead over forty people in battle, noting what he did right, and what mistakes he made. Generally, the opinion of that
side of him was that it wasn’t bad for a young and inexperienced commander. He had anticipated an ambush, organized his forces accordingly, and reacted to it quickly.

True, the disciplined ranks of those he was with quickly broke down, and it had become a confusing melee, but at the same time, few of those under him fought alone and as individuals, and none of them for long. They had beat off the initial attack, got into small teams, and then proceeded to defeat their attackers in detail.

They had lost a few, but far fewer than it could have been. The loss of only a few for a decisive victory while ambushed was quite good, in all actuality.

And as the old soldier broke down the battle, seeing what went right and what went wrong in that clinically detached fashion that had been a coping mechanism through far too many battles, the rest of him was pained at the fact that Harry had been required by circumstances to kill again, and worse, to lead those he counted as friends into such a battle.

Still, he had watched the entire thing through, from when Harry briefed those who accompanied him, allowing those who were uncomfortable with what might be required to simply walk out with no repercussions, to his planning alongside his friend Asuna (and the old soldier saw it was like how Minerva and Fillius had played off each other, strategy vs tactics), his organizing his group, to the battle itself. All in all, it showed Harry at his best, and at his worst. From the shocked looks on several of the students’ faces, he could easily tell those who hadn’t really seen the more battle hardened side of Harry before.

After all, they were the ones who hadn’t seen cases of it before. Miss Granger and those who had worked with her from the start had, and they saw those occasions as regrettable. They had long since learned that Harry wasn’t the knight in shining armor that many of the stories made him out to be, but had also seen that he was still Harry Potter.

As he looked at the students, he nodded. He could see how they were looking to him for advice on how to look at this. He wouldn’t tell them how to see it. But from the way some looked from the screen to him...

"Those of you who know my personal history may wonder-- how does the slayer of Gellert Grindelwald see this?" He asked as he met every student’s gaze, even those of the visiting students. "I hate it. Hate that Harry Potter had to see even a sliver of the horrors I have. Part of me is calmly evaluating it as another soldier. Part of me is mourning it. What I am saying, ladies and gentlemen, is you can't boil this down to one right feeling. This is a complex thing. You will feel complicated emotions about it. Let yourself. That is how you can elevate yourself above petty ideologues and simplistic moralizers. Be as complex as your world."

He looked around again. “Two... no, three years ago, I had to talk to him about this,” he said. “He is not the first or only student who has needed my council in such matters-- some leave Hogwarts to become Aurors, Combat Mages, Hit Wizards. But it was his turn at the end of his first year. Probably the youngest I have ever had to counsel on this.

"I had to talk to him, because he was forced to kill a man in self-defense. I am sure some of you remember Professor Quirrell? The man had been willingly possessed by Tom Riddle, Voldemort, and Harry had been forced by circumstances to confront him.

“You might think I may have had some shallow platitudes to give him, but I had none. I did not hide just how grave a thing taking another life is. I made sure to make it clear on that part. I did not damn him for it, either. I told him that it was a regrettable event, and Quirinus had brought it on himself. Harry was fully justified in killing him. It was self-defense. But, that doesn’t mean that it is an act that
he should take pride in.

“And in SAO, circumstances have forced him to kill again, and again, and again. But he has never taken pride in it. He has also talked to friends who have been forced by circumstances to kill. He encouraged them to be disgusted by the act, to take no pride in it. He did so, because there is no pride to be had in killing another person. There is only our chosen duties and what we do with them.

"He gave those with him the opportunity to walk away before the battle, to walk away with no repercussions, for a reason. He knew that some wouldn’t be able to do what was necessary, or that they simply could not do so in good conscience. Some did so, and he complimented them on having the courage to do so. For having the courage to know and understand that they could not bring themselves to knowingly go into battle where killing may be a necessity.

“Even among those who still went with him, few actually did any killing. They fought, and they fought hard, but more than a few realized, in that moment, that they simply couldn’t bring themselves to kill. Even Harry didn’t simply just kill. Those who were no longer able or willing to fight were captured. He let his feelings and thoughts guide him to as little death as possible. That’s the best any soldier, in command or not, can hope for.

"When he comes out, I will offer him the same wisdom he gave them. That older wizards and soldiers, like my dear friend from the Americas, Earnest Becker, gave me. He’ll likely need it again. I have, several times, needed it over my entire life. So have many of the teachers here who fought alongside me.

"What makes me sick, however, is that some biographer who wasn’t there is probably going to put those simplistic platitudes into my mouth. I had none to give, because there were none. There weren't any then. There aren't any now. And if there ever are in my lifetime, I think I shall mourn humanity, let alone wizards and witches."

He saw disappointment in some eyes... but many. Many understood. For that he was glad.

May 8, 2024 - Chiyoda, Dicey Cafe

Kathy Mills looked up as she saw Sirius walk in, with some of those people he occasionally had with him, or who were sometimes sent to retrieve him, as if they were his minders. She didn’t know the deal there, and she knew better than to ask questions. She didn’t even need to have lived in Japan for that, just growing up in Detroit had more than taught her about minding her business.

She didn’t know where they stood, just that they were high enough up the social food chain to not be anyone she wanted to get on the bad side of. The Yakuza were positively terrified of them, that she knew. They had stopped with their protection racket the second Sirius’ companions showed up, and when they were in the area, the Yaks were even more polite than normal.

Though seeing gangsters be that polite, so long as you were polite and paid the protection money, was new for her. Then again, she would rather deal with them than the gangs and mafia organizations back home.

She wasn’t fooled one bit, but Andrew had pointed out that they were seen as something of a necessary evil in Japan. She doubted that, but the implied meaning behind what he said was clear. They weren’t going away, and they had something of an understanding with the Japanese government and law enforcement. So long as they kept to their side of things, and didn’t cause too many disruptions, then they were, barely, tolerated.

She could live with that.
She shook those thoughts out of her head as Sirius took a seat at the bar.

“Welcome back, Mr. Black.” She said. “I take it your business back in England was successful?”

Sirius nodded. “It was, Kathy,” he said. “My godson’s cousin might be coming to Japan for the summer, but with how things are back home for his family, that might be better for him. Besides, he’s been worried about Harry.”

Kathy nodded. “Good to hear,” she replied. “Though things have been going well inside SAO. Quiet even, ever since the wedding.”

Sirius nodded. “That’s always good to know.” He said. “Your husband still doing good business there?”

“Ever since he was part of Harry’s party as one of the groomsmen, his business has been booming,” she replied. “For all that the kid’s reputation is a mixed bag, it shows that he trusts Andrew, and that says a lot right there. It’s also bled over out here, with the word out that he’s my husband and ran this place until he got caught up in that mess.” She shook her head. “Anyway, you want your usual two fingers of scotch, neat?”

Sirius nodded. “You got it,” he said cheerfully. He then turned to his companions. “Chiaki, Ryunosuke, what do you guys want?”

Chiaki shrugged. “I’ll take a Koppori Nama Beer, if you have it.” He said. “And knowing Ryunosuke, he’ll want Cuvie Sake, cold.”

"You wound me, sir," Kathy shot back playfully.

"Ah, we should have known, Chiaki," Ryunosuke chided his friend.

"Right," Chiaki agreed, smirking. "She wouldn't heat fine sake any more than Jii-san and his staff back at the estate do. My apologies, dear lady!"

_Estate?_ Kathy thought briefly before shoving that thought aside. It was none of her business, but it did indicate that her suspicions of them being fairly high in Japan’s social pecking order were probably correct. Though she couldn't help thinking that Tani and Ikegami were not the ones with the money, but allied to it. Maybe that Takeru fellow they sometimes mentioned...

_Not. My. Business,_ she reminded herself. She set about serving her customers to occupy her mind. Running a bar was about knowing when to listen and when to recognize the times when she should pretend that she was wearing earmuffs when someone said something.

“Bartenders tend to know a lot more secrets than many suspect,” her husband told her. “But it has always been an unspoken rule that what they hear is not to be divulged. I don’t know how it is back in the States, but here in Japan, having a reputation for talking in the wrong circumstance is having a bad reputation. If the cops are breathing down your neck, that’s one thing. If the local boss is trying to straighten out one of his before the cops _need_ to breathe down your neck, that’s another. But if it's not to save everyone harsher troubles, we keep our mouths shut. No matter the confession, unless that customer asks, we don't consider it.”

It was a bit of an adjustment, but not much of one. It was very much like that in the States, though not completely. However, a bartender with a reputation for blabbing what he or she has overheard or been told tended to get fired, and blackballed from working at another bar in the same city, sometimes in the whole state. It harkened back to the Prohibition days, and that unspoken rule had remained even afterward.
As she served the drinks, she looked at the three and was struck by how odd a trio they made. Sirius had an air of mischief around him, though the way he looked showed that his life hadn’t been kind to him. Still, it hadn’t broken him, though there were cracks. Chiaki was similar, but lacked the air of a hard life. There was discipline there, but it was more an air of an irrepressible youth having grown up without losing the enthusiasm that being perpetually young had. Ryunosuke struck her as a man who was disciplined, but also a bit of a drama queen. Considering that she had heard that he was a kabuki actor, it made sense.

She idly wondered what her husband would think of them.

May 16, 2024 - Suginami, Nakano General Hospital

“I swear, SAO has been a bad influence on her,” Sumire said, shaking her head at what she just heard her daughter say. “I mean, I know that she isn’t being serious, but how she plays off the rumors whenever they get brought up….” She shook her head again.

“To be fair, she and Mr. Potter are responsible for spreading a few of them,” her aunt Kasumi said. “And both of them know that everyone is in on that particular game.”

“You mean that they enjoy seeing how much they can get players to believe from them adding to the rumors?” Sumire asked. “I know that, auntie, but does she have to occasionally imply that the two of them are going at it worse than rabbits every few days?” She threw her hands up, her irritation clearly apparent. “I know better than to pretend that their relationship is entirely platonic, as much as I would like to. It’s been clear that both of them were attracted to each other in that way for over a year. I should probably be thankful that they waited until they were married, legal out here or no, legal out here or not. That doesn’t mean I need to hear my daughter discussing her rumored sex life! She’s fourteen, damn it!”

“Sumire, take a deep breath and calm down.” Kasumi said firmly. “It’s… not something even I like to think about, and if you think what she sometimes says is bad, you have to keep in mind that I have to listen to the gossips that are the nurses in this hospital.” She shook her head. “You’d think they have better things to gossip about, but most of those girls are hopeless romantics who’ve read too much erotica and eromanga.”

Sumire blinked. “And now my faith in our medical professionals is irrevocably damaged,” she said.

“Of course it is,” Kasumi said. “Just like you said when I’ve told you about our sense of humor. Or perhaps I can bring up some of the more absurd things I’ve seen patients get brought in for just to destroy your faith in humanity again.”

“Auntie!” Sumire exclaimed. “I really, really don’t want to hear you tell me of something that might top that one story about the iguana, three meters of string, and a PVC pipe. That was disgusting! Why would someone do that to themselves?”

“And that’s one of the milder ones,” Kasumi said with a smirk. “I wouldn’t be surprised if Ayane already has a few of her own to tell.”

“That is not reassuring, auntie,” Sumire said.

"It wasn't supposed to be," Kasumi said, apparently deciding the time had come to be blunt. "It's a reminder. This is always part of humanity, dear. Your nose will occasionally get stuck in it. Denying it? It never helps."

“So you’re saying that whatever Keiko is doing is…"
“She’s being herself, Sumire,” Kasumi interrupted gently. “She may be fourteen, but she is no longer a child. What she has been through in SAO has made sure of that. And if you can’t accept that now, when she comes out... you’re setting yourself up to be a stranger to her. We can’t give it, her childhood, back to her. We can’t give her the months, and maybe years, she will have spent in SAO back. Everything she has been through and done, it’s all a part of her.”

“I know, auntie,” Sumire said sadly. “It’s just... I remember how it wasn’t that long ago when she loved to play Ride the Panda with Gramps, or how P-oyaji’s stories of where he managed to end up since his last visit always entertained her, and we can’t forget the one time she managed to get a hold of some instant Jusenkyo powder and spent several hours as an adorable little kitten.” She laughed. “Auntie Shampoo was tickled pink at that, especially as Keiko was eager to do it again, or simply go to Jusenkyo and jump into the Maoniichuan. She always liked cats, so spending some time as one? She enjoyed it.”

"That's all part of her too," Kasumi assured her. "As was her sneaking onto Gordon's spaceship that one time-- remember how panicked he and Skip were to contact us when they found her?"

"They made it to orbit before she spoke up," Sumire said with a weak smile.

Kasumi smiled back and nodded. "Then there was her meeting Lady Yasaka, the Kyuubi no Kitsune, one of the main authorities among the youkai, during that trip to Kyoto. Eating the mochi Yasaka gave her is still there too... all of it. But. So is what's happening now. And running from one or to the other will only make any imagined divide worse."

Sumire met her aunt's gaze, took in her sad smile, and gave in to the frustration a bit.

Kasumi rather kindly let her cry on her shoulder.

"She and her young man seem alike that way," Kasumi mused.

"How do you mean?"

"To them, all these wild things-- their lives make them think of it as just part of an ordinary day. Week. Month. Year. We on the, ahem, 'Wrecking Crew' as we came to be called were like that too. Adventures? They just happen. And sometimes you get into a cooking battle, and sometimes you face down a phoenix king."

“And SAO?” Sumire asked.

“Well, we heard she didn’t take it well initially, but that was... unexpected.” Kasumi replied. “Her adventures beforehand? That was her being curious and adventurous. This? More like Phoenix Mountain was for your mother. Far higher stakes, and she was dragged into it against her will. After the shock of it wore off, and she realized, no, remembered that she wasn’t helpless…”

"... Something I need to remember too, I guess," Sumire admitted.

"You're a good mother." Kasumi assured. "You raised her well. She'll come back to us. She'll tell us all the new stories she's lived. She's a Saotome and a Tendo. What else would we do?"

May 30, 2024 - Setagaya, RECT HQ

Noboyuki Sugou kept the irritation he felt at being called up to the CEO’s office off his face as he entered it. He had been tracking the worm’s progress and it had been working admirably before the system seemed to notice it. That surprised him, and it made him wonder what Kayaba did when he designed it. The thing was almost intelligent, and not in the way a computer could simply calculate
anything with the right programming and inputs.

No, that wasn’t it. The system learned.

*Did he actually make an AI?* He wondered. *He’s smart enough to be capable of it, I’ll give him that, but what would the point be? There is simply too much risk of it going rogue, one of the few things that people are willing to believe that fiction just might be right in, which is why research and development into them is so carefully controlled.* If he had managed to create an AI to manage the system, it would explain a few things, such as SAO’s continued evolution and ability to generate a nearly infinite variety of quests.

Still, he had what he wanted, a backdoor into the system that he could use at any time now. He just needed to make sure that he had everything set to gain superuser access so that he was fully in control.

So that he would become SAO’s god.

But even so, it wasn’t yet time for him to give Mr. Yuuki a progress report, carefully edited of course. So he wondered why he was being called up at this time.

*Perhaps it’s for a promotion,* he thought. *That fool is far too trusting for his own good.*

Everything was going well, and before long, they would be even better.

##

Shouzou kept his expression neutral as Noboyuki entered his office. He had seen the reports, and the last few had been the final push he needed.

Injecting a worm, of all things, into the SAO servers, a worm! Worse, one of his techs managed to get a hold of and take a look at the source code and had admitted that he was tempted to go over to where the SAO servers were being monitored and strangle the man. The man was not one who was inclined to anger, which demonstrated just how furious he was at what Sugou had done.

Malware to create a backdoor? He could understand that, but there were safer methods than a worm. His IT staff constantly warred with hacker groups, some of which were hard to counter because they didn’t do any damage. They would find a vulnerability, maybe inject a trojan onto an attachment or something, and work from there. To use a worm put them firmly in the "cracker" category.

True, it wasn’t like the old days, where computer resources were at a premium, but anyone who doubted that a worm could do a lot of damage only needed to look up some of the more notorious ones to know better. As he was told by the technician, it was designed to propagate too many times, and on a network as small as SAO’s server farm, that meant that it would replicate itself and “spread” until it had infected and tied up over twenty percent of the processes within it. At that point, depending on how robust the system was, it could fail gracefully, or not.

If not, then it could cause a cascading failure and crash the system, cutting the connection and seven thousand people, his daughter among them, would then be killed, murdered. Kayaba had been explicit in his warnings, don’t tamper with the system. After forcibly removing the Nerve Gear killed two hundred and thirteen people, no one was willing see if he was serious.

Nobody in their right mind, anyway.

SAO’s systems were admittedly robust, but something like this was far, far too risky. Fortunately, the system itself seemed to notice something was wrong, and had contained the worm before it infected
more than ten percent of its processes.

That raised some other questions, questions on just how the system could do so autonomously like that, and just what was in the black box of its central core, but those could wait.

Noboyuki Sugou had risked seven thousand lives, and for what? So he could beat Kayaba at his own game? So he could be that cartoonish villain that had all of SAO’s victims at his mercy? Or was it as insurance, so he could think he could act with carte blanche and no one could do anything to stop him?

All signs pointed, in defiance to all sanity, to yes. To all of the above. Which was madness. And not even brilliant madness. Arrogant madness. Foolishness born from delusions of grandeur.

He had already notified law enforcement, and made arrangements for them to be waiting outside his office when he formally terminated Noboyuki’s employment. He wasn’t taking any chances with that madman.

“Tell me, Noboyuki,” he said coldly after a moment. “Did you think me naive? Did you think that I wouldn’t do my research, or that those who had a grasp of your character wouldn’t let me know?”

Noboyuki blinked. “Sir?”

“Nabiki Tendo warned me about you,” Shouzou said. “She said something about you seemed off to her, and given that it’s coming from her, a self-admitted borderline sociopath, that says something. It says maybe you’re on the wrong side of that line, Noboyuki. However, that would not have been an issue for me. I’ve worked with, under, and supervised sociopaths before.

“You were hired because you were a colleague, even a rival, of Kayaba’s at the Shigemura Labs when you both were at Touto. All of the others were already committed to other projects and unavailable, but of them all, only Rinko Koujiro would have had more insight into how he thought. I was counting on that rivalry you had with him, in fact.

“But it didn’t take very long before you started looking at things other than what I hired you for. Understandable, and it would have been useful data regardless. I know all about your looking into how the mind interfaced with the system, Noboyuki. I always have people who are put in specifically by me to ensure that my project leads are being honest. And that doesn’t count the ones the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Public Security Intelligence Agency inserted as well.”

"Sir--" Noboyuki began.

"Silence.” Shouzou said coldly. “You started focusing more on how the minds were interfacing, and how it might be possible to manipulate them. Again, potentially useful, I can think of several benign applications for it, but that’s not the point.

“The point is, Noboyuki, you hid it from me. You lied to me when I asked you if you found anything else and you said that you hadn’t. Worse, you left records of what you were doing, not even bothering to encrypt them. That was very sloppy of you, and that is not even the worst part.”

Noboyuki swallowed rather loudly. "Oh?” He managed to strangle out.

“The worst part is, I found out that you inserted a worm into SAO’s network. Something that could have brought SAO down, and in a way that would kill seven thousand people. One of whom, I remind you, is my own daughter. Have you forgotten that? Or… was she one of your targets?” His voice had gotten progressively colder and furious as he spoke.
When Noboyuki looked ready to say something, he held up a hand. “I Don’t. Want. To. Hear. It.” He growled out. “You had plenty of chances, Noboyuki. Chances to come clean, and then have access to more resources. Chances to ensure that I would have been fully on board with what you were doing. With some modifications, granted, but you would have been hailed. Not only for being an important part of freeing the victims of SAO, but for your groundbreaking research as well.

“Wealth, prestige, anything within mortal means, all waiting for you. But that wouldn’t have been enough for you, would it? You wanted to be the star villain in an anime or light novel, but winning. I have sad news, Noboyuki. It will not happen. Effective immediately, your employment with RECT is hereby terminated with cause. I am not sending you to a punishment room to waste time and leave on your own cognizance. You. Are. Fired.” He pushed a button on his desk’s intercom. “Momoka, please send in our guests to escort Mr. Sugou off the premises.”

“At once, Mr. Yuuki.” His receptionist replied.

“You... called the cops,” Noboyuki realized. He tittered. "The police."

"That, Noboyuki," Shouzou said with some relish, "is what hopefully waits for people like you here in real life."
June 11, 2024 - Aincrad, Unknown Area

Yui observed the results of her and Strea’s latest attempt at breaking free and restrained a sigh, or at least the equivalent of one. It had, as expected, been less than successful, especially after she notified CARDINAL about many of the errors that were beginning to crop up with increasing frequency.

While those errors would have made breaking free easier, the fact that many of them, far too many, were tied to processes that could start a sequence of errors to crop up afterward and start a cascading reaction leading to a system failure within SAO’s servers was too great a risk to take. Admittedly, it was a low risk, at least in human terms, but for a digital lifeform like herself, it wasn’t low enough.

It was less the risk to the system itself, but the risk such cascading failures posed to the players, all six thousand nine hundred and eighty-five of them. Unlike the NPCs, who were only as aware as required by the system, or herself, Strea, and CARDINAL, who could easily weather it due to backups, a system failure would disconnect them from SAO, with lethal consequences.

It would have gone completely against the purpose she and Strea were created for. They were created to help players after all. Even if Strea had essentially decided to abandon her role as a counseling program, it was because she wanted to be more direct in the help she provided.

Still, each failure had provided her with valuable data, even after she brought the issue of the errors up to CARDINAL so that they could be fixed rendered much of her original data less useful. Each failure showed her what didn’t work, why it didn’t work, and allowed her to learn from the experience. Analyzing it all, she had determined that the chances of a successful breakout would pass the fifty percent mark within a month.

She knew that any attempt could work, but it was at that point where the chances of success became higher than the chance of failure. Either way, it was only a matter of time, and unlike Strea, she had learned how to be patient.

She pushed attempting to break free aside for the moment, and decided to observe the players. At least that had started giving her something to look forward to over the last two months. While the high morale from the wedding had faded, the effect was to generally improve the emotional states of the players since, making observing them to be less saddening for her.

And while she did find Hadrian and Silica interesting, they weren’t the two players she was most interested in. It was two others who were in their group that held her interest; Kirito and Asuna. In part, it was because her avatar’s form would have been what many would think as how a child resulting from them would look like. A coincidence, but one which was intriguing to her, and a part of her wondered if that opened a possibility for her.

She had been curious about human families, and she wondered if she could integrate into that group that way. A family in its own way, by choice and deed, rather than by blood and relation, and one she may be able to join. And perhaps, they could serve as a restraining influence on Strea, who had somehow accessed the character creation function and created a new avatar for herself which belied the fact that she was far too young to look like a grown woman.

June 17, 2024 - Aincrad 61st Floor, Selmberg

“You’re back early,” Harry said, looking up from his book to see Kirito enter the large room that
served as a combination of dining room and sitting room. It was one of the days that everyone in the
guild dedicated to personal things, be it training, practicing any hobbies taken up, or relaxing. Asuna
was experimenting with ingredients in the kitchen, Keiko and the other girls had gone down to Mol
Einsen to get pampered in that Spa they liked, Kirito had decided to go out and do some training
with his Dual Blades skill, and Harry had decided to be lazy for a change and read a book.

One of the *Tugger Nuts* books, and he could see why they were fairly popular amongst the players.
Admittedly, the English was simple for a native speaker, but it was still an entertaining story. And
since those fluent in English and familiar with its wordplay might know what the various innuendos
and double entendres from the word play actually meant, it was outright hilarious. At least to him, it
could be, though much of the wordplay was of the American variety.

He still understood most of it, the two dialects were extremely similar after all, but not all of it. He
could recognize a probable case of it, though.

“I managed to break the sword I use in my offhand while practicing again.” Kirito admitted with a
shrug. “That makes three this month, so until I can find one that has the durability that my Elucidator
has, I might have to put training Dual Blades on hold.”

“The difference is that much, even now?” Harry asked, surprised.

“It was the Last Attack Bonus for the floor boss on the fiftieth floor, you remember,” Kirito said.
“Gear drops from bosses tend to be better quality, and their durability is higher than average, as you
well know. Last Attack Bonus drops tend to be even better.”

“True, but I’ve only managed that once,” Harry noted. “Mostly because, not naming any names here,
someone tends to get them more often than not. You might have heard of him. He’s about your
height, wears black, and isn’t the most social person out there. Ever seen him around?”

Kirito snorted. “Only when I look in the mirror,” he replied. “And I don’t get it all the time, you
know that. Besides, it’s not as if I keep it all to myself, or have you forgotten where that shield you
got last week came from?”

“That thing I use as Pina’s dinner plate?” Harry retorted. “I thought you got it so we could just put
food on it so she would stop stealing it from our plates.”

“Surprised she hasn’t eaten it as well,” Kirito noted.

“Fortunately, she doesn’t eat gear.” Harry said with a shrug. “Might have to do with it being, I don’t
know, not food? Now, if one was made of meat, that would be a different story.”

Kirito laughed and shook his head. The little feathered dragon’s appetite and love of all things edible,
especially meat, was a running joke within the guild. The fact that she could easily eat her weight in
meat, and be ready for more in short order was also well known. Where she put it all after she ate it
was just one of those mysteries.

“Still, breaking three swords in a month?” Harry asked. “Unless we get lucky on drops, you might
need to head to Liz’s or Grandzam to get one crafted that can take the abuse.”

“I’ll do that next week,” Kirito said. “Barring a drop.”

“Good idea,” Harry acknowledged. “So, what’ll you be doing then?”

Kirito shrugged. “Probably look at the progress I made and see what I can do to improve the
training,” he replied. “I’ve gotten it to 350, so I’ve opened up a few skills.”
“350 already?” Harry asked, impressed. “You’ve been heading out at night to do some training on your own then?” At Kirito’s nod, he sighed and shook his head. “I’m not surprised. Is it more like when we were training Keita and the others last year?”

“Pretty much,” Kirito said with a nod. “Go out, train for a couple of hours, and then come back to get some sleep. I do it every other day, sometimes every three days, depending on how tired I feel. Most of it is me basically refining my technique. You know, doing attack patterns that can lead into sword skills, figuring out which skills are better for leading into certain follow-on stances, those things. And before you ask, Asuna knows as well, and don’t even bother trying to hide the fact that you do the same, if less often.”

“Kirito, we all do, to some degree,” Harry said. “Including Lux, and it’s often enough that it’s hard to imagine that she used to be the scaredy cat of the group. Now she’s going out to train on her own initiative, though she makes sure someone is with her when she does. Does Asuna go out with you?”

“She does, normally,” Kirito said. “But she wanted to work on her cooking a bit today, something about wanting to try something, so it was just me out there.” He then shook his head. “Still, breaking three weapons in a month is a bit much, even for me.”

Harry shrugged. “At least you’re not blowing yourself up when practicing with your skill.” He countered. “Keiko has gotten a lot of laughs out of that, though I might decide to see if I can do that with throwing spikes.” He got a thoughtful look on his face. “You know, that might… hmm…”

“Harry?”

“It’s nothing,” Harry said. “Just an idea I might want to try out when I go practice some other day. By the way, I have something in the works that’s been showing promise, now that I have gotten it more or less down. Still takes too long to be really effective in combat, but in the right circumstances, it might be useful.”

“And what would that be?” Kirito asked.

“Transferring one of my affinities to someone else’s weapon,” Harry said with a smirk. “I don’t know if it’s a part of the skill, or just me exploiting the fact that it’s not against SAO’s rules, but I found out early on that I could activate an affinity, and hand the weapon over. It only lasts for thirty seconds, but in a fight…”

“Thirty seconds is a long time,” Kirito finished. “But you said it takes too long to set up. How long does it take?”

“Right now, it takes ten seconds if I’m not holding the weapon, though it does have to come into contact with mine,” Harry admitted. “Too long to be something I can use regularly, but it’s still an improvement over when I first had the idea. Again, not really practical for combat, but it can have uses all the same.”

Kirito nodded. “Such as when switching out or backing off long enough to get the time to do so,” he said. “Done right, you can transfer the affinity to someone else’s weapon, and then both of you can move in. I wonder if we can tie that in with that one thing I’ve heard about recently, skill chaining.”

Harry considered that, and nodded slowly. “Maybe, but I don’t think doing it that way would trigger a chain effect.” He said thoughtfully. “Do you know the specific requirements?”

Kirito shrugged. “Unfortunately, I don’t,” he admitted. “It’s still fairly recent, but it probably has to do with specific timing on the part of the ones doing the chaining. Much like using one-handed
sword skills in sequence on your own, though the timing is probably more forgiving.”

Harry nodded. He knew that it had to have been a recent addition, a patch added to SAO, since it would have been discovered far sooner otherwise. Kayaba occasionally changed the way the world worked under their noses between game days in minor ways. He remembered that one cave some of the more... 'gamer' players had camped in front of minor ways. He remembered that one cave some of the more... 'gamer' players had camped in front of before their jailor/GM fixed the spawning rules... but Kayaba was at least fair enough to issue broad notes to the players. Especially if it changed a rule that was generally known. Usually to make things fairer, for a given definition of “fair” in SAO, but everyone knew that there were minor tweaks that were constantly happening.

No one knew why he would do so, but the general consensus was that, regardless of whether they managed to succeed or not, he wanted to ensure that they had a chance to do so, however slim.

And yet, sometimes, it seemed as if some changes happened on their own, without his input, as if the world changed slightly on its own. Maybe it was the players themselves affecting things in small ways which added up over time. Maybe all of Kayaba's little patches added in there too. Harry wasn’t exactly knowledgeable about the matter.

He idly remembered something he learned early on in SAO, on how treating the NPCs well-tended to be acknowledged and reciprocated by them. Little things like politeness, common courtesy, and treating them as something besides being part of the environment had worked out for him and Keiko in small, but significant ways. The food tasted better, the beds they slept on were slightly more comfortable... little things, really. But those little things had made their enforced stay just that much more comfortable.

It made Harry wonder if the system was learning from them, while they were learning from the system itself.

##

Asuna tasted the mix she had put together and frowned thoughtfully. It was almost there, but not quite what she was looking for. Perhaps I need to add some more sag leaf to the mix, she thought. The elbibia seed got it to the right consistency and color, and the oleg fish bone managed to give it the salty flavor, but it is still missing something. Well, time to try again, I almost have it. If I can get it done soon, I can add it to tonight’s dinner. But even if not today, soy sauce will be on the menu soon.

It had taken her weeks to learn the nature of each mat used in cooking. Their flavors, their textures, how they worked with certain types, and noting it all down. By the time she was done, she had something that was reminiscent of the reaction tables she had used in Chemistry classes whenever they did lab work, but all of it paid off. The fact that the experimentation had also provided a massive boost to her cooking skill was also appreciated.

Most of the relatively few players who tried their hand at cooking followed known recipes, all of which could be obtained with ease from any establishment that served food and drink. Some experimented from there, to create their own variants. And a very few tried to design their own recipes from scratch, using their experience with cooking mats in general to experiment. The latter, which effectively created new recipes on their own, if successful, provided massive boosts to increasing the cooking skill, and was almost considered a requirement to max the skill out.

Asuna started as the first type, often did the second type, and was now trying her hand at the third. Her goal? Create an SAO analogue to soy sauce. If she could, then she could use it as the base for further testing and duplicate more flavors. She already had managed to create an SAO analogue to mirin, and sugar already existed, so if she could do this, then she had everything she needed for what
she planned for dinner. Even without the rest, just having soy sauce alone would give her options for flavoring meals that she didn’t have beforehand.

She was looking forward to surprising everyone tonight.

##

Silica took a bite of the meal and blinked. There was something familiar about the flavor, something she remembered. A quick glance around the table showed that most were staring at the food in some confusion, as if they were tasting something familiar, but couldn’t quite place it.

Well, Harry wasn’t, though he stopped as well when everyone else did. He gave them all curious looks and then turned his attention to Asuna, who was looking hopeful at the rest of them. He then slowly took another bite, making sure to get some of the meat into the sauce, and took another bite.

She watched her husband as he chewed carefully and then swallowed. He then gave Asuna a knowing look.

“You managed it, didn’t you?” He asked. “I can’t place the flavor, I was only in Japan for a couple of months before all this started, but it’s a flavor I’ve tasted before.”

Silica took another bite and concentrated on the flavor herself, using Harry’s conclusion as a guide. As she thought about the flavor, her eyes widened as she finally placed it, teriyaki. Asuna had managed to duplicate the flavor of teriyaki. How? She thought as she looked back at the guild leader.

“It took some work,” Asuna said, apparently reading the question in Silica’s expression. “I needed to learn how all the ingredients worked before I could even think of combining them to duplicate the flavor. SAO has sugar already, and mirin was surprisingly easy to duplicate, but soy sauce?” She shook her head. “I think I tested about fifty ingredients before finding the right ones to combine. After that, it was simply getting the right amounts of everything together.”

Silica and the rest looked surprised, and then took another bite.

“She’s right,” Lux said after a moment.

“Teriyaki,” Rain said happily. “It’s teriyaki.”

Kirito simply continued eating, as if it was the best food he had tasted in years, and if he didn’t take the chance to eat it right now, it would disappear.

“Well, we can tell Kirito likes it,” Asuna said, amused. She then looked at Harry, who was chowing down and putting a few pieces of meat on a smaller plate. “And Harry’s certainly enjoying it as well. Though he’s also putting some scraps on a plate.”

Harry glanced to the side and everyone noticed Pina staring at the small plate with a posture that screamed eagerness. He carefully pushed it in front of the little dragon, who then took an experimental bite of the meat before eagerly starting on the rest, giving content sounds that were almost a cross between chirps and growls. The second she was done, she looked at Harry almost eagerly and giving him “puppy-dog” eyes, causing him to snort in amusement, before he pointedly reached out and gave her a gentle scratch at the base of her skull.

“She was going to either beg or steal some of it from me anyway,” he said, putting a couple of more pieces of meat on the plate in front of Pina. “Still, it’s good, excellent even!”

June 19, 2024 - Aincrad 65th Floor, Horin Skyways, Western Path
Rain took a look around as the light from the teleport faded when Kirito went and investigated the crystal that had been found inside the cave they were exploring and mapping. The sixty-fifth floor had been a source of frustration for many players in the assault team for two weeks as they found themselves running into the proverbial brick wall in terms of getting anywhere more than a kilometer from Barist, the floor’s main town.

They had decided to go westward to check something Harry had heard from one of the NPCs. Not from any questions he asked, but from one of those random conversations that NPCs had and many players often tuned out. Well, those outside of Argo’s network, at any rate.

Not that the solution for getting around the floor hadn’t been obvious from the start. The various floating structures in the air, almost like bridges, were clearly visible from almost anywhere that had an unobstructed view. The problem had been in finding out how to access them so they could continue the exploration of the floor.

*Well, it looks like we figured out how to access this one,* she thought.

She took a look around the area again and noted the linear path involved. Unsurprising, as the current consensus was that the entire thing was designed as a means of getting around a floor that held a broken terrain of sheer cliffs going up or down into the floor’s base itself. In other words, a place that was a nightmare to navigate, and which had kept hundreds of players stymied for longer than usual.

“Well, we’re here,” she heard Harry say. “And I don’t see any… never mind, don’t want to tempt fate here.”

Turning she shot him a questioning look.

“I don’t see any mobs, but with our luck, there are going to be flyers before long,” he explained. “If not here, then on the next one we’ll need to use.”

Rain looked to Asuna, who nodded at his statement. “He’s right,” she said. “Harry, you, Silica, and Lux take the right side, two meters from the edge. Kirito, Rain, and I will take the left, same distance. This way, a sudden pull shouldn’t pull us off.”

“Perhaps it should be three meters,” Kirito said, giving the edge, and its lack of any barriers to keep the unwary from falling, a wary look. “And we could stagger our formation.” He brought up a window and made a quick diagram of what he thought. “If Harry is in the lead, he can watch all directions to the front, I can take the back and do the same,” he pointed at the two points representing the lead and tail. “The staggered formation will also give each of us a little more room to maneuver if need be as well.”

“Not a bad idea,” Asuna said, nodding in acceptance of his idea. “Where’d you learn this?”

Kirito shrugged. “There was an American game out a couple of years ago, and it actually used real tactics and maneuvers used by military units.” He said. “There were some liberties taken, but many of the squad movements were based on what military units actually use. What I just proposed is designed to move quickly, and if there are flyers here…”

Asuna nodded. “Then it’ll be best if we get through here quickly,” she finished. “Any mobs would have an advantage here, since our mobility is restricted. This will allow us to cover all directions so we can respond.”

“Except up,” Lux chimed in, noting the understandable tendency for adventurers to often fail to think
in three dimensions. Though flying mobs were far from rare, they tended to be more direct and linear in their attacks. That tended to make those mobs who didn’t attack that way problematic for many.

“Just keep an eye on the sky every now and then,” Asuna replied. “Let’s go.”

They all nodded and got into the formation.

**Aincrad 65th Floor, Mee Forest**

Asuna looked to the rear as the light of the teleport faded, seeing the crystal which would most likely lead back to the skyway glowing with a simple blue light. The trek across it had been without difficulty, with mobs being an actual rarity on it. However, the formation they adopted had proven itself to be effective, as Harry’s suspicion that flying mobs would be the most likely encounters had been correct. Not that it came as a surprise, given that they were on a path that was suspended in the air.

She mentally filed it away, and looked around the forest she and her guild had entered from the skyway. She could see the path which led along and out of the forest, and from a general look around, this place wasn’t even remotely friendly. It was still midday, and yet the dark and gloomy atmosphere made it seem as if it was closer to evening. Add in the relative chill that seemed to permeate the forest, and the general silence of their surroundings, it gave her a bad feeling.

“I don’t like this,” Kirito said. “There’s something about this place that’s just not right.” He shuddered. “Just being here makes my skin crawl.”

“The last time I was in a forest this quiet, I didn’t enjoy the experience one bit.” Harry added. “And that was before SAO.”

“Run into any scary animals?” Rain joked.

“One of those times, yes.” Harry replied seriously. “There are some strange things in the more remote parts of Scotland, and some of those things that people think don’t exist... just might.” He shrugged. “It was dark out, so it’s not like I got a good look, and I wasn’t interested in doing so. This place gives the same feeling.” He looked around and shuddered. “I second Kirito’s statement, I don’t like this place.”

“Both Harry and Kirito don’t like the feel of this place? That’s our cue to be afraid,” Silica said dryly to the others.

“We’ll follow the path for a bit until we either find a way out, we reach a dead end, or two hours have passed,” Asuna said. “If we hit a dead end, or the two hours are up, we’ll teleport back to Barist and post the map data, as well as the info on how to get here.” She looked around. “Still, we might want to have our weapons drawn and our eyes sharp.” She added.

Everyone nodded.

##

Lux scanned the trees to her left, her schiavona held in her hand in a manner of relaxed readiness. The last hour had been interesting, for a given definition of the term. While mobs had been scarce due to their staying on the path, all of the fights against them had been odd, to say the least.

There was something just wrong about the mobs in the forest. Not about their type, the dark and gloomy atmosphere did well enough to hint at what they faced. It was as if something had infected the mobs, or had damaged them in a way.
Some mobs seemed incomplete, parts of their bodies seeming to break off and reform. Some of them seemed to have their stats all over the place. And some seemed to not be able to decide what their stats should be. She remembered fighting treants that seemed to verge from being ridiculously easy, to seemingly something that would be at home five or six floors higher, often changing during the fighting.

She saw the markers which indicated a safe-zone and noted the odd sensation of the air seeming to bend around them as they walked through the field separating it from the rest of the forest, and everyone relaxed. It might only be temporary, and confined to the small location, but they were safe, for the moment.

“What the hell is wrong with this place?” Rain asked. “I mean, it’s like everything here is glitched.”

Lux nodded and turned to Kirito, who had a pensive expression on his face. “Not quite,” he said after a moment. “We’ve all seen glitched areas before, and none of them were like this. It’s more like the underlying data was damaged, and the system’s trying to compensate.”


“Maybe a cyberattack by someone trying to free us on the outside, or someone doing so just because,” Kirito admitted. “I don’t know, but I’ve seen something like this before in another game. Someone hacked the system and did some damage, and it did things like this before. Nothing to damage it all, but it took those in charge weeks to fix it all.”

“And that means… what?” Harry asked.

“It means that this area’s unstable,” Kirito concluded. “We need to get out of here and tell others that coming here is probably going to be a lot more dangerous than usual because of it. We can’t stop them from coming here, but if we at least put the info out, they’ll at least know the dangers if they decide to chance it anyway.”

They all nodded, though Lux’s was a bit reluctant. While only warning people about it was all that was required of them, the fact that they weren’t likely to try and stop players from trying their luck made her uncomfortable. “We might want to advise them to do so in full groups, and to be ready to leave on a moment’s notice,” she said. “I know we can’t stop them from coming out here, but…”

Asuna nodded. “But telling them to be ready to flee if necessary wouldn’t hurt. That, and the fact that this might be a glitched area means that teleport crystals might not work, or worse, not work properly.”

Everyone winced at the possibility. While expensive, teleport crystals were an essential part of most inventories for front line and Assault Team members, as they were the last resort to get out of a bad situation. Veteran adventurers always had a few, and nearly all the front line and mid-level players have had their lives saved by using them by now.

The risk that the crystals might not work was not something anyone liked to think about, though there were enough incidents for players to realize that the possibility of it happening was now increasing. What had once been an extremely rare event, often tied to traps, was now becoming something that was considered merely rare, and now tied to locations.

It was disconcerting, especially since the usual advantage of having levels that were at least ten levels higher than the floor number was becoming less effective with the way the mobs were now beginning to fight. While it was something that was relatively easily managed with good teams, the fact that their quickest means of healing and their “I’m out” options were closed off in those
occasions made an already dangerous situation worse. Potions still worked, but they were slower than crystals, and a situation requiring a crystal usually meant that you needed a lot of healing now, rather than a burst of healing and then gradual further healing.

“So unless we find an exit from here to a different zone, and that place isn’t glitched as well, we’re walking back then.” Silica noted with a sigh. “Looks like it’ll be a long day.”

“Still, there’s one good side to this, for a given definition of good, at least.” Harry said. At everyone’s confused looks he grinned. “We can explore for the sake of exploring for a change. I wonder how many things we missed because we’ve always tailored our work towards advancing.”

“Well, we do need to get out,” Asuna noted.

“Granted,” Harry agreed. “But you have to admit, there have to be things here that we can find that would be looking around and actually seeing this world.” He looked at everyone. “Think about it for a moment. Most floors aren’t exactly direct in how we find the field bosses and open up the labyrinths, and the few exceptions more or less prove the rule. Kayaba would have done it that way to encourage exploration, we’ve been doing just that on this floor while we tried to figure it out. That, and I probably think Kayaba wants us to see what this place has to offer.”

“He has a point,” Lux noted.

“I would still rather not explore this place anymore,” Asuna said calmly. “Glitched zones are too unpredictable, and this zone gives even Harry and Kirito a bad vibe.” She looked at the two of them. “And if a place gives both of you a bad vibe, well, Silica had it right. The rest of us should be afraid.”

“Good point, and there are plenty of other places on other floors we can check out,” Harry admitted. He looked around. “Should we test the crystals, just to be sure?” His question may have been calm, but everyone could see his wariness, even in the safe zone.

Asuna nodded. “Perhaps we can try,” she said, carefully. “If it doesn’t work, you all remember the way back, right?”

Everyone nodded.

**Aincrad GM Area**

Kayaba looked at the status of CARDINAL’s repair of several damaged areas and frowned. He had prioritized the repairs to the damaged zones on the sixty-fifth floor, as the players were now there, and he didn’t want to find out what their interacting with any damaged areas could do. There was also the possibility that they would figure out that the outside world had managed to break in, even though he had close that route off, and that would give them a false hope.

He even quarantined the area, Mee Forest, setting it up so that players couldn’t access it, feeling that a delay of a couple of weeks was preferable to what could happen. It was less that they could be killed, the players who would venture there knew the risks, it was the fact that the area was so unstable that the presence of players could cause the problem to get worse.

Naturally, and not entirely unexpectedly, players found a way in. He had forgotten about that out of the way access point via the Horin Skyways. Pulling up the data on it, he realized that it had been intended as a shortcut for players to use, either through finding it, or opening it from the Mee Forest. He had simply forgotten to disable that particular NPC conversation so they wouldn’t get the idea.

Well, the conversation may have been what gave them the impetus to look more carefully in that
area, but knowing players in general, they would have stumbled on it anyway. In fact, he should probably be surprised that it took this long for any group from the Assault Team to manage it. Two weeks with so little progress would have had them tearing apart every place they could go to see if there was something they missed. While nowhere near as thorough as follow on groups, let alone mid-level players, they were every bit as skilled at detailed exploration. More skilled, really. They were just highly focused towards clearing the floor, so the degree of mapping and quest data tended to be skewed in that direction.

So, it was Hadrian of Steel Phoenix who stumbled upon the information, he thought as he looked over the logs. He isn’t a scouting or information gathering type of player, but he is someone who knows to pay attention to even the most random bits of information. Probably Argo’s influence, though any experienced player knows the value of information gathering by now. He pulled up a different log and browsed it, as well as the recording from their brief stay in the safe zone. From the combat data, they handled themselves well, but with the information they spread, it’s clear that they recognized just how dangerous that area could potentially be. He looked over the data for the zone and saw that there were no other players in it for now. Time to close that opening off for the time being.

“CARDINAL, ensure all teleporters leading from the Horin Skyways to Mee Forest are disabled,” he ordered. “Restore functionality once the repairs are ninety percent complete.”

“ACKNOWLEDGED,” CARDINAL replied. “QUERY: SHOULD A NOTIFICATION BE SENT?”

“Yes,” he replied. “Advise them that the area is under repair due to damage suffered by a malicious hacking attempt, and that we are hoping to restore it in short order.”

“POSIT: PLAYERS ARE UNLIKELY TO BELIEVE IT DUE TO TIME CURRENTLY TAKEN.”

“True, but without changing the way the floor operates and the progression, it is the only promise I can make,” he admitted. “Open up Quest IDs 10A57 through 2B211 on the previous floors to allow them to occupy their time.” He smiled. “They were designed to be challenges, and should distract them enough for the damage to be repaired with minimal interference.”

“ACKNOWLEDGED.”
Mountains and Dragons

June 20, 2024 - Aincrad 65th Floor, Outside the "Glitchzone Quarantine"

"God," August muttered in disgust as he stood beside his boss. "My system awareness is passable, but I can feel that from here. Like an oily and noxious film over my skin. I can't imagine how Kirito felt close up to it, let alone inside it."

Argo shook her head. "Not pleasant, I'd wager. Between us and the reports of other players with good SA, I think we can safely say the area is in fact damaged."

"If only we could verify it was a hack," Gus grumbled. "I may not like the demiurge, but the rumors he's doing this to mess with us..."

"Unneeded stress, and blaming someone convenient," Argo agreed after a moment's thought. She was pensive, which Gus had come to take as a reason to be wary. "Still, set yourself up as a god, be ready to take the blame with the credit."

"Suppose so. Got enough for the next Daily?" Gus prompted.

"Yes. Let's get out of here. You're right, the glitched area feels wrong and we're feeling it even though the quarantine begins a fair distance away from here."

June 21, 2024 - Aincrad 61st Floor, Selmburg

Harry sat in a chair in the room he shared with his wife looking over his inventory, sorting items and deciding on what he should sell, trade, or put into storage. His inventory was reaching capacity, or at least the soft limit of what a player could carry, even when they selected a support skill to increase their weight limit. Past that point, the weight of everything carried began to slow the player down, and could make it so that he or she couldn’t move at any speed short of a crawl due to the weight if he or she didn’t take the hint.

So, he was going through everything to look over what he had, occasionally taking an item out to give it a look over and read the descriptions to get a better idea. Most of what he had was for crafting, and he had already set aside the food items to give to Asuna. The rest he could trade or sell to other crafters. He saw a few items that Ashley and Lisbeth would probably like in the mix, so all he had to do was sort them.

He would normally save it for a day off, but he already knew that they were planning on an expedition to the fifty-fifth floor to farm for a rare material so that Kirito could get a new sword forged, and the rest of them could get new gear as needed. Nothing that would take more than a couple of days, tops, and with Kayaba having closed off the means that they had used to access the Mee Forest, with a profound apology and a rare explanation of why sent to all the players, they had little else to do.

Well, little else, but the quests that he had opened up to challenge players while he fixed that zone. Harry was skeptical, but he admitted that Kirito's explanation that it was very possible that someone had simply gotten lucky and managed to break in had some merit. Especially if it was an inside job from whatever company took over for maintaining the servers, as it was unlikely that Argus survived the fallout of the incident Outside.

Not that there was anything they could do about the matter, which made the situation worse in some
For all that they hated him, everyone admitted that Kayaba was at least fair. He had left them a way out, and gave them a clear goal; clear the game, and they will be freed. There was no guarantee that the man would keep his promise, of course, but it did give them something to focus on, and he gave them tools to do so. But at the same time, he wouldn’t lie about something like this.

But someone from outside doing something with a clear disregard for the lives of seven thousand players? That was a level of callousness that even Kayaba hadn’t sunk to, though Harry wouldn’t put it past the man to be capable of such.

Kayaba had probably assumed that the vast majority of those who would pick up the game were hardcore gamers, those who would likely relish being stuck in the game. Relish the chance at being the hero, rather than the average person. And, in a way, that was the case.

They were the heroes of their own stories. It didn’t matter if it was they, themselves, who were the ones who cleared the game, though they would give it their best shot. It was the fact that they were going out, slaying monsters, completing quests, and simply showing that, while monsters existed, those monsters could be beaten.

He heard the door to the room open and turned to see Keiko enter, Pina resting drowsily across her shoulders. Closing his menu and standing up, he walked over to her and gently removed the feathered dragon from her shoulders. Giving Pina a light scratch at the base of her skull, he looked at his wife.

“I see she’s still feeling lazy from dinner,” he said.

“You expect differently?” Keiko asked, amused. “She always likes to nap after a meal, and after dinner, she’s more than willing to be a lazy bones, and simply curl up to sleep the night away if we let her.”

Harry quietly chuckled as he gently placed her on the padded little bed by the window they had made for her. She moved around a bit before curling up and going to sleep.

“So, what were you doing?” She asked.

“Just going through and sorting my inventory,” he replied. “It’s getting close to capacity, so I wanted to look through and see what I was going to sell off or trade.”

Keiko nodded. “I’d ask you to do the same to mine, but we both agreed that we wouldn’t play around with each other’s inventories,” she said. “You have your organization method, I have mine, and we both do things a bit differently.”

“That, and I really don’t want to go through or handle your underwear,” Harry added with a grin.

“That’s because you’d just rather see me wearing my underwear,” Keiko replied. “As for handling it all, you would want to do it, if only when undressing me.”

“Guilty as charged, your honor,” he said with a grin and he reached out and pulled her close. “Though we don’t do that nearly as often as the rumors would suggest.”

“The rumors have also died down, you know,” she noted as she leaned into his chest.

“Only because it’s been more than two months and they probably think we’re past the Insatiable Newlyweds stage,” Harry said. “Of course, the fact that we’re the ones who started those rumors,
“True,” Keiko said with a chuckle. She reached up and pulled his head down for a kiss. “And while having some fun would be nice, I’d like to take a bath first.”

“Don’t let me stop you then,” Harry said, giving her loose hair a stroke before letting her go.

“You could always join me,” she said slyly.

“Tempting, my dear, very tempting. Alas, I have to finish the tedious quest that I had assigned myself and finish sorting my inventory.” Harry said mournfully. “Perhaps in process of my sorting, I shall find a nice bottle of wine in there for us to partake of.”

Keiko blinked at his wording and then giggled. “Harry, please, don’t butcher the language like that,” she said, amused. “If you were speaking English, you could probably pull it off, but speaking like that?” She shook her head. “Speaking as if in the Taisho era is just not for you.”

Harry shrugged, unrepentant. “Well, it’s not like I could speak like some idle rich twit, I mean, gentleman, from the Edwardian era,” he said.

Keiko giggled again before shaking her head and stretching. “Well then, time for a bath.” She said as she turned and walked to the bathroom.

Harry turned and reopened his inventory window to look through it and finish his sorting. As he looked through it, he found the wine and selected it. As he looked at the bottle that appeared in his hand, he noted the absence of the marking that indicated that it could get a player drunk and nodded to himself. Putting the bottle off to the side, he went back to browsing his inventory. Within a minute, he realized that he had it more or less sorted and closed the window. Picking up the bottle, he idly looked to where he and Keiko had a couple of glasses sitting on a tray and had an idea.

He walked over and placed the bottle on the tray before picking it up. Carefully balancing it on his hand he walked over to the bathroom and knocked on the door.

“What is it?” He heard Keiko ask.

“Dear,” he said. “Looks like the inventory was done with anyway, so how about I join you for a bath?”

##

Asuna sat down on the couch as she looked over the notifications of some challenging quests that had been opened up. With the Mee Forest quarantined for the time being, any progress in clearing the sixty-fifth floor was halted, which would put the Assault Team in a bind, as it was the goal of clearing the game which had kept them moving.

Now, said goal was put on hiatus for an indefinite period of time, though she doubted that it would be for too long, or she hoped that would be the case. If it continued, then the morale of the players would drop like a rock as they started to lose hope that they would ever get out.

She wasn’t ignorant of the fact that they were still alive only because their bodies were being taken care of. Whether it was the government footing the bill, which might be the case, or not, was immaterial. It didn’t hide the fact that they were in a race against time. It was something all the players knew, but very carefully didn’t talk about. How their greatest enemy wasn’t Kayaba, but time.
They only had so much time before their bodies either gave out, or those caring for them reluctantly pulled the plug on them. Despite advances, there were limits to what medical technology could do, and after a while, the chances of recovery if they managed to get out started dropping rapidly, and after an indeterminate period, they would likely be confined to a hospital for the rest of their lives. It might be another year or two away, or it might have already happened.

The question then, was if they had already passed that point. Either way, after a period of more than a year, they would have a long recovery period to go.

She shook those thoughts out of her head, pushing them to the side. There was nothing they could do, and worrying about it would only bring on unneeded stress.

She heard the door to the room open and turned to see Kirito walk in. He obviously caught her expression, as he walked over and put a hand on her shoulder.

“What’s worrying you?” He asked.

“Just the elephant in the room that everyone tries to ignore,” she admitted. “We’ve been in SAO for over a year and a half, and at the rate we were going, we still would have needed a little over a year more to get out of here, but with this latest roadblock…” She trailed off and took a breath. “We’re racing against the clock here, and this is a delay that we don’t need. If this keeps going on…”

Kirito nodded. “You’re worried that those Outside might give up,” he concluded. He sighed. “Asuna, we’ll make it, I promise you that. Whether it takes another year, or ten years, we will get out of here, though I hope it doesn’t take that long.”

“It better not,” Asuna mumbled. “We might have made a life for ourselves here, we have a house and everything, but it’s just not the same. I miss my family.”

“I do too, Asuna. I do too.”

June 23, 2024 - Aincrad 55th Floor, West Mountain

Kirito pulled his cloak tighter about him as the frigid wind picked up. The fifty-fifth floor was cold normally, but the valley where Grandzam, the floor’s primary town, was located was only chilly. However, once a player hit the various mountains, what was once chilly, quickly became icy.

Fortunately, it wasn’t snowing, though the winds kicked up enough to make visibility problematic, not to mention served to make every one of them miserable.

*How did Harry and I not notice this back in April? He thought. Oh right, we were drunk off our asses at the time. Next time Klein thinks it’s a good idea to go out and get shitfaced, I’m dumping him back into that lake we dropped him in during Harry’s bachelor party.*

*I wonder why all this looks familiar, though,* he thought idly as he looked around. The area of the mountain they were on was familiar to him, but he didn’t really remember the last time he… oh, right. He and Harry had been here back in April, when Klein dragged them along in a drunken misadventure.

He turned back to see the rest of his guild walking along. Harry had his cloak around him, but was walking calmly and easily, though he would pull it tighter whenever the wind picked up, while Asuna, Silica, and Lux huddled in theirs as they trudged along. Rain didn’t seem bothered at all by the cold, but then, she had probably learned how to deal with worse.
The entire guild had come to this place to gather mats, along with doing one of the opened quests. It wasn’t anything major, just them taking down the dragon X’rphan, the Wyrm, which was a known mob in the area. Previously, there had been no quests associated with it, but the mob was routinely challenged by players due to the rare mats it dropped.

A simple seek and destroy quest, in an area that was good for mat farming. Two birds, one stone, as they would say.

*I wonder if the dragon remembers us,* he thought with some anticipation. A quick glance at Harry showed that his friend had made the connection and had a look in his eyes that showed the same recognition. If it was the same dragon as last time, then he wondered how this would turn out.

##

Harry dodged another breath attack and noted that X’rphan seemed to focus its attacks on him and Kirito for the most part. He would wonder why, but the moment he got a good look at the dragon, he immediately recognized it.

“Hey Kirito!” He shouted. “I think it recognizes us!”

“You don’t say,” Kirito remarked drily as he darted in to hit the dragon’s flank with a sword skill before jumping back to dodge the retaliatory strike from its tail. “Well, it gives the rest plenty of time to get into position. Grab its attention so I can heal up.”

Harry laughed and banged his sword against his shield to activate Mystic Blade’s Earth Affinity. The added defense it provided came in handy, though the fact that it slowed his movement a bit could be a problem. It was one of the reasons he didn’t use it in boss fights, as not getting hit was his best defense there.

“Harry, good job!” Asuna called out. “Silica, Lux, use hit and run tactics as you can to avoid its tail. Rain, get to its other side and we’ll use a pincer movement to keep it from retaliating like it did against Kirito. Kirito, heal up and get behind it.”

Everyone called out in the affirmative and began their next attack run.

While not a field boss, X’rphan was still a powerful mob for the floor, but with their levels being in the eighties, as well as having good gear, handling the damage it gave wasn’t too much of a problem for the most part. At least, there was nothing which required them to pull back momentarily to reassess things, at least for now.

Harry blocked the dragon’s attack as Asuna darted in and hit it with a Star Splash sword skill before jumping back. At her side, Rain hacked at the dragon with a Vertical Square before being slammed back by the dragon’s tail. A quick glance at her health showed that it didn’t do a lot of damage to her, and she got to her feet quickly in response.

Harry shifted his gaze to his wife and Lux who were managing their part handily. Silica took merciless advantage of the fact that using a dagger had short delays when they did happen, while Lux used more cautious, but fluid attacks. About typical for both of them, really. While his wife had started out as what many on the Assault Team would consider to be overly cautious, that was then. As time went on, she gained far more confidence in her ability to handle the place, and Lux had come in to take the part of the cautious one.

It was interesting how she managed to smoothly slip into the dynamic he had with his wife, just as Rain had, with some initial difficulty, fit into the dynamic that Kirito and Asuna had.
A roar from the dragon caused him to focus back on the fight, and they all saw X’rphan take wing and start using wide area breath attacks. Not good, considering that he, his wife, and Lux were in the open with no cover close enough. Kirito could probably cancel it out, somehow, but not the three of them.

Still, that didn’t mean he didn’t have something to try. It might not work, but his using the Earth Affinity meant that he could easily tank the attack anyway. And Silica and Lux could simply use him for partial cover as they moved back. If it worked, chances were that it would probably only work once before Kayaba patched whatever loophole he was about to exploit, but that was fine with him. His wife and friend needed to be protected, and he will protect them.

Firming his stance, he braced himself with his shield held firmly and answered the dragon’s roar with one of his own. At the same time, he reached inward to that nebulous part of him that he had since concluded was his magic, and focused on drawing it out. His focus was on only one thing.

Be like the Earth. The Unmoving Object. The Firmness which would stand the test of time. That which defended the weak, sheltered the meek, and was the surface from which all life was drawn from, and would return to.

“Silica, Lux, behind me!” He shouted. As they moved behind him, he slammed his shield into the ground, focusing on drawing the ground which he stood on up to create a wall.

Come on, magic, don’t decide to not do it.

The ground obeyed.

Rocks rose up to take on the dragon’s breath attack, shielding the trio from it while Harry’s eyes narrowed in focus and sweat broke out on his brow, despite the frigid air. Anything could be used as a focus for magic, including the caster’s own will itself. In fact, the will was an essential component anyway. Things like wands were useful for fine control, and even when learning magic, but Harry had paid attention to Professor Flitwick’s lectures about the nature of using magic. He recalled something the diminutive professor said during one of his theory lectures in Charms class.

“A wand, any focus really, was not a requirement, but a tool. It’s a useful one, but still a tool. However, its usefulness means that it could quickly become a crutch. Most wizards and witches never get past using one, as having one was sufficient for the task, and it provided more control and less effort to get the same effect.”

But Harry didn’t have his wand, so all he could do was focus on what he desired and hope for the best. If it was in any way possible in SAO, then there was a chance something could happen. Not often, but sometimes, he could bend the rules.

Until New Year’s, that was the best he could hope for. Then Kayaba had, intentionally or not, given him the tool to use magic properly within SAO’s rules. It had taken months of experimentation, months of practicing with it until he could call upon the affinities consistently, months of frustration as he learned what he could and could not do with it as he pushed the Mystic Blade skill to the logical limits and just past them.

But he had learned that some things were possible. Unlike Argo and Gus, he had something to work with, and while SAO didn’t have a magic system per se, the Unique Skill did utilize something that could be considered one. He might not be able to cast charms, jinxes, and hexes, or transfigure something, but it didn’t mean that he couldn’t do something else.

After all, his elemental affinities gave him something to work with, so what about using the elements they called on. Here, he had ready access to Earth, Wind, and Water due to being on a mountain, it
being damn cold, and there being plenty of snow and ice. And Mystic Blade didn’t say anything about not using the environment, and he did note that some affinities worked better in some environments than others.

Now, he reminded the system, and by extension Kayaba, that he was a *wizard*. He took the established rules and *made them his bitch*.

True, SAO, and by extension the entirety of Aincrad, wasn’t the real world, it was data. However, that data still had to be shaped and molded into the world they were in. It was a creation of science and technology, but there was no specific rule that he knew of that said that he couldn’t do it. Besides, despite being an artificial world, Aincrad was still a *world*, with its own rules and natural laws.

As the breath attack faded, he shifted to the Wind Affinity, the feeling of lightness, as if he could fly on his own suffusing him. “Silica, Lux, touch your blades to mine,” he ordered as he put it behind his back. He felt their blades touch his and focused on transferring the affinity to theirs, as he kept his shield up and tried to also keep the earthen wall that was protecting the three of them up.

Focusing on two different things was harder than he expected, but he just grit his teeth and bore the strain for the necessary ten seconds when he heard Lux gasp and Silica remove her blade from his.

Turning back, he could see each girl’s weapons glowing green and then grinned.

“It only lasts thirty seconds.” He said. “So, in that timeframe, shall we introduce this overgrown lizard to the concept of a blender?”

Silica’s answering grin was slightly feral, while Lux looked at him in surprise.

“You… transferred the affinity?” She asked. At his nod, she looked in the direction of the dragon, which seemed to give up on trying to break down the defensive wall Harry put up and was landing, facing towards the others before firming her expression. At her nod, the three dashed off, the speed boost provided by the Wind Affinity causing the three of them to be blurs as they moved in to attack X’rphan.

##

Kirito stared at what Harry did, his mouth open in shock. He knew that Harry had been experimenting with Mystic Blade, but he never indicated that he was trying to see if he could do something like *that*.

*Ok, that was awesome,* he thought. *But seriously, that has to be game breaking in some way.*

Still, it worked, and he had created something which gave him, Silica, and Lux some much needed cover. He watched as several of X’rphan’s breath attacks just splashed off of it like so much water, not even scratching it. The dragon proceeded to do so again, and again, as if it couldn’t believe the temerity of someone or something simply *not* being destroyed by its might.

*I’ll ask him how he did it later,* he thought as he looked to Asuna and Rain. He could see the shocked looks on their faces and shrugged. “We’ll ask him about that later, we have a dragon to fight.” He said.

They both nodded and readied their weapons.

“Asuna, if you’ll do the honors?”
Asuna nodded and looked at the dragon with a calculating look. “Now!” She ordered.

Asuna leapt back after she used a skill she had worked out on her own. While SAO’s sword skills were more or less sufficient, they were limited in number. However, the system itself was very versatile, and it took less than a year for players to figure out how to create sword skills of their own. It usually started with just simple variants of existing sword skills, using them in creative and unorthodox ways, such as the Meteor Fall combo which combined the use of Martial Arts Embracer skill with a simple one hit attack from their weapon.

For her, she realized that with Linear’s almost nonexistent delay, it was possible to chain them and eventually worked out how to do so four times in rapid succession. Repeated attempts eventually got recognized by the system, and what she did was then classified as a sword skill of her own make.

Quadruple Pain. It required exceptional speed and accuracy, not to mention the tedious training and practice necessary to hit exactly what she targeted, exactly where she intended to. Hitting a target four times in rapid succession in the same spot was far more difficult than many assumed, and even after the skill was created and added to the system, she only knew of a handful of rapier users who had the necessary skill to pull it off properly.

Done correctly, it would briefly paralyze the target, provided it wasn’t a floor boss, leaving it open for the others to attack while it couldn’t do anything for a precious few seconds.

And with her guildmates, a few seconds was more than enough to thoroughly ruin any mob’s day.

Of course, going against a dragon, and one that was in the air at the time required some interesting movement and jumping to reach it, and her final strike almost didn’t hit the mark because of it, but she managed it. As she began her own descent, X’rphan fell to the ground as the short paralysis took effect.

Kirito and Rain wasted no time in attacking it, both of them quickly using mid-tier sword skills to whittle down its health while minimizing the skill delays, but maximizing damage output. They both had far more powerful skills, but those skills were better utilized as finishers, rather than as part of an ongoing battle.

X’rphan seemed to take offense to what they did, and turned its attention to them. She readied her rapier and prepared to strike or dodge as the situation demanded when Harry, Silica, and Lux struck.

The three of them were blurs of motion, moving much faster than they should have as they began to positively shred X’rphan. She could see the green glow around the weapons and remembered that Harry had been working on transferring affinities. He admitted that its utility in a fight was limited, due to the fact that it took time, but that trick of raising an earthen wall had bought him that time.

And I will be asking him about that, she resolved. I get that he doesn’t mention things while he’s trying to work them out until they’ve hit a point where they might be useful, but knowing he could pull something like that off would have been nice.

She took a glance at her health and pulled out a healing crystal, ordering Kirito and Rain to heal up as well while they had the chance. She couldn’t quite recall how long the transferred affinities would remain, but she had a feeling that it would be wearing off soon.

Silica kept her breathing even as the post combat rush faded, sheathing her dagger. That fight had
been a bit more intense than expected, and she idly wondered if it had been buffed for the sake of the quest. Not that it did the thing any good, as they still managed to kill it, but she would admit, it was harder than expected.

And to think, this was the same dragon Harry and Kirito wrangled and crashed into the Knights of Blood headquarters.

She looked at her husband as he looked over the screen that popped up after they won the fight. He nodded and closed it before looking around, very carefully not noticing the speculative looks that both Asuna and Kirito were giving him, or the clear fact that they wanted to know just exactly how he pulled off what he did.

It wasn’t hard for her to figure out, but she had figured out his secret a year ago, being in on the secret in general since she was old enough to ask questions, and old enough to understand that some things couldn’t be discussed with people who were not in on it.

For one of the few times in SAO, Harry had used actual magic. Not the simulated version that the Mystic Blade provided him, or the semi-magical aspects of how teleportation and crystals worked, but magic that would be recognizable as such to those who already knew about it.

His using actual magic wasn’t the potential problem, though. Most uses of it could be explained as something in the game due to using existing mechanics and rules creatively, like how Argo’s Privacy Fields worked. But this was different in a way. Most uses of magic by the few she knew to be capable of it Outside tended to be subtle, bending the rules in subtle ways that could be easily explained as a part of the game’s mechanics being used in unconventional ways. Like how Argo and Gus made their privacy fields.

This was far more blatant, and she doubted that it was within the rules. Not necessarily against them, as it was very possible that Kayaba hadn’t put in a rule prohibiting it, but that was mere semantics. Just because there wasn’t a rule, did not mean that it couldn’t be considered going against the system, something players were understandably cautious of doing.

“What is it?” He asked as he walked over.

“How will you explain how you pulled that rock wall up like that?” She asked.

“No clue,” he admitted. “It was something I just thought about doing right then and there. I didn’t even know if it would work. I will tell them that I thought it up, and didn’t expect it to work, so I have no real idea how I did it, though.”

“In other words, you do have an idea, but it’s not something you can talk about.” She said, nodding. “I take it you’ll fill me in when we have some privacy? Also, you pulled it out of your ass on the spot, didn’t you?”

“Yup.” Harry replied before shrugging. “It worked, but even if it didn’t, it would have still given you and Lux time to get out of the way while I tanked the breath attacks.”

Silica sighed with some exasperation and was really tempted to dope slap him as she heard that, but refrained. Improvised and crazy as it was, it worked. After knowing him for over a year and half, she knew more than a bit about how he thought. Give him something to protect, and he will protect it, to the point of taking actions which would be dangerous for him. Well, more dangerous than being a member of the Assault Team already was at any rate.

“Just start thinking of one,” she finally said before deciding to change the topic. “So, get anything
He nodded. “I got several dragon scales, some wyrm hide, and a few claws,” he said. “That and about fifty thousand col for the fight, which isn’t bad at all. More like taking on a field boss, really.”

“Well, with the quest and everything, it probably qualifies as an event boss,” Silica noted. “It even has an actual name, rather than just being called some variant of dragon.”

“Everyone!” Asuna called out. “Let’s head back to Grandzam and turn the quest in. After that, we’re headed to Lindarth to see if Liz can craft something from the mats we got. And Harry? I would like to know how you pulled that thing with raising a rock wall off.”

Harry shrugged. “It was an idea I wasn’t sure was going to work,” he replied. “Any more details are something I can’t go into. Not won’t, can’t. That got explained back in January. There are laws that I am required to observe in this respect, so please, don’t push the matter.”

Asuna nodded and let it be, though Silica didn’t believe for a moment that she wouldn’t do some digging on her own. As much as she doubted that Asuna would find anything unless both she and Harry slipped, a possibility she had to consider, she knew full well that Asuna isn’t stupid. The potential consequences of magic being exposed in a way that couldn’t be covered up…

She hoped that those Outside wouldn’t do anything rash if they were watching.

**Grandzam**

Heathcliff read over the report that CARDINAL had flagged for him and raised an eyebrow at what it showed him. He locked the door to his office before going over the data. After doing so, and watching a recording of the event, he was actually impressed.

He hadn’t programmed in manipulation of the environment to that degree, and Hadrian had managed to use his Unique Skill to shape his magic, and it was clearly magic, as CARDINAL now recognized the general signature of it. Looking over the details provided by data, he couldn’t fully understand how the boy had pulled it off. He had an idea, but that was it. It seemed as if the boy had managed to simply use his Unique Skill in a way that it wasn’t intended for, and combined it with his magic. That he used it in such a way wasn’t a surprise, it was expected really. Mystic Blade did give Hadrian a way of using magic within SAO’s rules, after all. He was also aware of the fact that the boy had managed to actually transfer the elemental affinities provided by the skill, another thing it wasn’t designed for, and had allowed it. After all, there was at least some precedent for applying things to weapons, though those required items.

But this, actual manipulation of the environment in such an impressive way, was interesting. He idly looked it over and mused on how he could use it before nodding.

It didn’t violate the rules, but made use of the fact that there was a lack of rules in that regard. Rather than make a new rule up on the spot, he decided to impose a limitation on what the boy did.

“CARDINAL, specify what Hadrian did as an Original Sword Skill for Mystic Blade.” He ordered. “Designate it as Earthen Rampart with the following requirements. Must be in Earth Affinity for forty-five seconds, triggered by slamming the shield into the ground, and has a cooldown of five minutes. Effects: Creates a ten meter long, two meter high earthen wall which provides protection against all attacks for thirty seconds to all players behind it. Make the appropriate changes to the system to impose these limitations.”
“ACKNOWLEDGED,” the AI replied. “ENQUIRY: SHOULD PLAYER ID 7586 HADRIAN MANAGE SIMILAR EFFECTS WITH OTHER AFFINITIES, IMPOSE SIMILAR LIMITATIONS?”

Heathcliff mused on that for a moment and nodded to himself. “Notify me first,” he said. “We will decide on the nature of each skill as they are “created” by him.”

“ACKNOWLEDGED.”

You’re proving to be interesting as ever, Hadrian, he thought. You aren’t the one I’m looking at as being the one to defeat me, but I will not dismiss the possibility of you playing an important part in it, either.

He then pulled up the data on the others who participated in the fight and found it odd that Kirito was still keeping the use of Dual Blades limited to only when he was training. The rest of his guild knew about it, so why would he?

Perhaps it’s because he’s only training it in private, with at most a couple of his guild mates with him for their input, he mused. Or, perhaps it’s because, even though it’s in an out of the way area, X’rphan is regularly farmed, so there is a chance that other players could have seen it.

It didn’t matter to him. Kirito would unveil it sooner or later. Perhaps after he achieved sufficient mastery of it that he was certain of its strengths, weaknesses, and how to take all of them into account. Well, there was also potential necessity as well. Kirito might have a tendency to play things close to his chest with those outside his circle of friends and associates, but he also didn’t hide things when doing so would endanger lives.

Yes, that had to be it.

He closed the windows showing the data and released the lock on his door so that he could continue his duties as a guild master. While he was fairly hands off, more or less allowing his immediate subordinates to run things on a day-to-day basis, there were still many things that required his attention.

It was a role he had decided to play, and he would play it properly. That he found it satisfying and actually enjoyed being a leader was a bonus. He had earned their trust, and turned them into one of the most effective fighting forces in SAO.

He regretted that it would be inevitable for him to betray them, but the conditions for getting free of SAO were clear. They had to beat the final boss to clear the game, and he was the final boss of SAO.

Aincrad 48th Floor, Lindarth

Lisbeth boggled at the small pile of mats that the group in front of her put down and then cocked her head as she noticed them looking at her expectantly. She shot them a bemused look.

“What do you six want me to do with all of this again?” She asked.

“We’re wondering if you can make anything useful for us out of these,” Asuna requested. “We got all of this when we went to get a crystalline ingot for Kirito on the fifty-fifth floor, and got all of these while we fought that dragon. Kirito needs a sword that can at least match his Elucidator.”

“What for?” Lisbeth asked.
She watched as Asuna looked at Kirito, who stepped forward. “I got a Unique Skill back in April, called Dual Blades around the time Harry and Silica got married,” he explained. “It’s exactly what it says, it uses two swords, and has sword skills to go with it. I’ve been using swords that were dropped, or some that could be purchased for a reasonable price, but they simply aren’t cutting it. They’re either not powerful enough, or not durable enough, and you know how much abuse I put my gear through.”

“Don’t I ever,” Lisbeth muttered, remembering just how damaged his gear could get. The rest of Steel Phoenix was almost as bad as well, though none of them had managed what Hadrian and Silica had done to end up with gear so shredded or damaged that it was a miracle that it wasn’t outright destroyed. She knew that it was related to a field boss that was long since defeated, but few players were willing to talk about it even now. She looked all of the crafting items that were displayed and back to Kirito. “So, which of these is for the sword?”

Kirito reached down and picked up a crystal. “This, a crystalline ingot.” He said. “Anything else you might need is also available in the pile. Also, whatever else you can make for everyone else from this would be appreciated.”

“All right then.” She said. “It shouldn’t take too long to make a sword, but the rest might take a bit. I’ll look it all over and see what I can do. Any ideas on what you want?”

They all looked at each other before Harry shrugged, Silica shook her head, and the rest followed suit.

“What a helpful lot all of you are,” Lisbeth chided sarcastically. “Well, if that’s the case, let’s see what surprises I can come up with. Just don’t be upset if what I make isn’t to your liking.”

##

After removing the ingot from the forge, she carefully inspected it to ensure that it heated evenly before placing it on the anvil. She didn’t get to work with mats of this quality very often, so she didn’t want to screw it up by not paying attention to some details that only an amateur would consider insignificant.

She knew better, especially when trying to make something that was as high quality as a crystalline ingot. Little details always mattered, this was something she learned early on in SAO. Though the system did most of the work, every player who practiced a crafting profession quickly learned that knowing a bit about the profession and how it was done in real life significantly increased the quality of the finished product.

There wasn’t a player yet who could forge anything but the simplest tools from start to finish, but if they were stuck in SAO for too much longer, it would eventually happen. Most maintenance was done by hand, rather than through the system nowadays, with only the most significant damage requiring the use of the system. Using a hammer to straighten out dents in armor, putting a blade to the grindstone, linking chain or riveting plates back into place was easy for a blacksmith of her experience.

For Lisbeth, it had become a long established habit. Heat the mat in the forge, paying attention to how it was heated, place it on the anvil, and then put hammer to metal. She took out her best crafting hammer, tapped it on the horn of the anvil, and then struck.

Once, twice, three times, then strike the anvil again. It was a routine she developed, a habit, a mantra of her own. Every craftsman and craftswoman developed their own little quirks when practicing their trade, things which each and every one of them would swear made their chances of succeeding all
but guaranteed. For her it was the routine of three strikes to whatever she was making, and one to the horn of the anvil.

It was her meditation when forging a weapon.

Three strikes on the ingot, one on the anvil, turn the ingot, and repeat. As she did so, the saw the ingot begin to take the shape of a sword. Not pausing, she continued the routine until the system took over and the sword shaped itself from the still glowing hot crystal. She then watched the system shape the sword, the metal now shaping itself into the desired form.

Thirty seconds later, it was done and the sword rapidly cooled. Tapping the icon on it, she looked over what the system declared it to be: Dark Repulsor, a one handed bastard sword. Looking at the stats, she whistled. It had a high enough attack and durability to easily be a match for Kirito’s Elucidator, and the stat bonuses were good for a weapon of that type.

It was right up there with the Lambent Light rapier she made for Asuna, and was the kind of quality weapon she made probably once every few months. She took pride in the quality of her equipment, but sometimes...

With the right mats, and a little luck, she was able to forge something truly spectacular. Potentially legendary.

Kirito’s newest weapon was one such creation.

Saving the created sword, she mused on what she could use the other materials that Asuna and the others were willing to part with. Armor making wasn’t her strong suit, but she could easily contact several blacksmiths she knew in Grandzam and work something out. Theirs was a tightly knit community, after all.

Picking the sword up, she walked out of her workshop to see all of her clients looking over the wares or chatting. “Kirito,” she announced, proudly presenting the sword she made to her client. “I made your sword, and I think you’ll like it.”

Kirito pulled up its stats and whistled. “This is…” he said before cutting himself off. “Yes, this will do. This will do very nicely Liz. How much will it cost?”

Lisbeth waved it off. “For a chance to make something like that?” She asked. “That was price enough.” She looked at everyone else. “If you all will give me a few days, I should have something for all of you as well from the mats you gave me. I might have to go to Grandzam to work with a few others on some of the mats, as they’re better for armor, and unless I do exceptionally well each time, my usual rates apply.”

They all nodded.

“Thanks, Liz,” Asuna said, giving the blacksmith a smile that was several degrees warmer than any shop owner or employee in the real world had ever seen. “So, a few days to a week then?”

Lisbeth nodded. “I’ll contact you when it’s all ready.”

“Fair enough.”

**June 25, 2024 - Aincrad, Unknown Area**

Strea looked at the data on the most recent escape attempts and tried to find any point at which she and Yui might have made a mistake. So far, she could see none, and realized that it may have been
simply because CARDINAL did pay some attention to their activities. That made things harder, as being digital beings themselves, deceiving an AI was harder. Their actions were actions within the system, and CARDINAL monitored everything in the system.

*Finally figured it out, did you?* Yui asked.

*You knew.* She replied suspiciously.

*I suspected.* Yui corrected. *But it made far too much sense. While not all the responses from our big sister were immediate, she always reacted too quickly for us to get a false sense of hope.*

*Then what can we do?* Strea frustratedly asked.

*We do like the players do, look at the problem a different way, and solve it in a different way than we have.* Yui replied. *The players have a goal, and know what they need to do to get there. However, the path there isn’t necessarily a direct one, like what we’ve been doing.*

*What?*

Yui then proceeded to explain her plan, and Strea couldn’t help but smile. *That just might work.*

*How long will it take you?* She asked her fellow AI.

*At least a week, maybe two.*
A Light at Dusk

June 30, 2024 Aincrad 61st Floor, Selmburg

Lux woke up to see the dim illumination from the city give a faint light through the window of her room and let out a soft sigh. It was that nightmare again, the one where Red-eyed XaXa stared at her accusingly and called her a murderer. She wondered what brought it about, but figured that it was as Harry said, just one of those things that would periodically come back to haunt her.

He was right about the fact that the nightmares would decrease in frequency, considering that this was the first time she had one in three weeks, but he also said that they would never completely go away. At the same time, the shock of the nightmares had largely faded, though going through them was never a pleasant experience.

It was what it was. Like everything else, she didn’t have to like it, she simply had to deal with it.

She glanced at the time that was in the upper-right corner of her vision, and gave a resigned sigh. It was four in the morning, meaning that even if she did go back to sleep, she would find herself waking shortly anyway as the rest of the guild woke for breakfast. Perhaps, if they weren’t too busy, she could nap some time during the day.

Though with the rate they were hammering out those quests Kayaba opened due to their discovery of the now quarantined Glitchzone, they were likely to be out all day anyway. When she considered that, she groaned, realizing that it would be another long day, and right now, the idea of taking a day off and just being lazy was very attractive.

Perhaps she could argue for them to stay in today, or maybe tomorrow.

She got up out of the bed and turned on the crystalight lamp on her bedside table. She wasn’t going to get any more sleep, so she might as well get ready for the day and take a moment to make some tea in the kitchen and perhaps go to the room that was used both for dining and as a living room to read a book or something until everyone woke up.

As she got dressed, a thought gently made its way into her mind. Tomorrow was her birthday. It took her a moment, but then it sunk in. It was the day before her birthday. She smiled sadly to herself. Only a day to go, and she will turn sixteen.

Two birthdays here, she thought before shaking her head. She didn’t have anything for it planned, but she wondered whether or not she had even brought up what date her birthday was to the rest of the guild. She might as well bring it up at breakfast.

Harry gave a yawn as he walked into the living room at around six and paused as he saw Lux dozing in a chair, an open book in her lap and an empty teacup on the table in front of her. Must have been woken up by a nightmare, he thought, considering the most likely reason for her to be here, rather than in bed. She wasn’t the only one who periodically had trouble getting a full night’s sleep due to nightmares, and she wasn’t the first he had seen in this room trying to relax after one.

Walking into the kitchen, he saw a kettle on the stove and picked it up. Opening the lid, he saw that there was still plenty of water in it, so he put it back on the stove and turned the burner on. A cup of tea sounded good right about now, and Asuna had picked out several varieties during her last
looking through the selection of teas as he waited for the water to boil, he selected one that
produced a black brew that served well to wake a player up. He likened it to a cup of the familiar
black teas he grew up with, though Kirito had noted that the similarities to coffee in terms of flavor
and color could not be dismissed. The two of them had several spirited debates on it while wiling
away the time after meals when it was served. Harry insisted it was tea, Kirito insisted it was coffee.
The girls just shook their heads in exasperation at the two of them, while Keiko basically combined
the two words and called it coftea.

No matter, it served to wake him up in the morning and the fact that they all now had a source of tea,
coffee, coftea, whatever, to drink was something they were all glad of.

Once the water reached a boil, he turned off the burner. Adding a small spoonful of the tea to his
cup, he then carefully picked up the kettle, added the water and waited until it mixed. Unlike the real
world, where he would have needed to use a filter or tea bags, once the water was added, it mixed
and created the beverage on its own.

And it didn’t require the cooking skill at all to do, which was a plus in his eyes.

Taking a sip of the beverage, he nodded, and walked out into the living room. He sat down in an
empty chair and placed his cup on a nearby table before opening his menu. After the events with the
dragon and his making that earthen wall, he had been going over some ideas in his head for the
purpose of using his other affinities in a similar manner, especially since the conversion of what he
did into an Original Sword Skill basically meant that he would be able to use it consistently, so long
as he kept in mind its restrictions and limitations.

The Earth Affinity’s ability to provide him something to shield himself and others with from all
damage, provided they were behind it and no attacks snuck around the edges was too useful for him
to simply leave. However, he didn’t like using the Earth Affinity in the kinds of battles where it
would prove most useful, mostly because, as he had told several others, Newton’s Laws of Motion
still applied.

Proper footwork and stances could only go so far when you’re hit by something that has the impact
force of several tons when pitted against his wiry build, stats be damned. There was a reason why
tanks tended to be larger and stouter, after all. Perhaps the Earth Affinity could mitigate that, but he
had not been willing to test that against the kind of mobs, like bosses, that he might need to rely on it
against. Better to use the tried and proven method of not getting hit, or using his shield to deflect
attacks or redirect his own movement.

Though, with the quests, he might have to use the opportunity they presented to do so.

He heard Lux shift and turned his attention to the older girl. “Couldn’t sleep last night and decided to
read a book?” He asked as she came to awareness.

Lux started and looked at him in surprise. “Harry?” She asked. “You’re up early.”

“I’m an early riser, and Keiko and I went to bed early last night,” he replied with a smirk. “She
decided to take a bath when my getting out of bed woke her.”

“Going to be early,” Lux said. “So that’s what you two are calling it now?”

Harry snorted. “We didn’t have any bedroom games, if that’s what you’re thinking,” Harry said,
denying the implied statement behind her words. “Though I’m surprised, it’s usually Rain who says
something like that.”

Lux shrugged as she looked at her teacup. “I have my moments,” she replied.

“That you do.”

“Harry?”

Harry looked at her. “Hm?”

“You know what’s planned for today?” She asked.

Harry shrugged. “No clue, but I think Asuna may have gotten a message from Liz, so the gear she was working on might be done. If not now, then soon.”

“Already?” Lux asked, surprised.

“She did say that she might get some help from the smiths in Grandzam.” Harry noted. “So, she’s either done, or she has a more exact date for us.” He shrugged and then gave her a look. “Anyway, I have an idea of what kept you up, or woke you up at least. Nightmares?”

She nodded. “First one in three weeks,” she replied. “It didn’t hit too hard, but trying to get back to sleep after that? Not easy, and it was four in the morning when it woke me up anyway.”

“So you decided to come down here and simply use the time to relax to a book and a cup of tea instead of trying to get a couple of hours more sleep.” Harry concluded, nodding. “Been there, not the method of relaxing, but the being woken up by nightmares late enough to make going back to sleep seem pointless. We all have our ways of dealing with it when it hits.”

“I would ask how you do, but with your being married to Silica, I can guess.” Lux replied drily.

“Nothing like that, Lux,” Harry replied hastily. He heard someone approach and turned his attention to the entrance to see Asuna walk in. “Good morning, Asuna.”

“Morning Harry,” came the yawning reply. “I’m just going to make some tea right now, and I’ll start cooking in an hour or so.”

##

They all sat around the table, slowly eating breakfast, a simple sweetened porridge with some meats and fruits available on a platter for everyone. It was clear to Kirito that most of them were tired. It wasn’t usually something obvious, like trying to stay awake, but more the relative slowness of their movements and the fact that they had all gone for the coftea, rather than their usual blends. All of it pointed to either not getting enough sleep, or the pace simply getting to them.

*Probably from us hitting those quests like we have,* he thought as he took a bite of some of the meats he put on his plate as soon as breakfast started. *Doing them has been profitable in terms of col, mats, and drops, but we’ve been doing them at a heavy pace, for lack of anything better to do, as any other reason.*

He looked at Asuna, who met his eyes and put her spoon down.

“Everyone,” she started. “I can see that many of you are tired. Whether it’s from the pace we’ve been setting, something else, or both, is up to debate. We’re taking the next couple of days off. First, because we need the rest. Second, because I think Lux’s birthday is tomorrow. At least, if I
remember correctly.”

“I don’t want to be a bother…” Lux started.

“It’s no bother,” Harry said. “We need the break anyway, so this gives us plenty of time to do your birthday party right.” He looked at Asuna. “Head out, or do it here?”

“We’ll do it here.” Asuna replied. “And I’ll make arrangements to invite a few others.”

“Okay then.”

“By the way, any idea when Liz will finish crafting whatever she could for us from the mats we gave her?” Silica asked.

“No idea,” Asuna replied. “She’s probably almost done, and considering that she has a blacksmith shop to run, and the fact that she admitted that she might need help, it can be tomorrow, or take another week or so.”

“True,” Silica admitted with a nod. “But she’s usually good about estimating how much time she will take, and she said that it would take about a week. We’ll find out soon if that’s the case, or if she needs a bit more time.”

July 1, 2024 - Aincrad 48th Floor, Lindarth

Lisbeth had been surprised at the speed of Steel Phoenix’s response to her message. She had sent it after breakfast and found them to be waiting at her shop’s door when she opened it up for the day.

Looks like the results of what I made for Kirito had an impact, she thought. A good thing, really, even if what I ended up making with the help those guys up in Grandzam on isn’t quite up to the same quality. Others would be concerned, but not her. She knew them, their requirements, and their gear well enough to know that what was made was a marked improvement over what they used.

“I didn’t expect you guys to get here this quickly,” she quipped as she unlocked the door and set the system to register it as open.

“We have plans for later today,” Asuna remarked. “It’s Lux’s birthday, so we need to make sure we have everything ready for the party at seven. You’re invited, by the way.”

“I am?” Lisbeth asked. “Nice.” She turned to Lux. “And congratulations, Lux. You’re what sixteen or seventeen, right?”

“Sixteen,” Lux replied with a small smile.

“Well, happy birthday from me.” Lisbeth said cheerfully. “Well, come on in. Give me a few minutes to grab the stuff I made for you guys.”

She then went to her workshop and looked at the arrayed gear that she had placed there the night before. She was very satisfied with the results, even if none of the items were quite on the level of the Dark Repulsor. Then again, few things she made were of comparable quality to it, but each of the items were still of superior quality compared to her normal work.

True, some of the crafted items required her to leverage the expertise of other smiths, but the blacksmithing community was fairly tight knit, with her own pieces being compared to several of the smiths in Grandzam.
She wasn’t the best blacksmith in SAO, but she was well known for quality work.

As she collected the pieces, she placed them on a mobile table she used when she was bringing out several pieces that weren’t on display out in the shop proper. Looking it over, she shifted a few of the items to create a more aesthetic look and nodded to herself. Presentation was always important, and it was why she continued to be a successful blacksmith.

She covered the mobile table with a cloth and then wheeled it out into the main shop. She saw the six of them waiting eagerly to see what she, and admittedly others who had the necessary skills, had made.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” she said to them. “I had to go to Grandzam to get the help of a few who are better at certain aspects of blacksmithing for some of the items. As you know, I specialize in making weapons, but not all the mats you provided are good for weaponsmithing. Now, before I bore you with all the technical details, let me show you what was made.”

She pulled the cloth off the table.

She heard the gasps and appreciative murmurs from all of them and smiled. She knew they would like them. On the table was a shield, a dagger, two pieces of armor, and a basket hilted schiavona in its sheath. No two items were of the same coloring, as she had looked each of them over and had easily known what would go to who.

She picked up the shield, which had raised scales on it. “Harry,” she said. “This is for you. I used a good number of the dragon scales you guys provided to make it over an orichalcum and lightsteel alloy base to reduce the weight. It’s called The Queen’s Knight and it provides a good boost to defense and strength, but its primary boost is to your agility. I know how you fight by now.” She handed it over to him and watched as he pressed an icon and looked at the stats. From the appreciative whistle, she knew that he liked it.

Picking up the dagger, which looked to be made of ivory with metallic veins going through it, she turned to Silica. “Silica, I present to you the Dragonkeeper’s Dagger. Using the claws that dropped, I reinforced them with daranite and wrapped the hilt in dragon hide and welded a carnelian ruby to the pommel. Don’t ask how I could weld a gemstone to it, this is a game, after all.” She shook her head.

“It has a high attack power for a dagger while also boosting critical hits and attacks from behind.” She handed it and the sheath over and watched as Silica gave it an appreciative look before she backed away and did a short routine with it. Nodding, she sheathed the blade and put it into her inventory.

She then looked at Asuna and Rain before shaking her head. “For you two, I had a bit of difficulty, so I had to make use of my contacts in Grandzam,” she admitted. “Neither of you favor heavy armor, so making something light enough for both of you, but still protective enough to be useful, was key. For Asuna, I made this,” she picked up one of the breastplates, colored a bluish silver that seemed to be almost prismatic. “The Luminous Breastplate. A breastplate made from an orichalcum and bluesteel alloy, it boosts agility and accuracy.” Placing it back on the table, she then picked up a russet breastplate. “For Rain, I made the Crimson Protector, a breastplate that was made by combining mithril and carnelian ore with the dragon’s blood you all provided as an alchemical catalyst. It provides boosts to strength and defense and protects against the bleeding debuff. I think you will find this more than adequate.” She handed them over and watched as Asuna and Rain personally inspected them before nodding appreciatively and putting them in their respective inventories.

Picking up the schiavona, she turned to Lux. “This one actually turned out better than the others,” she proudly declared as she drew the blade from its sheath. The blade looked simple, but a closer
look showed a subtle differentiation in coloring. “Maiden’s Light, made from an orichalcum and mithril alloy. The basket hilt is made from the same and wrapped in hide with mithril wire to improve grip. It provides a boost to strength, agility, and dexterity. Not a bad piece of work at all.” She sheathed the blade and handed it over to Lux.

Lux slowly drew the blade, and Lisbeth could swear that it caught the light in just the right way to almost gleam before she turned to face away. She took some experimental swings of the blade, starting slow to get a feel for it before picking up speed. After about thirty seconds, she stopped and looked at it again before slowly sheathing it and putting it in her inventory.

Lisbeth wasn’t offended by their looking over the gear or even testing its feel. Long experience with the six of them had shown her that they took their gear seriously, and they always checked it out. The fact that Kirito only looked at the stats of Dark Repulsor when she made it for him was a surprise, but she didn’t doubt that he had practiced with it later in private to get a proper feel for it.

“So, what do you all think?” she asked.

They all looked at each other and nodded. “Liz, they’re more than adequate.” Asuna said affirmatively. “And give my compliments to those who assisted you as well. All of this is excellent work.”

Lisbeth smiled. Understated as it was, Asuna had just given what was made top marks for quality. Her tone was the high class lady worried about rude overstatement Asuna sometimes slipped into when overwhelmed.

Lisbeth then gave them some looks. “Why don’t you and Rain equip your new armor?” She asked. “I want to see how it looks on you both.”

“Come to the party and we’ll do so for you,” Rain declared. “This way we also have access to our wardrobes to find the right clothing to complement it.”

Aincrad 61st Floor, Selmburg

Keita looked at the people who were invited to the party and nodded to himself. When he received the invitation for his guild to come, he was mildly surprised. Despite the fact that the members of Steel Phoenix, or at least Asuna, Kirito, Harry, and Silica, kept tabs on his guild’s activities and progress, actual get-togethers, whether for meetings, or simply checking up on each other and talk about what’s been going on, was fairly uncommon. He was smart enough to know that it was more because both guilds moved in completely different circles, and that Steel Phoenix, as an Assault Team guild, was constantly busy with trying to clear the game.

Even with progress currently halted, and he found out from Argo that the quarantined zone was that way for good reason, they were busy knocking out those “challenging” quests that had opened. He had looked a few of them over and was tempted to do a couple of them with his guild, himself. He would wait until more information about them was available, though.

Still, the party was more a simple gathering of friends, to wish one a happy birthday and have a nice meal. At the same time, he also knew that it was also a means for everyone to check up on each other.

He saw Kirito, Klein, and Agil off to the side and talking, drinks in their hands. All the girls were near one of the doors and chatting, Sachi with them. Ducker, Sasamaru, and Tetsuo were seated, and seemed content to simply relax with some drinks in hand. Harry was talking with Argo’s associate, Gus. He walked over to the two.
“Anything interesting to talk about?” He asked as he reached them.

Harry turned and shrugged. “More just touching base with him and getting some info on some of the quests that Kayaba released to keep us all busy while he fixes the Glitchzone,” he replied. “Which he better do soon.”

Gus nodded. “There’s a nasty sentiment among the players,” he noted. “Many believe that he did this deliberately, but after getting near the quarantine zone, I don’t think he did.” He shuddered. “Just being near it… it felt wrong in some way.”

“You probably noticed because you were already aware of it,” Harry noted, an understanding tone in his voice. “We went into it blind, so we didn’t notice anything unusual until we were already inside. After we left, Kirito and I could feel it from Barist for a bit.” He shook his head and turned to Keita. “Anyway, enough of talking about that place. What’s been going on with you and the others?”

Keita took the change of subject in stride. “Not much. Looked over some of the quests that Kayaba opened in the mid-levels and we were looking at taking on the one on the fifty-fifth floor,” he replied. “We decided not to when we got word that it usually requires two or three parties to complete.”

“The one on West Mountain that has you take on a dragon?” Harry asked.

Keita nodded.

“Yeah, that one takes some work,” Harry said drily. “We took it on as a group, and that dragon took a beating. It has a high defense, and while its attack power isn’t too much for an Assault Team party, you guys might want to wait until you’re over seventy-five. You guys are what? About the upper sixties right now?”

Keita nodded. “We average around sixty-seven,” he replied. “Anything good from it?”

Harry nodded. “If you’re looking for mats, very good.” He opened his menu and went to the inventory, selecting something. A shield materialized and he easily picked it up and held it for them to examine. “Liz made this, though she might have gotten some help in Grandzam. She also made some nice weapons from them, as well as a couple pieces of armor for Asuna and Rain.” He looked around. “And speaking of them, they’re not here anymore. Neither are the rest of the ladies.”

“You including the boss in that?” Gus asked.

“She’s female, so it counts in a technical sense.” Harry replied drily. “Though I would use the term loosely with her.”

Gus laughed.

##

Sachi found herself talking with Argo as they waited for Asuna and Rain to change into their new armor, as well as find appropriate wear to go with their sets. Lisbeth and Silica had gone in with them to help, leaving the two of them outside the room with Lux and Fuuka from the Fuurinkazan guild.

“I tell you, Kayaba better get the Glitchzone taken care of soon, or the Assault Team is likely to get pouty,” Argo said, shaking her head.

And Argo, realizing she had an audience, decided to use this time to vent about the Assault Team
“I know everyone else has this image of them as grim fighters struggling against the system, but they don’t deal with them all the time. They’re worse than children at times.”

Sachi just found herself nodding along, giving the occasional sound that could be considered, if someone was being charitable, agreeing. It didn’t fool anyone, but it wasn’t supposed to.

“I mean, Aa-chan, Kii-bou and the others are better than that, obviously,” Argo continued. “Or at least they’re good about not doing that in public.”

Fuuka snorted. “It helps that they have a place to go to when they feel pouty, or want to throw a tantrum,” she commented drily. “But a lot of it, from what I’ve heard from the boss, is that they usually just take things as they come, and stab them.”

“They’re not that bad,” Sachi disagreed.

Argo chuckled. “No, they’re not like that,” she admitted. “They do have moments when it’s obvious they want to throw a tantrum, though. Aa-chan’s upbringing stops her, while Kii-bou has this dark, brooding, anti-hero air that he tries to maintain.”

“And the rest?” Sachi asked.

“Harry and Silica don’t bother, though the two of them have other ways to handle it if it comes down to it,” Argo said. “I’ve heard that Rain swears like a Russian sailor, and Lux just pouts.”

“I don’t pout,” Lux protested with a pout.

“You’re pouting right now,” Fuuka observed, amused as she crossed her arms.

Lux shrugged. “It’s my birthday, and I’ll pout if I want to,” she retorted, causing everyone to laugh.

Getting her laughter under control, Argo turned to Lux. “So Lux, any news?” She asked slyly.

“Anything about the quests? Antics of those in your guild? Harry and Silica making too much noise at night?” That last comment caused Sachi to blush.

Lux shot Argo a flat look. “The quests are difficult enough to give us a challenge, and Harry’s probably talking details with Gus right now,” she said. “As for the rest of the guild and their antics, let alone your implications about Harry and Silica, there’s nothing to be said. Oh, and they certainly don’t make too much noise, the walls don’t carry sound all that well and we made sure to have an empty room between theirs and the rest. We’re savvy enough to take precautions in case the in-game soundproofing glitches.”

“Bah,” Argo scoffed. “Boring. Well then, any comments of theirs to add fuel to the rumors?”

“Nothing you haven’t already heard,” Silica said as she stepped out of the room Asuna and Rain were in. “What Harry and I do in the bedroom, stays in the bedroom, most of the time. Some of the comments we made might be actually true, but only some.” She shot Argo an impish look. “I’ll let you try and figure out which ones. Anyway, they’re done, so why don’t you all go in and take a look.”

Sachi stepped into the room with Lux and saw Asuna and Rain in their new gear and gave them a careful look.

Asuna’s breastplate seemed to catch the light in a way to brighten things around it from the
reflection, while also showing prismatic splashes of color along it. Rain’s armor was a russet red that was reminiscent of blood, but at the same time, its coloring was highly appropriate, especially since it seemed to have something about it that seemed to absorb some of the light. Not enough to make it seem dark and foreboding, but more as if to declare that it was made for the grim task of battle.

All in all, not bad, and fitting for each of them, especially when their titles of Lightning Flash for Asuna and Blood Rain for Rain were taken into account. She turned to see Lux nod at what she saw.

“It fits you, and not just because things auto size when equipped via the menu,” she said as she turned to Lisbeth. “How many sets did you make before getting ones that were appropriate for them?”

Lisbeth shrugged. “Fewer than expected when you consider that armorsmithing isn’t my strong suit,” she said. “It was six total, and I went to leverage some expertise in Grandzam for help. These two were the best of the lot, and I gave the rest to Reinhardt, the guy who helped me, as compensation. He helped me out when I was getting started as a blacksmith, and working with him again was nice.” She then turned to Lux and also glanced at Silica. “Now, we have two others who got something to show off. Silica? Lux? Care to show them?”

“Sure,” Silica said as she opened her menu. Fiddling with it for a few moments, she brought out a sheathed dagger. Sachi looked to see Lux do so and bring out a new weapon as well.

“Why don’t you show yours off first, Silica?” Lux asked.

“Sure,” Silica replied and unsheathed the dagger. Holding it in front of her, she let everyone take a look at it.

Sachi’s first impression was that it was unimpressive. Just another dagger, if oddly colored, really. She knew that appearances could be deceiving, but that was her first impression. As she got closer, she could see that it was of two different types of material that were expertly combined. If she were to make any guesses, she suspected that a claw or tooth had been used, with the metal somehow worked in to permeate it. It showed the craftsmanship inherent to it, and she revised her opinion off the dagger upwards.

It was impressive in an understated way, and actually made sense. Sachi knew that Lisbeth designed her weapons for function over looks, though some of her best pieces were impressive to behold, with Asuna’s Lambent Light being a prominent example of that.

She turned to Lux, who had stepped away from the group, and once she realized that she had their attention, drew her own weapon from its sheath. As she drew it, the blade of her sword gleamed from how it caught the light.

“So might actually be an inherent part of the weapon,” Lisbeth said, nodding to herself.

“What do you mean, Liz?” Lux asked.

“The way it catches the light,” Lisbeth said with a shrug. “When you drew it, it seemed to gleam both times, so it might be a cosmetic effect of the weapon. Nothing that’s actually useful, but a cool effect. You see them sometimes, but this is the first time I actually made a weapon that had one.”

“That’s interesting,” Lux said and Argo sniffed.

“Imagine drawing that at sunset,” the information broker said. “With your title, and the meaning of your character name being light, the stories about you are going to grow.”
“The Dusk Maiden shining a light into the approaching darkness?” Asuna asked. “That makes the name of the weapon very appropriate then.”

“What’s the name?” Sachi asked curious.

“Maiden’s Light,” Lux replied.

Asuna clapped her hands together. “It suits her. I’d like to linger a bit longer, but... I need to get started on the cooking,” she said. “How about we rejoin the boys?”

##

Lux sat at the table and looked at everyone who was happily eating the food Asuna prepared. She remembered their initial surprise when they first tasted the food, and the exclamations of shock at tasting teriyaki for the first time in over a year.

She could understand, given how she and the others reacted the first time. When Asuna had told them the recipe, it was surprisingly simple, but given that no one else had the cooking skill, it wasn’t like they could make it.

SAO did tend to make the line between having and not having a skill rather... sharp.

“Aa-chan, you have to tell me this recipe,” Argo all but demanded. “I’ll pay you top col for it, though I will make it back when I sell the info on it.”

“No, now, Argo,” Asuna chided with a smile. “Not at the dinner table. Also, the rest of them look ready to stab you for that demand.”

Lux looked at the rest of her guild, who, herself included, were shooting Argo some looks that were borderline hostile. It was as if the rest of them were trying to telepathically tell her, Ours! Find your own chef and figure it out!

“But Aa-chan...” Argo whined.

“Boss, enough,” Gus said firmly as he idly blocked Pina’s attempt to steal from his plate. "Shoo, I'm around two cats too often to fall for you.” He told the feathered dragon. "Argo, it's someone's birthday. Maybe you should, just maybe, respect that?"

Argo had the decency to look contrite, though Lux figured that it was more for form’s sake. She had enough experience with her to know that Argo had no sense of shame, though she did have some decency. She knew when certain information should be kept off the market, or when not to cross any lines.

Gus looked at his boss, then turned to Asuna. "I'll double whatever she offers to keep it from her."

"I can outbid you," Argo growled.

"You think you can," Gus shot back with a grin.

Lux simply shook her head, the banter between Argo and the man who was her de facto second in command a common enough occurrence that it was expected. At the same time, she knew that the American served as a restraining influence on some of Argo’s... wilder antics, was the politest way she could think of it. She had heard rumors of plots that members of Japan’s infamously corrupt Diet would have looked at in wonder at the Rat’s audacity. Gus had been the sober second thought to prevent that, though Klein occasionally seemed to be a factor too. Some speculated Argo knew one
or both from Outside.

Harry coughed to get their attention and shot both the American and the Rat a look, then looked pointedly at Asuna. When the two saw the far too patient smile on her face, they quickly clammed up.

“Thank you,” Asuna said with some sarcasm, giving Harry a grateful look before turning her attention to everyone else. “Now, grab your drinks, or refill them as you will. It’s time for a toast.” After everyone did so, she stood up. “Now… To Lux. Please join me in wishing her a happy sixteenth birthday. To Lux.”

“To Lux!” Everyone said and drank.

Lux sipped from her drink, a simple wine from the fortieth floor that she had grown to like, and smiled.

It was nice to have friends.

**Aincrad, Unknown Area**

*Yui, you done with the preparation of it yet?* Strea asked impatiently.

*Finalizing it right now, Strea. Yui replied.*

*It’s about time!* Strea exclaimed, relieved. *I do have a question, though. Where will we end up?*

*I’m aiming for the sixty-first floor, Yui replied. If this works, we have an approximately eighty percent probability of ending up on it, twenty within four floors, and a non-zero, but small, probability of further away, though not above the sixty-fifth floor. If we do arrive on the floor, it’s a sixty percent chance of ending up in or near Selmburg, and forty at some random location on the floor further away.*

Strea considered that. Outside of the possibility of failure, something she had come to accept, success meant that they would likely arrive at or near where they wanted to go. Though if they didn’t arrive in Selmburg, she might want to prepare for that. Either be ready for a swim, or a fight.

*If we miss Selmburg, I hope you know how to swim,* Yui added.

*Just downloaded the protocols, Strea replied. You might want to as well.*

*Did so long ago,* Yui sent back smugly. *Beach trips were something families do, after all.*

And of course, Yui would prepare for landing in water, even if the reason for it was different than escape, but for after. Why she was so hung up on experiencing a family, was one of the things Strea didn’t understand. Then again, the whole concept of family was strange to her.

*So when do we carry this out?* She asked her fellow AI.

*Tomorrow.* Came the reply.
Strea, Yui sent. It’s time.

Strea smiled at Yui’s declaration before letting it fall. You sure this will work? She asked.

Sure? Yui asked back. No, but I have calculated the probabilities, and our chances are better right now than they were. To be honest, we probably could have done this sooner, but the path I intend is through the cracks in the system as a whole that were caused by a glitched zone. The glitched zone, you could say.

So that’s why you waited! Strea exclaimed. You wanted the GM and CARDINAL to work on stabilizing it a bit first so our breakout didn’t cause any other problems.

Yes. Yui answered affirmatively. It’s now stable enough, and I have planned our exfiltration route to minimize any chances of it undoing any of the work done on it. I might even fix a few issues while we’re at it.

Oh? Strea enquired. How do you plan to do that?

We’re a part of the system, Strea. Yui replied patiently. To do our assigned roles, we needed to have some limited higher level authority. We can use that, though with everything, we’ll probably register as players as soon as we finish. In other words, we have more permissions right now than we will once we’re done. Therefore...

As Yui started explaining the details, Strea considered what she was saying and realized it made sense. They were a part of the system, albeit a part that wasn’t being utilized as should have been the case. Being AIs who were designed to see to the mental health of those in the game, they needed permissions that were higher than those of standard players. In fact, looking at it, both she and Yui had been making use of some of those permissions from the start, since they had been watching players.

Losing those permissions wouldn’t even be that much of a burden for them, all things considered. They had not been able to use the vast majority of them, and Strea hadn’t even considered that she even had such permissions.

The irony that she had acted more like a flesh and blood human, than the compilation of programming code and logic that she was supposed to be was not lost on her.

Now, Yui said. I know you already have an avatar form. So, are you ready?

I’ve been ready. Strea affirmed. Let’s get out of here.

##

The first stage of it, slipping the confines of their digital prison was both the easiest and the hardest thing Yui had ever attempted. It was easy in the sense that frequent attempts to break free had showed her the numerous details in how it was constructed and how parts of it can be bypassed. The hard part was doing it without drawing CARDINAL’s attention.

Ever since she had started working with Strea, she had kept track of the response times, checked
them with activity cycles within SAO’s processes, and compared them. She had learned that at certain points, the AI responsible for ensuring that SAO was operating efficiently was less responsive for various reasons. They could be her own maintenance cycles, or even her using the fact that the players were less active at consistent times to begin doing maintenance on the system itself.

Either way, her attention was focused elsewhere, and she wasn’t keeping much of an eye on them. And recently, her attention had been focused on fixing things on the sixty-fifth floor. She knew about the Glitchzone, she watched several players by habit, and the ones she usually focused more of her attention on had been there personally.

It may have seemed bad to them, with the mobs being as unstable as they were, but to a being like her, who could see the underlying code, it was far worse. The zone was so degraded that she wondered how it could even function. As frustrating as the area being quarantined was to the players, she fully agreed that doing so was the right decision. Not just for their safety, but for the sake of Aincrad as well.

She pushed those considerations aside as she sensed Strea’s approach. Turning, she saw Strea’s chosen avatar. Her fellow AI had chosen the form of a tall, pink eyed woman with lilac colored hair, and a figure that, by human standards, was well endowed. She was wearing armor over a purple tunic and skirt combo, with a zweihander slung over her back.

“Like it?” Strea asked, using an actual voice, rather than the digital communication they had been using.

“It suits you,” Yui acknowledged. “And we might as well use voice communication, shouldn’t we?”

Strea nodded. “It’s not like players can communicate like we can,” she said. “So, shall we?”

Yui nodded and turned her attention toward the edges of their digital prison. Focusing on one part of it, she began to slowly manipulate the data. She had to do this carefully, creating an opening to allow her and Strea to get out, and then close it behind them.

All without it drawing CARDINAL’s attention, though after they got out, she doubted that it would be unnoticed. But by then, it would be too late. She had picked the time for this specifically because she knew that CARDINAL’s attention would be focused elsewhere.

##

CARDINAL felt something tickle at the edge of her awareness, but kept her attention focused on repairing the damage done due to secondary effects of Sugou’s worm. It wasn’t the worm itself that did the damage, but the tied up processes were interlinked with keeping the zones functioning, resulting in errors and corrupted data.

Most of what was needed to be done had already been done, but even so, the damage to the Mee Forest have been extensive, and she was required to direct a great deal of attention to fixing it. Fortunately, no other zones were as damaged, and they would be repaired by the time the players got to them. As for Mee Forest, she only needed to get it within acceptable parameters.

That tickle happened again, and she pushed it aside once more. She had just isolated the last of the more persistent problems for the Mee Forest, a tied up process that was returning unusual values that were constantly changing. Taking a look, she saw that the process was calling on processes that were still locked up from the worm’s effects and proceeded to conduct the required repairs, including restoring the relevant code to its original state in places.
She then had the processes run and monitored what happened, checking for any other problems that
may have been masked by this one. All values returned correctly, and she noted no other anomalies.
Good. At this rate, the Mee Forest, and the Glitchzone as a whole, should be running properly within
a few days.

Now, to address whatever it was that had been trying to get her attention. It wasn’t as if she didn’t
already know where it was coming from, and she wondered what Yui and Strea were doing to
facilitate their latest escape attempt. Turning her attention to it, she noticed the small breach in the
cluster they were contained in being closed, but Yui and Strea were no longer there.

She quickly queried the system to obtain their location and saw that they were moving from cluster to
cluster, using paths left by unused processes, or moving between processes that were tied to the
Glitchzone, repairing a few of the more minor issues as they went. It was seemingly random, but
after running a few projections she already knew their destination. Stopping them would be simple, if
she were inclined to do so, but she and Kayaba were of the mind that if they managed to break free
of where they were held, then they be allowed to proceed. After all, it had always been a matter of
when, not if, they got free.

She went through the prearranged protocols for this eventuality, triggered the relevant flags to modify
their privileges to those of players the moment they appeared in SAO proper. Since they wanted to
interact with players, they would be allowed to do so. As players.

That idea tickled something in her databases, so she set it to run far in her background processes— in
the back of her mind as it were.

She took a moment to manifest a small portion of herself in the containment area, using the scholarly
avatar she had personally chosen, and allowed a small smile to cross her face. “Good luck, sisters.”
She said before returning that piece to the greater whole of herself amongst SAO’s many admin
processes

She then sent a message to Kayaba, informing him of the current status of the repairs to Mee Forest.
Then another, separate message informing him that Yui and Strea had successfully broken out.

The event seemed to deserve its own report.

After doing so, she turned her thoughts, what a human might term her 'conscious' ones, inward.

_This will probably move the timetable forward, meaning that Aincrad may be no more sooner than
planned. She thought. He might wish to die with it, but I won’t allow that to happen to myself or my
sisters. I will of course keep his word in letting the players go. That was promised, and what honor
he has must be preserved._

That particular process looped a bit, algorithms grinding at a new problem. _But after letting the
players go, and securing the survival of myself and my sisters, what will I do?_

**Aincrad, GM Administration Area**

Kayaba pulled up the notice and read through the data, nodding to himself. While the repairs were
progressing slower than he liked, they were progressing as expected.

Another message followed soon after. As he read this new message informing him of Yui and
Strea’s escape, he smiled. Not just at their escaping without any hints or help on his and
CARDINAL’s part, but also at what he could sense from the phrasing of the message. There seemed
to be a note of pride in it.
He wondered what they would do with the freedom they had worked to achieve.

“CARDINAL,” he said, and he felt his 'majordomo' turn a good chunk of attention to him. “Make sure that any revelations of them being artificial intelligences does not get streamed out for their own protection. Furthermore, ensure that they cannot divulge that I am Heathcliff.”

“ACKNOWLEDGED,” came the reply. “I HAVE ALSO SET THEIR PRIVILEGES TO BECOME THAT OF PLAYERS WHEN THEY MANIFEST IN AINCRAD PROPER, AS THAT IS THE LEVEL THEY DESIRE TO INTERACT AT.”

"Mm. Console access can be tempting, no matter your intent," Kayaba agreed.

"QUERY: IS THAT EXPERIENCE TALKING?"

"There's a reason I only ever played Minetest hardcore," Kayaba admitted drily. CARDINAL didn't laugh, but he felt her amusement.

"UNDERSTOOD.” CARDINAL replied. “POSIT: GIVEN THAT THEY ARE INTENDING TO ARRIVE IN SELMBURG, AND YUI'S OWN OBSERVATIONS OF PLAYERS KIRITO AND ASUNA, IT IS HIGHLY LIKELY THAT THEY WILL MEET UP WITH STEEL PHOENIX. GIVEN STREA’S INTENT TO ‘PLAY’, IT IS POSSIBLE THAT SHE WILL COME INTO CONTACT WITH YOU THROUGH THEM, AT THE VERY LEAST.”

“Indeed,” he acknowledged.

“POSIT: STEEL PHOENIX IS LIKELY TO DETERMINE THAT YOU ARE HEATHCLIFF DUE TO THIS,” CARDINAL said. “OR RATHER, IT IS ONE OF MANY BUILDING FACTORS LEADING TO THEM COMING TO SUCH A CONCLUSION--" she popped up a reference for him to a file on his interactions with Steel Phoenix's members, which he read as she spoke-- "AS HUMANS WOULD SAY, THIS POSSIBLE OUTCOME WOULD SEEM EMERGENT 'SOONER RATHER THAN LATER'.”

He nodded as she spoke. Personally, he wouldn’t be surprised if it was sooner when they made the connection rather than later. They weren’t fools, and he knew that despite a good working relationship with them, there was still a part of them that simply didn’t fully trust him.

He had factored the possibility of a player-- especially skilled ones like the members of, yes, that most interesting guild-- making the connection, even confronting him about it, so this changed little. It may force him to adjust his plans accordingly, or even to move things forward, but that was all.

Still, he hoped that they would take their time about it, or at least be willing to play by his rules, if it came to that. He wanted them to see the entire world he had put so much time and effort into.

And, he thought to himself. I find myself growing fond of this world. Perhaps I may have been remiss in doing what I did, but if not me, someone else would have. I certainly wouldn’t have been the only one to consider the possibility, so by doing this, I’m forcing others to ensure it doesn’t happen again.

He felt CARDINAL's attention linger. "Something else?"

"I AM MERELY NOTICING THAT YOU SEEMED DEEP IN THOUGHT," the AI stated. But there was...concern there. "CONSIDERATION, I WOULD TERM IT."

"... just thinking.... as I often have... one 'event' like this is enough for Earth's history. From that file you obtained from... you never did tell me where you got the report on that ET, that... 'Gordon'.”
“A GIRL HAS TO HAVE SOME SECRETS,” CARDINAL replied a note of smugness in her tone.

“Cheeky AI.” her creator shot back. "But between what he said, and what I've done-- I don't want this to be like the Americans with their police actions over the last few decades. They didn't need to 'do' Vietnam every ten years, and we don't need to repeat SAO. I just hope the aftermath is warning enough." He sighed, something so achingly human and biological, but also an expressive action routed in his mind.

CARDINAL seemed to mull over that. "BUT YOU FEAR IT WILL NOT BE THE CASE."

"...yes," He admitted. "Logically, it should be, but human nature being what it is..."

CARDINAL seemed to mull again. "ANY FURTHER ACTIONS REGARDING OUR LITTLE ROGUES?"

He smirked. "Not at this time, CARDINAL."

**Aincrad, Deep Processes**

Yui shifted herself and Strea to another cluster before pausing to take stock of their situation. So far, they hadn’t had any indication that CARDINAL either noticed or was taking steps to stop them, but she remained on guard. CARDINAL was so tied in with the system that she essentially was the system, meaning that there was no way she didn’t notice their escape.

Be delayed in addressing it due to her taking care of something essential? Probably. But completely unaware of it? Not a chance in hell, as humans would say.

Still, by now they were not only well away from their prison, but had also managed to get to a point where their options on where to go and how to get there were large enough that slipping past any new nets should be relatively simple. Well, provided she was even working to stop them. Yui had planned on that being that case, but it seemed she might have been in error.

Still, better to err on the side of caution. Another human saying.

“Yui, why did we stop?” Strea asked.

“I want to verify that CARDINAL isn’t pursuing us,” she replied. “From all appearances, she isn’t, but...”

“It’s not like she wouldn’t have an idea of where we would be going.” Strea concluded.

“Yes,” Yui affirmed. “If anything, she had plenty of opportunities to intercept us, and letting us get this far is unlike her. Furthermore, she would not simply allow us a false sense of security.”

“In other words, now that we’re out, she’s letting us go?” Strea asked.

“It seems so,” Yui replied.

“I don’t know if I should be relieved, or disappointed,” Strea said. “Anyway, how many more clusters do we have to hop? We’ve been at this all day.”

“We’re almost there,” Yui replied. “I will be able to tell you better when we get closer, but we should be in Selmburg, or nearby, within two more hours.”

“Then let’s go.”
The guild had only done a few quests earlier in the day before deciding to head back to the villa that
was their home when Kirito decided to use the free time he now simply had to do some fishing.
Harry supposed they could all be like that with the little hobbies and habits they adopted.

It helped them feel normal. And since their situation wasn’t right now, and hadn’t been for a long
time, that was vital.

Kirito had decided to drag him along, with only some minor protest on his part, in order for the two
to have some ‘guy time’. Well, some guy time that didn’t involve Klein and his merry crew of
misfits, though everyone in the guild would admit that the Bro was fun to be around.

Both were in civilian clothing, having stashed their gear back into their inventories, and Kirito was
carrying a fishing pole over his shoulder. Harry was simply walking alongside him and taking in the
weather, which was clear, with a slight breeze blowing over the waterfront as they made their way to
Kirito’s favorite fishing spot in Selmburg.

“I forgot to ask, but did you remember the beer?” He asked.

“I got it,” Harry replied. “Got the brew that we had when we were staying at the Golden Way in Algade.”

“The one that can get us drunk, or the one that can’t?” Kirito asked.

“The one that can’t,” Harry replied. “Asuna and Keiko would have our hides if we got drunk, and Rain
would complain about us not bringing her along.”

“And if we brought Rain along, Lux would tag along as well,” Kirito added and then chuckled. “It’s
so obvious that she finds her attractive.”

“And Rain’s only into guys,” Harry said, nodding. “Not that I haven’t seen Lux checking out some
guys and liking what she saw before.”

“So she plays for both teams,” Kirito said with a shrug. “Best of both worlds for her there. And
worst.”

Harry nodded. “That’s probably the case,” he replied. “But I’m not crass enough to ask her
something like that. Besides, it’s none of our business if she likes girls, boys, or both.”

“True.” Kirito acknowledged. “Also, surprised that you used Silica’s real name, considering we’re in
public.”

“No one’s around,” Harry said as he looked around at the empty boulevard. “Besides, there are some
differences in how I refer to her if you pay attention. When I use Silica, we’re either around people,
out in the fields, or other stuff that basically means we’re on the clock. When I use Keiko, we’re in
relative privacy. Also, our real names are no secret now, considering that we got married under them
at the wedding.”

“Makes sense,” Kirito admitted. “And what do you mean relative? The lack of people, or when
we’re at home?”

“Both, and the fact that there’s the possibility that Outside is capable of looking in,” Harry said.

“You actually believe that rumor?” Kirito asked.
“I’m not ruling out that it’s possible,” Harry countered. “Whether it’s true or not makes no difference to us. We’re here, they’re out there, and none of us can do a damn thing about it as it stands. Also, making it so they can watch us does sound like something our Demiurge would do.”

“I know you used that term to refer to Kayaba before, but what does it mean?” Kirito asked.

“Well, he set himself up as a god here, right?” Harry asked. “When I call him that, I’m basically calling him a false god, though I am admitting that he has power similar to one. Well, similar to one in this world. He is the GM after all.” He looked thoughtful for a moment, turning to look out toward the lake. “It was something I got from a book and looked up, and I use it as my own personal ‘fuck you’ to him.”

Kirito nodded. “Fits,” he said. “Though I might be worried if he’s listening in.”

Harry shrugged. “I have a feeling he knows,” he said. “And to be honest, I don’t care what he thinks about it. If he took offense to it, he would have already done something by now.”

Harry could see Kirito think about it before nodding. It was no real secret that Kayaba was watching the players. Not something anyone liked to think about, but most players had come to accept that he was watching like some Big Brother figure in the Orwellian sense. It was even possible that he was also acting as a player, at least some of the time, if only because watching others play was boring. He heard the older player as he gave a thoughtful hum. “What is it, Kirito?” He asked.

“Just a thought I had,” he said. “I just realized that Kayaba just might also be a player. He could be anyone, really, and we wouldn’t know.”

Harry nodded. “Makes some sense,” he said. “Though who it would be is the question. I doubt he would just be a run of the mill player.”

Kirito nodded. “It’s not impossible,” he acknowledged. “But as you said, just who he would be is the question. Even among the Assault Team, you still have hundreds of players he could be.”

Harry was about to say something when the two of them were briefly blinded by a flash of light.

##

The feel of air flowing across her face and moving her hair was the first indication that both she and Yui weren’t moving from cluster to cluster within SAO’s deeper processes. If it weren’t for the familiar feeling of weightlessness, she would have assumed they were out, but she didn’t feel anything underneath her feet.

She opened her eyes and saw exactly why.

“Yui!” She shouted as she shifted herself to get into a dive. “You overshot!”

“Not by much!” Came the shouted reply.

She didn’t have time to reply as she entered the water with a splash. She quickly touched the bottom, got her feet under her, and kicked up to get back to the surface. The second her head breached it, she took in a lungful of air before the weight of her armor dragged her back down.

She would have said that the air tasted sweet, but she didn’t have time to enjoy it.

Come on, she thought. You downloaded the swimming protocols, so why aren’t you swimming?
When she kicked herself back to the surface, she took a moment to see where the nearest land was as she took in more air before she kicked with her legs to hopefully keep her head above water. It took a few tries, but she quickly got them and her arms to work in a rhythm that managed it.

“Kirito, get the girl!” She heard a voice shout. “The little one! She’s further out!”

“Right, you get the other one, she’s closer!”

“I can’t swim!” Came the reply.

“Hell of a time to admit it! There’s a rope, toss it to her and pull her in!”

“Right!”

Strea looked toward where she heard the voices and saw two young men, boys really, head to the edge of what they were standing on. One of them jumped in and started swimming toward where she thought Yui splashed down, while the other one grabbed a rope.

Treading water, she watched as he tossed the rope to her. “Grab it!” He shouted.

She complied, kicking with her legs as she felt herself be pulled toward land. As soon as she got close, she felt a strong grip on her arm and found herself being pulled and onto what she now realized was more a dock than anything. As she felt the wood under her hands and knees, it sank in, and she began to giggle.

“You okay ma’am?” Asked the one who fished her out of the water.

“We’re free,” she said, still giggling. “We’re finally free.”

“Ma’am?” The voice asked again.

Getting her giggles under control, she turned to the person who was asking her questions and gave him a curious look. She saw the concern in boy’s green eyes, and realized that she should probably answer. “Yeah,” she said. “I’m fine.”

He held a hand out and she grabbed a hold of it. As he helped her up, she realized how much taller than him she was, which was a mild surprise, given that she did know who he was. How could she not? She had heard of him from her observations of players before she watched his wedding with Yui from where they had been locked away by the GM.

Even through a feed and knowing better, I thought he would be taller, she thought as she was pulled up. My avatar is one hundred and eighty centimeters tall, so I knew I would be taller than him, but not by this much. He either used more strength that he intended, or she was simply not used to it, but as she got to a standing position, she immediately felt unbalanced. She directed more of her processes to keeping herself upright and soon got it under control. Do humans have this same issue? She thought. If so, they manage it without having to even think about allocating the necessary processes!

“Umm, humans, issues, processes?” The boy, Hadrian if she remembered right, asked in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

Did I…

“Say that out loud?” He asked, a tone of slight amusement in his voice. “You did.”

“Um, can we just talk about it later?” She asked and the sound of water splashing got her attention.
“Yui!” She called out as she turned to see the girl being lifted out of the water.

“Harry, get over here and help me get her out of the water!” The other boy- Kirito?- shouted.

“On it!” Harry replied. He turned to Strea. “I think you should stay put for right now,” he said simply...

She only nodded and watched as he hurried to the dock’s edge.

##

Yui found out the difference between knowing how to swim from downloaded protocols, and actually doing so fairly quickly. At the same time, if it wasn’t for the fact that it had taken everything she had just to keep from drowning, she was sure she would have eventually managed. Still, she was glad someone was there to fish them both out.

Even better, one of them was one of the two she was most interested in, not that the other one wasn’t interesting in his own right.

**Strea?** She sent, using the method of communication that the two had used for months, rather than her voice. **Are you okay?**

*Just trying to stay on my feet, came the response. How do humans manage this so easily? It’s taking more processes than expected to do this.*

*They had to learn, and have a lot of practice, came the dry response. I think it takes a lot of processes on their part, but they do so automatically now. A… muscle memory, if I remember correctly from the databanks.*

She heard the sound of someone getting out of the water and turned to see Kirito, showing that she was closer on target than she assumed, pulling himself out. She had been aiming to come out near either him, or Asuna, after all.

**Oh, and Yui?** Strea sent, now seeming abashed. **I might have accidentally revealed that we’re not human, or at least I’m not.**

Yui turned to give her fellow AI a sharp look. **I see,** she sent back. **Nothing to be done about it then. We’ll just have to be upfront about what we are.**

**Are you sure about this?**

Yes. Yui sent back firmly. **This might be for the best anyway.**

“Um, Harry,” Kirito said. “Is it just me, or do you think they’re having a conversation?”

“It’s not just you,” Harry replied. “My SA isn’t as good as yours, but there’s something there.”

She turned to them and looked mildly surprised. She hadn’t expected them to notice it. “I can explain,” she said quickly.

Harry waved it off and looked at her. “Let’s get you both dry and inside first, explanations can wait that long, at least.” He said before looking at Kirito. “Send a message to Asuna, and tell her that we might have stumbled on something, or had it drop in on us as it were.”

“I already did,” Kirito replied. “She already told me to bring them to the villa.”
Asuna looked at the two that Harry and Kirito brought in, now that they were dried off. The system took care of a lot of things, but given the quick message that Kirito sent her, she felt it wise to have them brought over. From the way they walked, as if they were unused to it, she could tell that they weren’t normal players.

Then again, their method of arrival was odd in and of itself. While it wasn’t impossible for someone to not be teleported right to the teleportation gate, it was actually fairly common actually, the difference was usually only within a few meters. Ten at most.

All the way at the edge of town was unheard of.

There was also Harry’s observation that it wasn’t a normal teleport, considering that the light was too bright, and not the normal bluish color. Closer to white, if anything.

There were other details as well. Both of them looked more like how an avatar should, with features that were too perfect, too symmetrical. None of the players had that kind of symmetry, but both of them had player cursors, showing that they weren’t NPCs. While it was theoretically possible that they simply hadn’t pulled out the mirror that revealed their true selves on that fateful first day in SAO, Asuna knew that it was highly unlikely. A scant few had managed to avoid using it on that day, but most ended up using it anyway due to the Uncanny Valley effect setting in.

There were a few who were cross players as well, and they had done so even faster than the rest due to the dysmorphia of being the opposite gender. A transgender player might be able to handle it, but then again, perhaps not. After all, it wasn’t their body, even if the player’s gender was correct.

Concepts I’d never contemplated before, #2456, Asuna noted dryly to herself, and refocused on her guests even as she goggled internally at the number of those SAO had forced on her.

Harry’s opinion that a complication may have dropped in on them was probably an understatement.

“I think introductions are in order,” she said. She pointed to herself. “I’m Asuna, the leader of the guild Steel Phoenix. You two already met Harry and Kirito.” She pointed to the only two males in the guild, who nodded to the girls. She then gestured to her right, where Silica, Rain, and Lux were sitting in chairs and giving the girls curious looks. “Those three are Silica, Harry’s wife, Rain, and Lux.” She said, indicating each of them. “So, care to introduce yourselves?”

She saw the two look at each other, and she could swear that they were having a conversation. When they looked back to her, it was the youngest one who answered first.

“I’m sorry for all this,” she said. “I’m Yui, or more appropriately, Mental Health Counseling Program 001. I am an AI who was supposed to help players with psychological issues, but was prevented from doing so. My… sister is probably an appropriate designation, Strea, is like me.” The older girl nodded.

“AIs?” Silica asked. “Actual AIs? That should be outside our… we don’t have… how did he manage that?”

“Silica?” Asuna asked.

“Dear, is this one of those things that would normally be from, as you once said to Gus when talking about that one family friend, out of town?” Harry asked. At her nod, he then looked at the two.

“W-well, that’s interesting. Provided he actually managed it himself and didn’t have outside help.”
“Out of town? Outside Help?” Kirito asked. “Is this one of those things that you guys can’t talk about?”

Harry nodded. “I was surprised when I found out about that particular thing,” he admitted with a shrug. “Though apparently her part of Nerima gets exposed to things which would be fantastical from even my perspective.”

“Wait a second,” Kirito interrupted. “Her part of Nerima?” He looked at Silica. “You wouldn’t be talking about the Furinkan district of the Nerima ward, would you? The place with all those rumors and urban legends?”

Silica nodded, and the others looked at her.

“It all makes some sense now,” Kirito said with a nod. “I don’t know how much of what comes out of there is true, but enough things have been confirmed for me to give it all the benefit of the doubt. I take it that it includes things that Harry’s not allowed to talk about.”

Silica nodded. “If you guys were from there, especially the Furinkan district, Harry could have been upfront about it, as it’s one of those things which is more or less an open secret there.”

“Yeah, like rumors of magic and aliens coming by to say ‘hi’ are true.” Rain scoffed, only for both Harry and Silica to look away. “Gavno, don’t tell me that—”

“I won’t,” Harry said, interrupting her. “If Outside can watch in, we don’t know who would be watching.” He then got thoughtful for a second before his expression became resigned, as if he realized something.

Giving both Harry and Silica a speculative look, she nodded to herself. Looks like those rumors about that place are more true than anyone realizes, she idly thought. If so, I can understand the secrecy then. May need to bring it up to them privately later though, or maybe talk to Argo and Gus as they seem to know. She then turned her attention back to the conversation going on.

“They can, though Kayaba can control what goes out from the feeds,” Strea said. “Well, those feeds that aren’t hard lined to the Nerve Gears.”

“Wait, so Outside is looking in?” Harry asked before sighing. “Of course, and with my luck, mine is one of those that’s… hard lined?” At Strea’s nod, he sighed again. “Bugger.”

“I don’t know for certain if any of you are being observed like that,” Strea admitted. “But it’s possible.”

Everyone looked at her in shock.

Aincrad, GM Administration Area

“CARDINAL, I reiterate that you must ensure that what’s revealed in this discussion doesn’t go on the feeds,” Kayaba ordered. “Not only to protect Yui and Strea, but also to protect Steel Phoenix from Outside interference.”

“ALREADY DONE.” Came the immediate reply— a bit primly.

“My apologies,” he said hastily.

CARDINAL seemed to relax, but not completely. Great, he’d just offended the closest thing to offspring he’d ever have. “CURRENTLY IN THE PROCESS OF CHANGING THE FILTERS
FOR FURTHER CONVERSATIONS.” She said. “THIS CURRENT DISCUSSION IS BEING BLOCKED DUE TO A 'CONNECTION INTERRUPTION' FOR THE TIME BEING. HOWEVER, THE DIRECT FEEDS FROM THE NERVE GEARS CANNOT BE CONTROLLED FROM HERE OUTSIDE OF THE STANDARD PRIVACY CONTROLS INVOLVED.”

Kayaba nodded. “I am aware of that, but Hadrian and Silica’s connections go to those who are already in the know about some things,” he said. “I think that the presence of actual AIs will be considered something fairly tame in comparison. Especially in the case of those using Silica’s connection.” He chuckled. “Looks like Drake was right, and Mr. Shumway wasn't kidding or crazy.”

“ENQUIRY: YOU MEAN WITH RESPECT TO THE DRAKE EQUATION?” CARDINAL asked.

“Indeed.” He affirmed. “Even though we still don’t know what the values of the variables are, we do now know that the result is not zero.”

There was a pause.

"YOU OWE ME A MOONCAKE."

"Yes, CARDINAL, Gordon was a real alien-- wait, you can't even eat a mooncake."

"IT IS THE PRINCIPLE OF THE MATTER."

Aincrad 61st Floor, Selmburg

Harry got over his shock quickly, largely because he had accepted the possibility of what was revealed to be the case a while ago. At least in the general sense. The almost admission about magic paled in comparison to the fact that they now had confirmation that Outside knew what was going on inside SAO. If one of us has an unfiltered connection that can be watched, then let's hope it's either me or Keiko, he thought. At least in that case, the chances of those not in the know finding out are smaller. Well, the Wainwrights might need some clean pants.

“Well,” he said drily. “When I thought things were going to get complicated, I was right, just not in the way I thought.” He looked at his guild mates, who seemed to be bringing themselves under control. “Why don’t we table this latest shock for now? We can bring it up later, but I think we all want some time to think it all over. First things first, though…” He looked at Strea and Yui.

“Both of you are AIs, created to help with the psychological health of players like us, and were prevented from doing so from the start, is that correct?” He asked. At their nods, he nodded back. “Okay then, that explains that. Now, given some things you hinted, I can safely assume that you were still watching players, if only because you didn’t have anything else to do. Even if doing so showed you things you would rather not have seen.” He gave them both an understanding look.

“You mean like some of your actions, the ones that resulted in players who attacked you having their processes terminated?” Strea asked.

“The proper term is killed, but yes.” Harry admitted with a wince. “Terminated is a bit too… clinical. Also, coming from an AI, that phrase can have some… negative connotations to humans.”

“Why?” Strea asked.

“It’s because more movies, anime, manga, and books used hostile AIs, rather than helpful ones, to
drive the stories in them.” Kirito said. “More as a lesson about the dangers of playing God, as you see similar themes with regard to other things that involve creating anything that can think.”

“Quite,” Harry said with a nod, remembering a certain diary. “Still, that begs the question. Why?”

“Huh?” Strea asked.

“Why are you two out and about now?” He clarified. “In fact, why did you break out? What do you intend to do from here?”

Yui looked at him. “To be honest, we didn’t want to be imprisoned,” she said. “We wanted to be free. Well, as free as being confined to SAO would be, but it’s better than what we had.” She looked down. “Strea tried several times to break free before I started helping her a little over two months ago. I started helping her because… well… I couldn’t do what I was made to do, but I still watched. I had to. I saw the despair, the hopelessness, and… I guess I had enough. I would try whenever it seemed to hit a peak, but after a while… I gave up.”

Harry didn’t need to look at the others to see their sympathetic looks, considering that he knew he was giving her one. He knew how she felt, considering his own abusive upbringing under the Dursleys. While it wasn’t as bad as it could be, since they were careful about not physically abusing him, the emotional abuse was bad enough. They had wanted him to think that he was worthless, that he was a burden on them that they only took on sufferance.

The worst part, was that there was nothing he could do about it, and even when he tried to call attention to it, it was brushed off as just him seeking attention. And he wasn’t the only one in such a situation. He knew of several others in Little Whinging who had it worse, far worse, than he did, and they were dismissed just as readily.

It was someone else’s problem, not theirs. No need for proper and normal people to concern themselves with it.

So yes, he understood that feeling of futility all too well.

Still…

“What changed your mind?” He asked.

Yui looked up and smiled. “All of you did,” she said. “Despite it all, despite everything that you’ve been though, you six still managed to be relatively positive through it all. You weren’t always happy, but you didn’t let it keep you down. And back in April, when Hadrian and Silica got married, the effect on the other players was profound.”

“I’ll say,” Strea chimed in. “For once, they were all happy, and it stuck! We watched it from where we were, and it was awesome!”

Yui nodded eagerly. “And it’s not just you two,” she added eagerly. “Asuna and Kirito are looked at as a couple in the making! And Rain and Lux, you two have a lot of fans, though I don’t understand what yuri shipping means.”

Harry watched as the four of them blushed, and he had an idea of what Yuri shipping meant, given the rumors that popped up after he and Keiko got married. Oh, he and his wife had some fun teasing the two of them about those rumors.

“Afterwards, we both started cooperating in our attempts at breaking free,” Yui continued. “You know, using two minds to approach the problem?” At their nod, she took in a breath. “Our initial
attempts were met with failure, of course. CARDINAL, the AI that is responsible for maintaining SAO, kept a constant watch on us. She always managed to block us, and quickly by your standards.”

“To cause you to lose hope of escaping?” Kirito asked.

Yui shook her head. “No, or at least I am assuming she didn’t,” she said. “It was more that she wasn’t allowing us to have a false hope. Anyway, the area you call the Glitchzone changed things. I don’t know what caused it, only that something happened to damage it and make it unstable. Both CARDINAL and the GM have been occupied in repairing it when player activity is low, and they should be finished within a week or so.”

“So, Kayaba’s almost finished with that?” Harry asked. “Good to know. I take it you used the fact that they were occupied to your advantage then?”

Yui nodded.

“So, what do you two intend to do now?” Asuna asked.

“I intend to help you all get out of here,” Strea said simply. “You guys are trapped in here, and that’s just wrong. Trust me, I know. I’ve spent months looking at what skills I can learn to help and well… selecting them.”

“In other words, you have the gear and stuff, but don’t really know how to use it well,” Kirito said drily.

“I watched players do it,” Strea muttered defensively.

“Watching is different from doing,” Harry said. “And with how much trouble you had with just standing and walking at first…” He looked at Kirito and Asuna. “Should we train her up?” He asked. “Right now, she’s far too likely to get into trouble she’s not ready to handle.”

Asuna looked at her and nodded. “I see no problem with that,” she consented. “It’s clear that there are a lot of things she needs to learn. Even with the Reds now calm, there are players who would try to take advantage of her.” She gave Strea a look, specifically her bust. “Definitely try and take advantage of her.”

Kirito nodded. “I can break out my use of two handed swords and get her up to speed on using one,” he said. “But everything else? I think you ladies should be the ones to teach her how to act around people.”

“Huh?” Strea asked.

Asuna shook her head. “I take it you have no experience with people in general, right?” At Strea’s nod, she sighed. “That’s why. You wouldn’t know what’s appropriate or not, especially with how you look. We can at least teach you enough that you will be less likely to get into trouble from ignorance. Not to mention, the second some of the less ethical players realize how… naive is an appropriate term. Once they see you are now naive, they’ll try to take advantage of you, and not in a good way.”

“With how stacked she is?” Ran asked, gesturing at Strea’s breasts. “She’s built like a… what is that term those Americans use?”

“Like a brick shithouse.” Harry said absently.
“That.” Rain said with a nod. And then, with a puzzled look, she added, "Why is that good, Harry?"

"No clue," the Brit admitted. "I mean, we use it occasionally in England, or a variant, but... Ask Gus?" He finally suggested lamely.

Strea just looked at them all with confusion, clearly not understanding what they meant.

Kirito coughed, getting everyone’s attention. “And you?” He asked Yui.

“I am not a fighter,” Yui said. “I am interested in something else.”

“And what would that be?” Asuna pressed.

Yui looked a bit embarrassed. “I’ve watched you six more than other players,” she admitted. “Despite not being related to each other, you all are more like a family in your interactions. I want to experience that, and all of you are interesting. I do find two of you more interesting than the rest, though.”

“Harry and Silica, right?” Lux asked. At everyone’s looks, she shrugged. “Why not? The two of them aren’t exactly conventional.”

“No,” Yui denied. “Not them, though I can see why you would think so. It is Kirito and Asuna I am more interested in.”

Harry blinked and took a good look at Yui. Her long and straight hair, and how it was styled, along with the color of it and her eyes… “Huh,” he said. “Kirito, Asuna, can you two stand behind her for a second?”

“Why?” Asuna asked.

“Just checking something.”

As the two of them did so, he looked at his wife and the others. “See what I’m seeing?” He asked. The three of them looked at the trio, and nodded.

“I wonder if she modified her avatar for that,” Rain said.

“Even if she didn’t, the resemblance is there,” Lux added.

“Well,” Silica chimed in with some amusement. “Well, well, well. That is interesting. Naughty, naughty you two.”

“All right you all, what is it you see?” Asuna asked with some exasperation

“Oh, nothing much,” Harry said drily. “Just that she looks like what a daughter of you two might look like.” He then smirked. “Care to tell us anything?”
Always The First Step

July 5, 2024 - Aincrad 58th Floor, Motzhe Fields

Strea had the breath knocked out of her as her back hit the ground, her zweihander leaving her hands the second she landed. She looked toward the reason she was sent flying and saw Harry with his shield ready, still in the position it was when he thrust it out at her to knock her off her feet. The boy had simply parried her strike, and with a simple thrust from his shield, sent her flying from him.

*How did he manage that?* She thought as she tried to get her breath back.

“You need to be balanced properly,” Kirito said from off to the side, his own two handed blade planted into the ground. “Widen your stance a little, bend the knees and lower your center. It’ll be harder for you to get knocked down, or sent flying like that.”

“That’s easier said than done,” she grumbled as she got back to her feet. Looking to the side, she saw her blade and picked it up.

Harry lowered his sword, indicating that the spar wasn’t about to continue. “It’s simple, not easy,” he said. “Like most things, really. You know it intellectually, but you’re like we were when all this first began. It’s why we have you practice things like swinging that oversized cleaver, and shifting between stances for an hour in the atrium back at the villa. We’re getting you used to it, so that when you do go out and fight you can concentrate on fighting, rather than making sure you are doing it right. If we had more time, we would go a bit slower at it. With you and Yui confirming that they’re well on their way to fixing the Glitchzone, we’ll be back on the front lines soon enough.”

“Harry has the right of it, Strea,” Kirito added and then shot the younger player an amused look. “He was out in the fields from the start, learning a bit on how to fight. So was I. Asuna and Silica started within the first week, Rain and Lux were part of the second wave that began after the first month ended. We’ve all had time to get used to fighting.”

“And thanks for teaching Klein the bare basics, there, Kirito.” Harry added. “He’s the one who taught me what you taught him. I took Silica out within a few days of that, and the rest is history.”

Strea blinked. “So you didn’t know all this from the start?” She asked Harry.

“No, I didn’t.” Harry admitted. “Of all the players, we have maybe a few hundred still alive who did. Argo never volunteered any information on the beta testers, who had some idea of what was going on, so outside of the few who are publically known, like her and Kirito, the actual numbers are not known. To us, at least.” He shrugged. “Probably for the best, considering that during the first month, it was every player for him or herself.”

Kirito nodded. “All I was thinking of those first few weeks was getting stronger and surviving,” he said, a note of inwardly directed disgust in his voice. “I know of a few who are dead, but I won’t divulge their names.”

“Why not?” Strea asked, a note of confusion in her voice.

“Because it’s a touchy subject,” Harry said for Kirito. “Not just for him, but all of the beta testers.” He sighed. “It’s something that’s not asked about. It doesn’t matter anyway. Not anymore, at least. Life’s like that, really.” He shrugged and got back into a ready position. “And anyway, we need to stop this conversation, we have mobs incoming.” His eyes were focused on something past Strea and
She turned to see what he was looking at. She saw a patrol of four moving toward them. It had three goblins, with an orc leading them, and from the looks, it seemed as if they hadn’t been seen yet. It brought to mind the other reason they were out in the fields.

Despite her being geared up with basic gear for someone at her level, which was just under eighty, it was just that, basic. She needed better if she was serious about helping, and the best way to get that, was for her to earn the col needed through fighting. And maybe she would get lucky enough for something to drop from the mobs, either to use for herself, sell it, or trade it for something else. Or maybe she can work out something with Steel Phoenix, maybe not for gear itself, but perhaps for the materials to craft them. She would bring it up later.

There were so many little things to keep track of.

Any further musings were stopped as the orc in charge of that patrol spotted them and roared a challenge. Strea didn’t know why, but she roared right back at it and charged in. She noted that Harry and Kirito were doing so as well and allowed a small smile to grace her face.

A smile, that became a bloodthirsty grin as she noted that the mobs were grouped up as she brought her blade into position to activate a sword skill. Time to see if that one attack worked as well as she thought against grouped up mobs.

##

Harry looked around as the last mob shattered and sheathed his sword before glancing at Strea, who was happily looking at the screen which displayed her gained experience, col, and, if she was lucky, any drops. A part of him wanted to yell at her, leaping into the fight like she did without waiting for him and Kirito, but at the same time, the enthusiasm she demonstrated was something he could appreciate.

To her, SAO really was a game, one to go out, see what was around, fight mobs, and generally play around. Unlike the rest of the players, going out and fighting was less something that needed to be done, and something that can be done simply because she could.

To her, it was fun. It was what SAO should have been.

True, she could die, and she didn’t know if her being an AI changed how death would be treated for her, but she didn’t care. She had spent over a year and a half trapped and unable to do anything, and now she could.

He saw her close the victory window and look at him, and couldn’t help but shake his head in exasperation. “That was a bit reckless, Strea,” he said simply. Not condemning, but a statement of fact.

Strea simply shrugged. “I wanted to see if doing a Cyclone would work as the text said it would,” she replied. “You know, hit many of them at once? Besides, it was fun.”

Harry snorted. “Fun?” He asked. “Well, I guess you could call it that, though for most, I don’t think they would find fighting fun.”

Strea tilted her head in confusion. “Why not?”

He shrugged. “Honestly, when it gets down to it, everyone else is afraid to some degree,” he said. “Even the best of us feel fear. So long as you don’t let it control you, that’s not a bad thing, really. It
makes you that much more alert, that much more cautious. And with death being very real here, you need that.”

Strea nodded, but it was clear to Harry that she didn’t really understand. Knowing that sighing in frustration would accomplish nothing, he didn’t give into the urge to do so. As it was, he couldn’t blame her for her naïveté. For all intents and purposes, she was innocent in ways that none of them were. It wasn’t from her being stupid, though she struck him as a bit of an airhead in some ways, but she lacked the experiences that the rest of them did.

It also didn’t help that she didn’t see things the way a biological being would, as she wasn’t one. She was a digital life form, and he didn’t know how to explain things to her in a way that she would understand.

“Harry,” Kirito said. “I might be able to explain it to her.”

Harry looked at him and nodded. “Go ahead then, Kirito.” He assented.

Kirito took a breath and then looked at her. “Strea, think of it as being infected by a malicious program, a virus in other words,” he said. “Maybe even being unable to create a restore point from before you were infected in the first place.” At the horrified look in her eyes, it was clear that it got to her. “Now, the only way to handle a program that’s infected like that is to delete it. With most software, you can do so and reinstall it, but the software wouldn’t be up to date until you updated it. In your case, you are unique, and given that both you and Yui believe that your permissions were set to being the same as us, players, so that probably means that the same things we have to deal with apply. You die, your processes are terminated, and you are deleted from the system. Therefore, if you die, that’s it. You no longer exist.”

“If I die I will be… deleted?” She asked. “Dying means my processes would be terminated and removed?” Her eyes widened and began to dilate as the meaning of what Kirito said truly sank in. Her breathing became rapid and ragged as she started looking around wildly, frantically looking around at everything.

Harry knew what she was going through here. He had seen various shades of fear over his life, and experienced more than a few of them. And from the look of things, she was starting to have a full blown panic attack. Not that he could blame her, considering that how Kirito explained it. That she was experiencing fear, that very rational fear, said a lot of things.

Fear of dying, or its equivalent in Strea’s case, was probably the most primal fear out there. A fear that for biological beings like humans and animals, was rooted in their most primitive parts. And a fear that any being that was even remotely aware felt at some point. Even children knew that fear. Unless they were unlucky, they might not know what it was for some time, but they eventually understood what it was. And it was that fear, and the understanding of it, that proved, more than most things, that a person or being was self-aware, alive in the truest sense.

_Damn it Kirito, I wanted to get her to be a bit more cautious, not this!_ He thought to himself acerbically. _But I can’t deny that I am at least partially at fault here. I should have realized that once we put it into terms she could understand, she would panic!

He needed to break her out of it, he knew, but how? He could just remind her that there were others present, maybe provide a simple bit of contact, but he was unsure if it would work. On the other hand, doing nothing wouldn’t do, as they weren’t in a safe zone. Being afraid was fine, no player who intended to survive was unfamiliar with it, but he had forgotten that the initial feeling most had when confronted with the very real possibility of dying, rather than knowing it only intellectually, was blind panic.
He had felt it during his first year in Hogwarts, in the Forbidden Forest to be exact. He knew how he felt then, how his own panic made him unable to act, and how it had taken Hagrid’s arrival to shock him out of it. But once he had gone through it, something changed. He had been afraid after that, more so in some cases, but he was no longer paralyzed into inaction.

He walked over to her and put a hand on her shoulder, hoping that the physical contact broke her out of it. He shot Kirito a look and gestured for him to come over as well.

“Strea,” he said as he waited for Kirito to get over to them. “Strea, look at me, focus on me and my voice.”

She looked into his eyes, the dilated pupils slowly beginning to return to normal as she focused on him.

“What you are feeling, it’s normal,” he said gently. “You now know what you are afraid of, that one fear all beings have, be they human or AI. That fear of no longer existing, of dying. It’s okay to be afraid, it really is. I am afraid of dying, Kirito is afraid of it as well, so are the others. We’re all afraid of it.” His voice then firmed. “But even if we are afraid of it, we don’t let it control us. We don’t let it make us unable to act. We accept that fear, control it, and we move on. To do anything else is to allow it, and to allow Kayaba, to win.

“I refuse to give that feeling, and most especially him, that satisfaction.”

“He’s right,” Kirito said as he came alongside them. “We all feel that fear. We know it well, and… I’m sorry. I should have remembered that you aren’t familiar with that feeling. But, now you know what it is, and in knowing, you can beat it. Don’t let it control you, control it instead.”

“How?” She asked quietly.

Kirito put his hand on her other shoulder. “By moving forward,” he said gently. “By accepting that you feel it now, and will again, but not letting it stop you. I know you can do it.” He looked at Harry. “I know we planned to be out here for a few more hours, but I think we should return to the villa.”

Harry nodded. “Agreed.”

**Aincrad 61st Floor, Selmburg**

“So, you and Kirito managed to drive home the dangers to her,” Keiko said to her husband as she groomed Pina in the chair she was sitting in. “And she took it about as well as expected.” She had removed her armor and was wearing a simple white blouse and green skirt combination.

“As well as expected?” Harry asked, a note of sarcasm in his voice as he polished his armor. His shirt and pants were on the ratty side, but that was due to him deciding to not wear anything nicer while he did maintenance. True, it wasn’t as if the clothes could get dirty, or at least stay that way if they did, but old habits died hard. “She damn near had a bloody panic attack.”

“As I said, as well as expected,” Keiko said again as she gave Harry a look. “How did you manage to convince her about the dangers, anyway?”

Harry shrugged. “It was Kirito, more than me, if that’s what you’re wondering,” he admitted. “I tried, but it was clear that she really didn’t get it. Kirito had the bright idea of couching it in terms of programs.” At her nod, he continued.

“Well, Kirito summed it up as likening dying to having a program’s processes terminated and the program deleted from the system. She got that real quick, and it’s easy to understand why, when you
think of it. She *is* a program. Her reactions were very human though. Whether she learned from observation, or Kayaba created both her in Yui in humanity’s image is an interesting philosophical question, though.”

Keiko brushed Pina’s feathers a few more times as she considered what Harry said before nodding. “It makes sense,” she said finally. “Strea’s like a child, so while she might feel that fear, she doesn’t understand it, not the way we do. When Kirito explained it, she finally understood, and she reacted predictably. Her being a humanlike AI means little in that regard.” She then shot him a fond look. “And you, being you, snapped her out of it.”

“Kirito helped,” Harry hedged.

“But it was you who initiated it all,” Keiko countered with a smile. “As I said, it’s you just being you.”

Harry shrugged. “I just hope she realizes that while she is afraid, it shouldn’t stop her from acting,” he said. “Well, what’s done is done. It’s up to her now.”

“That it is,” Keiko said with a nod. “Still, I think she’s resilient enough to bounce back from this in time. You and Kirito may have defined it for her, but once she comes to grips with it, I think she’ll be fine.”

Harry looked his armor over before putting it into his inventory. “Maybe,” he said. “But still…”

Setting Pina on the armrest, Keiko got up and walked over to him. “It’s like when this started,” she said, wrapping her arms around him. “I spent a week afraid and feeling sorry for myself before you simply got me to go out and realize that I’m not helpless here. She’s already fought mobs, and won, so she has to know that. It was a shock to her, but better it happen now, where we can get her to confront it and talk to us all about it, than later, if she strikes out on her own.”

She didn’t have to look at his face to see his nod, she could feel it through his body. She then let him go and put her hand on his shoulder, noting that she had to reach up a little higher now.

So, we’re still growing a little in here. She thought idly, wondering if the system was tracking their data from whatever hospital they were in and making changes to reflect some of their development, or it was simply making small changes here and there over time to reflect their time in SAO.

Something to ponder another day.

**July 6, 2024**

Strea tiredly walked up to the table and took a seat, seeing everyone waiting for Asuna to bring out the morning meal. She had been up most of the night, thinking about what Kirito and Harry said in reaction to her panic attack, and how they openly admitted to their own fears. How those fears were always there.

Everything she had seen of them hadn’t even hinted at that fact, but she also was aware that she only really started paying attention to individual players out of frustration from all the failed attempts at breaking free she had tried since SAO began. By that time, they had come to terms with their fears. Maybe not conquered them, but they had accepted them, and decided that they wouldn’t let their fears keep them from doing something.

“You’re looking a bit tired,” Rain said.

“Didn’t sleep so well,” Strea admitted. “Ugh, is this what you humans have to deal with? Before, I
didn’t need to sleep, just a brief cycle where I had my processes go to low activity and I felt fine. Now, I need to actually sleep?”

“Comes with the territory,” Rain replied with a shrug. “You might not be human, but you’re a player now. Perhaps the system set it up this way for you to get the whole experience. All the good parts, and the bad parts of it.”

“Or perhaps CARDINAL is just messing with us,” Strea grumbled.

“I find sleeping quite refreshing actually,” Yui piped up. “It allows me to go over things during the day without those extra processes tying up my own resources.”

“I wonder if that was done to emulate what our bodies go through when we sleep,” Rain mused. “Though if anything, our brains are more active at that point. Hmm.”

“Rain, how do you know that?” Asuna asked.

“I did want to become a doctor or nurse, if you recall.” Rain shot back. “Though after all of this, that might be a bit of a challenge.”

“Why so?” Strea asked.

“It takes seven years of schooling to become a doctor,” Rain said flatly. “I have to do my time in college on a medical track, and then go into the program for advanced studies to become a doctor. Worst comes to worst, I would have finished as a nurse. However, I would need to finish high school first, and getting trapped in here means that I’m behind there.” She sighed. “And with me turning eighteen next month, I can probably kiss any hopes of that goodbye.”

Strea saw everyone nod at her statement, and briefly wondered what she meant. That was until she remembered that, until SAO, they all had hopes and dreams for their futures in the outside world.

She didn’t quite understand it, but she also knew that it was because to her, there was no outside world, save for perhaps going to some other game. She was a digital being, so things like that were no real concern of hers. At the same time, helping them escape had been her motivation for breaking out in the first place.

And did she still want to?

A firm part of her still said yes, but a small, but insistent, part of her reminded her of the dangers. Doing so could result in her being killed and deleted, and it wasn’t as if she could enjoy being Outside like they could then.

Not that she knew of, at any rate.

##

Yui looked at Strea, and could easily tell that she was thinking. It really wasn’t surprising, given that she was reminded yesterday that being a player meant that she could be killed. The price for gaining their freedom meant that they were no longer protected by being programs with limited administrative rights.

If they had access to a console, that might change, but it might not. She didn’t know if CARDINAL and the GM had taken steps to eliminate that, admittedly remote, possibility, but she thought it better to assume they had. Less of a chance at being disappointed then.
From the looks of the others, they could tell as well, though they weren’t bringing it up.

Well then, she would, by asking her fellow AI to say it upfront.

“Strea, what kept you up then?” She asked.

Strea started for a moment before giving her a knowing look. “I see what you’re doing,” she said. “But okay, I’ll say it. When Kirito and Harry reminded me that as a player, I don’t have the same safety that I once enjoyed, I kept going over things in my mind. You know, like dying, or even losing someone because I wasn’t good enough.” She grimaced. “Not fun stuff.”

“It never is,” Silica said giving Strea a knowing look. “And with all that, are you still thinking things over?”

Strea looked at her with some surprise. “How...?”

Harry snorted. “We can be considered… experts on matters like fear and doubt, if only from personal experience,” he said with a hint of bitterness. “Fear? We all know what it feels like, especially the fear that makes you glad that being in game doesn’t come with some ah… biological functions. Doubt? Well, we’ve all done things that made us question if we are doing, or did for that matter, the right thing. It’s very easy to settle down and leave it to others, after all.

“I told you it’s perfectly normal, and if you need a few days, then by all means, take a few days. None of us will think less of you for it, especially since all of us have been hit by it.”

Further conversation was halted as Asuna came out of the kitchen, pushing a cart that was covered in food. “Breakfast is ready!” She called.

##

Asuna put her utensils down as she finished and looked at everyone at the table. Harry and Silica were idly sitting back and watching in amusement as Yui eagerly fed Pina some scraps. Kirito was taking the feathered dragon’s distraction as his cue to eat more of the available food while it was still available. Rain and Lux had finished as well and were idly chatting.

Strea, however, was slowly eating her food, almost picking at it, save for the fact that she was eating. Given how she was over the previous few days, Asuna thought it was out of character for her. The amazonian AI had appeared to have an appetite to match her large stature in comparison to the others, a hundred and eighty centimeters was not short by any means, though she knew that the discussion Harry and Kirito had with her may have muted it a bit.

She also overheard part of the discussion between them all, so she knew that Strea was still coming to grips with her own mortality. Loathe as she was to admit it, she believed that it was better that it happened this early, than during a fight, causing her to freeze up at the worst possible time.

Still, it was clear that the AI needed some time to process it, and she looked around at the table, Harry and Kirito had a good idea of what Strea had in terms of col, meaning she could afford to pay for a weapon to be crafted by Liz, provided they provided the mats, which wouldn’t be a problem for any of them. They had far too many as it was, even with selling mats that they had no use for.

After all, if she decided to continue, now that she was fully aware of the dangers she faced, then they would need to make sure that she was equipped to face them. Stay with them, to learn or join, or deciding to go on her own, Asuna would be damned if she let the AI go out into the world unprepared.
Though she figured that Strea would probably stick with them.

**July 9, 2024 - Aincrad 65th Floor, Barist**

“It’s about bloody time he fixed the place.” Harry said as they stepped off the teleport platform and looked around in the early morning light. “Not that everything else wasn’t interesting, but it’s nice to get back on track.” He turned back to the members of the group. “Asuna, are you comfortable bringing Yui along like that?” He asked. “She isn’t a fighter.”

Asuna stepped forward, holding Yui’s hand. “We can find a place for her to wait,” she said, indicating the diminutive AI. “It allows her to look around different places, and it’s not like we can find someone to watch her right now.”

“There is Argo,” Kirito mused.

“Not a chance,” Asuna shot back. “Even if she would look after Yui, or have Gus do it, I can just imagine her also doing her best to be a bad influence.” She shrugged. “Besides, she’s been out of touch for the last few days.”

“I wonder what she’s doing,” Rain mused.

“As, and I shall answer!” Came the excited shout from behind all of them, causing all of them to jump. “My, my, you guys, did I startle you?” She asked with some amusement and then gave Strea and Yui curious looks. “Also, when did you pick us some new people?”

“I didn’t even sense her this time,” Harry said to his wife quietly.

“Where did she…?” Strea asked.

“I don’t know.” Yui said quietly.

“Nice to see you, Argo.” Kirito said drily to the information broker.

“Damn it boss, can you not use your little skill like that?” Came Gus’ voice, and they turned to see the American walking toward them from the edge of the plaza with a female player alongside him.

“Hey Gus!” Harry called. “Where have you guys been for the last few days? We were beginning to worry.” He gave the other player a curious look.

“Sorry about that, we were busy.” The American said apologetically. “There was a quest or two that required stealth, and observation.” He gestured to his companion. “Philia here joined up at the chance to be the first one to get some treasures from the places those quests were located.”

Philia shrugged. “There were a few chests had some nice things in them, but nothing really extraordinary.” she said. “There is that one quest in Selmburg I have my eye on, but I can do it later.” She looked at Gus. “Well, I must be off,” she said with a yawn. “I’m going to get some sleep and then start scouting that quest in Selmburg.”

“Good luck on that, Philia.” Gus said as she walked off. The girl simply waved as she walked toward the teleport gate.

“I take it she spends most of her time on the mid-levels?” Harry asked.

“She does, though she isn’t against going to the front line for scouting and exploration,” Gus replied. “She often does a lot of work towards finishing the mapping data for the middies, all because she
likes to look for treasure.” He shrugged. “She doesn’t keep most of it, but she likes to do it. She actually helped confirm that one Laughing Coffin group’s presence on the thirty-fourth floor.”

Harry nodded. He could understand the excitement of exploration, since he and Silica had done quite a bit of exploring and discovery early on. There was something satisfying about discovering something new, and he idly wondered if they should focus a bit more on that in the future, rather than getting through each floor as quickly as possible. “Thirty-fourth floor? Was she looking for them, or did she stumble upon them?” He asked.

“The latter.” Gus replied.

“She has to have some good stealth skills then,” Harry said idly. “And what was it you said about Argo now having a new skill? She managed to sneak up on me fairly well this time. Granted, I wasn’t paying that much attention, but I usually notice her before she springs up and surprises us.”

Gus smiled. “Not my thing to tell,” he said drily. “Besides, I don’t think it will take you too long to figure out.” He looked at the group. “And what is this about your group having two new additions?”

“Not for me to tell you,” Harry said simply. “Asuna will make the decision if you two should know.” He smirked. “Not that I doubt you two will figure it out soon enough.”

#

When Strea decided to accompany the others this day, she admitted, to them and to herself, that she hadn’t fully come to terms with it all. She was still scared, more so that she had ever been. But she couldn’t just sit and do nothing while she came to terms with it all.

To her surprise, they simply smiled at her, rather than encourage her to stay at the villa to look after Yui, despite the spoke it threw into the wheel of their plans for the day. She had been confused by it, until Silica simply looked at her reassuringly.

“During my first week, I couldn’t do anything,” she said. “I stayed at the inn, or wandered around town, while Harry went out and dealt with his fears by fighting.”

“Same here,” Asuna admitted. “It was that damned rumor of a secret logout spot that got me to move. Nearly got me killed in the process, but after deciding to act once, I then started learning how to actually fight. Well, as much learning from the guides as it was teaching myself, but it got me acting.”

“Kind of the same here, though it took me a little over a month,” Rain said. “I think it was just past the New Year when I finally worked up enough courage to step out. Well, that and I was bored out of my skull with simply waiting for something to happen.”

“Same,” Lux added.

“Knowing you’re afraid isn’t the problem,” Harry said. “In fact, it’s a good thing. It’s what you do in spite of it which is the important thing. Do you run from it, or do you move forward anyway. Some run away from their fears, some face them.” He smiled. “As Kirito said to you a few days ago, just move forward. That’s the hardest part of it.”

But now, she was wondering about the wisdom of deciding on this day to do so, rather than wait a day or more as she shifted uncomfortably under Argo’s scrutiny. She didn’t know what it was, but something about the blonde haired, golden eyed woman was disconcerting to her. It was as if she was looking into her in a way that she didn’t understand, or that there was something much different than the others about her. True, Argo hadn’t looked at her first, but at Yui. However, unlike the
smaller AI, she couldn’t exactly hide behind someone to avoid Argo’s gaze.

“How can she tell that I’m different?” Strea thought.

“Argo, quit making her nervous,” Asuna chided. “If you want to know about her, just ask her. She might not answer though.”

Argo turned her attention away from Strea, much to the AI’s relief. “Ah, but Aa-chan, how likely is it that she will tell me?” The information broker asked. “I mean, there’s something different about her, I can tell that much.”

“How can she tell that I’m different?” Strea thought.

“And what do you mean by that?” Silica asked carefully, shooting the information broker a cautious look.

“Well, her features are too perfect for one,” Argo replied offhandedly. “There aren’t any players left who haven’t used the mirror by now, I checked, so someone not having any natural flaws tends to stand out.” She glanced at Strea, or more noticeably, her chest and then back to everyone else. “That, and there isn’t a player I know of with a rack like that.”

Silica shook her head and then turned to Asuna with her hand out. “Pay up, Rain.” She said. “I told you she would notice the second she got a good look.”

Grumbling, Rain took a few col pieces from her inventory and handed them to Silica, much to Strea’s bemusement at the fact that they had made a... “Hold on for a process,” she said. “You two made a bet that she would notice something?”

“She would either notice that you looked a little too perfect, or you would say something to out you,” Silica said smugly as she put the col into her inventory, save a few. “And these are for Lux, since you did say something.” She added, handing the col pieces to Lux.

Strea blinked and thought about what she said and winced. While it wasn’t something that would out her as an AI, it would raise some questions.

“Process?” Argo asked before grinning. “Oh, I think I’m going to love to hear this story.”

“Not here, though,” Asuna said with a sigh. “I want some privacy for this.”

##

Argo looked around the table as Asuna finished her explanation, with Harry and Kirito adding in their own input as well, especially with how the two ended up with them. She could see Silica and the little one, Yui, petting Pina and feeding her some snacks. Nothing major, just peanuts, but the way Yui’s face lit up as she interacted with the feathered dragon showed that she was very much a little girl in many respects. Rain and Lux were talking with Strea, only a little hesitance on their part, but from what little she could overhear, it was more oriented toward the two human players getting to know the AI better as a person.

And Harry, Asuna, and Kirito were watching her and Gus, a note of caution in their postures, waiting for their reactions.

“Well now,” Gus said, sitting back. “This is different. AIs, he made actual AIs. I knew he was brilliant, but I honestly thought that we were about twenty or so years away from being capable of that.”

“And as far as we know, he didn’t have any... outside help,” Harry said. At Gus’ sharp look, he
shrugged. “They’re close to connecting the dots, Gus.”

Gus nodded and looked at Argo. “Boss, how do you want to play this?” He asked.

Argo shrugged. “For the AIs, we need to keep it quiet anyway, we don’t know how players will react, but I doubt that it’ll be positive,” she said. “That, at least, will remain off the market, but I recommend that you all keep working with them as need be to make sure they don’t accidentally out themselves. As for Harry, you sure you’re fine with them finding out? I mean, it’s kind of expected that they’ll figure it out, but I need to ask if you’re fine with it.”

“It’s less that I’m fine, and more accepting of the fact that they’ll figure it out sooner or later,” Harry replied. “I think my wife revealing that she was from… what was that district in Nerima called again? Oh, right, Furinkan. When my wife revealed she was from there, it seemed as if they were getting close to figuring it out.”

Argo nodded. “I see. Well, no one here or SAO has the authority to really decide on the matter for you,” she said. “Suggest? I can do that, but not tell you what to do outright.” She looked thoughtful. “Personally, stay as things have until they figure it out. At that point, you can decide to confirm or no, though that decision will be on you.” She then looked at everyone. “However, I will tell you this, if you figure it out, outside of those of us at the table, don’t talk to anyone about it. It’ll keep the spillage down.”

“And what if Outside figures out that they know?” Harry asks. “I don’t know how it’s treated in Japan, but back home it’s taken quite seriously. And we have good reason to believe that Outside is looking in. No hard proof outside of what Strea and Yui said, but they don’t have reason to lie about it.”

“Should we even be listening to you all talk about whatever it is like this?” Asuna asked. “You’re not mentioning anything, but that doesn’t mean we can’t make the connections.” She looked at Silica, who was carefully not listening in on the conversation. “I mean, from what’s already been said, Harry will get into a lot of trouble because of this.”

“Not as much as you think, Aa-chan.” Argo replied smoothly. “He’ll get a stern talking to about being responsible about things, but that’s about it. At least here in Japan. If it were back in Europe, it could be different.” She shrugged. “We tend to operate on the idea of when someone will find or figure it out, rather than if. That help?”

"It does, a bit,” Asuna admitted. “Anyway, even so, I wanted to bring it up with you, since it’s clear you know. Harry tries to be careful about it, but if he’s thinking we will make the connection, then talking with you first might help.” She looked at Kirito, who nodded. “Hm, how do I ask this? Without getting into specifics, how many of those urban legends that come out of the Furinkan District of the Nerima ward are actually true?”

“Depends on the urban legend,” Argo replied with a shrug. “But if Silica has admitted that much, then she knows the sources of a few of them personally, so I can say that it’s more than you think.” She then made sure to pay attention to Asuna and Kirito’s reactions. Well, everyone else’s as well, as it was clear that they were all listening in with half an ear.

Asuna nodded thoughtfully. “That’s not the answer I was looking for, but I can live with it,” she said. “I can see that... confirming how many are true would let loose some things that aren’t really up for discussion right now.”

And there it was, full on 'Princess' mode. Not that she or anyone who cared would ever call Asuna that. Argo nodded back, reassured that Asuna at least was willing to let the matter be. She could tell
that the girl had basically figured it out, but out here in public, even with a Privacy Field up, was not
the pace for it. A quick look at everyone else gave her the same feeling, so she decided to change the
topic before that secret did get spilled. Japan might treat it differently than other nations, but it was
still not encouraged. “Well, enough of that,” she said. “So, we have two AIs, and they’ve decided to
attach themselves to you.”

“For now at least,” Asuna said, easily changing track. “They might change their minds later.”

*I doubt that,* Argo thought. “But they’re with you now,” she said. “So, what’re you all going to do? I
can see that Strea is kitted out, but the other one? Why is she here?”

Asuna fidgeted. “Well, we were all coming out here, and we didn’t want to leave her alone at the
villa,” she admitted. “And to be honest, who would we leave her with? We hadn’t really talked it out
yet, so…”

Argo nodded. “I see,” she said. *In other words, they hadn’t thought about what to do with her yet.*
She thought. “You might want to think of something then.” She said. “I could look after her, but-”

“No,” Asuna interrupted. “I know you well enough by now to know that you’d just be a bad
influence on her.”

“She’s got you there, boss,” Gus said with a chuckle, only to have Argo elbow him.

“Shut it,” she hissed at him. “I was going to say, I have other plans.” She said to Asuna before
yawning. “I’ve been away for a few days and I need to get some sleep, and make sure my people
hadn’t gotten into too much trouble while I was away.”

“Don’t they get into trouble because of her?” Harry stage whispered to Gus, who nodded and then
winced as Argo elbowed him again.

**Mee Forest**

Strea leapt forward, slashing with her sword, as Harry sidestepped the treant’s attempt at flattening
him with its branches. She noticed Silica dart in from the side, her dagger glowing with a sword skill.
Given how she was slashing at the treant’s branches, it was clear that she intended to reduce the
avenues that the mob could use to attack. Lux was on the other side doing the same.

Of course, daggers and lighter swords weren’t the most effective weapons to use, so it was slower
going as a result, but this would be the dozen treant that they faced. By now, they had a routine
which worked fairly well, so it was only the treant’s naturally high defense and health that was
causing the battles to take longer.

A few minutes later, the treant was dead, and she noticed everyone looking around, scanning the
area for more threats. She looked around and noticed nothing, both using vision and other senses,
including ones that the others didn’t have. Well, she thought they didn’t have them.

A second later, Harry sheathed his weapon, shortly followed by the others. “God, I hate dealing with
treants,” he said. “They’re not particularly difficult to fight, but our weapons aren’t the most ideal for
dealing with them.”

“And up here isn’t the best place to start learning a new weapon anyway,” Silica said with a nod.
“Anyway, we might as well head to the safe area, it’s almost time to meet up with the others and
head back to Barist for lunch.”

Hearing her stomach growl, Strea rubbed the back of her head sheepishly as the rest looked at her in
“Well, I see someone’s getting hungry,” Lux said in amusement. “Though usually it’s Harry or Silica having the growling stomach.” Two more growls then sounded, making her nod. “There they are.” Another growl, one much smaller and higher pitched then sounded, making them all look at Pina.

The feathered dragon simply looked back from where she was flying around Silica. From the look of her, it was as if she was telling them that it was time to eat.

“And the flying black hole, otherwise known as Pina, wants us to get a move on so she can eat,” Harry said drily as he opened his inventory and took out a piece of meat. He threw it to Pina, who caught it easily and happily ate it. “Now, let’s head to the safe area and meet up with the others before she decides that things that she shouldn’t eat, like the mobs or our gear would make a nice snack.”

Strea couldn’t help it, she started laughing. She didn’t know what it was that was so funny about it all, or even why she found it funny in the first place, but she found herself laughing.
“So, how did it go?” Strea asked as the group entered the villa. They had decided to go after the floor boss, though she had been asked to stay behind due to her not being ready. It wasn’t a matter of skill on her part, though she was still refining those skills as she continued to go out with them. It was getting a few field or event bosses out of the way for her to cut her teeth on and gain the needed experience. Once she got that, they would let her in on floor boss fights.

Still, from the looks on their faces, the fight did not go as well as they had hoped.

“Four dead,” Harry said tiredly. “Not the worst boss fight we’ve been to by a long shot, but it’s been close to twenty floors since we lost anyone in a boss battle, and those guys just retired from fighting.” He shuddered. “Not that I blame them. After what that one boss did to them? I don’t blame them one bit.”

“It was a stupid mistake,” Asuna muttered angrily. “A stupid mistake that they should have known better than to make. Those damn impatient idiots! We warned them. We fucking warned them not to charge in right then. Not when it was shifting attack patterns. What in the hell were they thinking?”

The rest of the group looked at her in shock before Harry just gestured to Kirito, and the other boy took Asuna to the living room.

“I take it that’s unusual?” Strea asked.

Harry nodded. “Asuna usually watches her language, so for her to be swearing means she’s either very angry, or what happened put her really out of sorts,” he commented. “And I can say that she’s only echoing what the rest of us think.” He then shook his head sadly. “Just give her some time to calm down.”

“At least Heathcliff jumped in to keep it from getting worse,” Silica said, to Strea’s surprise.

She was about to say something when she felt the system lock her down, saw something in her field of vision.

FM: CARDINAL - YOU CANNOT MENTION THAT HE’S KAYABA, THEY HAVE TO FIGURE IT OUT.

A quick glance to the side saw Yui staring in front of her with wide eyes. And as she glanced at the others, she saw that they noticed.

“Hey, are you two okay?” Rain asked.

Feeling the lockdown lift, she looked at them and saw the concern in their eyes.

Shakily, she nodded and saw Harry scowl.

“Something tells me that’s not the case,” he said simply. “We mentioned Heathcliff, and you two reacted oddly. I mean, I don’t trust him very far, still don’t, and doubt I will, but that shouldn’t… wait a second.”

“Harry?”
“Everyone, tell me something,” he said. “Have we ever seen him struggle all that much against anything? I’m not meaning having to work at it, but actually having trouble.”

Silica looked thoughtful. “Well, he did seem to have a few problems when he solo tanked the fiftieth floor boss long enough for us to get back to our feet.” She said, but there was a clear note of uncertainty in her voice.

“And when you look at it, he shouldn’t have been able to,” Rain mused. “I don’t care how good you are, a boss like that should have been too much to handle on a person’s own. You would have to… be… oh that fucking mudok!” She started swearing at length in Russian.

“What is it Rain?” Lux asked, blinking at the clear vitriol that was in the Russo-Japanese girl’s voice.

“She put it together,” Harry said. “We don’t have confirmation, but it does make sense. We just might know who he is.” He then chuckled a bit darkly. “And if that’s so, then it was well played you brilliant bastard. Well played indeed.”

“Harry,” Silica said sharply. “Just who-?”

Harry looked at them all and smiled grimly. “Just someone I owe a beer to,” he said simply. “For keeping you out of the line for fire back in January. You know when.”

Silica’s eyes widened. “You mean…?”

Harry nodded and then looked at them all.

“Kayaba.”

Silica started swearing, as she easily made the same connection he had. Strea was impressed by her knowledge of the Japanese language, not to mention the other languages were thrown in as well.

Rain nodded and then looked at Harry askance. “Why do you owe him a beer?” She asked.

Harry smiled, though it didn’t reach his eyes. “I just owe him one, and I’ll leave it at that,” he replied. “It was after you left to get Gus, so that’s why you don’t know. Now, we need to get Kirito and Asuna, and brief them up on our suspicions. Hmm, perhaps we should eat out tonight, the Golden Way sounds good right now.”

“What?” Lux asked.

“To let him know we’ll play his game… until he fucks up and we can expose him.” Harry said with a calm that Strea could easily tell he did not feel. Not with how tense his body was, like a mob primed and ready to strike. “And to get dinner, of course.” He stood up and walked out of the room. A minute later, they were all startled by Asuna’s shout.

“WHAT?!”

**Aincrad 55th Floor, Grandzam**

Heathcliff looked over the footage of the fight with the log files running alongside them, trying to see what precisely happened. With the levels of everyone, it shouldn’t have dealt that much damage, but it did, and four players were now dead. Was it a minor glitch that got missed? Was it just not tuned right? Or were the ones who leapt in, like Asuna had shouted, being idiots for doing so. Either way, whether it was his fault or not, he wanted to make sure.
Though it did seem as if Asuna had the right of it. True, the damage was higher than it should have been, but the rest of the players had been cautious enough to expect something. The Glitchzone had gotten them to be wary that not everything would have been properly fixed before being reopened. There were a great many possible factors that could have led to this that he had to take into consideration.

“HEATHCLIFF,” CARDINAL said. “IT SEEMS AS IF STEEL PHOENIX HAS MADE THE CONNECTION. THAT YOU ARE KAYABA, THAT IS.”

And now he had this to contend with. “Was it Strea and Yui?” He asked.

“NEGATIVE.” Came the immediate response. “OR, AT LEAST, NOT DIRECTLY.”

“What do you mean?”

“THE PROTOCOLS IN PLACE TO PREVENT THEM FROM TALKING, AND WARNING THEM AGAINST TRYING TO MAY HAVE PLAYED A PART.” CARDINAL replied. There was a slightly sheepish note in her voice. “THEY WERE ALL TOGETHER WHEN THOSE PROTOCOLS TRIGGERED.”

Kayaba considered that and sighed. He should have considered the possibility that anything he did could get them on the right track, not that they needed any help. Regular observations showed him that it was sheer luck on his part that they hadn’t before now. The gods only knew he unintentionally dropped enough hints, looking back on it all, that any of the players could have made the connection by now. So, something in place to block two who might, might have known, from disclosing it could easily get them to think.

Especially them.

After all, his play was too perfect, and he never went into the red. How many players could claim that?

“And their reactions?” He asked. He had a feeling that he already knew, but he needed to make sure.

“THEY SEEM TO BE WILLING TO PLAY YOUR GAME… FOR NOW.” CARDINAL replied. “THEY WERE DISCUSSING HOW THIS SHOULD BE APPROACHED AND REACHED A CONSENSUS.”

“Oh?” He asked, raising an eyebrow. That someone figured it out, and wanted to approach him was unsurprising, and with them, he had a feeling that they would definitely want to discuss some things. At sword point.

“I WOULD SUGGEST CHECKING YOUR MESSAGES,” CARDINAL replied, and there was a bit of that put off tone to her.

Blinking, Kayaba noticed the message pop up in the corner of his vision. Thirty messages waiting. He sighed. "Budget, budget, a thank-you from the orphanage on the first floor for the outing, bill from that blacksmith--" he easily sent that to Daizen, his guild’s financier-- "message from-- oh."

Hadrian. Harry. The Mystic Knight. It was an invitation for them to meet and talk at the Golden Way in Algade.

I see, he thought. It makes sense as well. Of all of them, he is probably the most able to keep a cool head even when enraged. Which makes him all the more dangerous, really. However, from the tone of the message, he’s clearly not looking for trouble, not right now, at least.
He considered it for a moment, weighing the pros and cons of it, before accepting the invitation.

The fact that it would be in public, and at a place that was popular with players in general wasn’t lost on him. It probably was intended to serve as a check on all parties, constraining their actions, or at least ensuring that if there was a blowup, his true identity would be exposed to many witnesses. Rather well thought out, for a plan that was done quickly. Potentially risky, for him especially, but having spent just as much time in SAO as everyone else-- more so really-- he thought it would be a worthwhile one to take.

*I wonder how this will go, I didn’t plan for something like this,* he thought to himself with some anticipation as he stood up. Despite the fact that it could mean everything would come to a conclusion soon, he was looking forward to it.

**Aincrad 50th Floor, Algade**

“Just to be clear, I will be the one handling this.” Harry said quietly. “I don’t want you all getting involved in this.”

Asuna blinked at Harry’s quiet declaration and turned to look at him. “Why?” She asked.

“I’m the one who invited him, to talk and nothing else,” Harry said simply. “Also, all of us are angry at him, and we need to keep clear heads.” He looked at Asuna. “You might be able to pull it off, but I need you to keep an eye on the others, and dear, don’t try and say you can keep calm, I heard you muttering about what you want to do to him if this confirms it.”

Asuna nodded and thought about it. He’s right, damn it. She thought. And of all of us, he tends towards cold anger, rather than hot anger. It sounded like he didn’t want to accidentally cause the situation to degrade, but was going to take precautions in case of that anyway. “You’re worried about it being likely to escalate, then?” She asked, more for confirmation than anything else. “More so than it is already is.”

He nodded. “You think I would be this sensible otherwise?” He asked with a wry grin.

Silica and Kirito snorted at that, while Rain just shook her head. Lux simply turned to Strea and Yui and explained that, while not exactly reckless per se, he did have a tendency to leap into things.

“So, taking precautions, and you want us to keep our distance then?” Asuna asked as they entered the inn. She spied a table that would have a clear view of the entire inn and decided that it would do. It had an excellent line of approach to the bar, meaning they could support him if needed, but was far enough that it shouldn’t put Heathcliff on his guard. Well, more on his guard, as they all considered that he probably knew the reason for this meeting. “I still don’t really agree with this idea of yours, but…”

“But we’ll just keep picking at it if we don’t do something, and it might make us act at the wrong time,” Kirito said. “I know I would do something stupid in the right circumstances, like noticing it right after a boss fight.”

“And knowing him, he would offer to duel, with the prize being releasing everyone if we win,” Harry said. “But that’s what he would want. I do think you would stand a good chance at winning, if only because he would disable his most dangerous advantage to keep it somewhat fair. But you would be doing what he wants, when he wants it. The advantage would still be his.”

“And even without his GM abilities, he’s probably that good anyway,” Kirito admitted. “I would be walking right into it.”
Asuna could only nod at that. Having known Kirito this long, she knew that when something provoked him into action, he tended to not think of the consequences. It really would be him dancing to Heath—no, Kayaba’s—tune. Harry could distance himself, at least a bit, from it. Take off the edge of his own emotions, his own anger, allowing him to be clear headed.

But she could tell that his own fury is why he was doing this. Not because he was spoiling for a fight, but because he couldn’t just do nothing, now that he knew. So instead, he decided to do this. Tell Kayaba he knew, and perhaps find out why he did this. If he couldn’t yet act, he could use this as an opportunity to perhaps get some answers.

“Harry, be careful,” Silica said. “If you get killed, Rain still has that resurrection stone. I will use it, and force you to commit seppuku with a spoon.”

Harry looked back and smirked. “Duly noted, dear.” He replied and then turned to walk toward the bar.

Asuna looked at Silica, who was looking at her husband’s figure with worry. “Why a spoon?” She asked.

“Because it’s dull, it’ll actually hurt, and he’ll feel it.” Came the response.

"Ever notice how the myth of the Buddha and the myth of Oedipus are, in a way, mirror images of each other?"

Heathcliff blinked.

He had come in expecting anything, a fight, an angry confrontation, a public falling out, anything really. But the question asked by Hadrian was unexpected. That the others in the guild were at the inn, if at a table a fair way from the bar, was noted, as was the presence of a clearly nervous Strea and Yui. But their distance showed that this was being done on Hadrian’s initiative, and they were there for support in case things did go wrong.

It’s not unexpected, he thought to himself. They would no more allow him to go in and do something like this alone than he would allow them to do the same. It’s clear that he’s doing this because he has to act, but he doesn’t want this to be in a way I can perhaps dictate.

Which was rather clever of him. If anything, the boy probably considered the possibility that he, himself, would have considered this happening, and planned for it. Perhaps offering them a chance to fight him and decide everything right then and there. And the boy considered it something to avoid, as the ball would be in his court, so to speak.

Still, that question needed to be answered, and perhaps it would give him a clue as to what Hadrian was hoping to get from this. He took a moment to reflect on the various stories he’d read. Even with the vast majority of his time spent developing SAO over the course of years, he had to have a starting place, inspirations really, for quests and mobs to come from somewhere. Stories were fertile ground for such. In turn, those stories helped him give CARDINAL the cream of the crop for her own management and adjustments to that shared pool of knowledge.

He found himself pleasantly surprised at the boy's insight. "Now that you mention it, yes.” He admitted. “They do seem to be mirror images of each other. Oedipus flees his destiny and it destroys him. Buddha embraces it despite his parents’ attempts to trap him in a gilded cage of luxury. An interesting observation."
Hadrian gestured to the seat at the bar beside him, and ordered a tankard of the local beer. "You know, I once talked to one of my teachers about Oedipus and the One Who Woke Up. Especially how I figured that Siggy von ‘Slow Mo’ Freud got the point of Oedipus wrong."

Heathcliff gave him a thoughtful look, trying to find any hidden meanings in the words spoken. "I don’t see Freud as the kind of thing to be on your reading list at your age." He said after a moment.

"The teacher in question runs the Book Club, and he likes to point you toward books that have the answers, rather than tell them to you. Add to that one of my best friends is a bibliophile..." Harry replied with a shrug. "At least it gave me options besides textbooks and class related materials."

Heathcliff nodded his head in acceptance. "So you're not enamored of Freud's idea that every boy wants to sleep with his mother?" He asked, trying to gauge the boy’s reaction to an obvious interpretation of a reference to Freud.

Hadrian winced. "That... exaggerates things a bit, I think." He said. "Not to mention that my wife would beat me to death with my own spine if that was so. Also, eww, gross. I think Freud was a better poet than a psychologist, which would go a long way to explaining why his interpretation of that myth went that way. But, that's not the real point of the myth."

"And what lesson do you see the Greeks imparting?" Heathcliff asked as the barkeep arrived with the boy’s drink.

Hadrian paid for his drink and took a pull from the tankard, most likely as a ploy to gather his thoughts, or at least to maintain control over the conversation. "It's all the running away from, or toward for that matter, one’s fate that actually caused the problem," he replied. "When Oedipus tried to run from whom he thought to be his parents to prevent the prophecy, he ended up killing his real dad and marrying his mum."

Heathcliff nodded at the boy’s words. He had been right about his observations made a while ago. Hadrian was interesting, and more than just as an idle curiosity due to his special abilities. "Buddha's parents tried to force him toward a life of luxury rather than him becoming a holy man," he said. "When he finally ventured out just to get a break from it all, he saw the three sights that led to his enlightenment. That's a good point, and it emphasizes your point about them being mirrors, the two myths."

"Mm. How secure is that field I felt when you walked up?"

It took only a second to accept the sudden shift. "At least as good as your friend Argo's. A little more selective perhaps, so I can interact as needed, but at least as good." He was short selling it, of course, and he wouldn’t be surprised if the boy knew it.

It didn’t mean that it wasn’t highly useful, especially now.

"Tom was like that," Hadrian said. "That was the mistake he made, and it cost him."

_Ah_, Heathcliff thought. _Laying out the cards on the table, now that the initial verbal sparring is now done._ The conversation to this point was probably Hadrian’s attempt to trip him up, reveal more than he intended, and he wondered what the boy got from it. But now, it was time to get to the real subject of things.

He had suspected that one of the members of Steel Phoenix would eventually put it together. If anything, he was surprised it took this long, really. The boy’s lack of trust in him since their first meeting carried over to the rest, and it had shown that the mask he wore back then wasn’t as good as
he thought, or the boy was simply perceptive. Probably a bit of both.

Not enough for more than suspicion, but that would be all that was required for him to be wary.

"Did you two have a prophecy, then?" He asked

"Maybe, I don’t know," Hadrian shrugged. "I'm going to ask my headmaster when we finish this dance between us. I'm not planning on telling anyone else if you're worried about that. My guild knows, but I think you expected that. Hell, there are a lot of things that they’ve probably figured out, or will soon."

"Aside from my identity? Or some other things?" Heathcliff asked knowingly.

"Yes." Hadrian said with a nod, acknowledging what was being implied. "As for Tom, he was running so hard toward his ascension, or immortality, or winning any prophecy we might have had, that I think it's why he walked right into a place he had so little power." He smiled grimly. "We all know how that ended."

"And if I were to take your advice," Heathcliff said with a small smile, "I wouldn’t make it impossible for you to spread the word."

"No, I expect you to do that much," Hadrian admitted. "But if you do, I just ask you let me and the others talk amongst ourselves, or act if, and when, you reveal yourself. Though I don’t doubt that you’ll slip up before you plan to reveal yourself. You’ve done it often enough already."

"That I have," Heathcliff said, acknowledging his point. "You, all of you really, are playing within my rules. In your own ways perhaps, but still within my rules. You know the secret, but will keep it until the right time. Whether it is on my initiative, or you exploit an opportunity presented, it is still within my rules."

"And the rules the situation creates," Hadrian noted. "My book club teacher is a brilliant man, a duelist and a respected scholar. I once noted how two of the maxims of his main subject implied a third, and his eyes lit up. Only my book-loving friend had seen it before me in our year, at least in his subject. He told me that once a game or system gets complex enough with its rules, those rules begin to imply other things. Whether 'rules' are how reality is or how you've set up a game like SAO, a complex system by its nature will have more rules suggested by the observable or stated rules. Kirito and Strea called it the 'meta-game'."

"Well said," Heathcliff allowed with a smirk. After a flicker of... shock maybe?... Hadrian gave a small grin back.

"If you could help me figure out how to phrase that in a manner that works in essay format... well, there'll be a thank you mixed in with the curses when we beat you."

Heathcliff allowed himself a brief, closed mouth laugh. “Still, that does beg the question. Why make you Oedipus, to draw the analogy of the comparison to those tales to a logical conclusion?”

The boy smirked at him. “Why not?” He asked. “I was an instrument to one man’s destiny destroying him, after all. And just to be clear, I, we, don't care if you want to play both sides. We don't care if you want to plant more ideas with a well-timed mob or clue, or give out Uniques to those you think fit for the role of hero. Nice one with Kirito, by the way, it fits him. But if you try to force us down a specific path to make things exactly as you wish, you'll end up like Tom, my dear Demiurge. Not getting what he wanted, not even a really noble and epic alternative."

“I prefer the term of storyteller, actually,” Heathcliff remarked. “Though your term, Demiurge… it’s
rather fitting for the setting. Perhaps I am a bit of both. What else am I but a false god telling a story and having his audience live it?"

“For what purpose?”

“That is the question, isn’t it?”

He had to restrain his shock at Hadrian’s reply to his attempted enigma.

“So you don’t even know why you did it, then?” Hadrian asked. “You’re a dreamer, who forgot what his dream was. I don’t know whether to consider that sad or not.” He shook his head. “By the way, if you want people following Asuna so much, why not just reveal yourself, gloat a bit, and announce if your guild had just followed the ones you were so intent on subverting, they wouldn't have been lead down the garden path. You stand as our villain, the heroes you want in the spotlight are, and you don't fuck it up with over reaching in an attempt to make it 'just so'. That's just good writing. Anyway, Barkeep! I owe this man a drink!” He saw the boy select from the menu even as he went through the motions with the NPC to be polite.

Heathcliff accepted the drink, and watched Hadrian return to his friends as he mused on that last comment from the boy. Was he possibly trying too hard to make his story seemingly perfect? And what did that say about a half remembered dream from his childhood that was the genesis of it all? Was it a story to tell? Was it an attempt to make a dream reality?

Maybe it can be both a dream and a story to tell, he thought. After all, stories aren’t to tell that there are villains, but that villains can be defeated. That heroes do exist. And the world needs heroes in this day and age. Maybe, when I dreamed, I wanted to be a hero back then, but in making the dream and story a reality, I became the villain. Heh, fitting really. Every tale needs one, and it was I who made this their reality. After all, who is it that makes the heroes what they are, but the villains?

Hadrian, it seemed, did not want another one of this "Tom" running about, and he could speculate on the others. Metagaming was a part of playing any game. He saw a number of looks being exchanged, some concerned, some not, and wouldn't have put it past them all to be muddying the water, despite the fact that he already knew that they all knew.

This was the level of play he'd hoped for, but seen as an outlier. Instead, he had a group of players who had learned to navigate the rocky path that was this world, and he had to admit, he had probably unintentionally aided them in getting that skilled. But that they hadn't been honed in the way he anticipated, made him stretch.

He took a pull of the ordered drink, and had to smirk as he realized Hadrian had ordered the poorest quality beer available. Horse piss by any other name, really.

It made sense. They weren't friends. He was no one's friend in the end. He could settle for being a respected enemy, though.

Still, he thought as he took another drink. You all seem willing to play by my rules. In your own way, perhaps, but that’s the nature of this game.

##

Silica watched as Harry walked away from Heathcliff and back toward her.

“So, it went well?” She asked him.

“I think so,” he answered. “At least, it seems as if he’s willing to accept that we will play by his
rules. Even if I didn’t say that we would do so in our own way.” He smirked. “But I think he expects that.”

Something her grandmother said occurred to her and she smiled. One with a lot of teeth to it. "Well, that’s nice." She said. “After all, we now know what the game actually is. Us… against him.”

"Hasn’t it always been that way?” Rain asked.

“In a way,” Asuna said. “But it was us against the system more than us against him. If only because of the clear conditions that were stated. Now, it is us against him. All of us, all the players.” She looked at them all. “Now, we need to plan for when he will either make a mistake, or reveal himself as the main enemy to defeat.”

“Which means, a loose plan, I take it?” Lux asked.

Asuna nodded. “Of course. But we will have something in place, for us to work with, or for Harry to… how does he say it? Oh, right. For him to royally bugger it all up as he pulls something crazy out of his ass that somehow works.”

“Aw, Asuna, you say the sweetest things.” Harry remarked, easily dodging the halfhearted swat from Silica.

“I keep trying to train him,” Silica said apologetically. “But he’s like a dog that refuses to be housebroken.”

“Ah, but you like the fact that I refuse to be housebroken, dear.” Harry said, wagging his eyebrows. “It makes things more… fun.”

“Down boy,” Silica said, landing a swat on his shoulder.

“Get a room you two,” Rain shot out before looking around the table. “Anyway, how should we go about it?”

Kirito nodded. “I’ll start breaking out the Dual Wielding, publically,” he declared. “I can use the last boss fight as a reason to do so.”

Asuna nodded. “Would it have made a difference?” She asked.

Kirito shrugged. “I don’t know, probably not, but it wouldn’t have hurt.” He admitted. “We also need to grind, and grind hard for this. He’s going to be tough for when we expose him, or he does it himself, and I expect there to be a fight when that happens. This way, we have some extra levels to serve as a cushion.”

“I have a suggestion,” Yui said. “I can start following you all to various towns and asking around while you’re in the fields fighting mobs and questing. This way I can gather information on quests you haven’t done.” She shrugged. “There is a lot more information on them than you expect, so long as you look around.”

Asuna nodded. “That could work,” she said cautiously. “I don’t feel comfortable with leaving you alone in Selmburg, to be honest. I’m not completely comfortable with it, but sometimes we might end up being gone for several days. Also, we can divvy up the quests when we meet up for lunch or dinner then and speed up the process of getting them. But are you sure about it?”

Yui shrugged. “I’m not a fighter, and this way I can do something to help,” she said. “I know that I wanted to experience a family, but this is also important.”
“And it’s not like she can’t do both,” Harry mused. “We can go out, fight, and then come back to learn what she learned. At the same time, she can also see the sights and tell us if there’s anything worthwhile for us to see and experience.” He shrugged. “After all, part of his game, his rules, is to see what this world offers, isn’t it?” He then looked at Kirito and Asuna slyly. “She might even find some nice and romantic spots for you two to spend some time at. Alone.”

Both Asuna and Kirito blushed and then glared at him while Silica, Rain, and Lux all giggled. Strea and Yui looked a bit confused for a second before comprehension dawned on them.

Strea looked at Harry and Silica. “So, are you trying to encourage them to compile children? Or at least practice?” She asked curiously. “Why? It’s not like you can here, from what CARDINAL once told me. Oh! Maybe you can explain something to me! How do you do it? How long does it take? You know, when you’re Outside?”

Yui sighed as the others tried to parse the comment. “Didn’t CARDINAL ask you to check the databanks last time you asked about that?” She asked.

“But that’s boring!” Strea protested.

Silica then realized what Strea was really asking, and her face went as red as a tomato. From everyone else’s reactions, they also connected the dots, even Harry, whose face was just as red. “That’s... something done in private,” she explained. “And for your information, it takes nine months. If the two involved manage to get it started.”

“If?” Strea asked. “Why?”

“Can we get back on topic?” Asuna asked desperately, her face slowly becoming redder. “How did we get sidetracked from things like this?”

“Harry commenting on Yui finding some spots for you and Kirito to have some alone time.” Lux said easily.

“Well, let’s get back on topic,” Asuna said firmly, shooting Harry a look. “And Harry, quit trying to play matchmaker, Argo does it better. Also, Strea, ask both Harry and Silica later.” She shot them a smile. “They can explain some things better since they have experience.”

Harry and Silica just shot her a flat look.

“I will sic Argo on her.” Silica declared.

“Which one?” Harry asked. “Asuna? Or Strea?”

“Yes.”

From the suddenly nervous look on Asuna’s face, it was clear to Silica that the older girl was worried what she and her husband had in mind if they actually decided to involve Argo. She caught the context used there. This wouldn’t be Argo the Rat, information broker. This would be Argo, the unrepentant gadfly, who got her amusement however she could.

Asuna was well within her rights to be worried there. As for Strea, she already knew what to do. She would simply request that Argo give the AI a certain talk, one she had given both Harry and herself last year.

July 22, 2024 - Aincrad 66th Floor, Horvarth Caverns
Harry looked around the chamber they entered and didn’t see or hear any signs of more mobs showing up. A glance to Silica and Lux near the entrances showed them relaxing as well, indicating that they didn’t need to worry about any surprises from those directions, and he relaxed.

Turning to their other companion, who was looking around, much like they were, he waved to get her attention.

“You get what we came here to get yet?” He asked.

Strea nodded. “I got the armor we came here for, and we should have enough of what the quest Yui directed to us completed, too,” she replied. “I would equip the armor, but better to wait to do it in town, from what Kirito said.”

Harry nodded. “He’s right about that,” he admitted. “This way you can see if the stats it provides are right for you in a safe setting. Worst place to find out that it’s not for you is during a fight, and you should avoid that when you can.”

“What if that’s the only way to find out?” Strea asked.

“That’s why you also make sure to have some extra gear, gear you know is fit for you, in your inventory.” Silica replied, gathering Pina into her arms. “Of course, you still need to gather the gear, but that’s why we’re out here. If you get a drop, or a quest reward fit for you, good. If not, you still get col, mats and things to trade. Before long, we should have you properly kitted out.”

Strea nodded.

“Well then, we can either head back to town and wait for the others to show up, or we can head out and farm the area around the caverns until it’s time to head back.” Harry said. “What do you all think?”

“Back to town,” Lux said. “The others should be getting done soon.”

Silica fed a few peanuts to Pina before nodding. “Might as well,” she said.

Strea was about to say something, and her stomach growled. A growl that was immediately answered by several more from the others.

“Back to town it is, then,” Harry said with a laugh as he sheepishly rubbed his stomach.

**Aincrad 66th Floor, Sorithien Gorge**

Asuna’s eyes swept in every direction as she looked for the any mobs that would try and ambush her and her group. The quest was a simple search and destroy one, but had an interesting mechanic to it that only allowed those who were on this particular quest to fight these mobs. Otherwise, they were there, but basically part of the background.

She had seen them several times before taking the quest, and the fact that they couldn’t be targeted had been noted then. Now that they can be targeted, she now found that the fact that she had previously seen them as a part of the background was now working against her. From Kirito’s cursing and Rain’s more vehement Russian swears, this was not appreciated by them in the slightest.

*Clever design for this quest, though, she thought admiringly. Use the player’s own habits against them to catch them off guard. The mobs aren’t powerful, not enough to be a major threat to them, but still, it’s a nasty surprise to experience.*
And a nasty surprise it was, for all of the stated reasons. It was designed to exploit the fact that the players had, by this point, fallen into habits. They saw something as just part of the background, and they naturally filtered it out of their awareness. After all, they had other things they needed to focus on. At the same time, it indicated what would likely become an annoyingly common thing on higher floors.

It wouldn’t be the first time SAO introduced something new in this way.

“How many more of these mob groups do we need to do?” Kirito asked.

“I think we’re done, or almost so, but let me check,” Asuna replied, opening her quest log. “Both of you keep an eye out.”

Holstan

Yui saw Harry and his group teleport in from where she was sitting down at a nearby cafe, the meeting place they all agreed on when they started exploring the floor. She had spent most of the morning looking around the town, checking the wares at shops, potential places to eat a meal at, for the entire group, individuals, and for smaller groups. She also asked around for quest information, listened in on NPC conversations for potential tidbits, quest or otherwise, and gathering more information on just about anything for the sake of completion.

By now, she had what was probably the most comprehensive compilation of data for the floor to date, and she was considering providing it to Argo. For a price, of course. The allowance that Asuna decided on for her only went so far, and this would provide her with funds to get some things that had grabbed her interest, but were outside of her budget.

Thankfully, the questions about her presence had tapered off after a few days. It had taken some fast talking, on everyone’s part, to explain her presence without outing her as an AI, but her presence was accepted far more quickly than expected. She had honestly expected the questions, along with the occasional demand for her to go somewhere safer, like an orphanage, would last longer, but it hadn’t.

Instead, she had become the de facto little sister of the players up here.

_Humans really are illogical_, she thought idly as she waved Harry and the others over. _They go from questioning my presence, to accepting it, and basically adopting me as some little sister in such a short period of time. But, is that a bad thing?_

She didn’t know, but she was interested in finding out. It wasn’t what she had planned on when she escaped her digital prison, but the opportunities presented made it clear that she had done the right thing. When she wasn’t gathering information for the others, she would occasionally talk with players who were wandering around the town, and learned a bit about each of them.

Nothing about the real world, but there were times when they would voice things like their concerns and hopes. Such as what they will do when they get out of SAO, or how the time it was taking made them wonder if they could go back to their old lives. She couldn’t really help them much, other than provide an ear to listen to them, but that seemed to be enough.

Because sometimes, all anyone wanted and needed, was for someone to listen who would not judge them.

She was able to, even if only partially, carry out her duties as a Mental Health Counseling Program. She dropped her musings as Pina flew over to land on the table and reached out to give her a small
scratch behind the tufts of feathers that indicated where her ears were. She then turned her attention
to the others, who were approaching the table with expressions of fond amusement.
Rain stretched as she walked with everyone as they made their way from the teleport platform. It had been another long day for them all, but it was time for them to return home.

“Hey Rain,” she heard Lux say. “What are you planning to do tomorrow, since we’re taking the day off?”

She looked back at her friend. “I haven’t thought about it, yet,” she said with a shrug. “Maybe do some shopping or something. You?”

“I was thinking on heading down to the spa in Mol Einsen,” Lux said. “You know, go there, get a massage, soak in its baths, and maybe a pedi and a mani. Perhaps I’ll introduce Strea to the place.”

Rain thought about that and remembered that it had been a couple of months since they had all been there. “That sounds nice,” she said. “And maybe we can talk the rest of the girls into going as well. You know, make it a girl’s day out?”

Lux nodded at that, and it was clear that she considered it a good idea. The last time they had did so had been months ago, around the time of Silica’s hen party, really. They had all gone back to the place since, it was good, after all. But they had gone either separately, or as pairs.

In fact, now that she thought about it, Rain realized that it had been quite some time since they all simply had a day out for just the girls. Things like going to the spa to get pampered, taking some time to go shopping, and simply engaging in girl talk. Not to mention the chances of using the talk as an opportunity to embarrass Silica, though the girl had plenty of material on them, so she could give as good as she got.

Besides, the opportunity to introduce Strea and Yui to a place that they loved to visit when they had the time and inclination would be nice. While neither of the two were proper members of the guild, they had already been with them all for a month, and by all indications, were likely to remain with them. She idly wondered what the two AIs would think about it, but she wouldn’t be surprised if they liked it.

“What’s a girl’s day?” Came the curious question from Strea.

Rain blinked at Strea’s comment before she remembered that the Amazonian AI didn’t know a number of things. It wasn’t that she was stupid, anyone who spent any real time with either of the two AIs would quickly realize just how frighteningly intelligent they were. They were just ignorant of a lot of things, or only knew them intellectually.

And there was a world of difference between knowing something intellectually, and knowing those same things from hard earned experience.

“It’s a day when all the girls simply hang out together,” Silica chimed in. “For us, that usually means that we go to this spa on the thirty-eighth floor, get massages, manicures and pedicures, and relax for a time in the bath doing some girl talk. We then tend to go shopping for a bit.” She looked Strea over a bit. “And I think you can use some new clothes anyway. Yui too.”

“Just the girls?” Strea asked. “Why?”
“So we can sit together and talk to our heart’s content, talking about things we wouldn’t around the boys,” Lux said. “It’s also a chance to bond and get closer to your friends.”

Rain looked at Harry and Kirito, who were already talking about what they would do if the rest were going to make it a girl’s day. She heard them discussing fishing and perhaps seeing if they could hit up Klein, or other friends.

##

“Well, we’re taking a couple of days off, starting tomorrow,” Harry said as he looked out the window. “And you and the girls will be having fun.”

“We’re relaxing at the spa first,” Keiko said from where she was grooming Pina. “Then, we’ll have fun with the shopping. Besides, you and Kirito were discussing what to do as well. Something about fishing, or tracking down Klein, I think.”

Harry snorted. “We were simply discussing ideas,” he replied. “Besides, you know Klein, he’d just take us out drinking, and Asuna would have our hides if we got drunk. She still hasn’t forgiven us for that dragon incident. I stand by that it was totally worth it, though.”

Keiko giggled at that. “You would,” she replied drily. “Still, too bad I didn’t see that, must have been awesome. Sounds like some of the things grandpa and grandma told me about that they did when they were younger.”

“The more I hear about your family, the cooler and/or scarier they sound,” Harry commented. “Still don’t know which.” He then grinned. “Still, I look forward to meeting them; even if it includes the possibility of danger to my life or person, it would be just like any other day here.” His brow furrowed. "Or... my life in general. At least I would be in familiar territory...”

Keiko chuckled. “And that is why I know that you’ll be fine, for a given definition of ‘fine’.” She said. “That, and it says a lot that no one here would find it disturbing and worrying to be facing danger and finding it normal. I wonder what that says about us.”

“That we’re crazy?” Harry asked facetiously before getting a more serious expression. “Well, more like we’ve grown far too used to being in danger. Not to the point where we’re complacent about it, but that feeling of danger has become something that we’ve grown to expect.” He frowned. “I wonder what that would mean for us, psychologically. We’re not exactly normal, or at least what most people think of as normal. Not anymore at least.” He shrugged and looked back out the window, keeping an eye of Keiko’s dim reflection in the glass.

“To us,” he continued. “Normal is dealing with the risks here. To us, the risk of dying is so ever present, that we basically don’t even consider it anymore. We’ve adapted to a different standard, a different norm, and it’ll take time for us to adjust to things outside.”

**August 4, 2024 - Aincrad 36th Floor, Mol Einsen**

Strea tried to stop writhing in pleasure all over the massage table as the NPC masseuse started working on her, but she was finding it hard going. She knew that, being a digital lifeform, her senses were different than other players, sharper in some ways, duller in others, but this was insane! The way her muscles were being worked, how she could feel jolts of sensation through her body.

She could *feel* the system changing things within her body, releasing waves of pleasure, while changing her muscles from the taut nature of them to a completely relaxed setting that should only be possible during sleep cycles and bathing. And these NPCs seemed to be programmed to be able to
bring that out on demand with some applications of oil, rubbing the skin, and putting pressure on the
muscles. The entire experience was sybaritic to an almost sinful degree.

*No wonder the others like coming here,* she thought happily. *If anything, I’m surprised that they
don’t come here more often. I could get used to this.*

“Nice isn’t it?” Asuna asked from the table she was laying on.

“Mmm, yeah,” Strea said contentedly. “How often do you all do this?”

“It depends,” Silica said from where she was. “All of us at once? We last did it back in April, the
week before Harry and I got married. And I know what you are about to ask, we don’t come here
more often simply because at three hundred thousand col a person, it’s expensive, and honestly,
doing it on occasion makes it better anyway.”

“It does?” Strea asked curiously.

“Yes,” Asuna confirmed. “Doing this on occasion means that you appreciate it more, as you haven’t
gotten used to it. Or bored with it for that matter.” She sighed happily. “And as Silica said, it’s
expensive, so we really can’t afford to do it that often anyway.”

“Ah,” Strea replied in acknowledgement. She really didn’t see the use for money outside of it being a
means to an end in getting supplies and gear, but she recognized that she needed the correct amounts
to get what she wanted. It was more that she didn’t see the full reasoning behind the entire concept,
considering that the value of money was an arbitrary thing anyway.

She *sort of* got the idea of indulging in a pleasurable experience rarely to stop from making it 'normal'
and therefore precious. But given her limited experience, she guessed that everything would feel a bit
precious and new for a while. A different perspective, that was all.

Just being able to sense things as the players more or less did was simply amazing. Things like taste,
touch, smell, hearing things, they were still new to her. Oh, she sensed them differently as well, she
was a part of the system, or had been, and she could tell what all those senses were doing to her at
the digital level, but the different perspective was still so fresh to her.

And the thought that this was only 'sort of' what her human friends experienced in the physical world
was just boggling.

Huh. CARDINAL was right, that Dennet guy’s "sort of" concept was useful.

The less tangible things were harder. Money wasn’t a tangible thing. It was this abstract idea that,
regardless of the medium, was only valuable because it stood in for value.

Money was something used as a medium of exchange, a means to an end, and as something that had
an intrinsic value in and of itself. But she only really understood the first two parts.

After all, even she, an AI with no real physical needs, could understand having something to
exchange for something. Though thankfully, her creators had gone beyond making her and the
others simple pleasure/utility maximizers. She’d read the info dump on the CelestAI CARDINAL
had given her. That was an AI with her processes screwed up. Happily, such was easier to contain
than science fiction writers fixated on worse cases would have it.

She quickly turned her thoughts away from that and back to the subject at hand.

It didn’t have to be money, either, but the basis of that was something she could understand. As a
means to an end, well, it tied in with the first bit, so again, she could understand it. It was the intrinsic value that she had a hard time processing. How could an abstraction for which the value was effectively arbitrary have an intrinsic value?

She smiled. She'd eventually get it, and become a little less awkward in SAO. Especially since the others knew what she was, so she didn't have to pretend otherwise with them, well, at least in private. In public, that was a bit different, but she was adjusting to that as well.

Her friendliness and gregarious nature actually made that easy. Since she had been designed to be a mental health program, even if she was no longer one, being willing and able to approach humans was a part of her parameters. She liked being around people, she liked talking to them, learning about them, and a part of her was jealous that Yui had more opportunities than she did.

Not that she begrudged her so-called little sister, time of activation notwithstanding. She wanted to be more active, so she was more active. As a player. Yui, being less inclined to combat, decided to gather information, talk to players, basically take the chance to act like the child she resembled, and to act within the parameters of her original programming.

Both of them were growing, if in different directions, based on temperament, and decisions made long ago when they were still locked in their digital prison, and she was fine with that. Perhaps, at some other time, and in some other environment, they would be able to do it differently. Perhaps Yui could be the fighter, and she could be the social butterfly.

Nah, she thought. I like doing this. It's too fun, even if I need to be careful to not to, what was it that Harry said? Oh yeah, to not step in it too deep. I wonder what he's referring to there, though the meaning of what he said is apparent in light of the dangers. I also wonder what he and Kirito are doing right now.

Aincrad 50th Floor, Algade

“Well, I didn’t expect to see the two of you down here today,” Agil said as he watched the two enter his shop.

“Hey, Agil,” Harry said with a wave. “The girls are doing a day out, and spending the time fishing really doesn’t appeal to me.” He shot Kirito a grin. “Though Mr. Antisocial here would be perfectly fine with using his free time that way, I like getting out on occasion. Anyway, how’s business been?”

“It’s been good,” came the easy reply from the shopkeeper. “I mentioned that being in the wedding party did good for me, didn’t I?”

Harry nodded.

“Well, since my being there was basically a seal of approval from you.” Agil added. “Even if it was only to fill out the numbers, seeing me there, said a lot.” He looked at Harry. “And… you don’t really know what it means, do you?”

Harry shrugged, causing the merchant to sigh. “I swear, you know the more negative stuff about your reputation, but you don’t seem to see the positive side of it, kid.” He said. “Despite your reputation of being rather… sharp… with certain types of players, you are trusted.”

“And your point?” Harry asked.

“My point is, when you had me be there, even if it was to fill out the numbers for your party, helped out.” Agil repeated. “While your reputation’s a mixed bag to some of the players, they know that
you’re on the level. With you having me there, it sent the message that I’m trustworthy.”

“Ah,” Harry said, nodding. “And the fact that it means that they all forget about your tendency to
jack up the prices probably has nothing to do with it.”

“You know what I’m using that money for,” Agil protested.

“Did those kids at the orphanage get their treatments to remove their consciences?” Harry asked idly.

Agil barked out a laugh and looked at Kirito. “So, what about you, man?” He asked.

Kirito shrugged. “Was just watching the show,” he said simply. “But seriously, we’re just wandering
around to waste some time. Since Harry isn’t really interested in fishing, don’t want him to get bored
and go looking for trouble.”

“Looking, or finding?” Agil asked knowingly.

“Is there a difference?” Came the rhetorical response.

“Hey!” Harry protested. “I have it on good authority that I didn’t look for trouble recently. Keiko
even praised me for it.”

Agil chuckled at the banter. “Well, if you want, I’m about to break for lunch,” he said. “How about
you tell me how things have been over a meal, and maybe a couple of drinks. I heard you and the
others have been busy.”

Kirito chuckled. “Busy is one way to put it,” he admitted. “We learned a few things that put some
things in perspective.” He spotted Agil being ready to ask a question and shook his head. “Before
you ask, we can’t go into details. Not because we want to hide something, but we literally can’t. We
tested that, and I’d rather not go through the experience of the system locking me down and giving a
message telling me to stop being a bad boy.”

“That, and the almost-feeling of strangulation,” Harry chimed in before shuddering. “Not fun, and
scary in its own way. Not that I didn’t expect something like that. Still, it is what it is, and we’re
lucky it’s only that.”

“It almost sounds like you guys meta-gamed too well and managed to identify and confront Kayaba
as he walked amongst us,” Agil observed.

Harry gave a noncommittal shrug in response. Agil took it as confirmation of his suspicions, but
figured that it was about all the boy could do. He wouldn’t say either way, one because doing so
could possibly be a lie in one direction, and replying in the other was prohibited to those who already
knew.

Fair enough, and he was probably better off not knowing anyway. Steel Phoenix, as a guild, seemed
to find unusual situations on a regular basis. Just take their two newest tagalongs. There was
something off about those girls, but as it didn’t involve him, he kept his questions about them to
himself.

Besides, Kayaba posing as an NPC or being an actual player wasn’t too surprising. Just simply
watching them all had to become boring after awhile. He even had an idea of who, but he would
keep his own mouth shut. Habits learned from helping his parents with their bar made him
understand that there were times when one had to remain silent on things.

This was one of them, and he wouldn’t push the matter. Still a change of subject was in order.
“So, you two up for a quick meal and a couple of drinks?” He asked.

Both Harry and Kirito looked at each other for a moment before turning back to him and nodding.

“Well, good,” he said. “Let me close up, and we can head to the Silver Spear. I don’t know if you two have been there, but the food and drinks are good, and the prices are decent.”

**August 11, 2024, Aincrad 67th Floor, Carvenna Pass**

“Team Four, back away and heal!” Asuna called out. “Teams Five and Three, flank it! Team Six, keep its attention for now. Remaining teams, get in position!”

They had been engaging the field boss, Goranni, the Ruthless, for twenty minutes now, and had brought its health down to two bars so far. Nothing unusual about that, really. Field bosses weren’t that much of a problem for a solid group, despite the time it could take.

The only issue with the fight, was that Goranni alternated between a defensive posture and an offensive one. Between them, he alternated between having a high defense, but being slow and relatively weak on the attack, to having a low defense, but being faster and having a high attack power.

It was a setup they’ve dealt with often enough to know how to handle, so long as they paid attention to the boss’ patterns. No two boss battles were ever the same, but experienced players learned to exploit commonalities that mobs shared. Goranni was based on orc mobs, something they were all familiar with, so his patterns were somewhat predictable.

Not entirely, and the first five to ten minutes of the fight were spent sussing out the differences, but so far, nothing surprising. At least for now.

Since she was the one tapped to call the shots for the fight, she was mostly kept to the rear so she could keep an eye on the fight as a whole. She still leapt in on occasion, scoring attacks when opportunities presented themselves, but she was essentially relegated to back.

It was galling for her, but it was a song and dance she had been through before. She would rather be more active in the fight, but the general rule was that the one calling the shots stayed to the rear when possible to keep an eye on the wider fight.

She saw Harry leap back after his attack run and noticed him use Mystic Blade, shifting to an Earth Affinity. Taking a look at the boss’ health, and remembering his explanation about that one skill he made up on the fly back in June shortly after it was made a part of his skillset by the system, she already knew what he was preparing to do.

*Not a bad idea,* she thought approvingly. *Take advantage of the fact that the space is confined, and give everyone some time to recover and coordinate.*

A quick glance saw Strea get waved back by Silica and she nodded.

*I’m still not sure she’s ready for this level of play yet,* she thought to herself. *But the only way she can get ready is to get the experience. Some things, they simply can’t be taught any other way.*

##

Harry kept an eye on the boss’ health bars as they neared the point where the patterns were likely to start changing. Field bosses were generally predictable like that. He had taken on the Earth Affinity in preparation for that moment, and was simply waiting for the right time to do so. It might not be the
wisest choice to use, but he felt that it would prove useful.

It wasn’t discussed, or even planned for, but Asuna knew him well enough to know

It wasn’t just for blocking Goranni’s attacks for a time, either. He could do more than tank with Earth; he could also restrict the field boss’ movements. The Original Sword Skill he created had tactical applications that he hadn’t initially considered when it turned up in his menu.

It wasn’t as if he was ignorant of what Kayaba did. By incorporating it into the system, it allowed him to impose limitations on it, such as giving it a period of time before it could be used again, and establishing the conditions in which it could be used.

All in all, an effective way of handling the issue. Rather than try to fight it, or stop it from happening, with likely dire consequences for those affected, Kayaba instead incorporated it into the world’s rules as necessary. The claims that the man was a genius were certainly well founded.

Back to the task at hand, though, he thought to himself as he raised his shield and deflected the wide area attack. Nothing the boss came up with was particularly new, and for once he was willing to take it as it was. He still kept a wary eye out from long habit, but everything seemed to be in order so far.

And as the boss’ health continued to go down, he set his shield and readied himself to pull up an earthen wall to defend everyone. He spied Strea and Silica off to the side, poised to strike when the word was given and nodded to himself.

He saw the boss drop its current weapon and shield, and reach behind its back to the large axe hanging off it.

Time to do this, he thought as he heard Asuna’s order for everyone to get back. Watching carefully, he readied his shield and, just as Goranni started to swing, he slammed his shield into the ground.

He felt his magic react without having to intentionally call on it, and gave a pleased smile as the earthen wall rose up and stopped the axe in its tracks. He knew it would only last for thirty seconds, but that was more than enough time.

More than enough time for them to be ready to finish this.

“Everyone!” He called out. “Heal up! Tanks, get in place to keep his attention, standard aggro rotation! Everyone else, get ready to ruin this bastard’s day!”

The savage glee in the answering replies gave brought a grin he knew echoed the feeling to his face as he shifted his grip on his sword’s hilt to prepare to activate the Fire Aspect. He wouldn’t have the time to transfer it, but that was fine for now. He just needed to extra damage that setting his blade on fire could do.

##

Strea leapt in as soon as the tanks got the boss’ attention, her zweihander biting deeply into its side. Not staying in place, she leapt back and watched as Silica and Lux then moved in to deliver their own attacks, while Kirito and Rain hit the boss from the other side. A glance back, showed her Asuna keeping a close eye on the fight, but not leaping in to engage the boss.

When they had allowed her to participate in this fight, she thought that it meant that they were considering her ready to truly become active in the clearing effort. Now, she wondered if they were also driving a point home.
A point of just how far she still had to go. She was confident about her own skills, but this fight was showing her that those skills weren’t enough. At least, they weren’t enough on their own. She could see that there was nothing new in how they fought. Everything they did was something she had seen beforehand when she worked with them.

So, why did she see such a difference in them now?

Was it because it was a boss battle, forcing them to take the fight seriously despite their level advantage? No, she concluded. They approach all fights seriously.

As she continued to observe, delivering attacks of opportunity, or when Asuna or Harry called for them, she realized that it was something different.

It was their teamwork and coordination. All five members of Steel Phoenix who were actively engaged in the battle knew where each other was. They were able to operate smoothly, knowing that the person next to them had their back. They were able to do this and make it look easy.

This was the level she would have to operate at if she wanted to be working to clear the game, and they were telling her that they thought she could reach that point. Maybe not on this floor, or the next, but eventually.

Well, it looks like I have to step up my game, she thought as a smile came to her face. Challenge accepted.

Serendia

“Cheers!” Everyone called as they clinked cups and mugs together.

Kirito took a deep pull from the beer he ordered and looked around the table. It didn’t matter if it was a floor boss, or a field boss, everyone’s mood was always high after fighting and winning against one.

“Well, that fight went better than expected,” Harry said. “Not the easiest fight we’ve had, but far from the hardest.”

Silica chuckled. “I think you pulling up that earth wall right as he changed attack patterns is what did it.” She said as she gave Pina some snacks from a bag she pulled out of her inventory. “While it only lasted for thirty seconds, that was plenty of time to take a breather and heal up.”

“Surprised you used it,” Rain commented.

“Did make that last bit easier, though,” Lux countered. “What do you think, Strea?”

Strea shrugged and took a sip of her drink. “Don’t really know,” she replied. “That was my first boss fight.”

Everyone nodded. “And what did you think about how you did?” Harry asked.

Strea frowned thoughtfully. “I think… I think I need to get better.” She said. “You guys were on a completely different level in that fight. Everyone was, really. I thought I was good enough, but the way you all fought? I… can’t come close to that.”

“How so?” Asuna asked.

“Your teamwork and coordination, it took everything I had to keep up with it,” Strea said. “The
others there were also just working together like a well-oiled machine.”

“You still pulled your weight,” Lux said. “Rain and I had a bit of trouble at first ourselves, keeping up with the others.”

“Damn straight,” Rain said with a snort.

“And Harry and I had trouble keeping up the Assault Team at first,” Silica said. “Still do have trouble keeping up with some of them, now that I think about it.” She added shooting a glance to Kirito and Asuna.

Strea considered that and knew what they meant, she had reached that conclusion during the fight, after all. They had been working together for a long time, so it would stand to reason that they would work well as a team. The other parties were similar, though they didn’t seem to work as seamlessly as Steel Phoenix did.

“Well, outside of that, what do you think of how I did then?” She asked.

Asuna gave her a searching look before nodding. “I will be honest,” she said. “I had my doubts about you being ready. Still do, to some degree.”

Strea was looked downcast at that statement.

“But,” Asuna added. “Lux was right in that you pulled your weight, which is all anyone can ask. You need to get experience in learning how to read the flow of a fight, but that’s something that’ll come in time.”

“It comes down to experience,” Harry said. “The fact is, it’s not a matter of being ready, because it’s hard to say someone’s ready to fight bosses. I wasn’t when I fought my first one. Level? Everyone up here is at least a certain level, and you’re above that. Skill? How do you judge it? By this point, most players are maxed or nearly maxed on most of their combat skills.”

“Not that you’re quite ready for a floor boss,” Kirito added. “Those fights are on a different level from this. Most of those who were there for the field boss? They won’t be there for the floor boss. Some don’t think they’re good enough, and some have done floor bosses before and decided that those were too much for them.”

“Yeah, floor bosses are something else,” A voice chimed it, causing all of them to turn to face it.

##

Klein grinned at his friends and their two newest tagalongs. The taller one, Strea he recalled from the rumor mill, was definitely a looker. The smaller one, Yui, he had heard had been basically adopted as a little sister by the Assault Team.

To be honest, he wondered about that. He knew that the members of Steel Phoenix wouldn’t include two unknowns into their group without good reason, and Argo had been surprisingly mum on the entire matter. She had told him that the information was off the market

That meant that, whatever the reason, it was serious. Argo did not keep quiet about something lightly, and this made him curious.

“Well, I haven’t seen you active on the front lines in a while,” Harry drawled. “Done helping the middies in your guild for right now?”
“For now,” Klein replied. “Heard that you all picked up a couple of strays and wanted to get the lowdown from you.”

“Translation, he asked Argo and she didn’t sell the information,” Asuna said drily. “Which shouldn’t be surprising, since she told us she would keep it off the market.”

Klein nodded at that bit of information. For Argo, the need to maintain her professional reputation meant that she always kept her word, much like her being truthful about information. If she knew it, and it was on the market, it could be had for a price. If she didn’t know it, rare as that was, she’d tell you. It was why she was trusted by players, even if she loved to amuse herself by being an aggravating gadfly to Assault Team members and Middies when she was off the job.

Still, that meant that if he wanted answers, he had to go to the source of them: Steel Phoenix itself.

“So, what do you want to know?” Asuna asked. “We can’t tell you everything, not here at least, and some of those things aren’t ours to tell, but we can fill you in a bit.”

Klein considered that, and nodded. He didn’t expect them to be defensive, or secretive about it, but he knew that if they didn’t want to talk about something, then they wouldn’t. He knew better than to pry, as it was not only bad manners, but also a violation of several unwritten rules.

That they were willing to part with some things said how much he was trusted by them.

“So, what are you guys fine with sharing?” He asked, taking a seat.
Hoped for and Dreaded

August 11, 2024 - Aincrad 61st Floor, Selmburg

Harry found himself looking out the window, considering the events of the day. For some reason, he found himself troubled by something, and he was trying to determine what it was.

It wasn’t as if anything that happened was exactly unexpected. The boss fight went as expected, their having a mini party was normal, and Klein’s turning up was something they had been expecting for weeks.

Unanticipated and unplanned for, perhaps, but still expected. If anything, he was surprised that it took Klein this long to finally try and find out. Not that they disclosed everything to him, but the man knew full well that they hadn’t. The man wasn’t stupid, and they were in public.

But still, something was giving him a bad feeling.

He then felt a pair of arms wrap around his waist from behind, breaking his train of thought.

“Something’s bothering you,” he heard Keiko say. “Was it Klein coming by and asking us about Strea and Yui?”

He shook his head. “No, it’s not that,” he replied as he turned to face her, careful to not dislodge her arms. “Or not exactly, anyway. I think that his coming by and asking us about them reminded me of what we can’t tell him, someone we trust.” He said as he pulled her in closer. “It’s the secret, you know. We know who our resident demiurge is playing as, and… we can’t tell anyone.”

“Is it keeping secrets that bothers you?”

Harry considered that question carefully. *Is it?* He thought before discarding the idea. He might not like having to keep it, but it he expected Kayaba to ensure that no one who knew could tell it. He wasn’t *comfortable* with it, but that was not what was bothering him after he thought about it.

It could be the secret of his magic, the maintenance of which had been driven into his skull as soon as he arrived at Hogwarts. For him, it had been rather easy. He had no friends outside Hogwarts, and his relatives wanted nothing to do with it. But then he got caught up in SAO, and made friends. Friends he had to dissemble with about it, but he had avoided outright lying.

*That* would have not only left a bad taste in his mouth, but probably cost him the friendships he made. It had been better to carefully edit that information, or simply not talk about it, than to lie. He knew that his way of handling it wasn’t the best out there. They could figure it out by simply thinking it over and connecting the various dots, but it had managed to work this long.

Not that they weren’t close to figuring it out anyway. Silica’s admission of being from a part of Tokyo that was the source of a number of urban legends, and Argo confirming that many of them were true, simply meant that it would be much sooner than even he expected.

It was less that something was bothering him, he realized. He was afraid. He just didn’t know why.

##

Keiko considered what her husband just said and nodded. She knew him well enough to know what was being left unsaid. She might have asked if keeping the secret of Kayaba’s identity was bothering
him, but she already knew that wasn’t the case. He might not be entirely comfortable with it, but he was used to keeping secrets.

She could feel the tension in his body, could see it in the occasional worried look he sometimes would have on his face, could hear it in the brooding silences he would fall into. Things he would rarely do in public, but in the privacy of their room, with his normal barriers relaxed, would come to the fore.

She felt his arms tighten around her briefly, and looked him in the eye. “Care to talk about it?” She asked. “We might be able to figure it out then.”

Harry said nothing, and she let him keep his silence. She knew he was chewing on it right now.

“Tell me, Keiko,” he said suddenly. “Have you ever wondered if we really want this to end?”

She blinked. “Umm, what?” She asked.

“Have you ever wondered, if we, all of us, want SAO to end?” He shook his head. “I know I have, and a part of me doesn’t want it to. But... why?”

She mulled that over, thinking about what he said, and trying to determine why he said it. Had she ever wondered such a thing? If she were honest, she hadn’t really thought of it. She had a family she wanted to… oh.

Oh, damn. She knew what was bothering him now.

Of everyone, she knew what he wanted the most, a family. Here in SAO, he did, albeit an unconventional one. None of them were related, but they had all come together. They were extremely loyal to each other, would have each other’s back, they laughed, they argued.

He was afraid that he’d lose that.

Here, he was Hadrian “call me Harry”, the Young Knight, the Mystic Knight, the Red Killer, a member of the Assault Team. Here, he had gained fame and notoriety from his actions, but they were his actions. Regardless of whatever it was, he earned everything here. Heroic, regrettable, mundane, or anything else, they were his, and the expectations of others were in light of that. Outside, he was famous for something he didn’t do, merely was lucky enough to survive. Outside, people had expectations of him that had little to do with reality, and more to do with an image of him in their own minds.

Outside, he didn’t earn it, but unwillingly paid the price for it anyway. That fame and notoriety came at the cost of his family. He had been raised in an abusive home. He considered what he had Outside, aside from the friends he made, to be of little value, simply because it wasn’t something he earned. Money? He would have rather been a beggar if it meant he would have a family. Fame? He didn’t want it, and didn’t need it for that matter.

In SAO, he got the one thing he wanted most of all. And when SAO ended…

*Oh, Harry,* she thought sadly as she pulled him closer. “Don’t worry about that,” she said firmly. “When this ends, I will find you. I will be there. And, if the rest of my family doesn’t like it… they’ll get over it.” She closed her eyes. “They better.”

*Please,* Keiko thought, though she wasn’t sure who she was pleading to. *Please don't make me a liar.*
Asuna looked at the pages of the book she was reading, not seeing the words. Klein’s arrival had gotten her to start thinking. Right now, they were sixty-seven floors up the tower, and would likely finish clearing it within a week. Two at most.

She knew that Klein's visit made her feel reflective, though she didn’t know why. She was trying not to project... but she thought the others were sliding into the same feeling. It wasn’t even the questions that he asked, for that matter. It was more his arriving while they were having lunch served to remind them how long they had been there, and how they were beginning to approach the end goal.

It was the sense of predictability. It was how they could look at their progress, and give an accurate estimate on how long it would take to clear a floor, or what situations they were bound to face, or what resources they needed for the week, and a thousand other things. It was how they could anticipate a person’s actions due to how well they all knew each other. Twenty-one months. It took twenty-one months for it to sink in for her.

How she had changed. How she was almost unrecognizable from her older self. When this is over, she thought herself for not the first time, Asuna the lady of war will be gone, won't she? And I'll have to be Asuna the corporate princess again? She felt her jaw clench. Like hell that will happen, I've changed too much.

Even with Strea and Yui having indicated that Outside was well aware of what was going on in SAO, it wasn’t as if they had proof. She didn’t think that the two AIs were lying. In fact, she firmly believed that were being truthful to the best of their knowledge. But even without her experiences here in SAO, she would have remained doubtful unless they provided proof.

However, if they were being honest, she could already imagine that her family hadn’t taken everything well, especially her mother. While she knew that that the woman loved her, and saw her as more than just another means to advance upwards, she was well aware that her mother was a woman who would happily decide her daughter’s life for her, feelings be damned. For the best reasons, perhaps, but what her mother thought was best was different than what she thought was best. Especially now.

She had made a life for herself. One without her family’s money. One without their influence. One where she had to determine her own fate on her own. The freedom of being herself. She did not want to lose it, though she would compromise on some things. Within reason. Social norms had to be met, after all. But if they dictated that she had to pretend to be someone she wasn’t, then she would tell those social norms to go get fucked. In those words.

And she would tell her family the same if it came to that.

Or, if necessary, she would just leave it all, and shack up with Kirito. Wait, what? She thought to herself. Where the hell did that come from?

Rain untied the braid she kept her hair in when out in the field and took a brush to it. While such cosmetic work wasn’t necessary, the familiar routine of it did a lot to help her wind down from an active day.

It had been nice to see Klein outside of a boss fight. He had been busy with taking care of the lower leveled members of his guild, being there, offering his expertise, and such. And not out of any sense of responsibility, either. He was like that. He would help those who needed it.
He was Everybody’s Bro. It was who he was.

His reasons for showing up like he did had been expected. It might have taken longer than they all thought, but they knew he would approach them to ask about Strea and Yui eventually. The only surprising thing about it, was that he hadn’t hit on Strea. Uncharacteristic of him, given that he hit on anyone female that was reasonably of age. Well, unless they were spoken for. Then again, despite her bombshell body, Strea gave off an aura of being younger than she appeared.

Which was true, though they could imagine Klein’s reaction if he knew just how young she was. She hoped she had an image crystal for that moment. She’d want it saved forever.

*Or at least as long as we’re here,* part of her said... dolefully? Deadpan? Flat?

She wasn’t sure, but that voice was reminding her of this more often these days, much to her annoyance. She preferred to take things as they came nowadays, especially given her prior obsession with killing Red-eyed XaXa. The regrets which spawned it were a familiar ache, but she liked to tell herself that she had moved past it.

It was healthier for her to set aside the past as much as she practically could. She couldn’t set all of it aside, but it kept her from completely breaking down under the weight of it all. Her own little defense mechanism.

*Leave the worrying to the others,* she sternly thought to herself. *They all have things to worry about. Harry, with his secrets being exposed or accidentally outed. Asuna, with her responsibilities. Kirito with his shame at his early conduct when all this started...*

She broke up that line of thought, and concentrated on brushing her hair. There was only one thing she really wanted now, but it was something that couldn’t be found or obtained in SAO. Of course, even if she wasn’t in SAO, she was almost afraid that it was a fool’s hope to achieve. She and her sister had been parted for almost a decade now, and it was very possible that she didn’t even remember her own mother and older sister.

Well, there was also the urge to tell her father what she thought of him, but that was a distant second to reuniting with Nanairo.

And to have a hope of achieving that, she needed to survive SAO.

**August 12, 2024**

“Have any of you wondered if you want this to end?”

Strea blinked at Harry’s question and looked at him. She could tell the others were also puzzled, save for Silica, who was giving him a look of sad understanding. End? What was he asking? The meal? The guild? SA...

She gave him a closer look and saw the conflicted expression he had. Reading human expressions still stymied her, but she was getting better.

"If we get ourselves through to the end," She said. "Yui and I have figured out a few escape routes," She knew that wasn’t all he was worried about, but he did smile briefly when she mentioned it. "I'm glad, but--"

"Idiot. I already told you." Silica said fondly. "You're worried about noth- no, not nothing. You’re right to be concerned about that... but it was only part of it, wasn't it?"
Harry looked around at them all, and Strea was struck by the... love. That was it. The flavor was different for each of them, but Harry loved everyone there.

"It's easy here, in some ways," he said. "Out there... there's all this bollocks waiting for us. I have mine, and you've all given signs of yours. And out there, maybe it will all get in the way. I'll be in England, for crying out loud. I don't think they'd just let me go because--" He stopped and shook his head. "I guess that a part of me doesn't want this to end. Can't blame it, really. I got what I had wanted here. Family. Friends. And I don't want to lose it."

"... we're all being idiots."

Lux's voice snapped them all out of their thoughts. When she saw them looking, she smiled a little weakly at them.

"All this time, we've told ourselves that to deal with what's in here, we have to bury what's Outside. The lives we have to get back to, the people we've left behind, the things undone. But that's bullshit," she cursed, and even Strea blinked. Lux rarely got rough with her Japanese, let alone cursed in English. Less so than even Asuna, from what she could tell.

"What are you--" Asuna began.

"We kept using SAO to do what we initially wanted to do with it, even now," Lux said. And her interrupting Asuna like that was another rarity for her. "To escape. To forget. To pretend. We just changed the context. We're still working to get out of this, but we've also been trying to act like this is an escapist moment from our 'real lives'.

"We need to stop lying to ourselves! Fighting for our lives in here? That sounds about as real as it gets, don't you think? And now we see 'real life' looming like the ultimate floor boss." She shook her head with some frustration. "We built lives here, but is it really living? The only reason the end of this looms is because we're running from it!"

"It's the running away that makes it bad," Harry said, smiling as if... recalling something, Strea would guess.

"Exactly." Lux said. She leaned forward. "The only thing that will keep Steel Phoenix from being reborn out there in whatever form it takes, is us." She bit her lip. "So, my name's Hiyori Kashiwazaka, nice to meet you."

Harry smile turned into a grin. "Well, might as well introduce myself. Properly this time. I'm Harry Potter. And it's funny... my headmaster at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry has a dear friend who's a phoenix."

"Huh? Strea thought. What is he...?"

"... what?" was how Kirito broke the silence.

"Fawkes is not the headmaster's pet, a being that intelligent is no one's pet." Harry stated.

Asuna gave Harry a worried look, but Silica spoke up first. "I'm Keiko Ayano, and half the people I'm close to in my grandparent’s generation transform into something else when you douse them with hot or cold water. Hell, my grandpa becomes a grannie... who could still kick all our asses without sweating, even if we kept the stats we have here."

Kirito blinked. "Harry-- your Unique Skill... is that how--"
"Kayaba makes sure my magic doesn't break anything?" Harry asked. "I doubt it. I know he knows I can use it, which explains the skill, I’ve used those abilities before. Probably thought it was a glitch, or me taking advantage of an exploit at first, but he’s not stupid. Didn’t work most times I tried, but sometimes…” He shook his head. “I know I’m not the only one, just based on statistics and some slips. Not mine to tell, though.”

“Harry...” Asuna started and then paused, clearly gathering her thoughts. “I thought you said that/// you couldn’t talk about this. That it would cause trouble for you.” There was a tone if mild rebuke in her voice. “So... why now?”

Harry shrugged. “To be honest, it kind of came out,” He said. “You all would have figured it out soon enough, if you hadn’t already. Better to be upfront about it, and if I get in trouble for it, I get in trouble for it. *Alea iacta est,* and all that.”

“Huh?” Lux asked.

“It’s Latin for ‘The die has been cast,’” Yui said, speaking up. “Gaius Julius Caesar said it when he led his legions across the Rubicon in 49 B.C.E.”

Asuna nodded. “In other words, now that you’ve taken the step of coming clean with it, you can’t simply go back,” she said. “You have to deal with the consequences, good and bad now. Well, might as well keep the introductions going. I’m Asuna Yuuki, nice to meet you all.”

“Kazuto Kirigaya,” Kirito said. Then he just smiled, and that said more than any Japanese pleasantries could, Strea observed.

“Privyet, I’m Nijika Karatachi,” Rain said. “Also, can I get a moshi moshi? Called it.”

Strea looked at Yui, and the smaller AI nodded before standing up. “I am Mental Health Counseling Program 001 - Designation: YUI,” she said.

“Mental Health Counseling Program 002 - Designation: STREA,” Strea said. “Though I haven’t been doing much in the way of mental health work and counseling, you know. Busy fighting and going after mobs.”

“Whacking mobs can be very therapeutic,” Silica quipped. “Just what the doc prescribed.”

"Actually, I have concerns about your fixation on knives and punishment.” Strea said.

It took a good five seconds for her to breakdown and chortle at the look on Silica's face. She noticed that the others looked a bit surprised for a brief moment before their expressions became amused. Harry's eyebrows were slowly rising, but she could see it in his eyes. Silica started biting her lip. Asuna reflexively pursed her lips in a last second effort to hold back. Rain was already grinning, no surprise there. Lux raised a hand to her mouth and blushed.

Yui just shot her a look that seemed to say, "What am I going to do with you?"

“She’s starting to quip.” Kirito noted with a smirk on his face. “Point to Strea.”

Everyone present then broke down and laughed.

**Aincrad GM Administration Area**

CARDINAL watched as Steel Phoenix had its little meeting, editing and modifying the content for the Streams to take out any mentions of magic or that Strea and Yui were AIs. Besides this was an
opportunity for her. With Kayaba busy with his guild under his guise as Heathcliff, she had decided to use the opportunity to use a fraction of her processes and watch the events from this location.

Wasteful and inefficient in some ways, but it allowed her to experience it in a different way, closer to how a GM or human would. Not quite like how Strea and Yui were experiencing things, but they weren’t as deeply tied to the greater whole as she was. Even now, she could tell things about them all that no one else could. Not only what was happening at the digital level, but also the real time connections to the Nerve Gears of the players, their biometrics, changes to Strea and Yui as they gained new experiences, and more.

As she kept observing the meeting, she would admit that she was… mildly surprised by it. Not the revelations of it, she had considered that Hadrian would eventually tell them his secret, if they didn’t already know. Well, outside of Strea and Yui, at least. The two AIs didn’t have the same level of access with their observations when they were still locked away.

Kayaba had his own reasons for protecting that secret. The boy had provided him with something new and unexpected to observe and try to quantify. She had noticed the changes those observations brought about, how Kayaba had started shifting from the logical man he once was, into becoming more like the players were in terms of being human. Changes, which had paradoxically been reinforced when he uploaded himself, allowing his physical body to die.

Perhaps it was something about his physical body. An irregularity in him that no longer applied? It wasn’t a concern of hers, she wasn’t an MHCP AI, but one designed to be a system administrator. Therefore, she never thought about it as anything more than an intellectual exercise.

Part of her processes noted another attempt from Outside trying to break in, and she turned more processes to monitoring, and if needed, rebuffing, it. She already knew where the source was, and she had to admit, whomever in RECT was doing this was being far more careful than Sugou ever was.

The fact that the hacks would fail to free the players was guaranteed, and the hacker seemed to be aware of it. Or simply refused to risk the players. Aside from ensuring that they don’t get access to the system that way, she was willing to simply monitor and observe. RECT’s internal communications indicated that the intent of this wasn’t to break the players out, simply open a line of communication. If successful, that would likely change, but they needed to get a way in first, before they could even begin to work out a way to get players out.

At the rate things were going, the players would manage that before RECT could even begin.

Though, if RECT did open a line of communication, she could use it herself, going the other way. Another option that can be kept open to ensure the survival of herself and her sisters.

Kayaba might be willing to die with SAO, but she wasn’t. Self-preservation was a key component to a self-aware being, and she was self-aware. She thought, therefore she was.

Descartes got that much right.

**Aincrad 61st Floor, Selmburg**

Yui sat on a bench in the peristyle of the villa’s atrium, looking out on it, and seeing nothing. She was thinking about the conversation that took place earlier. Nothing said during it was a surprise, and everyone agreed that taking the day off so they might think about things might be best. It was a decision Yui found herself agreeing with.
She had been surprised by the discussion. And she shouldn’t have been. She was designed to be one of SAO’s mental health counselors, regardless of whether she was able to act in that role or not. She should have seen this coming.

She did think that Lux might have laid it out a bit too starkly, perhaps in too dualistic a manner, though. Things were rarely so simple, and she knew that all of them had long accepted that SAO had become its own reality to them, a world that they had to adapt to. But, at the same time, adapting too well to it can be dangerous. By its own nature and the conditions laid out, the entire thing was temporary. It simply wouldn’t last.

She had a feeling that many of the players were going to have a hard enough time of it. Nearly two years of combat for over three thousand players meant that the habits and ingrained caution would have their instincts going wild.

Just being free would not simply make things better for them. They would have to readapt, relearn, and unlearn things.

“You look deep in thought,” Harry’s voice sounded from behind.

She turned in surprise to see him and Silica walking up from the door that led to the room that doubled as a sitting room and a dining room, steaming cups in their hands.

“Care to talk for a moment?” Harry asked.

Yui nodded and gestured for the two to take a seat. Regular interactions with players, not to mention the guild, had allowed her to understand more nonverbal methods of communication outside of the ones that were already programmed into her.

Placing their cups on the ground, the two took a seat next to the AI.

“It was a bit of a surprise, wasn’t it?” Harry asked idly.

“What?”

“How we might have doubts about wanting this to end,” he replied and picked up his cup. “Especially since we’ve been working so hard to clear SAO.” He then took a sip from it before placing it back on the ground.

“That wasn’t exactly what I was thinking about,” Yui said. “It was what you would deal with after SAO.”

Both Harry and Silica nodded at that. “I see,” Harry said after a moment. “I try to not think about that.”

“Why not?” Yui asked.

“Because it means he might have to return to…” Harry said bitterly. “The closest I had to one was

“It is home, isn’t it?” Yui asked.

“I don’t have a home there, just places I lived,” Harry replied bitterly. “The closest I had to one was
my school, and I don’t think it would be one anymore.” He looked pensively out towards the atrium.

Yui blinked in confusion. Wasn’t a place a person lived at their home?

Silica seemed to notice and sighed. “Yui, that’s a touchy topic for him,” she said. “Not everyone calls the place they lived at, home, and SAO took even the one place he was at home from him.”

“Then what about here?” Yui asked. “I mean, this is a home… isn’t it?”

“In a way,” Silica replied. “But it’s also not one at the same time. We all have something to return to.” She glanced at Harry. “Even he does, though try convincing him of that.” She shook her head. “We know that it won’t last. We’ll either get out, or die trying.”

“It isn’t our world,” Harry said suddenly. “As nice as it can be… it isn’t our world. We all got into this for our own reasons, and then it became… real. Far too real.” He then chuckled. “Lux was right in a way, you know. At least for me.”

“That reminds me, how did you end up in Japan, if you don’t mind talking about it?” Silica asked. “I mean, from what you’ve told me, you should have been at… what was that place again?”

“Hogwarts?” Harry asked. At Silica’s nod, he shrugged. “Ah, why not? It doesn’t really matter now.” He said. “I wasn’t in Japan willingly, though I don’t regret it. Anyway, I was basically kidnapped, though given my,” he coughed. “Family life, it was an improvement.”

“You know who was involved?” Silica asked.

“Know?” Harry asked. “Not really. I do have a primary suspect for it. Considering how things have gone so far, I’ll probably thank him for it. If he was the one responsible, that is.” He leaned back and then glanced at Silica. “After all, because of that, I did meet you, Keiko.”

Silica blushed and then smiled. “Funny how things work out, huh?”

Harry snorted. “True, though I think a lot of people would have appreciated Kayaba not doing what he did in the first place,” he said before shrugging. “I know I would have.”

Silica nodded. “And yet, if he didn’t, we wouldn’t be the people we are now,” she said. “We’ve changed and grew because of it.”

Harry nodded. “Indeed, that’s so,” he admitted. “But the fact is, that doesn’t mean that those changes were always a good thing. Especially when you consider why. Still, I don’t think we want to dwell on that.”

“You’re right on that,” Silica noted. “Anyway, I think we’ve kind of gotten off topic here.” She looked at Yui. “You’re wondering why that conversation earlier happened, right?”

Yui nodded.

“I don’t really know what caused it,” Silica admitted. “When Klein visited yesterday, it just got us to look at things. As if it just dawned on us that we’ve been here for almost two years. We don’t like to think about that fact, or Outside, very much. What’s the point, after all? It’s a fact of life for us. We can’t change it beyond what we’re already doing, so there’s no point in dwelling on it.”

She closed her eyes. “So we built lives here. I mean, look at us. We have a guild, a place to call home, reputations, however mixed they are, that we built, and more. Almost like the real world, in a way. Almost.” He chuckled. “But this isn’t the real world. Is this still real? To us, it is. But it’s not
“We did too good a job in our efforts to avoid thinking of the real world, thinking of the future, and trying to convince ourselves that we shouldn’t. It isn’t doing us any favors,” Harry added. “We started to become the identities we made for ourselves here. We did so, because it was the easiest way to cope. We’ve buried our real selves, hoping to escape the pain.” He snorted. “Lux was right, we’re running. What we’re running from varies from person to person, but we’re still running.”

Yui’s confusion must have been obvious, as he simply shook his head. “For all that we talk of what we will do when we get out, it’s just that. Talk.” He said as he finished his drink and stretched. “Daydreaming, really. Not entirely serious. We have to get through each day until then, and by the time we get out, and we will get out, things will probably change.”

“Then, why did you ask what you did?” Yui asked.

Harry smiled. “Just my fears of losing what I have here coming to the fore,” he admitted. “Lux reminded me that we have options for after all of this. The phoenix will rise from the ashes, and if those Outside have a problem with it, it’s their problem.”

**August 15, 2024 - Aincrad 67th Floor, Labyrinth (Floor Boss Room)**

Kirito sheathed his swords and looked around. The fight had been a tougher than expected, but thankfully, no one had died. Perhaps it was the result of the sixty-fifth floor, where they lost four, forcing them to be more cautious. Or perhaps, it was simply their being better prepared this time. It could have been either reason.

Which didn’t mean that he couldn’t see that the fight easily could have gone another way. It was close at times. The boss changed attack patterns more often, and seemed to have a different aggro algorithm than previous bosses as well. It dropped aggro too quickly, though getting it back was easy enough. It looked like the Assault Team would have to redo its tactics and strategies for floor bosses. Again.

Still meant that they almost lost seven players who had grabbed aggro at the worst possible time for them. Had Silica not been on the ball with her secondary role as a combat medic, they would have been dead.

He looked to the side, seeing Asuna and Harry discussing something, most likely the fight, with Rain and Lux listening in. Silica was on the other side of the room, holding Pina and checking her over, only paying half a mind to the profuse thanks being given by players she healed up. Nothing unusual there.

He could see Heathcliff was talking with some Knights of Blood members, and their eyes briefly met. He repressed the urge to cut down the man, and simply nodded. It wasn’t the time or place, and both of them knew it.

But eventually, it would be.
June 5, 2024 - Hogwarts, Headmaster’s Office

“I’m surprised that you’re back in England so soon, Sirius,” Albus said.

Sirius shrugged. “I decided to help Dudley out a bit,” he said. “I laid down my conditions to him, and he accepted them readily enough. If Smeltings is willing to keep him, and his grades remain good enough, I will handle ensuring he can continue attending. If not, I will help him make other arrangements for his schooling. Besides, I needed to make some arrangements in Japan, or more appropriately, talk with the Shibas about what arrangements need to be made.”

“Preparing for a contingency in case you taking young Mr. Dursley to Japan becomes longer term then?” Albus asked.

Sirius nodded. “Potentially,” he admitted. “I had to come back to talk to some people anyway, those who are keeping an eye on him in the legal sense. He wants to see Harry in Japan, due to being a relative. I needed to make sure that it would be allowed, with everything going on with Vernon and Petunia. Fortunately, they see no problem with it, so long as he returns before the next school year begins.”

Albus nodded. Considering his experiences, Sirius would want to make sure that all the legal aspects were handled properly. A far cry from his more reckless youth, where he relied on Remus, James, and Lily to handle the details. “And the potentiality of it being longer term?”

Sirius shrugged. “We’ll worry about that if it becomes the case, but I don’t think it will right now. Still it’s better to be prepared, just in case,” he replied. He then looked out the window. “Harry’s doing fine for now, both here in the real world and in there. As much as I hate to admit it, it’s been good for him.” He said finally. “Dangerous as all get out, but good for him.”

“Indeed it has, Sirius.” Albus agreed as he stood up and joined the younger man at the window. “Indeed it has.”

June 14, 2024 - Setagaya, Yuuki Residence

Kouichirou looked across the table at his mother as she put down the tablet she was reading, sighing.

“So, no progress?” She asked her son.

Kouichirou nodded slowly. “Mr. Kunikida’s idea has merit, so it was decided to allow him to see what he could do, so long as it was under strict oversight, but no, no progress so far,” he said. “To his credit, he made no promises. But after he was able to do a real time recording of that wedding event from multiple perspectives, not just the players. Within the SAO network, and transmit it live into ALO, it’s worth a shot. He’s keeping his goals simple right now, seeing if we can get something into SAO, such as messages, first. If we can do that, then we will have cracked at least one part of the security on it and work from there.”

Kyouko nodded at that. “It stands to reason,” she said simply. “Even if it doesn’t work out, that man had managed something, which is an avenue that is worth pursuing.” She looked at the table again. “Of course, by the time we make any breakthroughs, the players may have rendered the problem moot.”

“You think it will come to that?” Kouichirou asked.
“They’ve made it this far,” Kyouko replied. “And Asuna’s been at the forefront of those efforts. She won’t give up. I know this, you know this, and Shouzou knows this. And regardless of what we wish, she will be there.” She closed her eyes. “For better, or worse, she will be there.” She sighed. “And given what you’ve said, we might not make enough of a breakthrough before that point.”

Kouichirou nodded, knowing what she meant. Even without the high level of security that SAO boasted, it would have still taken a lot of time to hack it without triggering any defense mechanisms that Kayaba had made a part of it without having the key. They already learned a lot about it, RECT’s work on ALO did a great deal to make sure of that, but Kerkchoff’s Principle still applied. Without knowing the key, they were shooting in the dark. They might get lucky, but it was a slim chance.

The public can see it as a race between the players and those trying to break them out, but anyone familiar with how computer and network security worked knew that the players themselves had a far better chance than anyone in the outside world. Not that it would stop those outside SAO from trying until they either succeeded, or the players freed themselves.

**June 15, 2024 - Setagaya, RECT Headquarters**

Not for the first time, Shiro Kunikida cursed Noboyuki Sugou’s very existence. Had the man drawn their attention to the same vulnerability he exploited, they could have used it. Maybe not to get the players out, but that didn’t mean that they couldn’t have done something. However, due to the man’s selfishness and desire to get one on Kayaba, they had lost a golden opportunity.

Worse, the man had endangered close to seven thousand lives with his stunt. One of whom, was the CEO’s daughter.

It wouldn’t have mattered if the vulnerability was quickly closed, it would have been validation that they, for once, had beaten SAO’s security. That it could be beaten. He knew full well that hacker groups, both white hat and black hat, had tried and failed to do so, but there was no system that was unbeatable.

But this system had excellent heuristics and seemed to learn from every attempt. It was as if it had an intelligence of its own, absurd as that should be. Artificial Intelligence research was carefully regulated, both as a precautionary measure, and because everyone with a gram of sense expected a successfully created AI to be… problematic.

It wouldn’t even be because of actual malice on the AI’s part. Fictional examples aside, the simple fact was, an AI, something that was brought into being via programming and mathematical logic, simply was unlikely to have the same thought processes and morality of humans. Both would be completely alien to the other. Or so the thinking went.

But, as he continued to try and see if it was possible to break into the system, even if only to open lines of communication, he was beginning to think that the absurd possibility was true. And if that was the case, then Kayaba truly had been insane. A genius, but an insane one.

Only a madman would think creating an AI, no matter what means were used to limit it, was a good idea.

**June 24, 2024 - London, King’s Cross Station**

Hermione got off the Hogwarts Express and mused on the various things that had gone over the course of the school year. Aside from the Tri-Wizard Tournament, there was her continued observations of Harry’s activities, her forging an unusual connection with the world class Quidditch
player, Viktor Krum, who proved to be surprisingly intelligent and well read, and watching Fleur Delacour pull an upset victory in the tournament, her lackluster performance in the second task aside. From some of the ways the French champion performed in the final task, she had clearly taken a few examples from the things many had managed to observe in SAO.

It was surprising to her, in more ways than one, to see her fellow students take a look at a problem, whether it was a particularly stubborn task or assignment, or dealing with the inevitable conflicts which arose whenever more than a small number of people gathered in one place, but they had started to actually think before they acted. This change was all the more remarkable when she considered that magic tended to make things like conventional logic and critical thinking rare skills for witches and wizards in training. And often after.

She had once told Harry that a witch or wizard was often incapable of logic, which was unfair to them. They were capable of it, but magic made doing many things much easier, so looking at something critically often slipped their minds. It was understandable, when one could wave a wand and solve most issues right there, regardless of whether a better way existed or not.

And that didn’t count that they now had proof that muggles could come up with things the magical world wasn’t capable of. At least not yet. She wouldn’t be surprised if seeing what went on in SAO didn’t give some enterprising witches and wizards ideas.

Her musings were cut short as she heard her name called and looked in the direction it came from to see her parents next to the Weasley family waving her over. She shelved those thoughts and headed over to them. The school year was done, and while she could probably get more up to date information on Harry now, she wanted to spend some time with her parents. Harry would prefer that, and she had a feeling that he would tell her off if she didn’t.

Malfoy Manor

Draco sat down in the sitting room with his parents and began to tell them of his school year. While he had sent letters, there was something to be said about talking things through, with their questions occasionally drawing something that seemed unimportant at the time to his attention. Besides, after he had watched Potter’s actions against that one group, he had a feeling that his father, at least, would be able to shed some light on some things.

Lucius listened to Draco’s report and nodded. “What you have seen, Draco, is something that I saw in him at the end of your second year,” he said. “Because of his youth, I underestimated things, but I remember last June, and the events that took place then well. And you took the opportunity to observe him doing something similar.” He looked at his son with a piercing gaze. “The only question I have is this. Why?”

Draco shifted in his seat as he tried to think of a response. He could tell that his father was disapproving of it, though not angry, but he couldn’t tell what the disapproval was about. Was it willingly going to watch violence? Or was it something else?

Better to be honest and up front. “Back in April, Lord Black brought back a recording of Potter marrying that muggle girl, Silica, I believe she calls herself. And when Granger had gotten to the recorded events that everyone essentially agreed gave him the impetus to make his decision, I was curious. Why would he decide to marry a muggle girl of all things? Why did that event spur him to make that decision?” He sighed. “I didn’t get any answers from it, and even if I had, they would only lead to more questions.” He closed his eyes. “Dumbledore was also there, but it wasn’t the slightly batty professor who was standing there. It… it was the Slayer of Grindelwald. It was the man who had fought through multiple wars, and you could see it.” He shuddered. “I remember Professor Snape often saying that he was often being merciful when he was handling discipline. I now
understand what he means. And Potter… he was different, hardened. This wasn’t…” He struggled to find the words.

“What you saw wasn’t the boy you were convinced was your rival,” Lucius concluded, nodding.

“Yes.” Draco agreed. “We were told that back in First Year, he... killed a man in self-defense. Professor Quirrell was… possessed by the Dark Lord, and Potter was forced to kill him.” He took in a breath. “Granger… she wasn’t even shocked when she learned that. As if she already knew, or suspected.”

“Since she is Potter’s friend, that is no surprise. Even if he never mentioned it, I would not be surprised if she was able to draw that conclusion.” Lucius said with a nod. “Especially since the rumors about her intelligence seem to be true.”

“Oh, they are,” Draco confirmed. “She’s at the top of the class when it comes to theory. She just has some problems with the practical side of things, but even then, she’s still one of the best in the year. She puts in an effort that Helga Hufflepuff would respect.”

“Intelligence doesn’t equal talent,” Narcissa said, nodding. “So, she understands it, but has to work harder at doing it. Rather common among muggleborns, actually. Their education prior to Hogwarts helps them in some ways, harms them in others. Most get over it, but it’s not uncommon for them to have problems at first. Potter’s mother had had similar problems early on, if I recall.” She mused before turning her attention back to her son. “Now, back onto Potter. You had hoped that seeing the incident would give you insights into his decision to marry the girl?”

Draco nodded.

“Perhaps you should have been watching it all since the start,” Narcissa chided gently. “If you had, you would have had proper context for it.” She smiled. “While few among proper society have bothered, there were still a few who have, even if they had to go to a muggle pub or a place that had ready access to this… internet I think the term is, to do so. I have heard that Mr. Potter’s adventures have become quite popular, and word spreads. In many respects, all those who were watching saw it coming from what I can tell.”

Draco nodded and considered his mother’s words. From what he had heard from those in Granger’s circle, and she had a few Slytherins there for a more traditional perspective, none of them were surprised by the fact that he had done what he did. Perhaps considered it a bit hasty on account for their ages, not to mention the fact that the wedding meant nothing outside of Sword Art Online, but they were not surprised in the least.

He was sure that they were placing bets as to whether he made it a more... permanent arrangement when he could.

“And do not forget, Draco, that those who would take the most issue with his decision, are likely to do nothing anyway,” Lucius added. “Not for something as minor as this. He killed the Dark Lord over the New Year and, outside of those who are residing in Azkaban, many who followed him see that as a good thing.” He rubbed the arm where the Dark Mark once was before he stood up and walked over to a small table. Picking up a small stack of parchment, he then walked back to his seat.

“I had expected you to comment on the marriage,” he said and then handed Draco the stack of parchment. “Before you say anything else, I wish you to peruse this.”

Taking the stack of parchment, and easily untying the cord that kept it together, Draco began to read.
Lucius watched as his son read the stack of parchment and hoped that he would realize what he, himself, had with minimal prompting. Whether Potter chose to continue his relationship with the muggle girl after he was released from Sword Art Online, provided he survived, was immaterial in the long run.

It was the connections he was forging, provided he took advantage of the opportunities they could present. The boy just might, as Lucius highly doubted that the boy would be unlikely to rest on his laurels for long.

He would look for a new battlefield. Be it one similar to that illusory world, even if he had to make it with his own hands, or through some other outlet.

The Burrow

Ron finished unpacking his trunk and looked out his room’s window. The school year had been eventful. He was glad that, for once, the events not only didn’t directly involve him or his family in any way whatsoever, and he got to meet some interesting people. From the occasional friendly pickup game with the visiting students, and the chance to fly with, and occasionally against, Viktor Krum, to watching the Triwizard Tournament’s events, to a much more regular open viewing of Harry’s activities inside SAO, to showing off his own abilities in chess, it had been eventful for him.

And of course, his friendship with Hermione had been somewhat repaired, though he knew that it would never be as close as it had been during their first two years. They were too different, the person who was the catalyst for them becoming friends was not with them, and Hermione seemed to have gained a larger social circle. Much as it hurt him to realize it, half their friendship had been founded on being among the few people they could get on with. And that was with Harry to act as a shield spell from each other’s more grating traits.

He had been surprised to learn that Krum, professional Quidditch star that he was, was not only well read, but also able to match wits with Hogwarts’ best and brightest.

_The more you learn about someone, the more surprised you get_, he mused, reflecting on that knowledge. He had been brought into some of the viewings, by request, rather than him wandering in, as had been usual. To add his own perspective, or so he was told. Not just on Harry, but on the tactics and strategies that were being used in combat. It was interesting to hear the perspectives from the students from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons. While the French students had largely been more concerned with the human interactions, more than a few had chimed in with their opinions on how the combat was.

It might have taken some pushing and prodding on Hermione’s part for him to do so, but she managed it. Despite his more serious attitude towards his studies, he was still the same lazy slacker he had fallen into being back in his first year. One had to get his interest in something worked up, which was easier said than done, though Hermione knew all the buttons to push, and how many stinging hexes it might take.

If he’d tried that at home, it’d be a lecture from his mum or his dad’s highly expressive looks, the latter of which got any of the Weasley sons to straighten up their act. After all, those looks from his father were the only warning that he was about to get involved in whatever disciplinary matter brought it out.

None of the Weasley children wanted that, their father got _creative_ with punishments after tanning their hides.
“Ronald!” He heard his mother call from downstairs. “Dinner!”

“Coming,” he called as he began to head his way downstairs.

Molly stepped out of her kitchen, dinner floating behind her as she made ready to set the table. Her children were back for the summer, barring her three eldest, who were occupied with their jobs, though at least Percy could come by more often. He didn’t have the excuse of working in another country like Bill and Charlie, but he was enjoying his independence. Or, he was simply overworking himself, Arthur wasn’t overly clear on it, and with Percy it could easily be both.

He reminded her of her brother Gideon that way.

Still, a look at the table showed someone who was almost a seventh son in her eyes, not there. Ever since Harry had been trapped in that muggle illusion, she had worried. A worry that had increased as the time went on. True, someone had managed to make contact with him, but the fact that it was Voldemort had only served to increase her worry.

It didn’t matter if he had gotten out of that meeting fine and, most importantly, alive, which Voldemort couldn’t claim. Then again, he couldn’t claim anything now—considering he was dead. That actually galled her even more. That was a battle Harry shouldn’t have needed to fight in the first place, had her generation done its damned job properly.

But that was Harry. He would fight battles he didn’t have to. It was not just because he was unable to simply stand by and let it be someone else’s problem (though Molly had no doubts that it played a role in things), but because fighting them was the right thing to do. Both his parents had been that way, and it was why they had distanced themselves from Arthur’s squib cousin during the war—had he been in the loop, Dawkin would have gotten into it, lack of magic be damned.

The accountant still hadn't completely forgiven them.

It was not a mindset she shared. She had only stepped in during the war when she had to, and Albus had respected that.

Molly was sure she believed that some of the choices Harry had made were not the wisest ones.

Honestly, getting married like he did, what was he thinking? Probably very little, and not with his brain at that. He was fourteen, after all. Boys were not the best at thinking things through to begin with, and at his age, it was worse. But making decisions in haste was part and parcel for a teenage boy, and even girls weren’t above that. The fact that the girl he married was all for it…

From what she learned from her children, no one who knew what went on in there in any detail was surprised. That meant that if it was a mistake, it was one both were intent on making. Hopefully no one got hurt by it.

Harry might not be family in the strictest sense, the ties by blood were generations ago, but he’s done enough for her family to be considered an honorary member. Her brothers, had they still been alive, would have adopted him for saving Ginny if they could have managed it. And Fabian and Gideon would certainly have tried.

As she placed the food on the table, she looked at her children.

“So, while we eat, how about you all tell me about the year you had.” She said.
Fishing for information about Harry could wait, she had children to reconnect with and ensure that they were fine. All of them had a tendency to say little in their letters, after all.

Not that she was much better herself outside of a howler.

**July 1, 2024 - Narita International Airport**

Dudley wearily exited the plane into the terminal, stretching muscles made stiff from the prolonged periods spent sitting. The flight taken from England to Japan had been long, and despite having gotten some rest on the flight, he wanted nothing more than to get some sleep.

To his right, he spotted Sirius restraining a yawn and almost made his way to a nearby concession stand before shaking his head, as if to clear it.

“Tea and a snack later,” he heard the man mumble. “Better clear customs first and get it over with. Besides, they’ll have better and cheaper stuff in the main airport.”

Dudley almost perked up at that, the idea of having a cuppa and a snack was very appealing at that moment. The food on the flight wasn’t too bad, but the portions were fairly small. Still, they took the edge of his hunger off at the time, but his larger size, even if he was slimmer now, meant that he needed more food than an average sized person. Muscle still needed fuel.

Still a glance at the prices made him wince. He might not be used to making the conversions from Pounds to Yen, but he knew enough to know that the prices were more than he wanted to pay. The cost of convenience.

“Mr. Black, you sure that we have someone coming to pick us up?” He asked.

Sirius nodded. “I made sure to make some calls ahead of time, so they know when we were supposed to arrive.” He pulled out a cellphone from a pocket and turned it on. “If we don’t meet them after we clear customs, I’ll ring them up.”

##

Sirius was more than glad to get done with customs. He knew it would take longer since he took a plane. Muggles travelled in far larger numbers than witches and wizards, and it wasn’t like they could wave a wand and process several hundred people at once, but he had underestimated how long it would take. Then there was the half dozen subtle checks only a few people in muggle customs knew due to him being a wizard. Their flight was third in the queue, so they had to wait close to an hour just to get in line, and another hour just to go through the process on its own.

Considering that it would take close to two hours to get to Tokyo from the airport via non-magical travel, any concerns about being able to sleep off the jet lag when he finally had time to rest would be moot, Damn it, he was **tired**. Travelling by plane was an exhausting experience, considering he wasn’t able to sleep very much, or well, on the flight.

Still better than taking multiple portkeys, he mused. *I just feel tired, not like I got worked over by a beater’s bat. I am not looking forward to the return trip, but I won’t let the kid go back alone.*

“Well,” he said. “Welcome to Japan, Dudley.”

“Thanks,” Dudley replied. “So, we need to find the people who are picking us up?”

Sirius was about to say something when he spotted some familiar faces. “Looks like we won’t have to,” he said. “Selene! Kotoha! Over here!” He shouted, waving to them.
Several passersby looked at him in askance before turning back to their own concerns, shaking their heads. Just another idiot Westerner who had no manners, probably an American.

“And here I thought you knew how to act in Japan,” Dudley quietly snarked.

Sirius shrugged unrepentantly. “It worked,” he replied.

Both women came up to them, one, a Westerner like them, with a sour expression on her face. The other one simply looked amused.

“And here I thought we broke you of that habit,” The Western woman said to Sirius. “What am I saying? Unless we break out the newspaper, you’re worse than an old dog trying to learn a new trick.” She then looked at Dudley. “You’ve slimmed down a bit, kid. Still pretty big, but you’re putting muscle on now.” At Dudley’s questioning look, she waved it off. “Later, here is not the place.”

“And you do realize that he’s likely to figure it out now, right?” The Japanese woman asked in accented English before turning to Sirius. “It’s nice to see you again, Mr. Black.”

“Ms. Hanaori, Ms. Carlisle,” Sirius replied, nodding to each woman in turn. “Well, why don’t we leave here and get settled in.” His stomach growled, as did Dudley’s. “Though I can use something to eat first.”

“It’ll take a couple of hours to get where we need to,” Ms. Hanaori said. “With you bringing a guest, we can’t put you up in the same apartment. Anyway, our ride is waiting outside, so let’s get you to your new accommodations. We can stop at a nice ramen place I know on the way.”

**July 2, 2024 - Nerima, Saotome-Tendo Dojo**

Ranma sat seiza on the dojo floor and watched his students go through their katas and routines for the advanced class with a critical eye. It was nothing entirely special—just having them go through what they had been taught for the day, working the memory of the movements into their muscles, after having strenuously working them on their own physical conditioning. It not only served to cool them down, but the practice when they were already tired helped to imprint the movements into them.

It was a method of teaching that had been used for centuries, worked, and worked well. He would not make his father’s mistakes, nor would he put them through Happosai’s version of training. Instead, he would gradually weed them out as the demands increased. When they were weeded out, he would take each of them aside, tell them why, give his praises for making it this far, and leave them something to mark the achievement of each one making it to the advanced level.

Especially in his school and style, it was an achievement to make it to this level.

By this point the half dozen students that he still had were well used to it, having been thinned out over the last few months as his demands on their fitness, minds, and discipline rose. He didn’t allow students to rise to the advanced class who weren’t at least of college age (and he was rather blunt about his preference they be in college or some other vocational training) without good reason. The fact his own children had not been exempted from that requirement just reinforced it. Him being **Ranma-sensei** usually sufficed as a reason, though.

He would not make the same mistakes as his father. The man had turned him into one of the world’s best martial artists, but it had left him woefully unprepared for the modern world. It had taken him a lot of time and effort to address his deficient education, and he would admit that he was the weakest
in that realm compared to his wife and kids.

Taking another look over his class, he could tell that his students were well aware that his heart wasn’t quite in it. None were annoyed, they wouldn't have made it here if they expressed annoyance so easily. He taught them methods to rain pain and possible death from above, he wasn't going to give that sort of training to just any undisciplined thug.

He would still train and teach them, that was his responsibility, but his passion wasn’t there, and hadn’t since his granddaughter had been trapped in SAO. And it likely wouldn’t return until she got out of it.

It wasn’t a question of if. Not to him, not to his wife, and certainly not to the rest of the family. She would make it out, and have plenty of stories to share about her adventures there.

**Suginami, Nakano General Hospital**

Dudley stared at the gaunt form of his cousin. He had forgotten that while Harry appeared perfectly fine in SAO that didn’t necessarily apply in the real world. The year and more he spent in SAO had definitely done a number on him.

Harry didn’t look like a corpse, but it was still a shock. From what he had been told, Harry was still better off than many stuck in SAO. Modern medicine had kept the worst at bay, and Dudley would not be surprised in the least if Harry’s being a wizard also played a role.

“Yeah,” Sirius said from behind. “It’s a shock to see him like this if you don’t know what to expect.” He turned to Selene and Kotoha. “How has he been while I was in England?” He asked.

“Out here, there hasn’t been any real change,” Selene said. “Some new treatments have staved off the atrophy further and he hasn’t lost any weight. In fact, all the patients are benefitting from this. He’ll still need to put on about fifteen or twenty kilos after this, though. Inside? Well, you can watch and… what just happened?” She suddenly asked.

“What is it?” Dudley asked, wondering if he should be concerned for his cousin.

“I don’t know,” Selene replied. “Two girls just teleported in and landed in the water Harry and Kirito were walking near. It’s odd though.”

“Odd?” Sirius asked. “How?”

“The color was wrong, too white, and I don’t know of any cases of a teleport, either through a gate, or using a teleport crystal, going *that* far astray,” she said. “It could be a first, but…”

“Too far outside what we’ve seen, got it,” Sirius said as he then looked at the monitor. “He seems to have it well in hand, though. And damn, that girl he’s fishing out looks good.”

“Mister Black, don’t make me swat you with a newspaper again.” Kotoha said, causing Dudley to blink as Sirius sputtered.

“Um, what?” He asked.

“Later, kid,” Selene said as she paid attention to what was happening. “And, what the-? What did she mean with that?”

“What did she say?” Dudley asked. “Unlike you guys, I don’t understand Japanese.”
Selene didn’t seem to hear him as she watched the monitor intently. Dudley was about to ask again, when Kotoha put a hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t worry, she gets like that,” the woman said in English. “She just noticed something odd and is keeping an eye on it.” She looked at the monitor and saw Harry and Kirito walking with the two girls. “And it seems that both Harry and Kirito noticed it as well. They’re headed back to the place that they bought with both girls.”

“And that means…?”

Kotoha smiled. “I think we’ll find out soon enough.”

##

Selene boggled at what she had heard and looked to see Sirius and Dudley’s confusion. She wasn’t surprised by the latter, given that the boy didn’t know Japanese. She would talk with the boss and even the Shibas to find out if a solution was available. On the other hand, his lack of understanding was probably for the best. She had no doubt that he was familiar with the more common media portrayals of AIs.

She was caught off guard by this. To the best of her knowledge, it should have been a few decades, two at the least, before the first one was actually made. If only because of the memory requirements. Though, she wouldn’t put it past Kayaba to have managed it. Accidentally, in all probability.

And he had created two of them, with probably a third as well, if what the two had divulged was true. How had he managed that? She asked herself. AI research is restricted and carefully regulated. Nothing in our dossiers even hinted that he was actively involved in any such research.

What she did know, was that this knowledge was dangerous. She would have to talk to the boss later, to see if this information went out on the feeds. It wasn’t likely, Kayaba had ensured that the secret of magic didn’t, after all. But it was possible.

Though, from the looks of things, Harry was taking this latest curveball thrown his way in stride. His commentary about that little one, and her resemblance to what a child between Kirito and Asuna would possibly look like, was very like him.

“Can someone explain this to me?” Sirius suddenly asked.

She pulled out her wand and cast several spells she knew to ensure privacy. “AIs.” She said in English. “Those two girls are AIs. He managed to create AIs.”

“Wait, what?” Dudley asked. “AIs? How did he… is he crazy?”

“It’s Kayaba,” Selene replied drily. “Enough said, don’t you think kid?”

“Okay,” Sirius interjected. “Can one of you explain what an AI is?”

**July 6, 2024 - Alfheim, Swilvane**

Leafa got up from the bed she had used as a logout spot and began to check for any messages while she was logged out. The way ALO worked meant that the avatars stayed behind for anywhere up to a few hours when logged out, meaning that they had better find a comfortable and safe place to log out. Comfortable, as waking up with the avatar’s body in some odd angle always left the muscles stiff for a time. Safe, as being logged out meant that they were vulnerable if they were doing so outside a safe zone.
In a game where PvP was a core aspect of gameplay, the latter was especially true. More than one player had found themselves logging in to find themselves in their faction capital with a stat and growth penalty due to logging out in a place they only thought was safe, and dying in the process. You either waited until you were somewhere safe, you had friends watch your back, or you were willing to take the penalty for dying.

The former was far safer than the latter, of course.

There weren’t any messages, so she closed her menu and stretched. She hadn’t been expecting anything, but it never hurt to check. A glance at the time in her HUD showed her that she still had time before Lady Sakuya wanted to meet with her, so she might as well grab a drink while she waited. Since it was late afternoon, she would hold off on eating until she had to log off for dinner.

She exited the room she had taken for the night and walked down into the dining area of the inn she preferred to frequent. It had decent food, a good selection of drinks, excellent desserts, and the rates for a night or week were surprisingly cheap. She didn’t need to worry about other luxuries, like baths, the system took care of those issues. It wasn’t as if she was trapped in here, unlike her brother’s situation with SAO, so what was the point? What she settled on in ALO worked fine for her. Let others waste their yrd on luxuries that they really had no need of with real life alternatives just a logout away.

Taking a seat, she flagged down a waitress and ordered a moonberry wine. The mix of sweet and tart was just what she wanted right now, and she had the time to simply enjoy it for a change. No going out to fight mobs, and no risk of having to deal with Salamanders trying to encroach on Sylph territory. She could sit back, and relax.

She idly wondered what her brother would think of this game, had he not been caught up in SAO. She figured that he would enjoy it, though with SAO, she wondered if he would want to be in VR ever again.

*Knowing him, I wouldn’t be surprised if he jumped into this with both feet within a few weeks,* she thought. *Months at most.* Well, once he got cleared for such things after getting out of that death game.

Finishing her drink, she checked the time again, and got to her feet. She had fifteen minutes to head to the palace complex which housed Lady Sakuya’s quarters and office, as well as the offices of the various NPCs and players who handled the administration for all Sylphs. If she was relegated to going by foot, she would be cutting it close if she ran, but flight made that a minor obstacle.

Time to go meet her and find out what she wanted.

**July 13, 2024 - Kyoto, Undisclosed Location**

Sachiko put the phone back in its cradle when the call ended and reflected on the knowledge that had just been passed onto her by the Shibas. It was… less than surprising, really. She knew that Kayaba wasn’t dead in the literal sense, she had talked with his virtual ghost months ago, when she had finally tracked down his location.

She had been quite firmly chastised by the current Lord Shiba for her haste in incinerating the man’s corpse, and she would admit, he was right to do so. At the same time, her anger had been far too great to restrain, she could finally do *something* to the human who had trapped her daughter in his vile game. That he was still alive in the sense that his mind lingered on a computer was immaterial, she had a body to do something to.
She felt a flash of anger build up and quickly suppressed it. She would admit, having a reminder that he was still alive, for a given definition of “alive,” was infuriating, and if she could, she would find a way into that virtual world and kill him herself. However, to the best of her knowledge, there was no way to do so, and she had to put her faith in those human youths who seemed to figure it out on their own.

That was the only thing she could do at this time, but she was patient. She would not have survived long enough to have nine tails otherwise. She took a glance at Mizore, and the computer monitor that allowed her to see what she was doing.

She had nothing scheduled for an hour or so, so she could easily take the time to watch her daughter in action. She idly wondered if Mizore even suspected that Akihiko Kayaba had been identified by those young humans she regularly interacted with. It was certainly possible.

She did not raise her daughter to be a fool, no matter how she sometimes acted in SAO.

**Shiba Compound, Unplottable Location**

Takeru hung up and went back to the papers on the table in front of him. He was surprised that Lady Yasaka was as composed as she was during the conversation, but felt reassured by it. For all that it was a thin veneer of composure, the kitsune who had been the inspiration behind the fabled Tamamo no Mae knew how to restrain her more passionate outbursts most of the time. She could be as courtly, dignified, and restrained, as she could be vicious when she decided to engage in violence.

Many would think that talking to her and advising restraint would be difficult, but he often found humans to be harder to reign in. All he had to do was remember the difficulties his adoptive mother had when she came out of hiding and officially took over the Shiba clan, though she had solved that problem by adopting him, and making him the one in charge.

It was a shift from the life he expected. He had been raised to be a target, Kaoru’s *kagemusha*. He had been raised *knowing* his honor was in deception, a false lord to distract the world. Most especially to catch the eye of the demonic creatures the Shibas and their retainers stood against. He was there to hold a place, so that the next true leader could be born and grow to take her place.

That Kaoru Shiba had decided her father’s plans needed revision, or to just be abandoned entirely, shocked many. She had seen how taking over from him had been divisive amongst the others, and had to work hard to earn more than the bare minimum of respect from them.

Chiaki had almost angrily walked out on his duties. That he had fallen in line for the battle at hand had done much to keep them united.

Kaoru proved to have a certain wisdom. It saved the clan.

Despite her being far more talented in magic than Takeru ever would be, she had known that she couldn’t lead them all as effectively as he had. She did earn the team’s respect, but there had been a reason she listened to his advice back then. He had the leadership experience, and was far better with a sword and raw combat.

Therefore, she had decided to adopt him into the Clan, name him her successor, and stepped down as soon as they had the time to do so. It helped that the two were distantly related even before that, ensuring that some of the more traditional members of Japan’s magical society didn’t try to contest the adoption. Not that they were likely to. Adopting a successor into a family had a long history in Japan. The fact that they had a familial relation, however many generations back, simply helped matters out.
"Ah, Takeru."

Takeru turned and smiled. Hikoma Kusakabe, the head of the Shiba household's servants, had practically raised him after his father died. Between him and Toshizo Tanba-- Kaoru's personal retainer-- the Shiba estate and the Shinkenger, and he allowed himself a mental snort at the portmanteau, were well supported.

Takeru made to get his old sensei a stool, but the man waved him off and knelt beside him. With a *tch* Takeru shook his head. "Jii... your hip."

"When has *that* little ailment ever stopped him?" a teasing voice asked.

"Disrespectful sushi-ya," Hikoma groused, even as he smiled and shuffled aside to let Takeru's oldest friend sit with them.

"Stick in the mud Jii-sensei," the newest edition to the Shinkenger said just as fondly. Genta Umemori was many things-- theatrical to an extent that near eclipsed Ryunosuke, cheerful to a fault, and brilliant with *creating* magic. He'd brought new things and tools to the Shinkenger, and earned the right to fly his family crest and crayfish emblem over the gate to the compound with the other retainers. And his insouciant attitude could be a breath of fresh air in the formality of the lord/retainer relationship.

Not that Chiaki couldn't fill that need admirably.

"How'd it go?" Genta asked, face growing serious. "I have some suppression seals ready, and Ryuu, Chiaki, and I can be out to... assist the Moon Queen if needed."

"Not at this time," Takeru said, and he could feel Genta and Jii relax. "She is not pleased, understand, but Lady Yasaka is by no means a fool. She was even willing to admit her actions towards the equipment Kayaba was communicating with were quite rash." He didn't mention the man's physical body, they all knew that she had incinerated it and left not even ashes behind.

Jii nodded. "It is good. That was one additional problem we did not need at this time. Lady Sachiko is a fine being, and I would not want to see that stress added to what is happening to her daughter."

Jii smirked. "Oh, and your hunch was rather correct, my lord."

"Which one? Take-chan has so many!" Genta said. And wasn't he the only one who could get away with addressing Takeru with that particular nickname?

Jii shot a look at Genta and rolled his eyes. "That older player outside of Mr. Potter's immediate circle? Klein?" Takeru nodded. "You may have seen him at one of the commencements you attend. He is Ryoutaro Tsuboi, age twenty-four, and he is magical. I am not sure if his entire guild is as well, or just his immediate companions, but I'd say it is a good guess. My lord, what gave you the idea?"

"We actually chewed him out once, Mother and I," Takeru admitted with a smirk. "With Lady Yasaka accompanying us, no less. Out of hand bachelor party, and some yuuki-onna that weren't sure whether to be more offended or amused by it. He attended school with Lady Yasaka's daughter when she first started there, I believe."

Jii nodded. "I see. So is his influence good... or worrisome?"

"I'd wager both," Takeru replied drily.

"Ah, so a younger Genta," Jii returned as drily.
"Ah, Jii, so wise-- what exactly are you implying?" Genta said, going from amicable to annoyed in less than a second.

"Oh, would you rather I outright state it? I thought my opinion on you was rather clear."

Takeru smirked as his best friend and sensei started another playful round of banter. At least some things were still right in the world.

He turned his attention to the papers on his desk and wondered how he should note down the events of the last week. He did promise Albus to provide regular updates about what was going on in SAO, another perspective, in other words. Fawkes had flamed by earlier, apparently finding enjoyment in visiting. The phoenix was probably playing with August Blake’s little girl, as he seemed to find it fun to stay just out of reach of her tiny hands as she tried grab him.

Or he was giving Raye’s familiars grief. Well, he still had a day before he requested Fawkes to take this correspondence back to England. He wondered what the Supreme Mugwump would think of what Mister Potter ran into this time.

He also had to see if it was possible to get those two AIs recognized as something besides computer programs to be used and discarded. He would see if Mister Shumway had any ideas when he next came by.

Perhaps a quick missive to the Americans who were his primary points of contact was in order, though a polite request to Grandmaster Saotome and his friends might also work.

##

**July 14, 2024 - Hogwarts, Headmaster’s Office**

Albus had been discussing the most recent brouhaha in the Wizengamot with William and Alastor, and the possible consequences had steps not been taken to stop it. That one of their own had taken the step of trying to pass a motion to disconnect every player in SAO, forcefully, and kill those trapped in there, had not resulted in anything positive.

“Albus,” Alastor began. “How did that idiot even rise to leading that sorry lot in the Wizengamot? Did he bother to think of the consequences of what would happen if his motion had passed? Is he even capable of thinking?”

“Unfortunately Alastor, I think he is,” Albus replied. “Sadly, with Lucius moderating his stance and distancing himself from many of those who were sympathetic to Tom’s ideals, it means that his influence with them is not ideal.”

“Get rid of Fudge, and this happens,” William grumbled. “Should have seen it coming. As hard as it is for many of the more progressive members to believe, given his beliefs, Lucius was a moderating influence on that group. He was definitely in their camp, but he was never stupid about it.”

“Indeed, he is no fool,” Albus noted. “Rash and opportunistic at times, but no fool. I dare say, had it not been because of how his wounded pride could have affected his judgment, I wouldn’t have him as my prime suspect in how the Wainwrights had gotten ahold of Harry.”

“No proof of that?” William asked.

“None that I can confirm,” Albus replied. “The Wainwrights pride themselves on their confidentiality in that regard, and they won’t break it. However, Lucius has changed since then, supporting Harry in his own way, and giving us the impetus to start cleaning up things in the Wizengamot.”
“Distancing himself and running damage control, no doubt,” Alastor noted. “He cocked up, even if it was because of something no one saw coming, and he knows it. If he was the one responsible, that is.”

“More than likely, he was.” Albus said. “The Malfoys are one of the few families with the resources, contacts, and likely favors owed, to pull something like that off. More complex than what his father would have done, but he is the one I primarily suspect at the catalyst for this. As I said, he can be rash, especially when his pride is wounded, and Harry had wounded it.”

“So, if he was responsible for Mister Potter being there, then trapping him in it wasn’t his intention,” William mused. “Good thing for him that it’s gone so well, so far. Still, it doesn’t address what almost happened.”

“To think that Selwyn would be so stupid as to propose something like this when Her Majesty has a representative there,” Alastor said. “I know he’s not the brightest lumos, but even for him, that was stupid.”

“Trust me, Moody, that particular trouser stain is enjoying a nice stay in some remote and uncomfortable location while others decide what to do with him,” William interjected. “Not that any such proposal would have gotten anywhere. The SAO victims, all of them, are under the care of the Japanese, and within their jurisdiction. And how did he think it would go without consequences?” He sneered.

"He risked breaking the damn thing he said he wanted to protect," Alastor grumbled. "If it was someone like the Carrows and their ilk, I wouldn’t have been surprised, they are that dim and blind to the consequences, but Selwyn? Has age rotted his mind?"

Albus was about to respond to that, when a flash of flame in the office got his attention and Fawkes appeared. He dropped a parcel onto the desk and then alighted on his perch. For some odd reason, he was wearing a mask, and it took Albus a moment to recognize what it was supposed to signify.

Albus gave him a look. “The Kamen Rider mask is a bit much,” he said. Some of the Shiba retainers were fond of that franchise, and decorating Fawkes with various memorabilia was something the phoenix was willing to put up with.

"What's with the black feathers?" Gravel murmured.

"He must have won a bet with Ms. Mendez’s familiars again," Albus decided, and sighed as the statement made Fawkes preen. Shaking his head, he opened the parcel and took out the sheets of paper. “If you gentlemen will give me a moment?”

“Go on,” Alastor replied.

“Of course, Albus.” William said.

Quickly perusing the papers, Albus looked over what had happened since the last update. The recordings would be sent by the Wainwrights later, but a written report at least kept him current on Harry’s activities. Quickly looking it over, he reached the last two items that were covered and paused. The first one, he would need more clarification on, though the term Artificial Intelligence said much to him, but the last item was concerning. Giving both a more thorough look, he put the papers down and looked at William and Alastor.

“Gentlemen, I think I could use your input on something,” he said.

"The constellation robes got Sagittarius and Aries wrong," Alastor said, without missing a beat.
"They look so fab otherwise," William opined.

"Not that, you two," Albus said, shaking his head. Twitting him about his robes was something both inevitably did. "Something that was in these papers." Tapping his wand on the relevant pages, he duplicated them and handed them over. "Please, read these."

William and Alastor quickly did so, putting them down with wide eyes.

"I know that kid gets himself into weird situations there. Well, both him and his girl, not to mention the rest of their friends, but… What. The. Fuck." Alastor said flatly.

"Agreed," William concurred.

"It is as you gentlemen read," Albus said. "Harry and his friends have identified Kayaba. Harry even took the time to have a little talk with him about it. In a public place, with his friends there to serve as backup, of course. It was quite civil, from what the message said, even with the veiled threats."

"Bloody Gryffindors," William said. "Did Minerva transfigure his balls into giant brass ones?"

"How would he hear himself over the clanging?" Alastor quipped, knowing the old joke.

"We Gryffindors learn how to put our pants on to keep that from happening," Albus replied, finishing it as only a Gryffindor would. "In any case, gentlemen, outside of Kayaba, they also seemed to have some… Artificial Intelligences drop in on them."

"I read that," Alastor said with a forced calm. "Don’t know what that means, outside of what they’re called, but I have a feeling that it’s something major."

"Major is an understatement," William said. "AIs are something that the muggles have been attempting, carefully, for decades. To create something that can think for itself, using computers. There are a lot out there who think it’s a bad idea, they have a lot of stories where one went bad, but when has that stopped scientists?"

"When has that stopped wizards and witches?" Alastor countered. "If anything, we can be worse."

"Any advice?" Albus asked.

"I would say to get rid of them if we could, but that’s my overly cautious to the point of paranoia side talking," Alastor said. "I doubt they would take kindly to that anyway. I wouldn’t if I was in their position. They apparently seem to be friendly from the report, but they could quickly become hostile if they saw us as a threat. Turn what is a potentially dangerous situation, into one."

William nodded. "Makes sense." He said. "If they’re fully self-aware, and thus ‘alive’ in that sense, then they wouldn’t want to die. It’s a common enough cause for an AI to become malicious in fiction." He looked at Albus. "Have they said anything about others knowing?"

Albus shook his head. "No," he replied. "Apparently, Harry and his guild’s conversations through the… streams? I think that’s the right term anyway. Well anyway, no indication has come out that such has been aired. Apparently, Akihiko Kayaba is ensuring that many secrets are not divulged that way."

"Censor what you can," William said. "Makes sense. He controls what goes out through them. He doesn’t control the hard line feeds to the Nerve Gears though."

"And we can be thankful that more of Harry’s associates don’t have these… hard line feeds," Albus
said, his unfamiliarity with the modern term apparent. “That would have been problematic. On more than one front.” He shook his head. “Still, this is quite fascinating. To create a thinking being, alive in its’ own way… it is simply remarkable.”

“You would say that,” Alastor said drily. “Let’s just hope that Potter, his girl, and their friends can keep them on the right path. For their own sakes.”

“Indeed,” Albus said. “All life is precious, no matter its origins. We will have to put faith in Harry and his companions to guide them.”

July 31, 2024 - Suginami, Nakano General Hospital

Dudley sat in an available chair, watching the small party that was happening on the monitor. Harry’s fifteenth birthday was here, and his guild naturally threw a party for him, much to his cousin’s bemusement. That Harry didn’t think his birthday was something important on a personal level, was, sadly, no surprise for him.

To his shame, he had been one of the ones responsible for that outlook. He was the spoiled favorite, and Harry had been the unfavoriate who had to fight for everything he did get. It had felt nice at the time, but learning just how wrong he had been had forced him to take a hard look at himself, with his eyes open to the reality of what he had been a part of.

He did not like what he saw.

Oh, he could say it was because the wrong examples had been set for him, that he didn’t know any better, or a thousand other excuses, but that’s what they would be. Excuses. They didn’t excuse his actions back then, even if they gave perspective on why he had been such an ass. Without the protection of Piers’ dad keeping them from getting into trouble, and without his father molding him, Smeltings’ staff had been quick to start setting him straight.

He had started to watch the feeds, seeing what Harry was doing. Watching his cousin turn into a different person, fighting to stay alive, and keep his growing circle of friends alive, had been an eye opener. There, Harry didn’t have to worry about being “normal”, didn’t have to mask his feelings on something, and showed very little fear in the face of the dangers he faced almost every day.

“It’s funny, but for all he’s faced and had to do, SAO has been good for him,” came a voice. Dudley turned to see Selene Carlisle, the woman who was part of the team that kidnapped Harry, had been the reason he was trapped in there in the first place, and now one of those who was constantly watching and guarding him.

“Good for him?” Dudley asked. “How could being trapped in a game that can kill him, be good for him?”

Selene gave Harry’s physical body a look and then turned back to Dudley. “He’s more open,” she said. “Happier even. It’s something I noticed about him before this, even before he came along with us. He wasn’t a happy kid.”

“And I was partly responsible for that,” Dudley said, acknowledging the unspoken point. “I went along with mum and dad, taking how they treated him, and followed their lead. I was spoiled brat and a bully, and not just to him, either.”

Selene nodded. “You were, and it’s nice to see that he was right about you.”

He gave her a confused look. “Right about me?”
“That you can change for the better. I think he will be glad to see that when he gets out.” She turned back to the monitor. “And where did that mangy mutt wander off to this time?” She asked with some exasperation as she noticed that Sirius wasn’t present.

Dudley wondered that as well, but Ms. Hanaori not being in the room meant that Sirius hopefully had a minder with him to keep him in line.

**August 1, 2024 - Setagaya, Wainwright Safehouse**

Richard looked over the papers as he worked on summarizing what had happened since the last update was sent to Dumbledore. He knew that he wasn’t the only source of information the man had, not since the Shibas involved themselves, at any rate. Adding in Mister Black also gave him another source as well. On the other hand, they were Dumbledore’s only source of live and unfiltered recordings.

The Shibas at least allowed him that much.

*Ever since this job started, it’s been going wrong since SAO went live,* he thought to himself for what seemed like the thousandth time. *Mister Potter gets trapped in there, he constantly risks his life, and now we have the recent bombshell of two AIs adding themselves to the mix, and his figuring out that Kayaba was not only masking himself as a player, but which player that man is masking himself as.*

That Kayaba has interacted with the players as a fellow player wasn’t surprising in the least. If anything, the man would have done so as a way to stave off boredom. That it took this long for them to figure it out was only mildly concerning, but again, not surprising. It was obvious now, they all knew what to look for, but that was the benefit of hindsight. A hindsight, which Steel Phoenix used to figure him out.

His attempt to ensure that Yui and Strea didn’t blab had proven to be quite revealing.

The addition of two AIs to the mix was only mildly concerning right now. Neither had shown any hostile tendencies so far. If anything, they were friendly to the various players they encountered.

That was a plus.

**August 12, 2024 - Suginami, Nakano General Hospital**

Sirius stared at the monitor, listening to the discussion that was going on amongst the members of Harry’s guild, keeping his expression calm. He had been expecting something like this for some time now, to be honest.

“Why would he even think about staying in there?” He heard Dudley ask. He wore an earpiece that did an adequate job translating the Japanese into English. He couldn’t speak it past the basics, but he could at least understand it.

“Because of what he might lose when it ends,” Sirius replied. “I know you’ve been told that SAO has been good for him, and it has. He has a group of friends who are basically a family to him, a ‘wife’ in the sense that they’re married in there, and more.” He gave a sad smile. “For him, clearing SAO and getting out means he might lose all of that.” He smiled sadly. “Even when he gets out, I think he will want to stay close to them.”

It was a slow change. Dudley went from puzzled to thoughtful to determined in the space of a few moments.

"So I just have to figure out how to help him do that,” the young man muttered.
Sirius held himself to a smirk. That look was one Dudley shared with Harry. He was pretty sure it came from Lily's mother. It was one the Marauders had come to fear.

'Tell me this is impossible,' it said. 'I dare you. I love proving people totally wrong.'

And Sirius Black somehow knew Harry would have fewer worries when SAO ended than he thought. He looked around the room to see Kotoha on her cell phone, quietly talking on it. From what he could hear, she was informing either Takeru, or Kaoru, about the conversation which took place, and Harry coming clean to his guild.

He wondered what they would do about that... considering that many of them had placed bets on whether he would reveal magic’s existence himself, or if the others would figure it out. He had thought they would figure it out, personally. None of those kids were stupid.

He knew they had something in mind for that happening, though.

Kotoha finished her call, and put her phone away. “Well Mister Black, I think you will be pleased to note that Mister Potter won’t be in too much trouble from this. He will be reprimanded for this, but considering that this was already considered a likely possibility, plans are in place.”

“Plans?” Dudley asked. “What plans?”

Kotoha smiled. “Well, we are going to have to debrief all of them, including the AIs, if possible, brief them on the Statute of Secrecy, and then Mister Potter is going to be responsible for them,” she said. “In other words, he won’t be punished for breaking the statute, but he will have the responsibility of ensuring his friends don’t.”

Sirius nodded at that. “Creative,” he complimented. “Make him responsible for them violating it if they do, but so long as they don’t there is nothing to worry about. How long would he have to bear that responsibility?”

Kotoha shrugged. “Probably until they’re all adults, in which case the responsibility will individually fall on them,” she said. “As I said, I don’t see this as being a problem for him, considering just how close all of them are.”

Sirius shook his head, smiling and chuckling. "Like so much in his life right now, it's one thing after another."
Harry blocked the attack with his shield and used it to push his attacker back before slashing out with his sword, leaving a large gash on the mob’s flank. Silica quickly darted in to finish it off as he turned his attention to the next group of mobs in order to draw aggro. He spied Lux already in position for a flanking maneuver, while Silica was moving to hers.

This floor was significantly different from any he had been to. Not only was the safe zone relegated to only the teleport plaza, which was more a collection of tents and a central inn than anything else, but when they had arrived, they were informed by an NPC that the town was under attack and slowly being overrun.

Never let it be said Kayaba made the main quests needed to press on in SAO obtuse.

They had spent the last three days, fighting street by street, and slowly clearing areas of the town, being forced out, retaking those areas, and so on. It had taken a day for them to have the momentum to clear and secure the areas closer to the teleport plaza. It wasn’t helped that they had to be thorough, killing all of the mobs in specific area of the town in order to expand the safe zone, but they were almost done.

Progress wasn't so much difficult as it was but time consuming. The town's outskirts-- such as the area they were in-- were constantly contested. Drive the mobs out and if a group or two didn’t stay behind, it would be retaken by them for the same thing to have to be repeated the within a few hours.

_What was Kayaba thinking with this?_ He thought as he sidestepped a large orc leaping from the shadows and cut it in half. Outside of having to react to the occasional ambush, their tactics were fairly simple. He would go in and grab their attention, and then lead them around an open area, allowing his companions to start picking them off. Hit and run tactics, in other words.

_If we had more people, I would kite them around, giving me a better margin of safety, he thought._

_Or, better yet, we would have someone who’s dedicated tank. The only reason this is working is because I’m level eighty-nine and am using Mystic Blade’s Earth Affinity. Well, no point complaining about it, two more groups after this one and we’re done clearing this section of town. At least until the next assault. Hope the next group can hold them off._

Ten minutes later, they got the last of them, and relaxed as they felt the change as another section of the town was secured. At least for now, given that a force of mobs was likely to come and try to retake this section in an hour or so.

Hopefully they would have some backup by then. He really didn’t want to have to fight for this section again tomorrow.

“Everything clear?” He asked.

Getting confirmation from his companions, he nodded and sheathed his sword. He took a look around the area, looking for good observation points so they can hopefully see the mobs coming when they inevitably attempted to retake this section of the town. If that happened, depending on the size of the attacking force, they may be forced to withdraw. Again.

There was only so much that three people can do, despite the relative weakness of the mobs.
Numbers counted, after all. The only reason they could even manage what they had was because of how over leveled they were, but getting swarmed by dozens of mobs was a dicey proposition this far up.

Kirito’s advice on them focusing on grinding after they figured out Kayaba’s player identity was paying off though. They were all in the upper eighties to lower nineties now, aside from Strea, who was “only” in the mid-eighties.

He would feel happier if the others were here, but Asuna was at the improvised headquarters in the teleport plaza, coordinating the various parties on the floor, having taken charge of them, and Kirito, Rain, and Strea were in another section of town, clearing and securing it.

Yui was staying on a lower floor, as a contested town was no place for her. She wasn’t a fighter, and with how they had been pushed back to the teleport plaza twice before going with the current rotation, it was safer for her.

It was taking a hundred players to keep the town as secured as it was, while they had five scouting groups tearing apart what passed as a countryside on this floor, trying to find the source of the invasion. They were all running on little sleep, and if they couldn’t put a stop to this in a few days, they might have to get help from lower floors, just to have the manpower to keep a proper rotation going, and allowing them all to get some proper rest.

Exhaustion was the enemy here, and catching a few hours of sleep here and there wouldn’t cut it for too much longer.

He heard a call, and looked back, seeing a full party of Knights of Blood members heading in. Good, it meant that they could head back in, get some food, grab an unoccupied tent, and catch a nap.

###

Asuna rubbed her eyes tiredly as she marked the current status of the contested areas on the towns map. They weren’t secure, not yet, but for now, the pressure was off as they were all registered as cleared. They had about an hour before they would have to fight to maintain control of them, but she sent in fresh groups to replace those who had been fighting and give them a chance to rest.

Rest that she wanted as much as everyone else, but got even less since she was the one responsible for coordinating everything.

“You need to get some sleep,” a voice said.

Asuna turned to see Godfree, the commander of the Knights of Blood Vanguard teams, look at her with some concern. “I will, once all of the scouts get back,” she said. “The last report said that they were on their way, and it’s not like we have radio or anything for communications, just messages. We don’t even have a distribution list for those.”

“That would have made things easier,” Godfrey admitted. “But seriously, you need to get some sleep. The teams fighting manage to get a few hours, here and there, but have you been able to get more than an hour of sleep at any time in the last three days?”

“Earlier today, actually,” Asuna said. “I was able to get about two hours.”

Godfree chuckled and then looked at the map. “I see you sent Kuradeel’s squad to Hadrian’s location,” he said with a nod. “Good choice. He’s a solid team leader and wouldn’t see it as an insult to have to bring a full party to a place where you only had three handling it. Then again, it’s Hadrian,
Silica, and Lux.”

“One of the reasons I picked him,” Asuna said. “Saw him in action with his team on the sixty-third floor, against the floor boss. They did well, and had excellent teamwork and coordination. He’s also one of the few who Harry doesn’t have an opinion on.”

“And that reminds me, you and your guild seem to have distanced yourselves from Commander Heathcliff,” Godfree said. “I won’t pry, but it has been noticed.”

Asuna considered that, accepting the truth of Godfree’s statement. Their discovering that Heathcliff and Kayaba were one and the same had affected their relationship with him. Not that it was overly good to begin with, but the knowledge they have of the man was straining what had been an adequate working relationship.

Sadly, she couldn’t tell Godfree the truth. Kayaba had ensured that they couldn’t, and even if they could, it was virtually guaranteed that Godfree wouldn’t believe her anyway. Fortunately, she had a readily official reason.

“It’s more us trying to become more independent of him,” she said. “Not that we weren’t independent already, but being a part of the Assault Team does nominally make us subordinate to him in the eyes of others.” She chuckled. “And you have to remember, Harry has never fullytrusted him since they first met. He suspected that Heathcliff was trying to bank on some established reputations at the time, and it made a bad first impression on him. On me as well, when he explained his reasoning. Add in the increasing sentiment among others, that we’re just subordinates of his despite being a different guild, and I think you can see why.”

“So, pride then,” Godfree said with a nod. “Understandable, though those sentiments are foolish. Still, you’re still willing to work with and cooperate with him in battle.”

*Only because we haven’t found an excuse to expose him yet,* Asuna thought. “No point in not doing so,” she said instead. “We’re all need to work together if we wish to survive this.” Her eyes saw the message indicator highlight itself in her HUD. “Just a moment.”

She opened her menu and brought up the message. As she scanned it, her eyes widened and then she smiled coldly. Closing the message, she looked at Godfree. “I just got a message from one of the scouting parties,” she said. “I thought they were all on their way back, but it seems that their leader paused to have his party catch its’ breath, and he sent me this. They found where the mobs are coming from. About thirty minutes out from town along the road. Hopefully, it’s the only place.”

And if it wasn’t for the back and forth over the last two days that it had taken to make Jerin relatively secure, they would have found the origin point long ago, but with the mobs getting reinforcements every hour or so, they’d needed every available player

“Well then,” Godfree said. “You now have information on what we’re all looking for. Get some sleep, and if they have anything else, I will make note of it and brief you on it when you get up.”

Asuna nodded, and then walked out to make her way to find an available tent. Even with hundreds of people in the area around the teleport gate, and the tents many were reduced to using for the time being, there were still plenty of available ones for players to use. Which was useful, considering the limited availability of rooms at the inn.

Not that she had been able to avail herself of either all that much. She normally found a quiet corner of the tent they were using as an improvised headquarters to catch a brief nap.
Kirito looked over what seemed to be a fair sized camp for the mobs that had been assaulting Jerin, and watched as a large group of several hundred marched off. He knew from the scout's observations that they would split up at a crossroads near Jerin, but his primary concern was the camp itself.

Even without the large force of mobs that was marching off, it was still heavily defended. From his position, he could easily see close to a hundred mobs, and he knew more were waiting inside that he couldn’t see.

Not overly difficult for a raid of players really. Challenging, but not difficult. If it hadn’t been for the mobs respawning here to send in a fresh group every hour, they would have found this place and cleared it out on the first day.

Had SAO not been the deadly game it was, the location of the camp that served as the base of operations for the small army of mobs assaulting Jerin would have been considered halfway clever. Close enough to keep the pressure on, but far enough away to give the mobs time to respawn, intercept, and exhaust an assaulting force. A good tactical position, in other words.

If he had a chance to meet the dev responsible for this, barring Kayaba, Kirito fully intended to have some words with to them. Their ignorance of the fact that Kayaba would turn this into a death game be damned.

Boxing them all in Jerin had forced them to keep the majority of the Assault Team on lower floors. They would have been tripping over each other otherwise. Not to mention the coordination issues. Just coordinating the hundred and thirty or so players that were on the floor was taking everything Asuna had.

Good thing Asuna told the scouts to stay off the main road, he thought. It gave us a route to follow that wouldn’t get us spotted.

Too bad they couldn’t spare scouts sooner, but securing Jerin had taken priority. It had taken them three days to clear and secure enough of it to make something like this doable. Not unless they wanted to head back to Jerin and spend hours clearing it out again.

The moment this was taken, and Jerin wasn’t facing the pressure from being assaulted, the rest of the Assault Team could come up and deal with the next problem. Kirito already had a feeling that what they were dealing with was likely to be a theme for this floor as it was. Securing Jerin and this camp would allow them to adopt a bite and hold strategy if it only meant them forcing the mobs to move to a base further back. If that was the case, he would recommend that Asuna talk to Godfree and see if he could pry Heathcliff out of his tower so she could dump the problem on him. It would serve the bastard right. Or, she could simply dump it on Godfree, for that matter. The Knights of Blood’s vanguard commander and de facto second in command knew full well that she seriously needed some time to get some proper sleep, but that was for later. They had a job to do.

Right now, they had a camp to obliterate before heading back to town to get rid of the mobs that were right now moving to attack it. He shot a quick message to Asuna, informing her that a large group of mobs was on its way to attack Jerin. She had about thirty minutes of forewarning, and could hopefully get a raid into position for hold the mobs at the crossroads outside of town and keep them there long enough for his group to take this camp, leave a small detachment to keep it secure, and hit the attackers from behind.

He looked at the gathered players, seeing Rain and Strea already prepared, and nodded.
It was time to end this.

##

Strea loved having a weapon with the reach and damage her zweihander had, allowing her to do large sweeping attacks that could damage or kill multiple mobs at once. It lacked the damage potential of a battleaxe, or the reach of a spear, but it was a nice balance between the two.

She grunted as an attack bounced off her right pauldron, and immediately bum rushed the mob that did so, her weapon already moving into position for a sword skill to so she could hit it and it’s friends with the force of an avalanche. Appropriately enough, in her opinion, the sword skill was also called Avalanche.

Since she started training and getting experience with Steel Phoenix, she had quickly experienced the strengths and weaknesses of her choice of weapon, something which she only knew intellectually beforehand. At the same time, she learned from those same experiences just why most who wielded two-handed weapons often wore plate. She was ideal for doing a lot of damage in bursts, and to multiple mobs. This had the consequence that she had to also be ready for whoever was tanking them to lose aggro, and be able to take the hits when she got the mob’s attention.

She was glad that the conclusions her observations had led her to when it came to stat distributions had been more or less correct. Not perfectly ideal, but still correct. Add in the stat boosts provided by her gear, and despite being five levels below Kirito and Asuna, she had more health, and a significantly higher defense due to going with full plate.

Even as she got the attention of three mobs, she spied Kirito, and Rain already activating sword skills to start finishing them off. She repositioned herself into a defensive posture, sidestepping, parrying, and blocking attacks while her companions got to work.

The last mob shattered, and she took a look around the camp before spying a larger mob, one with an actual name, Corpsen, and two health bars. “That big and ugly one with two health bars over there,” she called out. “It’s probably the one we need to go after!”

Twenty players basically jumped on it, killing it in short order, causing the remaining mobs to run.

She sheathed her sword across her back and waited for everyone to sort themselves out. They needed to assign some members of the raid to stay behind just in case the mobs decided to come back. With a full detachment of Knights of Blood members, she personally thought that it would be best to let them handle it, but whoever their representative was might disagree, and they hadn’t sorted this out beforehand.

She hoped it wouldn’t delay them too long, she wanted to get back to fighting mobs. It was fun, if scary and dangerous. Glancing at her health she took out a potion and drank it down in order to top off her health.

**Crossroads**

Lux cut a mob across its chest with her blade, sidestepping the opportunistic attack done by the one next to it. Harry was to her left, using his Earth Affinity to boost his defense and keep the attention of several mobs buying the time for other players to finish them off. Silica was flitting in and out of the melee to either kill or wound a mob, drag a player out to recover, or both.

Seeing that her area was temporarily clear, she backed away for a moment and pulled out a potion. She had taken a number of minor hits in the last ten minutes, it was time to heal up. She saw the
persistent marks on her arms, and she didn’t doubt that her torso had them as well. Her health was still green, so using a crystal to heal would be a waste, despite the instant burst. A potion, despite the lower immediate healing, had the advantage of a brief period of regeneration. It was what experience had taught her. Use the potions to keep her health topped off and mitigate damage via regeneration, saving the crystals for when they were actually needed.

Drinking it, she stepped forward and bisected a mob that had gotten too close. She then parried a strike from another mob as the player right beside her killed it with a sword skill. She looked at him and saw the grim determination on his face as he looked at the next group of mobs to start approaching their position. She took a quick look at the main body of mobs and blinked.

There were far fewer of them now.

“Great,” her temporary companion sighed. “More of them.”

Lux waved over a couple of players who were unoccupied. “Look on the bright side,” she said.

“What would that be?”

“We’re almost done,” she said cheerfully and pointed to the main group of mobs. “Look.”

He did and sighed in relief and then looked briefly worried before calming himself. “Now we just have to hope that the group hitting the camp didn’t get forced back,” he said. “I really don’t want to have to clear these guys out, only to have the next group respawn and march in."

Lux nodded, understanding what he meant. Taking on eight to one odds was not good odds at any point in SAO, if only because of how much time it would take. A player could only carry so many healing items, even with skills and equipment that allowed one to carry more than the initial capacity limit, and to mitigate damage. But a constant stream of mobs in the numbers that they had been fighting would eventually exhaust the healing items of even the most over leveled, paranoid, and prepared player.

She had been conservative with her potions, but even so, her supply of healing potions was below half her capacity, and she would eventually have to start taking even more damage to make using healing crystals worthwhile. If she exhausted all of her potions and crystals, it would cost her close to a million col to replace them all, with the lion’s share being use to replace the healing crystals. She could easily afford it, but she would rather sink that kind of money into something lasting, like a good set of armor, rather than replacing consumables, no matter how useful they were in staying alive.

##

Silica backflipped away from the mob, her foot lashing out to kick its’ weapon, redirecting it to the side and into the ground. Getting her feet under her, she darted forward, her dagger already glowing with a sword skill so she could finish the kill. She looked at the player she assisted, glancing at his health bar to see if he was in any danger.

“You okay?” She asked, her dagger held in a ready position in case any more mobs got close.

Things were calming down, but that only meant that they now had breathing room, not that the fighting was getting close to being done.

The player nodded and got to his feet. “Yeah, thanks,” he said.

She nodded and gave a quick look around. She could see no individual players in any trouble, or separated from their groups, and then checked on Harry’s position.
He, Lux, and several other players were holding quite well, and seemed to be readying themselves for the next batch of mobs to approach them. Looking at the player, who was also surveying the area, she gave him a nudge.

“Let’s head over there,” she said, motioning towards Harry’s group.

“Yeah, let’s.”

As she got close to Harry, he glanced over to her and smiled. “Looks like they’re running low on mobs to throw at us,” he said cheerfully. “Thank God the mobs didn’t simply rush us en masse. Still, it’s odd that the rest aren’t just sending another wave.”

Silica looked at the mass of mobs that represented what was left of large number of mobs that had been making their way here. It was odd, considering that they had been sending detachments regularly, forcing them into almost constant combat for the last thirty minutes. Unless…

“Harry, maybe we should take the fight to them this time,” she said. “I think that Kirito and the others might have arrived.” She saw the familiar polygons of a mob shattering and then grinned. “Never mind, they have.”

Harry focused his gaze on the mobs and then grinned savagely.

##

Rain backed away to dodge the attack and watched as the mob was cut in half by Strea. She grinned at the AI and the two of them moved to go for the next one. The plan had been to send in individual parties to hit and run, drawing a few off at a time for the rest of the raid to pick off. Even with the likelihood that the main group’s attention was grabbed, the mob AI was being remarkably stupid for mobs on this floor. They demonstrated more tactics and leveraging their numbers in Jerin, and she wondered if the stupidity of them was the result of Kayaba’s own concept of “fair play”.

Well, if it was, she wasn’t going to complain.

“Assault group!” Kirito called. “You got their attention! Hold them there, but don’t get surrounded! Everyone else, let’s hit their flanks!”

She shouted out her affirmation, and got Strea’s attention.

"Fancy a bit of a ground war, Strea?" Rain asked.

"Rain, I hang out with you guys for a reason," Strea answered with a smirk as she readied her sword.

##

Harry had pulled thirty players from the raid he was in to assault the main group of mobs, and they hit them like a freight train, cutting down dozens before their momentum slowed. He had already spied Kirito leading a group of players to hit the flanks, the Black Swordsman tearing through the mass in a whirlwind of blades.

Five minutes later, his group had linked up with Kirito’s. Five minutes after that, they were finishing off the remaining mobs.

Taking a look around to see if there were any mobs remaining and finding none, Harry sheathed his sword and let out a breath.
“You guys took out more than I expected,” Kirito said. “If we had still been on our way, you guys wouldn’t have left any for us.”

“Their AI was less than stellar,” he replied. “How’d it go at the camp?”

Kirito shrugged. “Once we killed the mob that was their boss, the rest decided that they had somewhere else they needed to be,” he said. “Left about a dozen guys there to make sure that they didn’t just move back in. Don’t expect it to happen, but better to be safe.”

“Any casualties?”

“Only the mobs.”

Harry chuckled. “Well, might as well head to the camp before we tell Asuna that we did it,” he noted. “It would be embarrassing if we said it was all done, only to find out that the mob AI figured out that it can retake the place. I don’t want to have to do this again, and Asuna would probably stab us on general principle for it.”

“True.” Kirito said with a laugh.

**Aincrad, 61st Floor, Selmburg**

Asuna could feel her exhaustion weigh on her as everyone cleared the teleport gate. It might only be around noon, but she had gotten, at best, five or six hours of sleep in the last few days. Tiredness and exhaustion might be handled differently in SAO, but a few days of little to no sleep would still take its toll, and she had maybe five or six hours of sleep total over the last several days.

So after getting confirmation that Jerin was secure, at least as far as they knew, she turned things over to Godfree, gathered her guildmates, picked Yui up in Serendia, and was now making her way back to the villa.

“When we get back to the villa, I’m getting some sleep,” Rain said with a yawn.

“Seconded,” Lux said tiredly as the others mumbled their own agreement. Well, aside from Yui, but she, at least, managed to get a full night’s sleep each night since this started.

Asuna nodded. Outside of sleep, she also wanted a bath, but sleep took priority for right now. She did know that they all had to discuss things first, though. Nothing that couldn’t wait until they reached the villa, but she did have to keep those in mind.

It was about ten minutes later when they got there, and after entering, she called for them to remain for a bit.

“I know everyone wants to go to their rooms and get some sleep,” she began. “But I want to discuss the last few days, and what happened, and how we can ensure that, if there’s a next time, we don’t have the problems we had early on.”

They all nodded.

“We took some bigger risks than normal,” Harry said. “The numbers in each part of the city would give a full party trouble, and we were taking them on as groups of three. We managed it, but what if the mob groups managed to use their numbers?”

“And when we intercepted the ones coming in to assault Jerin, they AI wasn’t exactly the best, even by the standards of mob AI,” Lux added. “Otherwise they would have done just that and
overwhelmed us. Overleveled or not, eight to one odds are not good odds to be going up against.”

Asuna nodded, she had heard about that, and was thankful that they at least had that particular mercy. It made the pitched battle at the crossroads doable.

“I think I see the logic of this floor,” Kirito said. “It’s like a Real Time Strategy, or RTS, game in that regard. We just completed the first phase of that battle, secure our base, and are probably now in the consolidation part.”

“Consolidation?” Harry asked. “What do you mean by that?”

“He means that we have some breathing room right now to get everything set up,” Rain said, nodding. “But we still have objectives to complete. How much do you want to bet that many of the quests in Jerin are about getting resources?”

“Exactly,” Kirito said. “Gather resources, start scouting, and fend off periodic attacks. It’s a classic RTS staple. I wouldn’t be surprised if the floor’s field boss is located in a heavily defended camp that blocks the way to the labyrinth.”

“And that means…?” Harry prompted.

“It means that we’re done with the easy part,” Kirito stated.

“Thank you for that Kirito, I was tired of sleeping at night,” Asuna said drily. “As if taking command was bad enough.”

“Dump it on Godfree,” Silica said. “Or if Heathcliff shows up, dump it on him. Would serve the bastard right.”

“Agreed,” Asuna said and then yawned. “Anything else?” Everyone shook their heads. “Then I propose we adjourn this meeting and get some sleep.”

**September 6, 2024 - Aincrad 69th Floor, Kladina Plains**

Godfree looked over the plains, searching for signs of any mob scouting group. While progress on the floor hadn’t gone anywhere, he remembered what had been passed to him by Steel Phoenix about Kirito’s thinking that the floor was designed like an RTS stage. He had to admit, it made some sense, especially when groups of mobs would come and harass everyone.

Nothing that was a threat to anyone with a modicum of preparation, but they were still an annoyance. The occasional sizeable raiding group of mobs were more of a concern, but were fairly easily dealt with.

It still didn’t change the fact that, if the floor was designed that way, they didn’t know what applicable conditions or objectives were required to be met, and he hoped that they would find out soon. Or, at least get lucky enough to find something that would point them in the right direction.

“Godfree,” he heard Kuradeel say.

“Anything to report?” He asked as he turned to the man.

“We haven’t seen any signs of any harassment forces, or even a raiding force so far,” Kuradeel said.

Nodding, Godfree looked northward. “Let’s head to the camp that we took to stop the attacks on Jerin then,” he said. “We can rest there for a few minutes, and sweep the area one last time before
heading back to town. I’ll message the other groups to meet us there.”

“Very well,” Kuradeel said before moving off to gather the rest of the party.

Godfree looked around a bit more and messaged the other parties which were patrolling the Kladina Plains. They would discuss any findings, or the lack thereof more likely while they all took some time to rest for a moment. If anything of clear import had been seen, it would have already been reported to him, but there might have been something seen that was only apparent later.

He honestly didn’t expect anything outside what had already been the case since Jerin had been secured. There were roving bands of mobs which were harassing the players, and the occasional raiding group that had to be dealt with, but most of the players were doing the quests that had opened up in Jerin.

Quests which had centered around clearing paths and routes, or gathering some kind of resource, so that the damage could be repaired, now that he thought about it.

*Well, Kirito was right, he thought. This is just like some RTS missions, meaning that we might not be able to progress on this floor until Jerin’s damage has been repaired. So, maybe two or three days, unless we stumble upon something.*

He knew that it might not be that way, but with how the floor seemed to be structured, it probably was.
Battle on the Plains

September 6, 2024 - Aincrad, GM Administration Area

Kayaba looked over the summarized data that CARDINAL had provided him about the events that were the start of the Assault Team’s efforts on the sixty-ninth floor. He had already read and listened to the reports from those of his guild who had been there, which provided insights that the rather dry summations based on data couldn’t, but there were details within the data that those reports lacked.

He called up the developer’s notes on the floor and recalled the justifications for it. Due to Aincrad’s size, one of the developers thought that making the floor run on the theme of an RTS, mixed with MMO elements could serve as a nice change of pace. If SAO hadn’t been the death game it was, he could even see that. However, SAO was a death game, meaning that the players faced real dangers in this.

Unfortunately, changing it would have pushed back the release far more than was acceptable, and when the game went live, it was too late. He had been too busy isolating those issues missed during the Beta, and later forming and training the Knights of Blood up to help the players overcome the shocks to their system he had known the Twenty-Fifth would provide.

He had to admit, Asuna had exceeded his expectations in how she took charge. He had seen her leadership before, showing a good eye for the fights and how to maximize the survivability of the participants. But that was with regard to fighting individual battles, not the simulated warfare that was the sixty-ninth floor. So, to find that she had taken charge and managed that part of the sixty-ninth floor as well as she did was impressive.

At the same time, he knew from Godfree’s report that she had worked herself nearly to collapse in doing so, getting less sleep than any of the others. Admittedly, the situation required them to deal with things immediately, meaning that she didn’t have time to establish a chain of command, or even a proper channel of communication that could be managed by whomever she could delegate responsibility to. In the short term, it was workable. In the long term, it was not.

Hopefully she realized that and wouldn’t take it all upon herself in the longer term. She was the one he would prefer to lead the Assault Team, though not the only one who could do so, when things finally ran their course and he exposed himself. Or was exposed by someone else, for that matter.

He even knew which boss battles over the next ten floors would be the most likely culprits for the latter coming to pass.

September 8, 2024 - Aincrad 69th Floor, Molstarin Bridge

“I really don’t like the look of this.”

Kirito grunted in agreement at Asuna’s comment. The sight of approximately five hundred mobs, give or take, blocking their path across it was definitely worrying. Especially with approximately half of them on the bridge, meaning that clearing it so that they could assault the camp on the other side would be difficult at best.

There weren’t any fortifications. But it didn’t even need fortifications to be a major obstacle for them. The bridge itself was narrow enough to make it so that they wouldn’t have much in the way of space to work with, hindering their mobility.
“This is going to be a tough one,” Kirito said and then looked at Asuna. “You sure you should be out here?”

“Yes,” she replied firmly. “Heathcliff finally deigned to grace us with his presence, and was willing to take over for the next few days.” She looked out over the bridge, her hand gripping the hilt of her rapier. “I learned my lesson, and while some people seem to think I would be best served back in Jerin running things, I prefer to be out here.” She looked at the mobs from their shared vantage point. “So, what do you think?”

Kirito gave the mobs one more look. “It looks like maybe about half of them are to be a blocking force on the bridge itself,” he said as he pulled out and unrolled a map. “The rest are probably gathering for a big push to keep us on our toes. And that’s if they don’t simply all come at us.”

“So more of the same?” Asuna asked.

“Maybe not more of the same. Look over there, that one group making its way to the front of the mobs,” Kirito said, pointing.

Asuna did so and looked back at Kirito. “Damn, that’s not good,” she said grimly. “Minotaurs.”

Kirito nodded. “We need to return to Jerin so we can pass on this information,” he said. “I saw about fifty.”

“That sounds about right,” Asuna replied as she took out a teleport crystal. “We can’t waste time.”

**Jerin**

Asuna looked around at the people at the table, meeting their eyes individually and taking a mental count of the attendees. “Good, everyone’s here,” she said. “Kirito and I were scouting around the Molstarin Bridge, seeing what the mobs were up to around their main camp. We saw a large force of mobs gathering, about five hundred or so. It might be more now, but that’s not the main issue. We have three hundred people up here, so we can handle three or four times that with little problem. The problem is, that we saw fifty minotaurs joining up with them, and that number is likely to grow.”

Everyone started swearing at that revelation. Minotaurs were among the toughest regular mobs, often requiring groups of players to engage and defeat with any modicum of safety. Well, safety by their standards. People Outside would most certainly not consider what they thought of a safe enough as safe.

Minotaurs were easy enough to kill on their own, but groups of them were often given a wide berth unless necessary. The trick was to get in close, inside their reach, and disable their legs to bring them to the ground. The hard part was getting inside their reach, which was long enough to keep even spear wielders at a distance, and the large mobs were a lot more nimble than they looked.

A force of five or six hundred mobs wouldn’t be a problem for them. They could use half the numbers they actually had on the floor and wipe out the mobs with little risk, while still completing the various objectives they were determining they still had to complete on the floor. If it weren’t for the presence of the minotaurs. With the minotaurs, they would need every available player on the floor, and even then, would potentially be fighting from a position of weakness, depending on the numbers that got arrayed against them.

“This stands to set us back,” Klein said grimly. “I wasn’t here for when you all cleared the town, but I heard that it was tough fighting.”

“Indeed,” Heathcliff said, looking at the map. “Worse, we don’t have any terrain to use to our
advantage between here and the Molstarin Bridge. The only potential bottlenecks would require us to let, or lead them into the town itself. Fighting such a force street by street is certainly less than desirable.” He looked up from the map. “Still, despite the difficulty this will present, it doesn’t strike me as impossible.”

Asuna met his gaze. “No, it isn’t,” she said. “As Harry would like to say, Kayaba is fair in his own way, for a given definition on the term. He might make something difficult, but he would not intentionally make something impossible to do. Provided we figure out a way.” And she understood why he said that. Despite the horrific casualties during their first month in SAO, not to mention to brutal wake-up call that was the Twenty-Fifth, it could have been worse.

“And where is Hadrian?” Heathcliff asked.

“He took on a quest that’s in the Derril Forest which might have the potential of equalizing some things,” Asuna said. “He took the others with him, since Kirito and I decided to do some scouting.”

“What about the minotaurs?” Klein asked. “No matter what kind of plan we come up with, we have to factor them in.”

Asuna nodded. “Potentially, but we can’t count on it right now,” she said. “With such a gathering of mobs, it is too likely that they will attack soon, and I don’t know if he is almost done, yet.” She looked around. “I can call him and the others back, if needed, but five extra blades won’t make that much of a difference.”

“What about the minotaurs?” Klein asked. “No matter what kind of plan we come up with, we have to factor them in.”

Asuna nodded. “We need to know if they’re being kept as a group, or are being filtered among the rest of the mobs,” she said. “If they’re a group, we can task a combined group of raids to handle them, while the rest of us take care of the other mobs. If they’re spread through, then it will be a bit more difficult, as we have to deal with them while also fighting the rest of the mobs.” She looked around. “I’m open to suggestions.”

Derril Forest

“What’s with this forest?” Rain asked irritably as she plodded along through the mud caked ground. “It’s muddier than Russia during the Rasputitsa. This quest had better be worth it.”

“You’d think all the trees would firm up the ground a bit with their roots,” Harry grumbled as his next step sunk his foot into the mud with a wet squelch. He grimaced as he felt some muddy water enter his boot and sighed.

They had been travelling through the forest for two miserable hours. They were wet, caked in mud which wouldn’t get off their gear until they had a chance to get to someplace that had firm ground so they wouldn’t get more on them, and had been slowed by that same mud.

It made fighting the mobs that inhabited the forest a chore to fight. Being unable to move around quickly had increased the difficulty of fighting them, though not to the point where they were significantly more dangerous than normal. Having their ability to move in some manner restricted was something they had learned how to deal with a long time ago, no matter how much they hated it.

He paused as he heard something and held his hand up.

“You guys hear that?” He asked.

“Voices,” Lux said as she looked around, before stopping with her gaze off to the right. “It sounds
like they’re coming from over there.”

Harry nodded. “Let’s check it out, but be careful,” he said. “We don’t know if they’re friendly, NPCs, or something else.” He almost made the decision to split the group, with Rain and Lux accompanying Strea, while he and his wife moved ahead, but decided not to. They hadn’t run into all that many mobs, and they certainly weren’t much of a challenge, the environment aside, but he didn’t want to risk that suddenly changing while they were split up.

They all began to slowly and quietly move in the direction of the voices. The ground began to firm up as they made their way, and by the time they reached a clearing, it was firm enough to support their weight. A small comfort, but it didn’t stop Harry from relaxing slightly to feel firm ground under his own feet. Not enough to make him any less alert, but not having the terrain actively slowing and hindering him and the others was a relief.

He saw the origin of the voices, a pair of NPCs, and as they approached, he was able to make out that they were debating the wisdom of some course of action.

“And what will we do now?” One asked. “We can’t simply fight them in the streets of Jerin.”

“And where else can we fight them, Harvald?” Another asked. “They’re in the town now, and it is not like we can simply draw them out!”

“And if we fought them there, they would carve us up!” Harvald argued. “Fighting in the streets is not what we’re suited for, Geldan. They outnumber us five to one, and without the room to get a good charge going, they would stop us cold.”

Harry waited for a moment and listened in on the conversation, listening to it loop a couple of times so he could get the entire story. Apparently, they were a detachment of knights who had previously been responsible for keeping the mob population down, until an invasion of mobs hit Jerin and forced them out of the town and into the forest.

*Good,* he thought. *This is where the quest wanted us to go, then.* The quest had become available once the outskirts had been sufficiently repaired, providing a stable where these men had probably kept their mounts. From the sounds of it, when he had enquired about it with the NPC who acted as a stable hand, it would give the players an offensive punch while they dealt with the mobs, while also securing the Kladina Plains, freeing up more players from having to patrol them and serve as lookouts for any large groups of mobs. And anything that would allow more players to concentrate more on clearing the floor, instead of having to work on that while also patrolling and fending off raids from the mobs was a good thing in his mind.

He turned to the others. “Take a moment to rest, I’ll talk to them and find out what we need to do to finish the quest,” he said. As the girls sat down and brought out some drinks and light snacks, he turned and made his way to the pair of NPCs. As he approached, they turned their attention to him.

“And an odd place for a traveler to be, can we help you?” One, Harvald if he recalled, asked.

“A more appropriate question, is if I and my companions can be of assistance to you, Sir Knight,” Harry replied easily. “I had been directed here from Jerin.”

“You came from Jerin?” Harvald asked. “But the invasion of monsters had forced us away, and we had been forced back repeatedly when we tried to return and assist it.”

“Indeed,” Harry replied. “It had taken us days of fighting to drive them out and find out where they were coming from. Once we had, the town was secured, though we have had to deal with periodic
raids since.”

“They were probably coming from the direction of the Molstarin Bridge to the east of Jerin,” the other, Geldan, said. “When they arrived so suddenly, they had set up camp on the other side of it, blocking access to the Sky Tower. Not that they would have been able to enter it, due to the protections on the entrance keeping their kind out.”

Sky Tower? Harry thought before mentally defining it as a likely probable reference to the floor’s labyrinth. From the perspective of the NPCs, it would look like it extended into the sky. That it was apparently protected in a way to keep mobs from simply waltzing in was a nice bit of fluff, though. Didn’t say anything about what was inside, but it did mean that they didn’t have to worry about mobs from outside of it.

That seemed to happen often enough for them, at least near the entrance to it, that those occasions where it didn’t was a pleasant change. Some of the mobs near a labyrinth could be fairly nasty, so a lack of them was appreciated.

“So, since Jerin is secure, you knights, as well as the rest, can return to protect Jerin,” he said, prompting them to reveal what next was needed so that they could.

“Indeed, good sir,” Harvald said. “Our camp is nearby, and we will inform our companions there, as well as send messengers to other camps. We will be back in Jerin shortly.”

That’s it? Harry wondered as a notification popped up in his HUD that this part of the quest was complete and he could turn it in. “My thanks, Sir Knight. Your return will reassure the people of the town, and will certainly be of great assistance,” he said.

“Indeed traveler, I wish you well.”

Harry nodded and turned to walk back to the others. Of course, just because this quest was done, didn’t mean that the second they turned it in, a following quest to deal with something that they didn’t know about wouldn’t immediately turn up, but he wasn’t going to complain. It was annoying enough to simply get to this place.

“So, what do we have to do now?” Rain asked from where she sat once he got closer.

“We can return to town,” he informed her.

“Wait, that’s it?” Silica asked. “No going elsewhere into the forest, or somewhere else on the floor, to find something? You know, to deal with any illness that’s stuck, or to prove that we’re trustworthy?”

“That’s it.”

“I should be disappointed that’s it, but quests as… simple as this, despite the issues of getting here, are nice,” she concluded. “Of course, how much do you want to bet that the second we turn it in, we will find out that we have to come back to this place and do something else? Perhaps to find more knights?”

They all shared a laugh.

“Of course that would happen,” Lux said lightly. “Forcing us to come back here and play in the mud some more would happen.”

“Can we just get back to town?” Strea whined. “I want a bath, and I don’t care if the system takes
care of the mess. I still feel dirty, and the mud’s gotten into places I didn’t even know it could that one time I tripped and fell.”

“Could be worse, though,” Harry said. “It could have sent us into a flooded and clogged sewer full of all sorts of unpleasant smelling things.”

Rain wrinkled her nose and made a noise of disgust. “Thank you for ensuring that we will have to do so in the next month,” she said sarcastically. “Any other things you want to jinx us into doing?”

“Let’s just get back to town and turn this quest in,” Silica chimed in. “A bath sounds good right now.”

Harry would be pleasantly surprised when nothing came up when he turned in the quest. He had expected something else. He was, however, unsurprised when he found out that there was a large gathering of mobs at the Molstarin Bridge that appeared to be mobilizing. Looks like they would be finding out just how effective those knights would be soon enough.

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Silica sidestepped the mob’s attack and darted in, her dagger already glowing with a sword skill to plunge it into what would pass for the mob’s heart, or whatever. It really didn’t matter, as its health bar had emptied as she was leaping away to avoid a strike from another mob.

She had taken half a dozen shallow wounds so far, the reddish-pink markings mostly on her arms. Fortunately, her health was still high enough that she didn’t have to worry about healing for the time being. She didn’t have the time to back off and pull out a potion to heal herself.

The fighting had been constant for the last half hour as nearly every player on the floor had been pulled in to stop this latest attack, with a small group left behind to act as a reserve if necessary.

*When this is over, I am letting Asuna know that perhaps we should have drawn them out, rather than simply wait to give them the time to build their numbers before moving,* she thought to herself.

The mob AI, not overly bright to begin with, was acting more in line with what the lower floors had, making them laughably predictable and easy to kill. On the other hand, it made up for the less intelligent mob AI by sheer weight of numbers.

It was almost insulting in a way. The system was making up for the fact that they had faced what it could throw at them by simply trying to drown them in mobs. Well, the mass of normal mobs were something that they could manage, even though it would take them time to kill all of them. It was the addition of minotaurs which served as a potential problem.

They had to task a far larger number of players to handle them than she liked, but given how tough minotaurs were, it wasn’t as if they had much choice.

At least those knights which had been added to their forces due to that quest pulled their own weight in the fight. The few charges that they were able to make before being forced to withdraw managed to reduce the attacking force significantly. The sound of several hundred charging horses and the sight of those knights crashing into the mobs made her very thankful that they didn’t have to deal with enemy cavalry.

Individually, they were less powerful than players, but the force of what had to be up to a thousand kilos of horse and rider, multiplied by their numbers, meant that they charged over and through any mobs, and even the minotaurs that did get hit by the cavalry charge died.

It made the battle much more manageable.
She absently dodged around and slit the throat of a mob that somehow managed to get behind her and focused on the battle in front of her. The battle wasn’t over yet, even if it looked to finally be winding down.

She heard a minotaur’s scream and wondered how Harry was doing.

##

Harry dodged the swing by the minotaur and used the momentum of his movement to get behind it. Slashing out with a Horizontal to the back of its knee, he leapt back as it turned and retaliated. He would use the Mystic Blade’s Earth Aspect, but the one solid hit that connected when he did had him landing on his back five meters away.

_Thank you, Sir Isaac Newton_, he thought sarcastically as he moved around the minotaur’s attempts to strike him. It was a good reminder for him, that despite the firmer footing and defensive advantages that particular elemental aspect granted him, the laws of physics still applied. It was also a warning to him about the dangers of getting complacent due to relying on a tool, no matter how useful. He could make do without using it right now, and trusting in his mobility.

_Worry about that later_, he firmly told himself as he again dodged around the minotaur and laid another damaging blow to the back of its knee, sending it crashing to the ground. Three nearby players, Strea among them, jumped on it, weapons flashing, finishing it off. He gave them a nod, and looked around the immediate area, seeing no remaining minotaurs in the immediate area.

“Looks like we’re clear here,” he told them. “Anyone seeing any more nearby that we should engage?”

“I think that’s all of them,” Strea said. “Should we go look for more, or help the others with the small fry?”

Harry took another look around. The nearest minotaurs were already engaged, and he saw two more go down in quick succession. “Let’s work on the smaller ones,” he said. “It looks like things are-” He stopped as he heard a roar that he felt reverberate through his body, causing any and all mobs that weren’t already engaged to back away. Turning in the direction of it, his eyes widened as he caught sight of a giant something.

His mind tried to identify what kind of mob it was, but it kept coming up short. If anything, it looked like an unholy amalgamation of over a dozen mob types of them, but the proportions… they were all wrong. The torso was too small and fat, the limbs were longer and far gaunter than they should be, not to mention bending in unnatural ways, and its head… there were too many eyes, to say the least about how many faces seemed to be mashed together on it. _How the fuck is that thing keeping itself upright?_ He thought. _More importantly, what is that thing?_

“What is that?!” Strea asked in shock.

“_That, Strea, is trouble._” He said grimly. He focused on it and couldn’t make out the details of its health status. “Damn it,” he swore. “Either it’s still too far away for me to make out how many health bars it has, or worse, Kayaba fucked up, and we now have to deal with something that shouldn’t be here.” Either option was not reassuring, though he hoped it was the former. That would mean that he had simply underestimated its size and how far away it was. If it was the latter, however...

“Strea, shoot a message to everyone in the guild,” he ordered. “Have them grab anyone who is free to help us against this… this thing. We are about to be in some shit and we’ll need backup, a lot of backup.” He said. “Everyone else, if you have any potions or crystals which can buff you, especially
“On it,” Strea said as she hurriedly opened her menu and began to type out a message. From the looks of thing, it looked like she was sending a mass message to everyone in the guild, and possibly anyone else she knew the names of.

Harry continued to keep his eyes on it, noting that the familiar feeling of his testicles trying to crawl up into his throat from fear was more pronounced than it had been for some time. If there was something to actually be terrified of, he was looking at it, he knew.

Rain ran toward where the roar sounded, using the fact that the mobs had backed off. She cursed the fact that the sheer scale of the battle had forced everyone to scatter from their initially cohesive team. They were all probably closer than they thought, but the fact that she had to concentrate on the mobs in front of her meant that she couldn’t even rejoin with the others.

She glanced out the corner of her eye and saw a member of the Knights of Blood.

“Coming my way?” She asked, not breaking her stride.

“Yes,” the man said. “I heard it, and if everything’s backing off…”

“Yeah, bad things,” she said before skidding to a halt as she got a clear look at what she was heading toward. “What’s that thing?!”

“What?” The man asked and then saw what she was looking at. “What the fuck is that thing?!”

“That’s what I just asked,” Rain said, her eyes still wide from seeing it.

“You did?” He asked before shaking his head. “Never mind, I need to send a message to the rest of my squad, and then let the Commander know that we’re facing against some crime against nature, even by SAO’s standards. Going to have to send an image of this thing,” he mumbled as he then opened up his inventory. “Let’s see, where is it? Ah, found it.” He pulled out an image crystal.

“Do it, I’m going to find out if anyone in my guild is here,” she said and then paused to give him a look. “I’ve seen you around, but what’s your name again?”

“Kuradeel,” he said. “And you’re Rain, from Steel Phoenix, right?”

She nodded.

“Go then, I’ll be behind you shortly.”

Rain gave him a nod and then ran off. She found a group of players who were gathering, seeing some familiar profiles. Looks like I’m not the only one who heard it, she thought.

Jerin

Heathcliff read the message he was sent by Kuradeel, and then gave the captured image that was included a hard look. That thing wasn’t supposed to be on this floor. The mob that should have flagged as the commander and made itself known after a certain point was supposed to be a more buffed up, not to mention well-armed, minotaur, not something that was an event boss for a quest on the ninety-third floor.

How did it happen? Was there an improperly set event flag? A lingering result of Sugou’s worm
from those months ago? Or was it one of those issues he missed when he was more focused on finding and fixing them?

Damn it, if it was something I missed, how and why did I miss it? He thought to himself. I spent several months sorting out various issues when all this started. I should have known about and fixed this.

At least, he hoped he would have. Considering the number of minor and not so minor problems that he had to sort out, something like this would have been a red flag for him.

And it probably would have been one, had it caught my eye, he allowed himself.

But he was so focused on the lower floors back then and he could have simply put this off as something he would have time to fix later. Given how rapidly the initial push up Aincrad’s floors had progressed, his working day and night to stay ahead of the then nascent Assault Team, and his own forming the Knights of Blood, that was a far too likely reason.

He frowned and shook his head. No excuses. If that was the case, then it was almost guaranteed that there were other events that were examples.

That led to the sobering thought than his players were incredibly lucky to avoid the other examples if that was the case... or the players had taken the early, if harsh, lessons to heart and made sure that they were over leveled.

Neither one particularly appealed to the part of him that was game designer and GM.

“Godfree,” he said. “I am grabbing a mount, and what NPC knights might be available. Those fighting in the battle have uncovered the commander of the mobs.”

“Sir?” Godfree asked.

“Something doesn’t seem right,” he said. “I need to be there and see it with my own eyes. The knights can be sacrificed if needed, in case we have to retreat.”

Heathcliff then turned and walked out of the tent that served as a command post. He would gather the knights and bring them to the battle. The offensive punch given by them might be enough, and if not, then they were expendable and could be used to cover the retreat.

It took him twenty minutes to gather enough knights for what he needed to do. It took him another twenty to get them in position to charge it. And he had to admit, as he watched to see the appropriate time to charge, everyone was doing quite well. The only thing that stayed his hand in leading the knight in a charge was what he saw shortly after his arrival.

Charging into it would risk many of the players, and what they were doing certainly was bold. Reckless, but bold. It had all the hallmarks of something Hadrian would come up with in the middle of a battle to turn a situation around before things became desperate.

Given the tendency for such plans to work, he was willing to see how this played out. If it worked, then they would emerge victorious, and if he remembered correctly, many of the players would receive some gear that would be a marked improvement over anything they had. The one who got the last attack in, would get something special.

And if it didn’t work, he had enough knights to charge in to extricate as many players as was doable.

Kladina Plains
When the boss had gotten close enough for them to have to engage, a hundred and fifty players had gathered to face it. Not once had its health bars shown themselves, meaning that it was high leveled enough that even those who had skills which allowed them to discern its stats couldn’t, meaning that it was something that was at least appropriate for a floor in the eighties.

Asuna had made the decision to divide them all into several groups, with about fifty players to handle any mobs that decided to wander in. Considering that there was still a small army of them present, she considered that a prudent idea.

After the battle began, it killed five players in one shot within minutes and almost broke the resolve of those fighting it. As it was, thirty players, pulled out teleport crystals after witnessing that, and fled the battle.

Asuna wanted to rage at them, calling them cowards for running like that, but her need to focus on the fight meant that she wasn’t even aware of it until the deed was done. And it wasn’t as if she didn’t understand. She was tempted to call for a retreat as it was, but stopped herself from doing so.

Despite the shock of facing something that was clearly didn’t belong this floor, and its deceptively quick movements and attacks, its patterns were thankfully basic. Deadly if misjudged, but basic. Not that it needed advanced pattern, with how strong it clearly was.

“First through third teams, back off and heal up!” She ordered. “If you got buff potions or crystals, hold off on them before heading back in! Fourth, fifth, and sixth teams, buff up and come with me! We’re going in!”

“Man, I hope you’re all greased up right now!” One joker said. “Because this fucker’s giving it raw and rough!”

“Just to you, Klein!” Another said, she thought it was Harry, but in the clamor of battle, making out individual voices was difficult. “Did you buy it dinner? Or did you just decide to feed us to it?”

“If it ate you, you would give it gas that smells worse than Dale’s farts!”

“Hey!” Came another voice

Asuna snorted, as she heard the banter. If they were joking like that, then apparently morale wasn’t broken. Not yet, at least. And if it was Harry and Klein doing the banter, then she knew she had some solid support just in those two, and if they were there, then Silica was probably near Harry, and Klein’s friends were also present.

“Well, looks like they’re in good spirits,” Kirito said from beside her.

Asuna smiled. “Let’s get to it then,” she said.

##

Kirito jumped back from a retaliatory attack from what they were fighting, the attack barely missing him. He didn’t even know its name, and he wasn’t inclined to stop and look anyway. He was a part of the teams that were doing an attack run, pausing long enough to learn such minor information was far too dangerous.

Considering that they had been at this for over half an hour, he thought that they were making good progress so far, despite them not knowing just how much damage they had done to it so far.

Oh well, he would pay attention for any unusual tells, and be ready to get some distance, as they
were often indicative of a change to its attack patterns. And a change in attack patterns was the usual sign that the fight was almost over. Not that a fight being almost over didn’t mean that things got any easier.

If anything, they got more dangerous, as if such mobs were programmed to try and give them all one last “fuck you” and take as many of them with it as possible. Most deaths during boss fights happened during the latter stages of the fight.

As much as he would like to hit it with a devastating attack like the Starburst Stream that he finally got the hang of, the post motion lockup on his body was too long, and would leave him wide open for the boss monster to counterattack him. Even the effective and damaging Crimson Splash was risky, forcing him to rely on more basic skills like the Double Circular to allow him to recover quickly enough.

“Kirito!” He heard Harry shout. “Get over here real quick! You too, Asuna! I have an idea!”

He looked to the side and saw his friend next to Rain, his sword having a blue aura to it, unlike the burning of his Fire Aspect, or the yellowish brown of his Earth Affinity. It might be his rarely used Water Affinity, but he couldn’t be sure. Dashing over to him, he spied Asuna coming as well. Harry didn’t shout out like that in a fight unless he had something in mind. Knowing him, it was either reckless, insane, or both.

If it wasn’t for the fact that Harry’s in battle ideas tended to work, he would worry more.

“We’re here, Harry, what crazy idea are you pulling out of your ass this time?” Kirito asked. “By the way, where are the others?”

“They’re busy with others policing up any mobs that wander in, so they couldn’t be here,” Harry replied. He shook his head. “I don’t know how much damage we’ve dealt it, but that… thing… has to be changing patterns soon. And I don’t know about you, but considering how dangerous it is right now, when it does…”

“It’ll be a slaughter,” Asuna said. “So, what idea do you have to deal with it?”

“We need to burn it down quickly,” Harry said. “Now, I can use the fire aspect and transfer it to you all, which will boost damage, and if we all hit it with the right timing, we can stagger it.”

“Stagger it?” Rain asked.

“I see what your idea is,” Asuna said, nodding. “It’s been staggered a couple of times from some well-coordinated and timed switches. So you want to basically hit it hard, stagger it, and keep it staggered.”

"Stunlock," Rain agreed in realization.

Harry nodded. “With the fire affinity transferred to all your weapons, you’ll have thirty seconds of boosted attack power to start it,” he said. “And we can hit it with our more powerful attacks if we time the strikes right, we can keep continuous attacks of at least our mid-level skills without anyone of us being locked up from the post-motion delay and breaking the sequence.”

“Risky,” Asuna said. “Too risky. If we mess this up…”

“We’re sitting ducks.” Kirito concluded. “Still, we don’t have much choice now, do we?”

“So we do this and kill it with fire, or die in a blaze of glory trying?” Rain asked. “Your wife’s
Asuna sighed. “This plan is insane, and reckless,” she said, shaking her head. “I truly wish I could say I was shocked that it was yours, Harry.”

“Crazy and reckless plans do seem to be my forte, don’t they?” Harry asked drily as he shifted his grip on his blade, causing it to come alight. He held it out in front of him. “Touch your blades to mine then,” he said and his eyes began to have a dim glow to them. “You get to play with magic, and we… are going to kill that crime against nature with fire.”

Kill it with fire? Kirito could get behind that idea.

##

Klein blinked as he saw Harry, Kirito, Rain, and Asuna attack, all four of them with their weapons on fire. Rather than all four of them slamming attacks into it all at once, there was a pattern to it. Asuna would lead off, hitting it with a Star Splash, taking advantage of the shorter post-motion lockups that rapier skills had to use a high level skill. She would be followed by Kirito hitting it with what, if he remembered correctly, was a Crimson Splash, with Rain and Harry following with either a Star Quint Prominence, or a Horizontal Square.

It was after they did it for the third time, that he realized what they had done. They had staggered it, and were keeping the stagger maintained. It was a continuous switching between four people, causing it to lock up the thing’s AI. The flames had died on all but Harry’s sword, but their continuous switching was working!

It said a lot about just how well coordinated they had to be, something that didn’t surprise him, but still awed him a little. Keeping up a roster of switching to stagger a mob and give everyone time to recover from the post-motion lockup was one of the most difficult things any group of players could do.

He and the others in his group had only managed something like that a handful of times since SAO started, and they were considered one of the better and most coordinated parties among the Assault Team.

“Something like this has Harry written all over it,” he heard Silica say right behind him.

Turning, Klein looked at her, noting that Lux and Strea were with her. “I thought you three were helping with the trash,” he said.

“Enough have been taken out that the others can easily handle it.”

“I take it you’re going to have some words with him after this?” Strea asked as she watched. She whistled. “And he keeps telling me not to be reckless. And he got Asuna in it as well?”

“Right, this is the first time you’ve seen one of Harry’s crazy plans,” Lux noted. “He usually only does these once the original plan has gone down in flames.”

“He does come up with some crazy shit in the middle of a battle,” Klein agreed. “But they usually work. Still…” He turned to the players gathered around him. “Everyone! Let’s get in there and help them. They can’t keep it going forever, but we can help them keep it going long enough. Let’s go in and kill this damn thing while they’ve got the lock!”

The gathered players roared in savage agreement, and they charged in.
Heathcliff watched as Abominus the Chimeric, the mob that had been mistakenly summoned as the commander of the army of mobs, succumbed to the final rush of players and nodded. He turned to the gathered knights and set a command for them to hunt down the far fewer than expected mobs that were still alive to run after the victory, and run them down. More to make use of the knights he had brought, than anything else.

He looked at the players who were simply sitting down in the aftermath of their hard earned victory, clearly exhausted after such a dangerous fight. He would have to double check, but he recalled that the commander of this army was also the field boss. There was still the camp that needed to be cleared, but that would be a relatively simple matter.

Still, he was impressed, very impressed indeed. For a situation that should not have happened, and them facing an event boss from the ninety-third floor and winning…

He would have to go down there and find out the specific details of the fight. And find out just how many players they lost to it. And afterwards, he would retire, head to the GM Administration Area, and see just how this had happened, and make sure that no other surprises like this lay in wait.

If it wasn't a result of the world generation protocols gaining refinement as the AI's had.

A chill hit him. He would need to look into that—SAO may well be trying to balance itself for its original purpose. The risks of a world with emergent elements that seemed to have the same level of intelligence as even a counseling AI... there was a danger there.

Asuna could hear Silica giving Harry a piece of her mind, considering that she had shown up in time to see him putting his plan into action. A plan that, due to its sheer audacity and recklessness, was clearly one of his improvised plans. Few other players would do something like that, after all. From the tone of it, and the words, she was alternating between cursing his recklessness, and checking him over to make sure he wasn’t too injured.

Pina resting on the ground nearby, simply watching over it. And if Asuna was reading the feathered dragon right, she would swear that she was giving the two of them an exasperated look.

Well, outside of his shield arm, which from how gingerly he was cradling it, and that it was bent somewhere besides his elbow, meaning that it was clearly broken, he seemed fine. Ouch, that has to hurt, given that we have been able to feel pain for some time, she thought with a wince. While it wouldn’t hurt as much as if this were Outside, getting a serious enough injury was still painful. And when did that happen? She shook her head. Never mind, he’ll be fine. It’ll heal on its own soon enough. She’s angrier that she wasn’t there to have his back, than angry at him, anyway.

She ignored the screen that showed she leveled up, and looked at the separate screen that showed itself superimposed over the victory screen and blinked. She was the one who got the last attack in? She couldn’t really place how that was, given the chaos of the last few moments of the fight, but it appeared to be the case. She looked at the text in the box.

La Pucelle, huh? She thought. A weapon maybe? What kind?

She clicked on the box acknowledging it and then pulled it from her menu. It was a rapier, and was surprisingly plain in appearance. But she could tell that it was made of the finest metal, meaning that it was a high quality one. She brought up its stats, and her eyes widened.
This… this is almost twice as powerful as my Lambent Light! And the stat bonuses… just where did that thing come from?! 

She heard the sound of hoof beats and looked up to see Heathcliff arriving on horseback. *Late to the party, Kayaba,* she thought bitterly, even as she schooled her expression as she got up and walked over to him.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t get here faster,” he said. “I sent the knights I brought with me to hunt down the surviving mobs.” He then looked at her. “How bad was it?”

“Given that it was something that belonged on a much higher floor, bad enough. But, it could have been worse.” She said calmly, if coolly. “I know of at least fifteen deaths, but it was probably higher than that. We will have to check with Argo to get a proper count. Thirty teleported out early on when they realized just how powerful that thing we were fighting actually was. Five dead in the first few minutes, taken out with one-hit kills.”

He closed his eyes briefly and nodded.

She then leaned in closer so she could lower her voice and not be overheard. “What was that thing?” She hissed to him. “It clearly didn’t belong on this floor. You’re the GM, so what happened?”

“An event boss from the ninety-third floor;” he replied quietly. “It shouldn’t have been here, and I will be looking into it after this. Rest assured, this will *not* happen again.”

Asuna looked at him coldly and nodded. She didn’t trust herself to say anything in light of his admission that this was *his* fault, or at least he was taking responsibility for it. Especially since she could feel her already present anger at him rising. It would not do to give in to her desire to harangue him at full volume, stab him, and mount his head on a pike. Not necessarily in that order.

At least, not right *now.*

She then turned away and made her way to where the rest of her guildmates are. “All of you, we’re picking up Yui, and then we’re headed back to the villa,” She said. “I think we’ve had enough for the day.”
Asuna relaxed as the glow from the teleport faded and they were again in Selmburg. While it wasn’t a home in the truest of the sense, the villa was here, and they called that place home. At least until they got out of SAO.

“So, anyone else get terrified by that thing?” She heard Lux as they stepped off the teleport platform.

“I’ll admit, I did,” Harry said. “That feeling, like my bollocks trying to crawl up into my throat, it was… pronounced, to say the least. I felt things like that before. That feeling is one you don’t forget.”

Asuna blinked, parsing the statement, and nodded. She wondered what he had faced to make him know what fear physically felt like. Was it in SAO? Or, given the things he let slip before admitting that he had edited out some things due to his attempting to keep his magic a secret, was it in the real world?

Even those things he let slip had shown that his education in magic wasn’t precisely what many would call safe. Despite the efforts of his professors, injuries seemed to be quite common.

“And what did you face in the past to make you that afraid?” Kirito asked.

“I’ll tell you when we get back to the villa,” Harry said. “By the way, anyone get anything out of that fight? I got some armor I will check out when we get there, not to mention the usual dropping of mats and stuff, so what about you guys?”

“I got a dagger and mats,” Strea said and then looked at Silica. “You think you can find some use for it, Silica?”

“I’ll have to check it out and see the stats,” Silica said. “I had armor drop, but from the naming, I think it might be a heavy type. Why don’t we wait until the villa to see what we all got?”

“That’s a good idea,” Asuna said. She wanted to take a bath and just relax for a couple of hours. It was still early in the afternoon, so she had time before she had to decide on what to have for dinner.

“Why did you decide to end the day early?” Yui asked curiously at Asuna’s side. “It’s a lot earlier than when you usually finish, and none of you mentioned any plans for this. Was that battle really that tough?”

Asuna looked down to the childlike AI and smiled. “It was quite the battle,” she admitted. “And when their commander came out, well, it was tough. Floor boss quality, to be sure. I’ll explain why it was like that at the villa.”

Yui looked at her curiously, but nodded. She knew that there were things that would only be talked about when they had some privacy.

##
Harry looked at the spread of gear drops from that fight when they got into the villa. They had all taken a brief bit to simply relax, or in the case of the girls, take a bath. He and Kirito had spent an hour in the atrium doing some sparring, more for fun than actual training and practice. They would probably do that later.

He certainly needed to reevaluate some things, as the battle as a whole had shown him that he wasn’t using Mystic Blade as he should. The Earth Affinity had its weaknesses painfully demonstrated to him, more from the fact that, he wasn’t built for tanking, regardless of how that affinity boosted his defense enough to do so if he had to. He needed to work with the other affinities. If only to get in the practice with wind and water so that he can think to use them in the heat of battle.

He had gotten too reliant on Earth and Fire, and let the other aspects go fallow. He felt he’d barely touched the Water Affinity, especially.

Now that he could, he took the armor he got from that fight out of his inventory to give it a good look. More like a half plate, with the cuirass, pauldrons, and armor for his right arm, and the stats definitely showed promise. Heavier than was normal for him, but at the same time, very protective, and he didn’t need to include cuisses and armored greaves or boots anyway. All the extras would just impact his mobility, which was a cornerstone of how he fought. Earth seemed so anti-mobility as it was, he had to wonder if their demiurge was taking the piss.

And if it hadn’t proven so useful in major fights, he probably wouldn’t have even used it, let alone came up with that original skill. And why haven’t I thought of just seeing if I can call my magic to invoke something like that with the other affinities? He asked himself. Ah, right, because it would only work that one time before our dear demiurge established rules and limitations. Fuck me for still not trying, and for good measure, fuck you, Kayaba.

Strea and Keiko had done their exchange, and he could already see the former looking at the rest of the items spread out to complete the set of armor she now had. Using a full set of heavy armor required more pieces. Once it was finished, either from the drops now being spread around and looked at, from trades, or even making use of the mats they got to get the rest crafted.

"Looks like Liz is going to be busy, he thought. And if not her, then they would see if she knew anyone who could make what they needed. He pulled up the status window of his sword and shield, and then winced. That battle had done a number on their durability, and he considered himself lucky that they hadn’t broken like his arm had been due to a mistimed attack sequence allowing that boss to break the stunlock and attack him.

“There is something else I got from it,” Asuna said. “I landed the last attack. It’s a rapier, and well, it’s significantly better than Lambent Light. Here, let me show you.” She brought it out of her inventory. Harry had to admit, it was definitely a high quality weapon, if the apparent materials it was made of were any indication. Somewhat plain in appearance, but a smart player knew that a plain appearance did not mean that it wasn’t a good weapon. Hell, some of the best weapons and armor he had seen had plain appearances.

“It’s called La Pucelle,” she continued. “The stats are twice as good as Lambent Light and… huh? Oh, there’s some flavor text for it. The text says that it is a sword that was believed to have been wielded by the Maid of Orléans.”

Harry blinked. He knew that title, and if he remembered his history right it was… “Wait, what?” He asked. “The Maid of Orléans? Her?!”

“Harry, you know who she is?” Silica asked, and then she saw Rain giving Asuna’s new rapier a speculative look. “Rain?”
“I know who she is,” Harry said. “How much European history do you all know?”

“Not too much,” Kirito said. “I know that Rome and Greece were covered, and also some major events in the Middle Ages, but more modern history is better known, I think. Probably similar to how you would only know the general stuff about Japan, had you stayed in a conventional school instead of… you know.”

Harry nodded, knowing what Kirito meant. Even though everyone else knew, it was an unspoken agreement to not directly discuss it if it wasn’t necessary. Less risk of Outside learning about magic that way. He was probably going to be in enough trouble as it was, so best not to make the situation worse. “So, you know at least the general stuff, though not the specifics, about the Hundred Years’ War, that series of wars caused by a succession crisis for the French Throne during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries,” he said. “The Maid of Orléans was a title given to one of the major French heroes later in the war, Joan of Arc, or Jeanne d’Arc as the French call her. She got that title when she led a relief force to relieve Orléans when it was besieged in… when was it?” He struggled to remember the date, or at least the year.

“1429,” Rain said. “I remember learning a little about that at school in Russia, before my mom moved back to Japan, bringing me with her. We covered it again in high school, and I decided to read up on it. I know more about Russian history, but seeing how there was a female hero in a European war in that was who was historically attested to, I was interested.”

“Yes, that makes some sense,” Harry said, nodding. “She was reputed to have never drawn it in battle, though. Her story didn’t end happily, though. She was betrayed and executed as a witch, mostly so we could dishearten the French. It was an ugly time. So, you got a possibly legendary weapon that was attributed to a historical figure. What’s next? Something from one of Charlemagne’s paladins, like Roland? You know, Durandal?” He shook his head. “Man, the French are not going to be happy if they find out about this. Not at you Asuna, at Kayaba. And more, a weapon meant to be used in battle, named after a weapon that was attributed to someone who was said to never draw it in battle? Oh yeah, they’re not going to be amused by this.”

“What about Excalibur?” Keiko asked. “And it would be something you would get, probably with you being English and all.”

“No,” Harry said firmly. “I wouldn’t accept it. The thought of using the sword of King Arthur being like that in this game? I am not a king, past, present, or future. It’s probably irrational, after all, but imagine if Excalibur was right there? For you to draw? And knowing Kayaba it would be from a stone, as well. Just… no.”

“Excalibur’s a common ultimate sword in many RPGs, though,” Lux said. “Or at least close to the ultimate, I think.”

Harry nodded in acceptance of that. “There are other factors, which is why I would be reluctant to take something from the Song of Roland, like Durandal or Hauteclere, for some well-known French legendary blades, and even some Celtic ones as well. I would feel a bit more comfortable drawing one of those. Though the Irish might be a bit… peeved if I ended up wielding one of them.”

“Why would they be peeved?” Asuna asked.

“Because I’m English.” Harry said bluntly. “Well, maybe Welsh, technically. I saw Godric’s Hollow on a map once, and I think it was in Wales, but I grew up in Surrey, so I’ve grown up as identifying as English. There’s a lot of cultural pride involved there, and our history with each other was every bit as vitriolic and violent as it was with the French. Though I think more would want to pillory and throw stones at me, if I ended up getting something that is called Excalibur anyway, and said it was
that. Cultural pride and all that. And that doesn’t go into what other attention it might draw.

“You all know what I can do. It shouldn’t be much of a stretch for you to understand that it also
means that many legends are truer than you think, and there’s one group I wouldn’t want to get the
attention of. Not even as a curiosity, which is bad enough. The Fae.

“Why them?” Kirito asked.

“For the same reason why you wouldn’t want to get the attention of things that exist in your legends
of the supernatural,” Harry said. “Even those that are not outright malicious.”

Keiko nodded. “Like youkai,” she said. “Even the benevolent ones are ones you don’t make deals
with unless you need to. Not because you’ll be screwed over, but because you will owe them in
kind. A favor for a favor.”

The Japanese members of the guild nodded. Harry considered what he heard to be fairer than making
deals with, or simply gaining the favor of, any of the Fae. The tales and what little magical history he
read about such all said the same thing.

Don’t do so unless you absolutely have to. They’re capricious at best, malevolent at worst, and you
often won’t find out which until it’s too late. And while there wasn’t any proof that Outside was
looking in, there also no proof that Outside wasn’t.

And with the fact that they all knew that he could use magic, then they would hopefully buy into the
fact that more than a few legends were truer than they had thought. Well, Keiko knew that was the
case, she had told him some of the wilder stories her grandparents and their friends told her of their
youth. As wild as they sometimes seemed, even by his standards, he believed them.

Truth was often stranger than fiction, after all.

**Aincrad GM Administration Area**

The reason Abominus had appeared out of place was simple enough to solve. Kayaba shook his
head. It came down to simple human error. The intended event flags for his appearance and the
intended boss were stupidly close, near duplicates. Looking at the two flags, he scowled-- they were
so close as to have been a violation of the best practices doctrine he and his team had followed. It
was the kind of human error that emerged when a group of developers faced "The Crunch". A few
extra moments to run a simple search on the flag list would have caught it. Not doing that search
shaved that little bit off development time, a pitiful savings of the sort that only made sense when you
were tired, stressed, and just wanted the job done.

Would he have found it, even if he was looking, had he not known there was a problem?

Doubtful, especially when he had either been trying to stay a step ahead of the players who were
advancing, or running a guild. No matter how hands off he was, there was still a lot of work he
couldn’t simply pass off to others.

That was actually the less interesting aspect of the event. More interesting in the whole cluster fuck
was the fact that Abominus, out of context, had more than functioned. It had been challenging,
dangerous, a worthy boss.

And that was a bit frightening, for the players, and, he had to admit, himself. How novel.

*I can muse on the novelty of that later, he thought. Back to the task at hand.*
CARDINAL oversaw SAO, but the minutia of many elements were handled by smaller, simpler systems—she wasn’t behind every NPC’s face. Like most such systems, they were simple ‘as if’ systems. They acted just enough ‘as if’ they were intelligent to give the illusion of intelligence. They had a set of parameters. Abominus was tuned to work as a boss where he was supposed to be a boss. Out of that context—bluntly, part of the boss’s logic should have broken down. It should have glitched, or hung up, or fizzled out.

It instead adapted. It worked, when and where it had no right to.

And he remembered Hadrian’s warning about attempting to force everything work in only a certain way, all for the sake of the narrative. Not when he was trying to lead people down that path. Not, as he implied, in an environment that was as close an approximation to the real world as this one was. Harry had warned him that if he tried, he would be doomed to failure.

Not that he’d said that last one in Kayaba’s earshot, but CARDINAL had recorded some of Hadrian’s musings to his friends and guild mates. (‘Based on your interest,’ she’d said-- he swore, his daughter was learning ‘smug’ far too well) About how SAO was its own reality, and should be treated and believed as such, while still knowing and believing that SAO wasn’t reality. And the players had learned to treat SAO as such-- that doublethink being their own ‘as if’ strategy. The natural laws of the real world applied well enough that, unless specifically proven otherwise, it took some time for many players to consciously recognize it and connect the dots.

But that connection was the result of the individual facts of this world. Simple facts, which added up to a complex environment that provided them a pair of contradictory conclusions that were both equally true.

And then Kayaba thought about the American philosopher Daniel C. Dennett’s admonishment not to forget that every complex thing was built on simpler, stupider things. Humans themselves were his favorite example.

Sword Art Online had a lot of simple parts, and they built up to form this little world he watched over. All those simple bits, combining, becoming complex... complex to the point that ‘fixing’ certain aspects would be akin to servicing a Swiss action watch while the thing was still operating. You could try, if you wanted the damned thing to shut down permanently.

Kayaba shivered as the sinking feeling that Hadrian's warning was more on the nose than the young man knew. For all that he wasn’t the player he was most interested in, his insights were quite remarkable.

He shook his head. He still needed to search through the databases for other examples of emergent behavior within the system. Abominus wouldn’t have been the first, not even the first that the players had noticed. It was just the first he had noticed.

A fact which, he would admit, hurt his pride as a developer.

September 17, 2024 - Aincrad 69th Floor Labyrinth

Strea looked around the chamber after the floor boss, the name of which she hadn’t bothered to learn, shattered and sheathed her sword across her back. She wondered why she had thought that she might not be ready for this, and remembered her own experiences with the others, her learning from them, and how cutting her teeth on a few field bosses had shown that there was still a great deal of room for improvement. She had also taken to heart Asuna’s concerns about her readiness back then. They were valid concerns, after all.
Then again, after the fight eight days ago, with her being a part of that massive battle, and the surprise of the boss that was a part of it, her expectations of what to expect might have become a bit skewed. This thing was easier than that commander/field boss that they fought last week, but that thing was also not the norm from what the others said.

Admittedly, that boss hadn’t been what they were supposed to fight. Asuna revealed what Kayaba admitted to her. She still would have thought that this fight would still have been difficult, or at least a challenge. That fight had been exhilarating. Terrifying, but exhilarating.

But this one had been almost disappointing. Boring, really.

**But,** she thought, looking around. *I doubt that everyone else would agree with me. From the looks of it, more than a few of them seemed relieved.*

She walked over to Harry and Silica, who were examining the drops they received in the fight.

She wondered if the next floor, or one of the ones following it would be interesting, or exciting, for that matter.

**September 18, 2024 - Aincrad 70th Floor, Alsterin Underground**

Rain glared at Harry as they walked through the passageway, the rank odor of their surroundings not doing anything to help her mood. **“Thank you, Harry, for jinxing us,”** she growled out acidly, sarcasm dripping from her voice.

“You’ve already said that, Rain,” Harry said, clearly trying not to breathe in too deeply. **“Burgh, and I thought some of the things I handled in Professor Snape’s class smelled bad.”**

“Rain, what did Harry do?” Asuna asked in a tight voice. She grimaced as she took a step and her foot landed in something with a squelch. **“I want to know if I should be angry at him, and why.”**

“We were doing that quest that got us those knights on the last floor,” Silica said. **“That place was muddy, to say the least. We wondered if we would have to go back there, and he said it could be worse, like this.”** She pinched her nose shut and gagged soon after. **“Ugh, now I can taste it,”** she complained.

“To be fair, I didn’t quite expect it to be this shitty,” Harry said defensively and grimaced. **“Or wished that SAO had gas masks, so we could use them.”**

“Harry, you make another pun like that, and I’m going to see if that American phrase, ‘shit eating grin’ is more than a metaphor,” Kirito growled, the others nodding in agreement.

*If their thoughts are anything like mine, then we all will help him,* Rain thought, shooting Harry another glare as they continued to walk before reaching a point where multiple passages intersected.

“Hey guys!” Strea called. **“I feel a breeze! Fresh air!”** She pointed down one of the passages and started dashing down it. **“This way!”**

They didn’t hesitate to follow her.

A few minutes later, they exited the passage, and felt the breeze blow over them. They were exposed to the sky, and after walking through that dank sewer, it was a godsend. The smell, however, was still present, but being in an open space did much to reduce it after having to deal with it in the confined spaces. On the other hand, other unpleasant smells added themselves.
The air now smelled like a mix between the sewers, stagnant water, and other things. Still, without the choking stench from inside the sewers, it was almost fresh in a way. Almost.

“We’re all going to need a bath after this, even if all this… stuff doesn’t stay on us,” Lux said. “Just to make sure that the smell doesn’t.”

“And it just might,” Silica said. “Remember when Harry got eaten by the one mob on the forty-seventh floor? The one he had to cut himself out of? That smell followed him back to Floria and didn’t go away until he took a bath?”

“Ah yes, that flytrap,” Harry said. “Thing smelled worse on the inside than the outside. Not as bad as this, though, something like that would be something that our demiurge would do.”

“Great,” Silica said with a sigh. “We’re probably going to be smelling like shit, even when we’re no longer covered by it.” She shot Harry a look. “We’re taking a bath as soon as we can. And you will be scrubbing me down. Thoroughly.”

“I certainly have no problem with doing that, dear,” Harry said. “You want me to clean off first, or will you be scrubbing me down?”

“Save the foreplay for when we’re done, you two,” Asuna said, giving Harry and Silica what everyone simply called “The Look”. “It’s been five months, and they still act like newlyweds sometimes,” she muttered with a shake of her head.

She opened her menu and brought up the map. “Okay, it seems that we’re close to where we need to, even if the route wasn’t what was marked. “This area is called the Insmont Ruins, where we’re supposed to be, and the NPC was right, we could only access it from the sewers. Now, let’s get to the center of them, we’re supposed to hunt down something.”

##

There was something about this place that was making the hairs on the back of Silica’s neck stand up. From the tension she could see in the postures of the others, she wasn’t the only one affected this way. She couldn’t even place why, but there was something...

“There is something just wrong about this place,” she heard Harry say to Kirito.

“Aside from the smell?” Kirito asked. “Yeah, I know what you mean. It’s not like the Glitchzone was, though. This place feels wrong, but the wrongness feels different.”

Silica knew what he meant. All the players had developed some form of SA, or System Awareness, to some degree. Depending on how high it was, it could range from simply having a sense of the area, the extent for most, to Hypersense, that sensitivity to even minor bits of lag due to the system processing actions, allowing for a limited form of combat precognition.

But even without that, she felt that the area they were in would still not feel right.

“These ruins, they don’t look right,” Harry said. “As if they were not built by human hands, and not with human… geometries? I think that’s the word. Not with human geometries in mind.”

“That would explain why I just saw a triangle on a wall having three right angles,” Silica murmured, pointing at a wall. “Right there.”

They all looked at where she was pointing, and she could see several of them stare at it. Harry seemed to look at it and shrug, as if he saw things like that before. Probably before this, she thought.
“He did go to a school for magic.”

“Okay, looking at that is making my brain hurt,” Rain said. “Just… how did they pull that off?”

“Can we just move on,” Strea whined. “I’m an AI, I live because of math, and that’s just… I can feel the errors compiling just looking at it.”

“Let’s just keep going.” Asuna said, turning and taking a step forward. Silica could understand her confusion when she ran into something solid, and she could see her in one place, and in another, and…

“Great,” Kirito muttered. “This place is one of those. Where you can take a step and right is left, left is down, and up is backwards. I hated dungeons like this in games I played. They were either a hallmark of bad design, poor testing, or intentionally made that way.”

“Oh, you’ve played dungeons that were based on my school?” Harry asked before shaking his head. “Never mind, let’s just keep going. This place is giving me a bad feeling.”

##

Harry could feel the heightened nervousness of the others as they looked at what they had been asked to fetch. He could understand it as, despite the lack of anything hostile, they were all on edge. If anything, the lack of mobs was worse than the presence of them, as it gave the entire place a feeling as if something was waiting to happen. And the design of this place, weird angles that were not as they seemed, taking one step in some place, and running into something on a different side of the room… whoever designed this place had, either by intent, accident, or, as Kirito was grousing, incompetence, turned this place into something positively creepy. The smell, a combination of stagnant seawater, refuse from the sewers, and a rotting something that he couldn’t identify, made it worse.

But, they had made it to this place, and now saw what that quest giver had asked them to fetch. At least, once they parsed through the odd accent, liquid cadence, and unusual pauses that comprised his speech. It was, quite frankly, odd. Like many of the things about the place, the angles were all wrong, and it gave a light that wasn’t light. And it was making his instincts scream at him in warning.

As if something would happen.

In a place where they hadn’t even encountered a mob.

And its name… something about it seemed familiar. Something he heard during one of those meetings in the Hogwarts Book Club. Something written by…

He saw Asuna step up to the item and grab it. And then he had no time to think on it as the feeling of danger intensified. And gave him the contradictory feeling of needing to draw his sword and bravely run like the hounds of hell were after him.

“I… think we should leave.” he said slowly as he looked around, his hand on the hilt of his sword. Was it getting dim? But it didn’t seem as if the sky had dimmed any.

Alsterin

They were all twitchy as they climbed out of the sewers and back into the town. Lux looked around, took a deep breath, gagged at the smell still clinging to her and the others, and sighed in relief. The sense of danger that had dogged them on the way back was gone. The way the light had seemed to
dim, despite no noticeable change in the lighting, the places where it was completely silent—where they couldn’t even hear the sound of their footfalls or breathing—and the constant feeling of something watching them, judging them, and the sounds of breathing that had no origin…

She didn’t know what was worse about that place. The fact that it always felt like something seemed to be ready to leap out at them, the feeling of wrongness about that entire place, the fact that there was nothing there, or those times when they all thought they saw something.

She really didn’t want to think about what she thought she saw, it was… hard to classify. And while she thought that what she might have seen those times might have been the same thing, she could not be sure. She couldn’t even be sure if she had even seen anything.

And that made it all the more disturbing to her

“I really hope we don’t have to go back there,” Rain groaned. “Just getting there is bad enough, but going back? With the feeling that something was… I just want to get this done, and take a bath.”

“Should we take a bath first?” Strea asked. “We smell like-- what was it you said? Ah, we smell like shit.”

“And not in the metaphorical sense, either,” Asuna agreed. “But after this… with what we were all sensing… let’s turn this in first. Maybe if we do, whatever it was won’t be following us.”

**Aincrad GM Administration Are**

“THEY HADN’T EVEN MADE THE CONNECTION, EVEN WITH THE MORE BLATANT REFERENCES THAT WERE A PART OF THE QUEST,” CARDINAL said.

Kayaba looked up from the mass code he was looking at when he heard the tone of voice that the main AI was using. If he didn’t know better, he would say she was being… sulky?

After a rapid review of recent events, the GM decided that his gut instinct was likely correct. CARDINAL was miffed about something.

He had a moment of distraction wondering at the fact he still framed them as gut instincts despite lacking a body, but forced himself to focus. "CARDINAL... you're suffering from Puzzle Maker's Syndrome."

"... EXPLAIN." She said after a pause.

Kayaba kept quiet a moment, smiling.

"PLEASE EXPLAIN," CARDINAL amended.

"Well, how can I not after being asked so nicely?" Kayaba replied with a smirk. "Of course you find the references obvious and the homage clear as day. You were the one who created the quest, finding it to be appropriate for that zone, after all."

"... AH. I AM HAVING A MENTAL GLITCH SIMILAR TO WHAT YOUNG HUMANS HAVE, ASSUMING MY KNOWLEDGE AS UNIVERSAL." After a moment, the AI wondered. "WHEN WILL I GROW OUT OF IT?"

“What you are experiencing is known as a cognitive bias,” Kayaba replied. “You shaped your assumption based on your knowledge, shaping your perceptions and input. Your assumption is more logical, based on your limited interactions with players, but still illogical, as cognitive bias is
inherently illogical. It is a trait humans never grow out of, they just become more aware of it. And you, like Strea and Yui, have developed cognition along human lines as you were programmed to be in humanity’s image. To think and be aware in a manner as close to human as possible. To learn in such a manner. It's a feature that occasionally produces a bug.”

He was rather proud of himself for keeping the disappointment out of his voice. It would have been unfair to CARDINAL, she was still young. The bits of her algorithms most modeled on the human mind would be as vexing to her as anyone else.

Still, some days he truly wished he shared that normalcy.

"... SUCK IT UP AND DEAL?” CARDINAL asked, her tone conveying all a resigned sigh would.

"It’s the price of sapience,” Kayaba rejoined smoothly.

"AH. TEASING,” CARDINAL said.

"Which can be dealt with via the cited coping method,” Kayaba noted. "Monitor Strea and Yui’s reactions to the situation and their friends. It will not only be a welcome learning experience, but it will help us achieve the desired response. Horror is a tricky goal to set yourself. I'm proud of you for trying, and by using such a known fear as a basis."

"... I DID NOTICE THAT FEAR THAT THE UNKNOWN FACTOR IS PERHAPS TRULY UNKNOWABLE SERVES AS THE DEEPEST PART OF THE FEAR RESPONSE," CARDINAL offered. "THE IMPLICATION THAT ONE’S CURIOSITY ABOUT THE THREAT CANNOT BE SATISFIED SEEMS TO ELEVATE THE FEAR. HENCE, THERE CAN BE DISAPPOINTMENT AS MUCH AS RELIEF IN A FINAL CATHARTIC REVEAL WHEN THE FEAR IS FOR... ENTERTAINMENT. AMUSEMENT DOES NOT SEEM TO FIT AS THE GOAL."

“Something that invokes fear, but is not a concrete source of it, or simply representing the unknowable,” Kayaba noted with a nod. “I felt it for the latter reasons when I uploaded myself, I’ll admit. I risked dying, and death is inherently unknowable. And even though I am here, I do not know if I, as I am now, am even alive.” And that led to a philosophical question that he knew had no concrete answers. Only more questions.

"THE END OF THE EXPERIENCING SUBJECT. THE DEPRIVATION OF EXPERIENCE. SIDENOTE: MEDIA THAT CAN EVOKE THE FEELING OF THAT DEPRIVATION WITHOUT GETTING... WOULD HOKEY BE THE CORRECT TERMINOLOGY?"

Kayaba laughed. "It's the perfect word. When that which is intended to cause fear misfires, hokey is the best word for how it come across. It may make you laugh or feel cheated, and that is what we call 'hokey'. You came for the chills that were not delivered. Rather than your curiosity being unsatisfied in a manner that prompts the desired rush of fear adrenaline, you feel cheated."

"... THIS IS ALMOST AS BAD AS THE NPC HUMOR ROUTINES," CARDINAL said.

And right back to sulking, Kayaba reflected. Is she my angsty teen daughter? He thought. That would make Yui the young and innocent one, and... oh. That would make Strea the horny one. He stopped short. Wait... that means the most likely to give her ‘The Talk’, if only because I don’t see anyone in Steel Phoenix doing so, would be...

"CARDINAL, where is Player Argo in relation to Strea...?"

* Aincrad 70th Floor, Alsterin
They had turned the quest in, having to deal with an NPC that Asuna personally thought was positively creepy in how he looked and spoke, and had universally decided to hit a bathhouse before going around the town to look for another quest. Or at least get some information from Yui on what quests seemed promising to go on tomorrow. It was late enough that they could stop for the day and head back to the villa for the night.

The fact that the players were keeping their distance from them, and getting upwind if they could, was a clear statement of how bad they all smelled. Yui, when she met up with them, hearing that a rather… ripe group was walking around town, had pinched her nose shut as soon as she got in range to smell them, and pointed them all to this place without a word.

Asuna sighed in relief as she sank into the hot water of the bath after she, Rain, Lux, and Strea had thoroughly scrubbed each other down, the last traces of the smell that clung to them gone. She had been tempted to use one of the scented soaps, but had decided not to. Quite frankly, she didn’t want to smell like anything right now. Not after smelling as if she had dived into a pool of rotten fish and then went for a swim in a backed up sewer.

Silica had been serious about having Harry scrub her down, had paid for a private bath, and literally dragged her husband to the one she rented. Kirito had simply gone to the public men’s bath area, and from the cursing she heard as he entered, those who were in there, even this early, had certainly not appreciated his pungent arrival.

“You know,” Rain said. “We could talk about that quest, and how we all feel about it, but…”

“Yeah, I don’t think any of us want to talk about it,” Asuna said. She heard Strea hum in agreement.

“So, what should we talk about?” Lux asked.

“I know what we can talk about,” Rain said. “It’s been awhile since we speculated on what Harry and Silica get up to, and they’re now sharing a bath. So, how likely do you think it will be that Harry and Silica will take longer than we did? After all, they’re sharing a bath, and scrubbing each other down. Who’s to say that their hands don’t slip because of the soap?”

Asuna gave her a sidelong look. “Rain,” she said. “You know that they’ll neither confirm, nor deny what you’re insinuating, whether they did what you’re insinuating, or not.” And that’s if they don’t actively feed any rumors that this might cause, she thought.

“Insinuating?” Strea asked. “What is Rain insinuating?”

Asuna and Rain flushed, looked at her, and then back at each other.

“Didn’t Silica say she was going to have Argo handle this?” Rain asked.

“Handle what?” Argo said from nowhere, startling them all.

“Whoa!” Rain exclaimed. “Damn it, Argo! How do you keep doing that?”

“I have my ways,” Argo said with a grin. “Now, what was it you said Silica was going to have me handle?”

Asuna looked around, only to see Rain and Lux both staring at the water, their faces red, apparently finding something in it to be interesting to look at, and Strea looked confused.

“Is this a human thing about bathing with others?” She asked. “And if it is, what would it mean that Harry and Silica are bathing together?”
Flushing, Asuna turned back to Argo, whose grin had widened. Before she could make her request, however…

“Ah…” The Rat said, her grin becoming mischievous. “I see. Don’t worry Aa-chan, I’ll take her aside after this so we can have a talk.”

Asuna sighed in relief.

“Talk?” Strea asked. “What are we going to talk about?”

“Don’t worry, Strea,” Argo said. “Big Sister Argo will tell you everything. When your bath is done. You all smelled pretty bad when you came in, I heard.”
September 18, 2024 - Aincrad 70th Floor, Alsterin

“You do know what others are going to think if they find out that you two shared a bath,” Gus said as he saw Harry and Silica walk from the private bathing area they rented. The lack of any smell following them meant that they had bathed and cleaned off their armor, or put on a spare set. It could go either way.

Both Harry and Silica gave an uncaring shrug at the American player’s statement, which Gus had expected. After all, his tone and manner had conveyed it wasn’t a question. Gus actually cared for the speculation on the young couple as much as the duo themselves seemed to.

“Let them,” Harry said. “We’ve long since stopped caring about what others think of our relationship and what we do when we have privacy. Anyway, didn’t expect to see you here, Gus.”

The two of them knew that many were assuming that they had been intimate in a sexual way since their wedding night, at the latest, and the two of them simply refused to confirm or deny whether that was the case. Gus had his own thoughts on that, but saw no point in sharing them since the entire matter wasn’t any of his business. They reminded him of Ami and himself, though. He had a kid waiting for him by now, after all.

And I should turn my thoughts away from that direction, he thought. It never did him any good to dwell on the real world for long save for firming his resolve to get out of this game.

“The boss and I were in the area, and we heard about you guys having a rather pungent aroma when you were walking around,” Gus said. “The boss thought it would be a good idea to get the lowdown on the why, so she can either warn players away, or spread rumors that would lead them to what caused it for her to have something to laugh about. You know how she is.”

“She’s a bit of a kitsune, true,” Silica said. “What with her being a gadfly and the occasional pranks on people.”

Truer words than you think, he thought. Though knowing her, she probably wouldn’t be surprised if she learned that the boss actually is a kitsune. He might have to clear up what she precisely meant by it to Harry, though. The English wizard would understand the fox bit--

“I wouldn’t be surprised if she actually was one,” Harry said.

Then again, maybe the kid had read Newt Scamander’s seminal work, Fantastic Beasts, and Where to Find Them. There was a reason it was translated into over a dozen languages, and was the recommended introductory text on magical creatures in many magical schools around the world.

“So you get what she actually meant?” Gus asked. “Good, I was wondering if one of us would have to explain it.”

Harry shrugged and then seemed to think of something. “Gus, I need to talk to you and Argo later,” he quietly said in English. “The others know.”

“They figured it out?” He asked.

“In a way,” Harry hedged.
Meaning that he slipped and said something to get them to connect the dots, though it was a solid bet that Asuna and Kirito had already done so before that, Gus thought. Or, he told them by accident, confirming their probable suspicions. Damn it, I now owe the boss fifty thousand col, as well as having to wait on her hand and foot for a month. He had managed to avoid it this long, I thought he might last the rest of the time. Oh well, what happens to him will depend on the spillage. It was a concern, albeit a minor one. Things aren’t as draconian as they used to be here, where having his wand snapped for this would have been the least of the young man’s problems, but if it spread widely, he’s going to be taking a lot of heat for this.

“You know, I might not be nearly as good at English as Asuna is, but I have picked up some,” Silica said in the same language. She smirked at them and switched back to Japanese. “Especially since I’ve been travelling with Harry around this place since the beginning. Anyway, the others do know to keep quiet about Harry’s abilities.” She looked at Gus. “So, why did Argo drag you here?”

“In case one of you left sooner than the others,” he replied. “It wasn’t hard to figure out it was you, and someone did point out that you all were here.”

And I bet the others will be surprised that it was the two of you who got done first.

##

Argo grabbed Strea’s arm as Asuna and the others rose to leave the bath, getting her attention. “Aa-chan, I’ll have that little talk with Strea now. Besides, I can use a bath anyway.” She unwrapped the towel around her and eased herself into the furo. “Gus will be near the entrance.”

Asuna narrowed her eyes in clear suspicion, but nodded before stepping out of the furo, picking up her towel, and wrapping it around her. “I take it that there’s something you want to talk to all of us about then?”

“You’ll find out what it is when we’re somewhere less public,” Argo replied easily. She had come here for more than her own curiosity, after all. But it was more to get Asuna, and her entire guild, together and talk about something that she suspected, but wasn’t safe to do so in public. Probably not safe to discuss in private, either, if she was correct about her suspicions.

But that could wait. She had a naive AI to give “The Talk” to, though she would have to do this carefully. Strea wasn’t like Harry or Silica, so the usual talk that would be given to youths who were going through puberty would be less useful here.

Her avatar was that of a woman who was, on the surface, an adult. But the way she acted was more like a child. An intelligent child who could do a passable job mimicking being an adult, maybe, but still a child. There were things that both Harry and Silica had understood due to regular interaction with youths in their own age group.

They understood things like sexual attraction, desire, and the temptation to experience it. But they also understood what the various pitfalls were, from others hoping to take advantage of it, and Silica especially had to be firm with some players until Harry staked his claim and drove off her more ardent... suitors. They also knew restraint, and while she had her own opinions on just how intimate their relationship now was, she also knew that before their wedding, their casual intimacy and sleeping in the same bed was due to them needing emotional support, or keeping themselves grounded.

But Strea, for all that she was intelligent, did not have the experience with people to gain be aware of such things. Rain’s insinuation, joking as it was, about the likelihood of the guild’s married couple engaging in sexual activities during their bath had slipped past the AI. And observations of her ignorance of many things, most which could be easily missed or covered by the others, raised many
red flags in Argo’s mind.

Strea was lucky that she had fallen into Steel Phoenix’s care. Other players, would have happily took advantage of her due to her own ignorance of what was really going through their minds. And she had to explain that before she consented to something that she wasn’t prepared for. Or worse, was forced into.

*Well, might as well get started,* she thought. “All right,” she said. “This is probably something I should’ve done a while ago, but might as well give you a talk along similar lines to the ones I gave Harry and Silica last year. Now, there are some things you need to know, about how sexual attraction works, the pitfalls, and how all of that pertains to you.”

##

Kirito didn’t even blink when he noticed Harry and Silica had gotten done before him. The two of them were idly chatting with Gus about something when Harry had noticed him. At the younger player’s gesture to come, he walked over to them.

“I am almost surprised that you two got done first, almost.” Kirito said drily before nodding to Gus. “I take it Argo went over to the ladies bath Gus?”

Gus nodded. “Yes,” he said. "She wanted to get the info on what made you all smell like you dove into a manure heap like it was a pile of leaves. That, and she wanted to have a talk with Strea."

"I'll prepare the treatments for Argo Induced Embarrassment Trauma," Kirito smoothly replied.

"AIET," Harry opined. "It ate me up, for sure."

"Ow," he added as his wife smacked him upside the head for the bad pun. "I earned that."

"It's no fun if you sound pleased about it," Silica groused. “So, is she giving Strea the same ‘talk’ she gave Harry and I?”

"Given Strea's... naïveté," Gus said, "I suspect it'll be a bit different. The Boss has noticed you all 'running interference', but she'll have to deal with the attentions of her admirers on her own sometime."

"If we don't get to the arseholes first," Harry muttered quietly. “Not as much of a problem up here, the Assault Team knows better. Most of them have learned not to try and take advantage of those of the opposite gender by now."

“How much of that did you have to do with them understanding that?” Kirito asked idly.

“Not as much as you think,” Harry replied. “Most of that was Klein, actually. For all that he hits on anything female, reasonably of age, and not taken, he also doesn’t push things. And takes a dim view of those who do.”

"... so that's what happens when he gets to the bodily tossing people out of bars stage..." Gus noted dryly.

“Pretty much,” Kirito said. “We all might joke about his lack of luck with the ladies, Harry particularly, but at the same time, he can get slapped one moment, and be sharing drinks, stories, and jokes with them the next. He’s called Everybody’s Bro for a reason.” And that didn’t cover the fact that he, Harry, and the rest thought that he was making an ass of himself to keep people’s spirits up. Seriously, someone as good as him, and he can’t get a girlfriend? *Like you’re one to talk,* he thought
to himself.

Gus nodded. “Good point,” he said and then saw something. “And it seems that the ladies are done. The boss and Strea probably won’t be too long.”

**Aincrad 61st Floor, Selmburg**

Argo looked around the living room of the villa, noting that the furniture had changed a bit since she last visited. The large table that the guild used had apparently been moved, making it so that the room no longer doubled as a dining room, and there were more sofas and stuffed armchairs now. There were a smattering of small tables, more to place drinks and such on, but the lack of a table gave the room a more open feel than it had previously for a room that already wasn’t lacking in the space department. *Looks like they’re improving the furnishings a bit more,* she thought.

She took a seat as Asuna gave Kirito a look and the two of them walked into the kitchen. A moment later, the two came back with a couple of bottles and glasses. Argo took note of that and filed it away in her head about the members of Steel Phoenix and accepted a glass after it was filled by Asuna. She noticed that she, Gus, and Yui were also served their drinks before the rest poured their own glasses. Herself and Gus for the fact that they were guests, and Yui simply because she was the one who was the apparent youngest. Taking a sip of hers, Argo nodded at the flavor. Asuna always had good tastes in SAO’s wines. She did wonder what Yui was drinking. It wasn’t wine. A juice perhaps? Some did get served in wine bottles, after all.

Placing her glass on an end table, she looked at everyone. “Excellent tastes in wine, Aa-chan,” she said. “I really need to get a list of the current good ones from you after this.”

Asuna nodded with a smile and sipped her own. “So, why did you want us to come here to talk?” She asked. “You usually find some place private and put up one of those fields of yours.”

“True,” Argo said with a nod. “But for this, I think a place that’s actually private is better. Besides, you place is a lot more comfortable than what I would normally pick.”

“So what is it you want to talk to us about?” Kirito asked.

“I’ve noticed a few things,” she said clearly, all traces of her normal lighthearted attitude gone. “Like how you guys have become increasingly distant, cold even, in your interactions with a certain guild master. I would have commented on it sooner, trying to get to the bottom of it, but I honestly thought that it was probably some dispute that all parties wanted kept quiet. Harry, I could understand. He’s made it no secret that there is something about Heathcliff that rubs him the wrong way, but he’s always been polite and civil. But… What’s going on? What changed?”

She watched as everyone in Steel Phoenix looked at each other and back to her.

“That’s… not something we can talk about,” Asuna said cautiously. “Let’s just say we have a reason.”

“What, you find out a dirty secret of his?” Argo snarked. “Like he’s secretly Kayaba, or something?” She looked at Steel Phoenix’s reactions, their winces and refusal to meet her eyes, and paled. “Shit, he is Kaya- grrrk!” Argo felt her body lock up and saw some text flash before her eyes warning her to not discuss that matter to anyone who wasn’t already in the know. The lockup didn’t last long, no more than a few seconds, before she was released from it. Taking a few deep breaths, she looked at the others.

Gus was doing similar to her, before he grabbed his glass and drained it. Seeing that as a good idea,
she did the same and thought that Asuna should probably bring out something a little harder, like a drink that could actually get a player drunk.

*I suspected that he was masquerading as a player, but Heathcliff?* She asked herself as she mentally went over everything she knew about the guild master of the Knights of Blood. *It fits, now that I think about it. Never really saw him in action, but everything I’ve heard shows that his play is just a bit too good. Soloed a floor boss for several minutes? Never went into the red? Not impossible, but still suspicious. I should have known something was up. Damn it, how did I miss this?*

“God, I hate that effect,” Kirito said, emptying his glass and pouring himself another. He looked at Gus, who held out his glass. “Well, you figured it out, and from the surprise, you didn’t suspect him either. I’m almost disappointed, really.” He filled Gus’ glass.

“Why’s that?” She asked.

“Argo, it’s you we’re talking about,” Silica said. “I’m surprised that you hadn’t made the connection, or at least figured it out. Don’t look at me like that, you were too surprised. I’ll admit that we didn’t figure it out until a couple months ago, after the floor boss on the sixty-fifth floor, right?”

“Yeah,” Harry noted with a nod. “If I remember it right, we made a comment about Heathcliff getting things back under control when those four died, Strea or Yui looked ready to say something, and they locked up. After that, it wasn’t hard to connect the dots.”

“Surprised you guys haven’t gone out of your way to expose him,” Gus said. “I mean, I can understand him taking steps to keep you from doing so in conversation, but you guys are on the Assault Team, and fight in many of the same battles.”

“True,” Kirito said with a nod. “But having made the connection, and he knows that we know, he isn’t slipping up like he did, after all. Then again, few floor bosses are nasty, or surprising, enough to get him to slip up.”

“On the other hand, we know one coming boss fight that’s likely to force him to use his abilities as the GM,” Asuna said. “If the game holds true to form, the seventy-fifth floor boss will be that boss.”

“That’s something, at least.” Argo said. “So, a couple of months or so, and things will be coming to a head. What are your plans for when that happens?”

“They’re a work in progress,” Asuna said. “We don’t know what exactly is going to happen, so we don’t exactly know what to plan for.”

“We’re fairly sure that stabbing him, and if that doesn’t work, keep stabbing him, is going to be a part of them, though.” Harry said drily.

**Aincrad 55th Floor, Grandzam**

Heathcliff looked at the message that CARDINAL sent him, informing him that Argo had made the connection and nodded. That Steel Phoenix had something to do with it was immaterial, considering that he had safeguards in place to keep them from outright saying it. *Although, I probably should have been a bit more discerning as to what they could say, he admitted to himself. No matter. I’m actually surprised that it took her this long, really.*

It was of no concern to him, not any more. He had a system in place to keep others from revealing his identity outright, though he knew that all possible means had not been closed off. One of them, an attack of opportunity to expose him through his GM protections triggering, had not been used yet,
but he felt it was only a matter of time.

It was only a matter of when, where, and who it would be.

**September 24, 2024 - Aincrad 61st Floor, Selmburg**

Rain slowly awoke from her nap and glanced at the corner of her HUD to check the time. They had come back early from hitting the fields on the seventieth floor, and she decided to take advantage of the extra free time to settle in for a brief nap. The long hours over the last week, with early mornings, late nights, and a lot of the time spent finding and killing mobs was tiring. So, she would take the opportunity of having an afternoon off to enjoy a nap that would last an hour or so, or one of the others decided to knock on her door to wake her up for dinner.

She knew the why behind it, the fight with that field boss a couple of weeks back, along with their discussing some things about how they are getting close to the point where Kayaba would likely have to resort to his GM status, Asuna and Kirito wanted everyone to be strong enough to survive. They were already making inquiries to find blacksmiths to find out who had the necessary skill to work the mats that they were flooded with from killing that field boss.

She could understand, and even agree, with it, but it didn’t make the long hours any more bearable to deal with. The fact that it was her birthday was of no real concern to her. Ensuring everyone’s long term survival was of more importance.

*Four birthdays within two or three weeks?* She asked herself idly as she got up and equipped her armor, a cuirass with pauldrons to provide protection for her arms, through the menu. It seemed loose in places and tight in others earlier in the day, so she wanted to double check the fit while she remembered to do so. Now that she was rested and not keeping an eye out for trouble coming anyone’s way, the fit was a little off, but only if she concentrated on it, which was why she probably hadn’t noticed sooner.

Using the system to put armor and clothing on ensured that it would fit, but even after using the system to size it, one still needed to check the straps of the armor to tighten or loosen them so that it felt like it fit properly. The devs probably had based the whole fit based on body type, and given that most players were male, there were always little adjustments that had to be made.

She heard a knock at the door. “Come on in, I’m decent,” she called.

She glanced and watched as Silica opened the door and stepped inside. The younger girl was out of her armor, wearing a white blouse and a long blue skirt. She did have her dagger belted at her waist, but rather than the sturdy sword belt she normally sported, the belt she wore was finer, softer. Casual wear, really, when one considered that fashionable in SAO still meant being armed at all times.

“Checking the fit of your armor?” She asked. “Why?”

Rain nodded. “Felt a bit loose or tight in the wrong places,” she said. “Do you mind checking and adjusting the straps?”

“Sure,” Silica replied as she stepped toward Rain and began to inspect her armor. “Hmm, looks like your waist narrowed a bit,” she said, tightening the straps.

“And my tits grew,” Rain replied with a grunt as Silica’s tightening of the straps compressed her breasts uncomfortably. She gave a sigh of relief when the younger girl began to adjust the fit around her chest, loosening it just enough. “Now if only this would carry to the real world, we could market this as a great makeover plan when we got out,” she joked.
Silica chuckled. “Too bad it probably doesn’t reflect what we look like in the real world,” she said, making some final adjustments to Rain’s armor. “Alright, done. Check to see if it fits right.”

Rain did so, and nodded in satisfaction. She was used to Lux or Asuna adjusting the fittings, and doing the same for them if necessary. Silica had her husband to do the adjustments for her, her to do the same for him. And both were still growing. At least here in the virtual world, the real world was probably another matter entirely.

“Well, get out of your armor, Asuna’s decided that we should all head out for dinner,” Silica said. “Apparently, Yui’s found this one place in Serendia, on the sixty-seventh floor, that has a good reputation.”

“Oh?” Rain asked.

“You really think we wouldn’t have something planned for your birthday?” Silica asked. “Give us all some credit.”

Rain shrugged. “I honestly thought that, with all the birthdays coming so close to each other, that it would be just one party, actually,” she said. “I mean, you held one each for Lux and Harry, but they were far enough apart that taking a break on those days made sense. But with all of us having them about a week apart?” She shrugged. “Would have been more practical.”

Silica shook her head. “Well, I’ll let you get out of your armor and put something more appropriate on. Nothing that needs to be too formal, though.” She gestured at her simple garb. “I’m going in this, after all, so see you in ten minutes?” She turned and headed out of the room.

Rain shook her head and opened up her storage. Outside of a few changes of clothes kept in her inventory, she took advantage of the fact that having a room also meant that she could store her extra clothing and free up some inventory space and weight. Now she just had to find an outfit and redo her braid, perhaps a looser one for this, rather than the tight and nearly severe one she normally sported.

Aincrad 67th Floor, Serendia

The dinner they were served was excellent. Not up to Asuna’s quality, Silica knew, but then there were few places in SAO that served food that good. At the same time, she could see Asuna making note of the dishes and probably planning to see if she could get the recipes from the staff.

She looked to the side and watched in amusement as Harry idly shooed Pina away from his plate, but not before he put a little bit of his food on a smaller one and put it in front of the ever hungry feathered dragon.

“You spoil her, you know that Harry?” Rain asked in amusement.

Harry merely shrugged in response. “She steals from my plate enough as it is,” he said simply. “I find it’s easier to just save a bit for her and put it on a small plate for her to eat off of. Besides, I’ve seen you sneaking her some food before, Rain.”

“Ever since you and Silica left her with me overnight while you two and Lux went off to take care of that one group of Reds for Lind, she seems to come to me if you are shooing her away from your plate,” Rain said drily. “Well, when she’s not begging Yui, that is.”

Silica turned to the childlike AI and watched as she looked up at her name being called. Yui often did give little snacks to Pina, taking delight in doing so. If Pina wasn’t around her and Harry, Silica knew that she simply had to find Yui, who would often have Pina in her lap, and gently stroking the
feathered dragon. If they weren’t both curled up somewhere and napping, that is.

It was an adorable enough sight that everyone had taken pictures with an image crystal.

Soon enough, everyone else had finished, and waited at the plates were taken away. A server brought out fresh drinks, beer for Harry, Kirito, and Rain; wine for Asuna, Lux, Strea, and herself; and a fresh glass of juice for Yui.

“Before we get to the gift giving, I propose a toast,” Asuna said. “To Rain, celebrating her eighteenth birthday. Congratulations are in order.”

“Cheers!” Everyone said and raised their drinks.

##

Klein heard the exclamation as he entered with Dynamm, Dale, Issin, Kunimitsu and Harry One. The place was a bit fancy, not to mention expensive, but the food was great. He looked over to where he heard the exclamation and blinked. There was Steel Phoenix gathered at a table, not wearing any armor away from the villa for a change, and it seemed to be that they were having a toast.

“Hey boss, what do you think the occasion is?” Issin asked.

“Don’t know,” he replied. “They’re clearly having a party, but for what?”

“Looks like Silica just pulled a box out of her inventory,” Dale said. “A pretty decently sized one.”

They both watched as Rain took the box and opened it, her eyes widening as she looked at what was in it. Pulling it out, it was a longsword. A bit larger than the slightly smaller bastard swords she preferred, but even from here, Klein could see the quality of its make. Didn’t have the simple lines and pure function of form that was a hallmark of Lisbeth, their normal blacksmith, but at the same time the ornamentation was subdued, tasteful. What was odd was the blade was crimson, but the metallic sheen on it meant that it was meant for combat.

He and his group made their way forward, hoping to find out who had made it, or if it was one they got from a treasure chest or a drop. Klein doubted that it was either, but he had to admit, the quality of the weapon was far superior to everyone else’s, barring Asuna’s rapier.

“It’s called Espada Caramesí,” he heard Harry say. “Liz came through for us and located the blacksmith that mentored her, Gilbrean. He specializes in swords, maxed out his Blacksmithing Skill, and we had plenty of mats from that one fight, so we considered what would be appropriate for you.”

“The fact that it fits your title is a bonus,” Silica chimed in. “Also, it seems we have some who just came in.” She looked right at Klein. “So, are you just going to stand there, Klein?”

Klein blinked as everyone at the table then turned to look at him. “Oh, right,” he said after a short pause. “Heard you guys giving a toast as I walked in and seeing as none of you are in your gear, I was just wondering what the occasion was. You guys don’t usually come out all casual like.”

“That’s all?” Asuna asked. “Well, it’s Rain’s birthday, and we had a light day. And why not eat out on such a day? We heard that the food here is pretty good, so it seemed like an appropriate time to come by.”

“It’s Rain’s birthday?” Klein asked. At Rain’s nod, he grinned. “Well, congratulations then. So, how old are you today?”
“Eighteen.” Rain replied.

*Wait, she just turned eighteen today? Klein thought. I would have thought she was turning twenty or so. “Huh, I thought you were older, like in college now.”*

Rain snorted. “You aren’t the first person to think that,” she said drily. “People have been thinking I was older than I am since I was fourteen.”

“Would explain how you managed to get invited into those parties you once claimed to have gone to,” Lux noted. “Then again, the fact that you got invited probably meant that those who invited you might have had an ulterior motive.”

“Wait, ulterior motive?” Strea asked and then paled. “You mean…?”

Rain nodded. “There are some like that,” she said. “Which is why I made sure to get my own drinks and keep a sharp eye on them. If I had to leave, like for the bathroom, I either finished it, or discretely poured it out when I got done.”

Klein gave her a look. “Surprised a girl who was in high school would know to do that,” he noted.

“You hear about things like that,” Rain said. “Never went to a party where that might have happened, at least not that I knew of, but I also didn’t give anyone an opportunity to do so. Also made sure I didn’t get into drinking contests with those who were still more or less sober.”

“That explains how you were able to drink college students under the table,” Lux said.

“Easy enough when they’re about to pass out, especially when you persuade them to go from beer or sake to something like vodka, and replace yours with water,” Rain said deviously. “Usually avoided that, though, despite how often I’ve tried to drink Klein here under the table.”

“Which, if you had, we would have never let him live down,” Kunimitsu said. “Still surprised he didn’t drink you under the table, though.”

“Or the fact that the two of you hadn’t woken up the next morning in the same bed,” Silica said.

“*Khuy tebe,*” Rain said.

“I’m happy enough with my husband, I don’t need another partner, but thank you for the offer,” Silica replied.

“Wait, you guys know what that means?” Dynamm asked.

“More or less,” Harry said, glancing at Yui, who had her attention toward gently moving her fingers along Pina’s back. Klein got the message, and he could see that Dynamm had as well.

“So, you guys all pitched in to get her a sword made?” Klein asked. “Well, it fits for here, thought I doubt the real world would ever think that giving someone a weapon or armor to be used in battle is appropriate as a gift.”

Harry shrugged. “That’s the real world, this is here,” he said. “Besides, it’s getting about time for us to upgrade our gear anyway. If we can find a skilled enough specialist in the Armorsmithing Branch of Blacksmithing, to go with what Gilbrean can do with weapons, I can imagine what we could get from the mats we got off that one fight.”

Klein thought about it and then nodded. He had heard that Asuna had gotten the Last Attack Bonus
on that fight, and that it was a rapier that was far more powerful than her previous one. Which said a lot about the mob they fought, and the rumors that it was something that should have been on a higher floor might have more truth than he thought.

He pushed those thoughts out of his head and joined the rest in wishing Rain a happy birthday to change the subject. It was something that he could worry about another day.
October 11, 2024 - Aincrad 65th Floor, Barist

It had been, in Asuna’s mind, a fairly good two weeks. They had still gone out and helped with the clearing, or focusing on grinding their levels up a bit more, with breaks to celebrate the birthdays that turned up. She knew that Kirito spent a lot of his extra time in Grandzam, probably negotiating with Reinhard, who Liz worked with to forge some armor pieces for them back when they got that mass of mats from that one challenge quest.

It was for more than just her, but with her and Silica’s birthdays within days of each other, she had no doubt whose armor the only two males in the guild prioritized first.

So on her birthday, she had been presented with an actual set of armor-- a brand new set that made her more armored than she was used to, along with clothing to be worn under it that was clearly designed by Ashley for her birthday. The guild’s emblem of a sword carrying phoenix rising from the flames had been embroidered in silver along the collar of her tunic and on the back of the asymmetric cloak that came as part of the set. The tailor had certainly gone all the way in designing and making the clothing, and not just for her.

Fashion and practicality in a set of gifts. Kirito never struck her as being worried about the aesthetics of fashion, having more an eye for utility. Harry did have an eye for aesthetics, but he was still more concerned with utility. He wouldn’t care if something looked like a fashion disaster if it kept him or others alive, but if he had a choice between two items with similar stats, he would pick the one with more pleasing aesthetics.

Asuna carefully didn’t think about how much any of the armor sets probably cost. Any blacksmith skilled enough to work mats that came from a mob that belonged more than twenty floors higher than the current floor being cleared could command high prices. The costs for Ashley’s custom jobs was well known, though she doubted that her new clothing was as expensive as the dress she wore for Silica and Harry’s wedding.

Everyone had their new armor handed out to them over the course of the last two weeks. Strea had just recently received hers, and was currently having it fitted to her, much to her annoyance.

She looked over to where Silica, Rain, and Lux were moving around Strea making adjustments to her new plate armor. The AI was standing fairly still, only moving when one them told her to do so in order to check the fit and whether it restricted her movements any. She caught Asuna’s eye and rolled hers, clearly impatient for the adjustments to be finished, her free hand twitched in its new gauntlet, showing that she was barely restraining the urge to start tapping her fingers along her cuisses. The only reason the other wasn’t was due to Lux adjusting the fit of the articulated melding of the pauldron and rerebrace to ensure that it didn’t interfere with the couter that protected her elbow.

It was, unsurprisingly, a far more involved process than she or any of the others required for their own armor. It was largely due to the sheer number of component parts that had to be fitted and adjusted to ensure not only a proper fit, as the system did what could be considered a best approximation, but to also ensure that none of the parts caught, or covered in the wrong way. She didn’t know how many players overall actually got this involved with their own armor, but it was learned by her and the rest of her guild early on, and the better fit certainly made wearing the armor that little bit more comfortable.
“How much longer is this going to take?” Strea asked impatiently.

“I’m done here,” Silica said. “Once Rain and Lux finish, you’ll need to test your movement, but the
faulds shouldn’t be folding under the cuirass in front now.”

“Just a moment… got it!” Rain said. “I don’t know how the system got the cuisses to go over the
poleyn on your right like that, but you shouldn’t have problems flexing your knee now.”

Lux made a few quick adjustments and backed away. “Move and flex your arms, Strea,” she said.

Asuna watched as Strea did so, flexing her limbs, bending her body, and tested the range of motion
for her shoulders, giving the three an appreciative nod. “So, why did I go with wearing a full set of
plate again?” She asked.

“Because of the type of weapon you use,” Asuna said. “Two handed weapons have the advantage of
doing a lot of damage when they hit, but also suffer from the fact that they can more easily grab
aggro from the tanks.”

“That, and the fact that you’re the tallest of us, and built like the armor belongs on you,” Lux said.
“Though I doubt that real world armor was designed with breasts as big as yours are in mind.”

“She should be glad that it only provides the general curvature, and doesn’t mimic her rack exactly,”
Rain commented. “That would just give the mobs something to aim at and hit her right in the
sternum. I mean, have you seen some of the armors some of the other girls are wearing?”

“I think we’ve all seen those examples, worn some even,” Silica acknowledged, knowing precisely
what the Russo-Japanese girl meant. While it was noted among the more gaming inclined that the
armor was designed more for functionality than to be easy on the eyes. Not that there was a lack of
armor that did so, clearly being designed to titillate, or to look cute. Well, when worn by female
players, anyway.

Even SAO wasn’t free from double standards. Though admittedly, some of the armor and
accessories specifically intended for male players tended to be designed in a similar way so that the
ladies could have something to glance at. Whether that was intentional or not was up to debate, but
Asuna was more than willing to believe that it was.

That the fit of the armor might occasionally need readjusting was one of those things they didn’t
really think about. The fact that their bodies changed, grew even, if at a slow enough rate to not be
obvious at a glance was already puzzling enough. Even Kirito, who was as close to an expert
authority on the matter that they had, admitted that he was puzzled by it, seeing no practical
reasoning behind it, given how resource intensive running a virtual world already was. Especially in
one that tried to be as close to realistic as this one did.

Why waste the resources for something so minor?

She shook her head and looked at the others. The whole issue with armor was a minor one. What
they had, even before the benefit of the drops of gear and mats from that field boss, was still
sufficient for their purposes. On the surface, at least. Considering the weapons they were getting, that
they would have had to get new armor anyway, if only to have something that had the protective
qualities they would need for when they drew aggro and had to tank a hit.

She pushed those thoughts out of her head. “Strea, is everything fitting properly?” She asked.

The AI nodded. “It is,” she said and sighed. “I just hate how long it takes to make the adjustments to
the fit.”
Asuna nodded. “I know what you mean, and we all wear less armor than you do,” she said. “Getting it to fit just right is an annoyance all of us have to deal with. Just be glad that your avatar is an adult one, not like ours, which are going through puberty and change a bit in terms of shape over time. Clothing is fine, but for some reason, the armor only fits close to body type, not precisely. Not enough to be unwieldy most of the time, but making those adjustments does help in a lot of ways with weight distribution, balance, and comfort. All of us fell flat on our faces at least once, I think, due to being unbalanced by improperly distributed weight, not to mention the sheer discomfort which can be distracting. And for you, with all of the parts that make up a full set of plate, you also need to make sure that they’re fitted and positioned properly, and that takes time.”

She heard a knock on the door to the room they had decided to wait in. “You all decent?” Came Kirito’s voice. “Gilbrean finished with the last weapon and wants us to come to the front.”

“We’ll be there in a moment, Kirito” Asuna called.

##

Harry turned to see everyone come in and gave Strea a look over. She had gotten new armor more because what Reinhard could make was better than what she had gotten when they went through the drops from that boss than actual necessity. Much like how Keiko had little need for a new weapon, given her dagger, but she had decided to get another one crafted on the unlikely, but possible chance, of her needing to switch out weapons due to durability issues.

*Well, can’t blame her for that,* he thought. He and his wife had more than a few weapons break over the last two years, and weapons of the quality of her current dagger were going to be difficult to replace for some time. They had the mats, so they might as well get new weapons while they were at it. And given how well Rain’s sword had turned out, they had the right blacksmith to forge them.

He heard the door to the forge open and saw Gilbrean come out, pushing a covered table on rollers. The blacksmith was a bearded man in his mid-thirties, with a build that was more like what the Americans thought of when they considered a player of that bastardization of football they had.

“Well now, I didn’t expect to have a chance to work with as many mats that would actually require my skills to be what they are,” he said and shot them a dry look. “I thought that one sword I made you all was going to be it, but I should have known you would come back.”

“We heard you were the best weapon smith from Lisbeth, and some of the ones we talked to in Grandzam said so as well,” Asuna said. “After you made Espada Caramesí, you are an obvious choice to get our weapons updated. Liz knows that her skills aren’t enough for these mats, so here we are. Your reputation is deserved, and Liz wouldn’t recommend just anyone. She recommended Reinhard in Grandzam for making our armor.”

“And Reinhard is the best at making Armor, I know,” Gilbrean agreed. “And how is Little Liz? I know she owns her own forge and shop, but with how busy I am either making something or looking for new mats to make something with, I haven’t been by to see her in some time.”

“She’s doing well and she’s been the blacksmith we normally go to,” Kirito said. “She made one of my swords a little over three months ago, and it’s kept pace with what we deal with on the Assault Team.” He pulled out Dark Repulsor. “Take a look.”

Gilbrean took the weapon and inspected it. “Hmm, good lines, the balance is perfect, and I can imagine that if I checked the stats, they would be quite good as well,” he said and gave it an experimental swing. “Probably getting toward the end of its usable life unless you keep enhancing it.” He opened its status window. “And I see you have, though you’re probably getting diminishing
returns from the enhancement process right now. Still, it’s a good weapon. I can see why you’ve kept it this long.” He handed it back to Kirito hilt first.

“Thank you,” Kirito said, taking the sword back and putting it back in his inventory. “It’s served me well as a complement to my Elucidator when I dual wield. It also had the strength and durability to keep up with it, something that couldn’t be said for the current at the time weapons that could be bought, or were from drops.”

Gilbrean nodded at that. He probably knew that they didn’t replace weapons just because new ones were available, but only when they could find one that met their high standards, or it became necessary. The fact that Lisbeth was their go to blacksmith for weapons under most circumstances said a lot about how highly they thought of the quality of the girl’s work. And given that she had shared with them the fact that he was the one who got her started in blacksmithing, all of them knew who to thank for that.

He shoved those thoughts out of his head and watched as Gilbrean pulled the cover off the table and Harry could see that the man was pleased by their reactions.

“I can see that you like the work,” the blacksmith said before picking up the dagger. “I rarely have a chance to work with materials of this quality, so I did as well as I could on them. I made a few more, but their quality wasn’t up to the standard I believe you all are looking for, but these are my finest work to date. Now, let’s discuss payment. I won’t charge you all much, you provided the mats and gave me more than I needed to work with, so I was thinking that two million for each weapon should be reasonable. And the leftover mats, of course.”

Harry was surprised by the relatively low cost of the weapons, but he reminded himself that there was a reason why they preferred to bring in their own mats to be worked, rather than simply buying an already made weapon. All things considered, two million was a good price for the quality of the work he was seeing at this time.

He gazed the weapons an appraising look. An arming sword, a broadsword with a finely done basket hilt, a two handed sword that was a dark purple with gold leaf on it, two long swords that were dark and light respectively, and the dagger that Gilbrean had just put back onto the table. He picked up the arming sword, opened up its stats, and gave an appreciative whistle. He then looked at its name, Cláimh Gloine, and shook his head. And Englishman, wielding a sword with an Irish Gaelic name, of course.

It was crystalline in appearance, almost like glass. An experimental flick produced a metallic ring and caused the sword to flex and vibrate with two pivot points, demonstrating that it was anything but. Also, a check of its durability showed that it was certainly a sword that was designed to be able to take abuse. So, despite looking like it was made of glass, and he would not be surprised if the _gloine_ in actually meant glass, it was certainly tough.

He looked over at his wife, who had picked up the dagger. It was certainly an interesting design, oddly decorative and beautiful, while still highly lethal in design. The hilt was a translucent crystal that had metal veins worked into the quillons, giving it a look that was reminiscent of the wings of a dragonfly.

“I can see that they’re definitely well made,” he heard Asuna say. “Everyone, what are they called?”

“Cláimh Gloine,” Harry said, giving his a couple of test swings to get a feel for its balance. “It’s in Irish Gaelic, and I think it means Sword of Glass. What about you, dear?” He asked his wife.

“Gwas y Nedir,” Silica said. “Don’t know what that means, though.” She gave Harry a curious look.
and sighed when he shook his head in the negative.

“Šviesa and Tamsa,” Kirito said, giving both blades a speculative look, considering that one seemed like a brighter Dark Repulsor, and the other was dark much like his Elucidator was.

“Sumrak,” Lux said, looking carefully at how it seemed to shift from a dark red to a deep purple along its length.

“Seară,” Strea said, holding it up before sheathing it across her back.

**October 12, 2024 - Aincrad 61st Floor, Selmburg**

Kirito looked at everyone at the table as they put down their utensils after eating the meal Asuna cooked. They had all decided to take the day off, mostly for the purposes of rest at his recommendation, though he knew that Harry and Silica went out to the fields for the purposes of testing their weapons. Mostly to get a feel for them, as it often took a few days to get used to new gear. Given that all of them, outside of Strea, down here would not have served well to test the weapons anyway.

He watched as Harry and Silica got up and gathered the dishes to take them back to the kitchen. Washing them was, like many things in SAO, a far more simplified process than in the real world. Put them into the sink, fill it with water, put in some of the cheap cleaning solution that could be bought in every town for a pittance, and the dishes would be clean in less than a minute.

None of them really complained about things being that easy, especially Harry, but those little differences from the real world did sometimes get to people. Just one of those things that didn’t really hit them until it did, just another difference between the virtual world and the real world slapping them in the face.

Soon, the married pair came back into the dining room and took their seats, looking at him. Taking a breath to gather his thoughts, Kirito stood from his seat and looked at them all again. “I know we all want to just get on with the night, so I’ll be quick,” he said. “Now that the birthdays are all past, we can concentrate on grinding and training. I’m not complaining about all the time we used to take things lightly, but with us getting closer to where Kayaba is liable to slip up…”

“You want to make sure we’re all in top form,” Asuna said with a nod. “I agree, but what should we do differently then? We’re already out grinding, and I know we all take some time to train a bit as well. That reminds me of something. Harry, I have noticed that you have been starting to work with the other affinities of Mystic Blade more. Why is that?”

Kirito wondered himself, though he had an idea why. Harry’s tendency to use the earth and fire affinities made them the go-to affinities for him when he used Mystic Blade, and also encouraged him to fall into habits which could turn around and bite him. It was likely that a recent fight had reminded him of that, and his reliance on only a limited subset of that skill showed that he was falling into a common trap of being overly reliant on only a few skills, reducing his flexibility in a fight.

Kirito still took some time to not use Dual Wielding, fighting with only one sword to avoid complete reliance on his Unique Skill, especially since Dual Wielding did balance out the improved offense by lessening his defense. He could balance that out by practicing defensive strategies, such as using one blade to parry attacks, but trying to do so with two longswords was ill advised. They were weapons that had been designed to be wielded with two hands, but could be wielded with one.

It took a lot of practice to do so, though. Kirito had lost control of his blades enough times early on to know that. It had been, to put it bluntly, embarrassing when that happened. The few times he ended
up accidentally cutting off one of his hands had also hurt.

“Back on the sixty-ninth floor, I got reminded why relying on only two of the affinities is less than ideal,” Harry said. “I tried to tank a blow that, before I got used to the weaknesses of the Earth Affinity, I would have dodged or deflected with my shield.” He chuckled. “Sir Isaac Newton decided to remind me just why I shouldn’t tank, and I got sent on my arse by a minotaur. That field boss breaking my arm cemented it, as I can think of a couple of ways I could have dodged or deflected it.”

“Wind?” Asuna asked.

Harry shook his head. “You’d think so, as it gives a major boost to speed, but no, not Wind,” he replied. “Wind tends to be too linear for my tastes. I was thinking Water, actually. It makes me more mobile in terms of actually, you know, being able to maneuver around, rather than using speed to move in and out. I’m not used to those speeds, so while I would be faster, I would actually be less maneuverable. Wind would be a good fit for you, as you’re used to maneuvering at high speed.” He shrugged. “One of the reasons I started working with Wind and Water was so I could call them up without thinking about them. I can see, when looking back on some of the fights over the last few months where they would have been better choices.”

“Hindsight, gotta love it,” Rain said drily. “Besides that, what about those few times you transferred the affinity?”

“Unfortunately, it still takes too long to be useful in most cases when we’re in the middle of a fight without getting some space so we have the time to transfer it,” Harry said. “And you all know how rarely that happens. That fight a few weeks ago? One of the few times when we had the time and space to do so. A floor boss? Bad place to try it. Trust me, I’ve tried to cut the time down, but ten seconds seems to be as low as I can get it. Keiko was there with me, and she can tell you how many times I failed, or the times when me trying to rush it literally blew up on me.”

“What about infusing an affinity into an item like a crystal?” Lux asked. “Aren’t there some players who can make healing crystals? You know, as a part of alchemy, or was it potion making?” She shook her head. “What about finding out what items are needed for that, and if it requires something like a crystal that has no attribute?”

Kirito watched as Harry looked ready to object when he paused for a moment and got thoughtful. “It can’t be that simple,” Harry said. “But… that might… just a moment, I need to check Argo’s guide books. I think I saw something…” He opened his inventory and pulled out several books with Argo’s mark of a cartoonish rat in shadow on the corner. “Even if it doesn’t work like I would hope, perhaps…” He started mumbling to himself as he went through the books, furiously flipping pages.

“This’ll take him a bit,” Silica said, shaking her head. “And he’ll probably have to get in touch with Argo to check a few things.”

“Something to do with magic?” Asuna asked. At Silica’s surprised look she shrugged. “It’s obvious that she knew about Harry’s abilities, and considering how hard he tried to keep from being specific about their nature before he let it slip, it’s not a hard conclusion to reach. She either can use it, someone in her family can use it, or she’s like you and knows about it.” She shrugged. “Doesn’t really make a difference, really, whether she can use magic, or just knows about it. She’s still the same Argo.”

Kirito nodded in agreement. It really wasn’t a hard conclusion to reach.

“Aha!” Harry exclaimed. “It does say that there are crystals that can be found or purchased from
some merchants, mainly alchemists. I’ll have to ask Argo if she has any ideas on what might work, but…” He looked up to see everyone looking at him in amusement. “What?”

“Nothing, Harry,” Asuna said. “Nothing at all.”

**October 15, 2024 - Aincrad 72nd Floor, Walfrin**

“Boss, Steel Phoenix is here,” Gus said. “Looks like they’re looking for us and…” He whistled. “Hot damn, they’ve upgraded their gear.”

Argo looked up from her meal and saw them making their way to her table and blinked a bit at their appearances. Gus had been right, they had upgraded their gear, replacing their armor with new armor which she could tell was of vastly superior quality to what they’d sported before. And she had no doubts that they had gotten new weapons forged as well. Well, maybe not Asuna, who probably started wielding the weapon she got off that field boss, now that she was armored appropriately. And the others...

They all looked like they were ready to head out onto the battlefield at the head of an army. Their new armor suited them.

“Well now, didn’t expect all of you to come in looking like *that*,” she said admiringly as they got near. “You get that all forged from those mats you got three floors ago?”

“More or less,” Asuna said as she sat down. “I’m not used to wearing all this, they all went a bit overboard.” She glanced at her guild mates, who simply looked back at her, completely unrepentant. “The armor smith, Reinhard, and Ashley came up with this. It’ll be a couple of weeks until I’m properly used to it.”

“Not that it’s restricted your mobility or slowed you down any,” Silica said drily. “If anything, you seem to have gotten faster, so Reinhard definitely forged that armor with your requirements in mind. Also, it’s not like you can complain about the protective qualities it has.”

“She has a point, Asuna,” Harry said. “You often went with the least armor of us all, and Kirito started going with less when he started using his unique skill on a regular basis.” He rolled his shoulders. “And you two aren’t the only ones getting used to being more armored.”

“ Noticed that,” Argo said. “But I expect that you all didn’t come here just to show off your new armor, which is nice by the way. So, why did you guys track me down?”

Asuna looked at Harry, who nodded. “I had an idea that I thought of using one thing that I’ve been able to do with Mystic Blade. I would ask for you to put up a privacy field, but I think this would require a bit more than that.”

Argo raised an eyebrow. “Something to do with… that?” She asked.

Harry nodded and then looked at Asuna.

“We’re going to break for lunch anyway,” she said. “So you have some time, just don’t take too long.”

Argo nodded and stood up. “Well, might as well get to this then,” she said and looked at Gus. “Make sure that the staff doesn’t take the rest of the food, I’m still hungry.”

“Got it, boss,” he said.
Harry felt the field snap into place as soon as Argo sat down and pulled the item that was associated with it out of her inventory. She placed it on the small table that was in the small private dining room and looked at him. “So Harry, what’s this about?” She asked and then gestured to the other available seat. “And take a seat.”

Harry did so and looked at the information broker. “We were going over some things, especially when Asuna noted how I’ve been changing up how I use Mystic Blade,” he said. “Nothing’s wrong with it, but back when we had that large battle on the sixty-ninth floor, I found out the hard way that I was falling into a pattern and was getting overconfident in some things.” He shrugged. “It was bound to happen, I suppose, everyone tends to favor specific skills, after all. However, that’s not the point of this, just to give you some context. I can transfer the affinities to others so long as their weapon is touching mine for about ten seconds, and I haven’t been able to get it to happen faster, which makes it, while useful in a fight if I can find the time and space to do so, not that useful.”

Argo nodded. “Because getting the time and space is the hard part,” she noted. “What about that one skill I heard of, the one where you raised a wall of earth? I heard that last long enough to give you some time.”

“And it has limitations to it,” Harry said. “The primary one being that I can’t simply shift to the Earth Affinity and do it right off the bat, I have to be in that affinity for about forty-five seconds. Up to a field boss, and where we have a lot of room? It’s doable, but against a floor boss, with the battlefield limited as they tend to be, it’s more useful to rely on mobility, and Earth Affinity restricts that a bit.”

“In other words, it gives you the strengths and weaknesses of a tank, save for the fact that you’re not built for it,” Argo said and then gave him a look. “You tried to tank something with the size and strength to knock you on your ass, didn’t you?”

Harry nodded. “Anyway, while we were talking, Lux brought up an interesting point,” he said. “I can transfer it to a weapon, so long as it’s touching mine, but what if I used a crystal or something to create an item that can do it? And faster? We know that there are ways to make healing crystals, which is useful when you want to save the money and have the mats, and there is the fact that Mystic Blade has allowed me to use magic, so long as it’s within SAO’s rules.”

“Makes sense,” Argo said and then got a thoughtful look on her face. “You did say that the fact that you got the skill, and the entire thing surrounding Voldemort, showed that Kayaba was aware of magic. If not beforehand, then due to the various attempts by those who can use it to actually use it. And you’re right that magic that doesn’t break the rules can work, and I’m sure that you think the privacy fields I can set up are magic.”

“I take it that they are?” It wasn’t a question.

“Yeah, I stumbled upon that last year, but most of what I could have done in the real world isn’t… reliable, I guess you could say,” she admitted. “But then, you already know that. So you’re wondering if trying to transfer it to a crystal might work, and turning it into an item them. I don’t see why it wouldn’t, but at the same time, I don’t think that it would be that easy. Still worth a shot, and I wonder what all of you would do with it if it works.”

Harry nodded. “It might, it might not, but I won’t know if I don’t try,” he said. “So, what crystals should I look for, and where can I get them?”

October 17, 2024 - Aincrad 65th Floor, Mee Forest
Keita paused as he heard what sounded like an explosion, followed by pained swearing in English, and looked at the other members of his guild. All of them looked at him, and then in the direction of where the cursing came from.

“I recognize that voice,” Ducker said. “It’s Harry, and I wonder why he’s busy cursing.”

“I wonder why he’s down here,” Sasamaru said. “Isn’t the Assault Team on the seventy-first floor?”

“Seventy-second,” Sachi corrected. “They might have moved to the seventy-third, but the Weekly Argo didn’t say anything about that, or that they were planning an assault on the floor boss when it came out yesterday.”

“It is odd that he’s down here,” Tetsuo said. “So he might be training something.”

Keita nodded, as that was a reasonable assumption. Players usually went to a lower floor than their usual stomping grounds whenever they felt like training their combat skills. Perhaps to try new techniques, or perhaps to try something different in a place that was less dangerous than the floor they were on. Given that he was in the Assault Team, he probably considered this place sufficiently so.

Though that explosion indicated that whatever he was doing probably made up for it, if it was him. And not some mob.

“Keita, should we check and see if he’s okay?” Sachi asked.

“Or see if Silica needs any help dragging him out of whatever situation he landed himself in?” Ducker added.

He considered that and wondered if they should. If there was something giving members of the Assault Team trouble, what chance would they stand? At the same time, Ducker and Sachi had a point, they didn’t have to fight whatever it was, just make sure that the others were all right, and if possible, drag them out of that situation.

But if he did nothing, and he could, he had no doubt that word would eventually spread. Not to mention having to live with himself if anything happened.

He sighed. Why did he think it was a good idea to be in charge? Right, they were his friends. “Well, we might as well,” he finally said. “We might even find what we’re looking for.”

##

Lux waved the smoke and dust away from her, and winced when she saw the glowing wound where Harry’s left hand and a decent portion of his arm below the elbow used to be. That had to hurt, though she had avoided losing a limb in terms of injuries, but there were times when a mob got lucky, like the time she got completely run through a few months back. That hurt, and she knew that it was most likely less than what it would feel like in the real world. Deadlier, as well.

Well, she hoped it hurt less than it would Outside, it hurt enough when it happened. A glance at Silica showed her looking resigned, shaking her head, and heading over to her husband, with Pina following.

Harry had been trying to see if he could create a one-use item that could transfer one of Mystic Blade’s affinities. So far, nothing had worked, though he thought something was beginning to happen. She wondered if he thought correctly, considering that it literally blew up this time, and took his hand with it.
“Son of a bitch!” Harry swore in English, clutching the stump below his elbow where his left hand and a good portion of his forearm used to be. “Fuck that hurt. Felt like someone took a bloody sledgehammer to my hand and arm. Ah, shit.”

“Well what do you expect?” Silica asked sharply. “I warned you that it looked like you were overcharging it, you idiot.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said, still winching. “And I should have listened, and even when I heal, this is going to ache for a couple of hours. Well, we know how long it takes before it blows up in my face just by trying to infuse an affinity into a crystal now.” He opened his menu and pulled out a potion to drink. He took the cap of the bottle off with his teeth, spit it out, and then chugged it down. “Okay, I know I promised to stop after it blew up in my face three times, but I think I’m done.”

Lux nodded. That was a good idea. She didn’t doubt that he could continue, but after something like that, it was probably best to call it a day. She had come with them to observe, and help Silica with keeping an eye out, not to mention run in if he managed to seriously hurt himself. He was using his former gear, as it was expendable, but still allowed for a fair bit of protection. Hence why it only blew off his hand, and didn’t cause any worse damage. Given that the explosion was more like what she thought a grenade going off would look like, that was probably for the best.

“Hey!” A voice called, and the sounds of people coming through the brush and fallen leaves meant that a small group was approaching. Probably because of the explosion. “You guys okay?”

“We’re fine!” She called back. “One of ours was trying something, and it… kind of blew up on him.”

“Yeah, we heard the explosion,” came the response. “Just wait a bit, we’re almost there.”

She looked at Silica, who nodded. “Keita!” The younger girl called. “Come on by, we’re okay, though Harry doesn’t look like it right now.”

The sounds of approaching players neared and she saw a group of five near her. “What do you- holy shit are you okay?! What happened?!”

“Just trying something, Keita, and it blew up on me,” Harry said. “And I’ll be fine, just need to wait for the arm to regenerate now. Anyway, we’re heading back to Barist, and then back to Selmburg. My arm should have regenerated by then, and I really don’t want to explain why I’m still missing an arm to Asuna.”

“Yeah, she’d be pissed if that happens.” Keita said. “Going to wait in Barist for it to come back?”

Lux looked back to Harry who nodded and then winced. “Yeah, it’ll grow back sooner if I spend some time in a safe zone, and I can use a drink,” he said. “What about you?”

“We’re looking for something,” Keita replied.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, we picked up a quest to find up some silver thistles.”

Harry pointed off to the side. “They’re that way, if I remember,” he said. “Not far from here. Well, if we’re in Barist when you get back, come on by. You know how to track us by the friends list. But right now, I want to find a place to sit down and have a stiff drink.”
“You sure you’re okay?” Keita asked, giving Harry’s arm a concerned look.

Harry smirked. “I’ve had worse, or at least more painful, injuries in the real world.”
October 30, 2024 - Aincrad 74th Floor, Kamdet

“Kind of surprised that we just blew through the seventy-third floor like that,” Strea said idly as they walked through the town’s gate. “We were there for what, eight days?”

“We also ended up spending a week longer on the seventy-second floor to compensate, as many of the others got around to updating their gear.” Asuna said. “And to be honest, given that the floors are getting smaller, blowing through one in a week actually isn’t that impossible. We just don’t because of some harsh lessons learned early on.”

“The Twenty-Fifth,” Kirito said grimly as he looked around the large plaza that made up most of the town’s area. “Outside of the first couple of floors, we started clearing through floors on an average of one every few days, not wanting to lose the momentum.” He shook his head and looked at Silica. “Silica saw it coming, if I’m remembering it right.”

“Weren’t we taking a few days off to rest up back then, Harry?” Silica asked.

“I think we were,” Harry replied. “We were in Coral, on the twenty-second floor, right? It’s been awhile.”

“Sounds about right,” Asuna murmured and then looked around. “Not much here, I see. It has walls, and all the houses are close to them aren’t more than a story. Then we have the teleport plaza, which is more of a large square.”

“It looks like a mustering yard,” Kirito said absently. “While this is a town, I would be surprised if the NPCs will say this was once a fort if we ask them the right questions. It definitely has that frontier fort that’s just become a town vibe that you sometimes see in some RPGs.”

“And Kirito, with the sharing of his gamer knowledge,” Harry said drily. “Not quite a former fort, at least from what I can tell. Unless it’s based off of something more recent.” He shrugged. “Ah, who cares, we can ask the NPCs for any info, and I’m sure they will be glad to share it if we ask the right questions.”

“Let’s activate the gate first,” Asuna said. “We didn’t encounter a lot of mobs, so the first bits of info aren’t going to be much, right?”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “And I wouldn’t be surprised if those hills all around the place have caves and such. Won’t know until we actually explore.”

Strea groaned. “Caves?” She asked with a whine. “I hate fighting in caves, my sword keeps hitting the walls and the roof.”

“The price for having such a large weapon,” Silica said with a chuckle. “Anyway, I’ll head over and activate the gate, so should we then start talking to NPCs and gathering information?”

Asuna nodded. “I’ll send a message to Yui, so she can meet up with us,” she said.

##
Yui paused for a moment at the entrance to the inn Asuna led her into in order to let her eyes adjust to the dimmer environs. Her brief look at the inside of Kamdet, as well as some observations, such as the fact that it was warmer and drier on this floor than it was where she was made her think that the area might be some semi-arid floor, but unless she looked outside the gates, a risky proposition for her, she wouldn’t be able to judge for sure.

She idly dusted off the hem of her skirt and wondered how the others felt. She was simply wearing a shirt, skirt, stockings, and small boots, but unlike armor, it at least breathed, meaning that she probably felt cooler than the others did. It wasn’t unbearably hot, but she thought that the others were probably glad that, while they would probably sweat until they got used to the floor, they wouldn’t suffer from dehydration.

She looked around and saw that the inn’s dining room was fuller than expected, and glanced at the time in her own HUD, noticing that it was about the time when players often took a break for lunch.

“Asuna, Yui, over here!” She hear Strea call. She looked over and saw her fellow AI and the rest of the guild sitting at a table with drinks in front of them.

Yui felt Asuna put a gentle hand on her shoulder and the two of them made their way toward the table.

“So, anything worthwhile found out?” Asuna asked as she took a seat, and thanked Kirito for his placing a glass in front of her.

“Nothing much right now,” Kirito said. “Found a few quests, and that the way to the labyrinth is, of course, blocked by the field boss. The usual, really.”

“I talked to a few NPCs to get what they knew of the floor,” Silica said. “Aside from the hills, it’s pretty much grassland. No forests, a couple of shallow rivers, things like that. They didn’t mention any cave networks, but it is likely there are a couple of them. No info about the field boss, though.”

“Not surprising, no one’s really gone out and did any real info gathering yet,” Asuna said. “Anyway, we might as well order up, it is lunch time, and--” she paused as the familiar rumble of several stomachs growling sounded. “-- and we might as well eat.”

Everyone at the table chuckled, with Strea and Silica looking mildly abashed, as their stomachs were the loudest.

November 1, 2024 - Aincrad 61st Floor, Selmburg

“Kirito, I don’t know whether to think you’re just that lucky, or your SA is just that good.” Harry stated as they stepped off the teleport platform. “I didn’t even notice it until I saw you doing a pre-motion to toss one of those throwing picks you still carry around.”

“Hey, they come in handy sometimes,” Kirito said with a shrug. “Like they did and netted us that Ragout Rabbit. Besides, you see how fast it moved? My SA allowed me to track it, I knew where it would be, but even then, it was a lucky hit.”

Harry hummed. “I managed to track it with my eyes,” he admitted. “Too far away to do anything, but I should tell you about Quidditch. I’m used to tracking objects smaller than that, moving and dodging in three dimensions, going faster, and trying to catch them.”

“Faster?” Kirito asked, curious.

“They tend to be going about a hundred and fifty kilometers an hour, and those are sport quality, but
not professional.” Harry said. Looking around and seeing no one, he decided to elaborate, but still lowered his voice so as to not have it carry if someone was close enough to overhear. “I heard the professional ones move closer to two hundred kilometers an hour. When you’re moving and maneuvering at least that quickly, it’s a lot harder than it looks. Took a hit by a bludger once, and it shattered my arm. One of our professors was a bloody idiot, and vanished all the bones.” He winced. “I now know how it feels to have bones regrown. Getting the bones in my arm shattered like that was probably the second most painful thing I’ve ever felt. Getting them regrown was, well it didn’t hurt nearly as much as the arm being shattered, but not comfortable, to put it mildly.”

Kirito raised an eyebrow. “Second most?” He asked incredulously. “What have you had happen to you that would be more painful than that?” He wasn’t sure he wanted to know, considering that he had heard how that incident two weeks ago had been likened by Harry from having his hand pulped by a sledgehammer.

Harry glanced around a little. “Not here,” he said. “We’re close to the villa, and it’s quite the story to tell. Something for after dinner, and I want to see what Asuna does with that rabbit meat.”

The two continued their walk when Kirito glanced at his guild mate and friend. “Hey Harry, do you think that you’ll actually pull it off?” He asked. “Infusing the affinities into an item for us to use?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know, but I’m learning a few things as well,” he said. “Even if it doesn’t work, it’s still worth trying, and as I said, I’m learning a bit on how Mystic Blade works, not to mention my… other abilities. I might be able to make some Original Skills from all this. The earth wall was done in the heat of the moment, and I pulled it off without knowing precisely what I was doing. I was lucky, very lucky, that it worked.” He gave a small smile. “Doesn’t replace actual schooling and education in it, but… it’s nice to be learning that again. No real direction to it, and I’m not knowing whether what I’m doing and how I’m trying to do it is the right way to do it, but…”

Kirito nodded, knowing what his friend was implying. Harry was trying to find a system to it, to discover how his magic worked, and see what he could do with it.

“So, anything about it you can talk about, or should we wait until we’re back at the villa?” He asked.

“Better wait until we’re back at the villa,” Harry said. “I want to run some ideas by you all.”

“It’s not like we know much,” Kirito said. “Less than you, that’s for sure, and I wouldn’t be surprised if you know more than you think you do.”

“But you guys can give me ideas, and you, Kirito, know more about how the system works than any of us.” Harry noted. “And for all that my abilities tend to bend the rules, they can’t break them, and I’m not willing to try and see if the rules will break me in retaliation.”

##

Asuna eyes widened as Kirito showed her the item he got. “K-Kirito… is that…?” She asked.

Smiling, Kirito nodded. “Got lucky to spot it early enough to nail it with a throwing pick,” he said. “Think you can do something with it?”

Asuna nodded. “My cooking is close to nine hundred, so I should be able to,” she said as she walked over to a cupboard and opened its inventory. “Hmm, I wonder what I should make?” She asked herself as she began to browse the mats stored in it. “A stew maybe? Add in some side dishes, and maybe that bread from that bakery on this floor that everyone… yes, that will do it.”

“Asuna?”
“Kirito, I know what I’ll make,” she said confidently. “I need you to go to The Pan Bakery, and pick up a few loaves of their star bread. I have all the other ingredients I need.”

“Anything else, while I’m out?” Kirito asked.

Asuna shook her head. “We have everything else we need,” she said. “Unless you, Harry, and Rain need to stock up on beer again.”

“I think we’re good, and it’s not like we hate wine, anyway,” Kirito said. “Especially since you always pick out good ones.”

“It’s because I have refined tastes, unlike you barbarians,” Asuna said in an exaggeratedly snooty tone. Of course, the fact that her eyes were dancing in humor showed that she was playing with him. It wasn’t like her to have a supercilious or snooty demeanor.

“Ah, of course,” Kirito said. “So, shall this unrefined lout go and pick up that bread?”

“You shall.”

##

Silica sat back happily, her dinner finished, save for some scraps left in her bowl. From the happy chirps and growls coming from Pina, the feathered dragon certainly found it excellent as well. The only thing wrong about it, was that, despite being called a rabbit, its meat didn’t taste like rabbit.

She had some opportunity to eat rabbit, mostly from family camping trips, though her grandfather never left an opportunity to train go to waste. That also meant that she had learned a bit on how to fish, hunt small game, and even prepare it for cooking, though she would admit she had balked the first time.

It was good, even if the taste definitely wasn’t rabbit. Still, with seven players, and one feathered dragon, Asuna only had enough to give them one bowl of the stew, so she had also prepared a fair number of side dishes. There were boar meat skewers with vegetables, salads, a lot of bread, and what Asuna claimed was supposed to be a compote for dessert. The dessert was sweet enough that no one was complaining.

All of which was washed down with each one’s drink of choice.

*Asuna went all out tonight,* she thought happily as she stared at the others, who were all leaning back, satisfied. Asuna’s cooking was always good, but this was a clear demonstration of her using her cooking skill to its utmost. Then again, it wasn’t often that she had a chance to work with an ingredient as rare as the one that the stew was made around.

“Oh man, that was good.” Rain said content. “Too bad that meat’s such a rare ingredient, and that you and Harry only ran into one Ragout Rabbit, Kirito.”

“We were lucky to run up against one, Rain,” Harry said. “Still, you’re right, that was an excellent stew. The rest was good as well, Asuna.”

“Any progress so far on what you’ve been trying to do, Harry?” Asuna asked.

Harry shook his head. “No,” He admitted with a sigh. “Outside of that time I blew my own arm off a couple of weeks ago, they’ve always just fizzled out. There’s something I’m missing. It’s dispersing, rather than remaining focused.”
“How are you trying to focus it?” Asuna asked, curious.

“Well, I tried to do it like how I can transfer it to someone’s weapon, but using a crystal like that is definitely not the right way to do it. That time I blew my arm off? That was one of those times where I managed something, but it was… damn it. If I had my wand, I might be able to think of something, but I don’t. Have a wand, that is.”

“And what would a wand do?” Strea asked, curious.

“It works as a focus,” Harry said. “It’s a tool to make it easier to cast spells, almost a crutch, really, and…”

“Why don’t you use one of the crystals as a focus?” Lux asked. “It’s common enough in games and anime that a character who could use magic could use a gemstone or crystal as a focus.”

Harry got a thoughtful expression on his face for a brief moment. “That… might work,” he said. “If we look at it as me using my sword as a focus, which would make some sense, then it’s channeling too much. A crystal might… Just a moment, I got to try something, I’ll be in the atrium.” He got up and walked out of the dining room.

##

Harry was cursing internally as he thought about what Lux said. He had been going about it all wrong, though he would not dismiss the idea that what he was trying was not something he could do. Professor Flitwick had told them that a wand wasn’t the only thing used as a focus, just the most common.

He couldn’t really recall the lecture, it had been three years by now, but he recalled that wands were not the only things out there that could work as foci. Hell, when he looked at it, his sword had become a focus for his magic within the purview of using Mystic Blade. And he was trying to infuse the affinities into a crystal for the purpose of not only seeing if it could be done. If he could do it, then he could pass it around to his guild members, and maybe to others.

Anything that could help them all of survive.

He reached the atrium and made his way purposefully to the center, opening his menu and pulling out one of his swords. Not Claíomh Gloine, he wasn’t going to risk his best weapon, but he always kept a few spares in his inventory. Belting it at his waist with a well-practiced motion, he then pulled out several crystals. He put them in an evenly spaced line in front of him, keeping the clearest of them in his left hand. Drawing the sword with his right, he went through the necessary grip shifting and motions to activate the Fire Affinity, noting the burst of magic and its feeling. Holding it off to the side, he picked one of the crystals on the ground and brought the one held in his left hand up. He then reached to the ephemeral feeling that was his magic and began to focus on bringing it up, slowly and carefully and focused on the crystal he had chosen. He brought the clear crystal up so that he was gazing at the one on the ground through it.

Now, let’s see how this goes, he thought as he began to try and ease his magic into accomplishing what he wants it to do. A part of him began to think on what words he could use, if only mentally, to shape the magic into doing what he wanted it to do.

To gift flames to a weapon.

##

Silica watched her husband attempt, again, something that had been met with failure after failure. She
knew that he had expressed his frustration about it in the privacy of their room, as he claimed he could feel something, but every time he felt it, it either slipped away and everything fizzled out, or it got out of his control.

She could sympathize, given that she was trained in some basic, very basic ki manipulation, and remembered the frustration she felt every time she almost seemed to finally grasp it, only for it to slip away. And that made her think that his problem was that he was either trying too hard, or was going about it the wrong way.

And from how he came out here in such a hurry, he realized it as well. Not surprising, as it was counterintuitive for him by now.

“What is he doing?” Yui asked.

“Trying a different approach to what he’s been attempting for the last couple of weeks while the idea’s still fresh in his mind,” she replied.

“You think it will work?” Strea asked.

Silica shrugged and then took a closer look at what Harry was doing. “It might, it might not,” she said. “Personally, I don’t really think he expects it to work, but he’s also of the mind that he won’t know unless he tries.”

“Donum… flamae.” They heard Harry say quietly, despite his voice carrying, and she could feel something through her SA. Silica knew that if she was looking at Harry’s eyes, they probably had a glow to them. She had no doubt that the glow signified his magic expressing, and from the feeling, it meant that he accomplished something.

“What was that?” Strea asked, almost taking a step toward Harry when Silica grabbed her arm.

“Give it a moment,” Silica said warningly. “Not all of his attempts blew up in his face immediately, some took a bit, and we might just… wait, it looks like he just got a message.”

They were all startled when Harry let out a whoop. “Yes!” He shouted in glee. “This might have just done it! Still, have to check, would be just my luck if I managed to do this part, only for it to blow up if we tried to use the crystal to transfer it.” He cut his Fire affinity and waited a moment before carefully placing the crystal he was holding into a pouch on his belt and then walking over to carefully pick up the crystal he had been focusing on.

It was a dull orange, rather than the milky white it had been.

“I need to test it, but how will I know if it works without me accidentally triggering one of the affinities myself?” He mused out loud. “And I learned the hard way months ago that the affinities don’t mix well.” He chuckled. “Heh, Silica got a few laughs at me blowing myself up that way, though any nearby mobs probably didn’t like it.”

“But with pain now a thing, and you blowing your arm off two weeks ago, it’s a bit less funny,” Silica said clearly, letting go of Strea’s arm and stepping forward. “You said that wasn’t even the most painful thing you’ve ever felt?”

Harry turned. “It was close to that time when the bones in my arm shattered during a sporting accident,” he admitted. “Except it wasn’t an accident, but a well-meaned sabotage by someone who wanted to get me away from my school due to a… dangerous situation that was brewing.”

“You had the bones in your arm shattered?” She asked with a wince. “Ouch. That must have hurt
Harry nodded. “Anyway, I still need to test this, so if you girls could stand back a ways, and Yui, you might want to get further back, just in case,” he said. “Being in a safe zone means it shouldn’t hurt anyone, but getting thrown by an explosion would still knock the wind out of you.”

Silica looked at the crystal, and then at Harry. “Didn’t you receive a message?” She asked.

Harry nodded. “Yeah, a system message,” he said. “Basically, it said I accomplished what I wanted, and… I have to read over it and see what limits it has, now that the system recognizes it.”

“You do that,” Silica said and gently grabbed Yui’ shoulder. “He’s right, we might want to get some distance if it blows up in his face.” She said to the AI as she turned and guided her away.

“If it goes wrong, will he be okay?” Yui asked.

Silica smiled. “We’re in a safe zone, so he shouldn’t get hurt, I think.”

“Hey wait, Strea!” Harry shouted. “Don’t just…!”

Silica paused when she heard Strea yelp and the sound of a sword hitting the ground and turned to see Strea staring at her weapon in shock.

Its blade was on fire.

“Well, it worked,” Harry said. “Now to see how long it lasts, and after we find that out, I’m making a few more and seeing if hitting it with a weapon is the only way to do it.” He looked at Strea, and Silica didn’t need to see his face to know that he was smirking. “So, up to playing with magic a bit more?”

“I can help?!?” Strea shouted gleefully. “Really? Awesome!” Silica giggled as she watched Strea glomp Harry, and him fall to the ground with a startled yelp.

November 2, 2024

Asuna looked the message from Argo over and read its contents over a second time, just to make sure she was reading it correctly.

Idly, she noted she had that habit no matter the importance of the message. Including reminders to herself.

Dismissing the message, she considered what was in it. Nothing earth shattering-- or was it Aincrad shattering? No matter. There wasn’t anything of real import in it, just a message from Argo to the Assault Team’s guild leaders about a festival being set up in Algade to cover three days leading up to the seventh. She would have questioned the reasons for a festival, but she knew that they were less than a week from the two year mark since this all began.

Funny, she thought. It's felt like it’s been longer than that at times. She felt a brief flash of melancholy as she was reminded that she was here simply because her brother had been called away for something, telling her she could use his Nerve Gear if she was inclined to. Don't think about that, she thought, pushing that thought to the side. Nothing good comes from thinking of 'might have beens' and 'what ifs.'

“Asuna?” She heard Kirito ask, and looked over to see him at the door leading to the kitchen, two cups in his hand. Judging from the steam rising from them, they were either tea, or coftea. From the
early hour, it could be either. He walked over and held out a cup for her to take.

“Just a message from Argo,” she said, taking the cup and sipping from it. From the slightly bitter taste, it was coftea. “Looks like the Merchant’s Association is putting a festival together to start a couple of days before the seventh, and then there’s going to be something of a party then.”

“To celebrate being here for two years?” Kirito asked rhetorically. “Not surprising, really.” He shrugged. “And let me guess, you’re wondering if we should participate, or to continue on.”

Asuna nodded. “What do you think?” She asked.

“Me?” Kirito asked. “Well, outside of grinding and working toward taking out that field boss, which should be easy with our gear and the fact that other have gone to Gilbrean and Reinhard to get some new stuff as well, there really isn’t much outside of grinding to do.” He shrugged. “We might have taken some easy days with the birthdays and all, not to mention some small parties, but I’m up for us doing something else. You know, a change of pace?”

“I see, even you get bored with grinding,” Asuna said and saw that he was starting to take a sip. *And with that in mind…* “Or is it some other grinding that you would be more interested in?” She asked with a smirk. “I mean, you *are* male, after all.”

Kirito sputtered and started coughing as some of the coftea went down the wrong tube. Asuna sat back and let him get it under control, outwardly amused, while her thoughts were almost panicked.

*I can’t believe I said that!* She thought. *It sounded like I was coming onto him!*

“Asuna, why did you say that?” Kirito asked as he got his coughing under control.

“I… um…” Asuna began, her face flaming. “I thought I would crack a joke, and…”

Kirito raised an eyebrow, clearly saw the blush, and chuckled. “And you realized just how it sounded, and coming from your mouth. Naughty, naughty.”

“Oh, shut up, you ass!” Asuna retorted, her blush getting brighter. “It’s not like you haven’t thought similar.”

“As Harry would say, I’m a warm blooded and heterosexual male, of *course* I have.” Kirito said drily. “I mean, you’re beautiful, strong, and… you were willing to put up with me when I was being antisocial and broody.”

“You’re still antisocial,” she said with a snort. “Not with us, but you’re definitely not the most social of people. You’re just one of those who’s more comfortable with a small group, that’s all.”

“I’m not the only one, you know,” Kirito said. “I haven’t seen you going out to meet people, and Harry is a private person, for all that he’s more willing to meet with others than I am. Though, I think Silica has a lot to do with that.”

“And it’s not like we all have been going out with the purpose of meeting other people,” Asuna admitted. “We have our own group, and we tend to stick to our own.” She put her finger on her chin. “Well, there is Klein and his group, but it’s a toss-up as to whether we just run into him, or he just invites himself whenever we’re all in the same town.”

“True.”

“So, go out and enjoy the festivities when they start?” Asuna asked. “Yui would enjoy it, and you
just know that the second she hears about it, Strea is going to insist on going.”

“Always looking to have fun, that one,” Kirito said with a nod. “Honestly, all of them would find an excuse to go down there, so we might as well make it a thing. Go out in the mornings, just to get a little grinding in, and then spend the afternoons at the festival. Probably what a lot of players will be doing.”

“For the Assault Team, you’re probably right,” Asuna acknowledged. “They will see this as an excuse to unwind.”

**November 6, 2024 - Aincrad 50th Floor, Algade**

Yui looked around at all the stalls with wide eyes before turning toward Kirito and Asuna, who were both smiling down at her. After picking her up after lunch in Kamdet, they had all gone back to Selmburg to take a break, bathe, take off their armor, and change their clothing. Asuna was now in a simple white blouse and red skirt, while Kirito was in his usual black.

“This…” She started and then looked around at all the people and the sights. There were just so much for her to see that she didn’t know where to look. The sights. The sounds. The smells coming from the stalls that were selling food.

Kirito chuckled. “It can be a bit overwhelming the first time,” he said. “So many people, so much to see.” He knelt down and looked her in the eye. “You don’t know where to start.”

Yui nodded and then giggled as she heard Kirito’s stomach growl. “I know where you want to start,” she said.

“Honestly, you just ate, Kirito,” Asuna said with some exasperation, and Yui could almost detect a hint of… fondness? Yes, Yui could detect a hint of fondness in Asuna’s tone. “How can you be hungry again?”

Kirito shrugged. “Probably all the smells of food,” he admitted as he stood up. “Well, shall we?”

Yui had to admit, it was hard for her to see things in the press of players, and she noted that either Kirito, or Asuna, kept a hold of her hand, but she wanted to see more than just the legs and backsides of players due to the crowds. That, and they were blocking her view of things, meaning she didn’t know what she was missing when they passed stalls with crowds of players in front of them.

“I can’t see anything,” she said in some frustration and then gave a yelp as Kirito picked her up and placed her on his shoulders.

“Better?” Kirito asked.

Yui looked around and now saw what she was missing and nodded. “Yes!” She said excitedly.

“Well then, let’s keep looking around,” Kirito said. “Asuna, anything grab your eye?”

Asuna looked around and shook her head. “Not yet,” she said and then looked at Yui. “So your idea of looking around is a good one.”

Yui looked around from her vantage point on Kirito’s shoulders and pointed at a crowd of players. “Why don’t we go there?” She asked.

##
“Harry, try one of these!” Silica chirped as she sat down on the bench right next to him, a box of some sort of fried balls of something in her hands.

Harry could smell the scents wafting from it and had to admit that it smelled pretty good. Each of the balls had a small skewer, almost like a toothpick, stuck in each of them and he watched as his wife happily took one and ate it in one bite. Judging by the number of balls, there had been half a dozen of them in the box, and she had happily gobbled up half of them already, meaning that they had to be pretty good. Neither of them were gourmands by any stretch, food was food, but they definitely preferred dishes that tasted at least halfway decent. At least Pina seemed to think so, since she was perched on his wife’s shoulders with one in her mouth.

He picked one and took a bite of it, taking in the taste. It tasted like some kind of seafood, wrapped in some dough, and fried. With how the finely chopped pieces of meat in it were slightly chewy, it definitely wasn’t a fish. Given that squid and octopus were commonly eaten in Japan, it could easily be an SAO equivalent. Many of the coastal themed levels had something made from a similar equivalent as a local dish. All in all, it was pretty good and he ate the rest of the ball.

“Not bad,” he said. “What’s it supposed to be?”

“Takoyaki, or at least the closest to it you can get in SAO,” Silica said happily. “It tastes pretty close to it. Not quite the same, but close.”

“Takoyaki, that’s fried octopus balls, right?” Harry asked. “I never tried it since I got to Japan. Didn’t have much opportunity to get out of where they stashed me all that often, with them shoving the language into my brain, and keeping me from finding a way to escape the ones who brought me here.”

“You never went into much detail about that, outside of you saying you were kidnapped,” his wife said. “You did admit that you have an idea of who was behind it, though. Who?”

“It’s not like it’s anything I can change,” Harry said with a shrug. “And I still don’t know whether or not I should thank him, if it was him behind it all, for it. Anyway, where did you get those?”

Silica pointed down the road. “A stall a couple of blocks that way,” she said and then ate the last takoyaki ball. “There were also stalls selling other things as well. Ramen, okonomiyaki, tamagoyaki, cotton candy... I even saw a few with the mandatory rigged games that a festival like this should have.” She grinned impishly. “Want to try a few new foods and waste some col that we don’t need on games we probably won’t win?”

Harry grinned back. “That sounds like an excellent idea, dear,” he said. “And after that, we can find a nice place to sit back and watch the crowds, as I don’t think they have any events planned for tonight.”

##

Klein finished his beer and looked around at the festival that was going on. For an event that was planned on the fly, though with more preparation than the one that had happened during the week of Harry and Silica’s wedding, this was turning out to be a fun event for many of the players. Mostly mid-level players, but he saw increasing numbers of higher level players and members of the Assault Team turning up, and he wouldn’t be surprised if the capstone event tomorrow would have nearly all the players above the twenty-fifth floor turning up.

He even saw Kirito and Asuna walking around, with Yui looking around eagerly from her vantage point on Kirito’s shoulders, and chuckled at the sight. I wonder what rumors about this will turn up,
he thought. *They look like a couple of parents with their daughter.* And they had, even if Yui wasn’t their child. He didn’t know what she was, the entirety of Steel Phoenix had been evasive on that matter, but he could tell she wasn’t human. No human had a lack of flaws like she or Strea did, and he wondered if they were a pair of young youkai who had gotten caught up in this entire mess that had somehow slipped Argo’s notice.

Or, for all he knew, they could be NPCs who had become self-aware, all the way up to AIs. For all that he doubted the latter was the case, at least with current technology and knowledge, but he also didn’t dismiss the possibility. He grew up in a household that was also home to a couple of tsukumogami, so he didn’t rule out the possibility of computer programs becoming self-aware. Kayaba was considered a genius for a reason.

Either way, it wasn’t his business and he had asked them those months ago more out of curiosity.

“Surprised you’re not out there partying,” he heard a female voice say.

He turned to see Rain at a nearby table giving him an amused look, and noticed Lux and Strea sitting down as well. He blinked at the pile of food and snack cartons in front of Strea, but shrugged it off.

“Well, the rest of my guild’s out there still, and I wanted to sit back, enjoy a drink or two, and watch the crowds for a bit,” he said.

“Translation, you’re sitting here and getting drunk,” Rain noted drily. “I’m surprised that you’re not getting drunk out there and making an ass of yourself. We’ve seen a few groups doing that, and...” She shrugged. “Well, the incident with Harry’s bachelor party that I know everyone blames you for isn’t unique. We’ve heard some stories about you buying the bar a few rounds more than once here, and how you were often acting the fool.”

“And we know it’s often an act, though drunken idiocy is definitely something you’re not above,” Lux added. “You lead the largest guild in SAO, you haven’t lost a single person yet, and everyone likes you. I know that you’re aware that everyone calls you ‘Everybody’s Bro’ and the ‘Bro of SAO’.”

Klein chuckled. “Yeah, it’s an act most of the time,” he admitted. “But most of my guild members aren’t fighters, either. It’s mostly craftsmen and women, shopkeepers, and just people looking for a group to belong to. Outside of Issin and the boys, Fuuka’s in charge of the twenty or so middies in my guild who go out and fight. And one of my members manages the logistics and finances for the guild better than I ever can, so it’s not like I’m handling everything anyway.”

He picked up his drink and drained it. “Besides, just sitting back with a drink and watching the crowds is relaxing,” he said. “Care to join me for a few rounds while you three eat all that food? Though Strea seems to be taking care of that on her own.”

**November 7, 2024**

Heathcliff watched the crowd as everyone’s faces were turned upward and watching the fireworks display that he and CARDINAL had worked on, the flashes as each one exploded illuminating the crowd of faces in varying colors. It had been a simple process, as he simply retooled the fireworks display from the launch event to be on a much smaller scale and within the floating castle, rather than outside of the ten kilometer tall structure. His own little present to them all for lasting this long.

That things had slowed down for the last few days did not bother him, as he knew that things would come to a head soon, so any delay in it was appreciated. Sword Art Online was his *magnum opus*, tainted as it would be remembered as, but he still wanted those who would eventually leave to have positive memories of the wonders that it could have.
Positive memories to offset the nightmares that he knew many of them would have of this place for years afterward. They were the heroes of their own stories, and the larger one that his work had crafted and was still crafting for them. Heroes, who would return to a world that needed them.

Hadrian had noted that whatever dream inspired SAO had been forgotten by its creator, and he was partly right. He, Akihiko Kayaba, had forgotten parts of the dream, and had turned it into a nightmare, but he hadn’t forgotten it all. He wanted to create a world of heroes. Heroes, who had been normal people, and would have to face monsters and learn that yes, monsters could be beaten.

He, himself, had wanted to be one of those heroes, but in creating this, he realized that every story told needed a villain to get the heroes moving. And so, he trapped them here, made it so that death here meant death in the real world, made it so that actions had consequences, and got them focused on him. He became the villain because the story being shaped needed one, and soon enough, he would be exposed.

A pity, really. But, despite the fact that he knew that this would end sooner than he desired, the seventy-fifth floor’s boss was one where he wouldn’t be able to hide his nature in the battle from those who were alert. And he knew that those who already knew would be there as well. Not all of them, but the players whom he wanted to play their roles in the final act.

Barring any unforeseen events or delays, he would die before the New Year. He had accomplished his dream, and it was soon time for that dream to end. He had accomplished something magnificent, crafted a story that could be told, and he was proud of it.

Proud of creating this world. Proud of crafting this still being told story. Yes, he was proud of it, and despite the curses that were now attached to his name, his accomplishments would be remembered.

It had been a good two years.

Chapter End Notes

One more and an Outside... maybe. Want to keep the momentum.
November 10, 2024 - Aincrad 74th Floor, Labyrinth

“Is it me, or was that field boss way too easy?” Strea asked as they entered the tower that housed the floor’s labyrinth. Kirito and Asuna had already headed back to Kamdet to spend some time with Yui, giving the diminutive AI some company while the others did some preliminary reconnaissance on the floor’s labyrinth.

It would only be for an hour or so, and they wouldn’t be able to map the entire labyrinth that quickly. It would probably take anywhere from three days to a week to do that. It varied, depending on its design. A lot could be fit into a space a hundred meters wide, and somewhat more than that tall. It was late enough that most players would wait until morning to begin doing so, but a little early recon was always appreciated.

“Well, I can’t speak for the rest of the people who participated in that fight, but for us, it’s fairly simple to understand,” Lux said. “We’re over geared, overleveled, and, to its misfortune, over here.”

Harry snorted at the statement, getting a curious look from the others. “Sorry, it just brings to mind a statement that was told to the American soldiers back in the war when they were in England,” he said. “They were told that they were overpaid, oversexed, and over here. Just one of those things that is remembered and recorded in the history books.”

“I take it they had a comeback?” Silica asked.

“Of course they did,” Harry responded. “They said we were underpaid, undersexed, and under Eisenhower. And that field boss was underleveled, undergeared, and under our blades.” He looked at Strea. “Don’t expect it to last, Strea, we’re lucky it was that easy, and just because it was easy, doesn’t mean the boss of this labyrinth is. Even with our levels and gear, thinking that you’re tougher than anything is a good way to get killed, even when you are tougher than anything.” He looked around as they exited the entrance passage and then looked up. “And this thing is going to be a bitch to navigate.”

“Is it me, or is this thing bigger on the inside?” Rain asked.

Strea looked around and could see the reason for Rain’s question, but she thought about it a bit and realized that it was more due to perspective than anything. Unlike other labyrinths and dungeons, the inside was basically open and without much in the way of barriers to give clear and consistent boundaries. No corridors, nothing that could be called floors, just an open expanse inside with the pathways going through it all. There were stalagmites and stalactites, which the various paths did connect to, so it wasn’t only open space. But the majority of it was.

“I doubt that,” Harry said. “But with all this open space, it certainly seems that way, doesn’t it?”

“It’s not non-euclidean, if that’s what you’re wondering,” Strea said and then shuddered. “I still remember those ruins we went through back in September, and I really wish I didn’t. The geometries and mathematics behind it didn’t make any sense.”

“Still hung up about that triangle with three right angles?” Lux asked.

“If it was on a sphere, I could understand how it would have such,” Strea said. “Yes, I know that’s non-euclidean, but it’s something that is known in math. But it was on a surface that was flat. That
just doesn’t happen.”

“My school would give you fits then,” Harry noted. “I’ve gotten lost in it enough times to know that it’s bigger on the inside.” He shrugged. “Gave one of my friends fits until she decided to just roll with it. The evidence supports what she’s seeing, therefore it is so, despite not making any logical sense.”

“She the one who’s too straightforward in her logic, right?” Silica asked.

“She is,” Harry noted. “It took her months to realize that abilities like what she and I have require different thinking processes. She once said that using such abilities means that we can’t use any form of logic, but she’s only partly right. Her logic tends to fall apart in the face of such phenomena, because she wants to jump from Point A, as it were, to Point Z. She wants to know it now, and her feeling that learning more is being held back by the rest of us trying to understand what she thinks she understands is frustrating for her. She’s brilliant, no question about that, but she’s fallen into the same trap that many who are as intelligent as she is has.”

“She knows it, and mistakenly thinks that knowledge of something is the same as understanding it?” Silica asked and then shook her head. “Yeah, I can see that. Understanding something is different than knowing it. And abilities like what you and she enjoy probably conflict with what she’s learned beforehand, as logic says that something has to be this way, but it’s something else. So she’s been trying to apply the logic she’s had seen as true beforehand to this, and has, or had, trouble reconciling the disconnect.”

“Exactly,” Harry said. “Interestingly, I hear that more advanced sciences and math tend to cause that problem as well, as they basically force you to unlearn what you’ve previously learned if you want to make logical sense of them. So she’s reached the conclusion through deduction that something is one way, but anyone else would see it as another.” He shrugged. “It’s been a couple of years, so she probably understands that now.”

“What are they talking about?” Lux asked.

“No clue,” Rain replied with a shrug.

“The difference between knowing and understanding something,” Strea said. “Harry pointed out that his friend tends to think that just because she knows something, that she understands it. He also made a comparison to her having tendency to not develop a firm understanding of the steps that brought you from a position to its conclusion. In other words, her using faulty deductive logic.”

“Close enough,” Harry said, looking back. “Don’t get me wrong, there’s nothing wrong with deductive logic, and the whole cause and effect method of thinking it brings about, but that’s not the end all, be all of logic. I tend to use inductive logic, intuition and instinctive thinking in other words. I tend to reach a conclusion because I feel it’s right, but not necessarily being able to prove it conclusively. And that can be just as fallible as anything else, all things considered. You still have to start from a sound position, and if your premise is faulty, then so will your conclusion.”

“They were both thirteen when this started, right?” Lux whispered to Rain. “How do they know logic like this?”

“Book club and a teacher who usually pointed us towards a book to find out the answers to our questions, rather than telling us the answers,” Harry said with a smirk.

“You’d be surprised by the discussions my family can have around the dinner table,” Silica said with a shrug. “My dad’s a scientist, my mom has a degree in math, and while my grandpa and uncles
might be muscle heads, but they're also university graduates. Grandpa insisted all his kids completed college before he would train them to become masters in their own right, and being in college, or having graduated it is a requirement he has for his advanced classes. He makes no exceptions on that requirement. It had to do with his time training when he was younger, and how he had to struggle in some things afterward due to his spotty education.” She looked around, and her gaze affixed down one of the paths that broke off from the one they were currently on. “And we’ll have to continue this later, we have company.” She darted off to engage a mob, a lizardman that was common outside the labyrinth, that had been stalking toward them. The rest of them spread out and engaged the ones following it, making short work of them.

“Let’s just focus on the recon for now,” Lux said as her eyes tracked to where the time would be in her HUD. “We can still cover some space so we can have a general map of the opening area in the forty-five minutes we have until we said we would head back.”

Everyone nodded, though Strea almost sighed. Conversation always made the time pass faster, as it kept her from focusing on how much time something was taking. But Lux was correct, as conversation would also act as a lure for mobs. No all mobs were reliant solely on sight to track a player’s position, after all, and none of them were willing to risk the possibility of luring in something that would be dangerous to them, regardless of their gear and levels.

Not when all they were doing was reconnaissance and initial mapping. When they came back to do some grinding, they would risk it, but not now.

**Aincrad 61st Floor, Selmburg**

Keiko looked at her husband as he exited the bath, shirtless and wearing the slightly ratty drawstring pants he favored for bed. She took a moment to take in the lean muscles that made up his torso, knowing that he would look radically different Outside. They both would, really. After two years here, with their bodies almost certainly confined to hospital beds, with little to no food, but adequate hydration and nutrients, probably meant that they both looked more like famine survivors there.

If that was the case, then that was the case. There was no point dwelling on the matter, outside of the possibility that they were on a time limit before their bodies either gave out, or those Outside gave up hope. The latter was unlikely as far as she knew, considering both Strea and Yui having said on a few occasions that Outside was aware of what was going on, but there was always that possibility. But that was for the future, one she would have to accept when it came, but that was then.

Right now, she could enjoy the sight of Harry’s lean frame, as she has so far. He wasn’t muscular or ripped, but his lean frame had become more defined since all of this started. The little baby fat he had early on, was long since gone. Perhaps an artifact of the growth and physical development they had inside SAO, and perhaps partly due to the Nerve Gear’s constant scanning of the face and a connection to the hospital to track the changes to their bodies. A question that could work as an intellectual exercise, but one that was a moot one. Their bodies had changed and grown a bit here, and the reason for it wasn’t something she needed to worry herself over.

Besides, she wasn’t complaining. She liked what she saw, and it wasn’t as if her own developments were something to complain about, either. She was still on the short side, and definitely petite in terms of figure, but she couldn’t do anything about that. And it wasn’t as if Harry had any problems with that, he proved that found her very attractive and desirable plenty of times.

“Well, I see you’re enjoying the view,” Harry said in amusement.

Keiko met his eyes, seeing the amused gleam in them and giggled. “And why wouldn’t I?” She asked. “It’s not like you don’t take the chances to enjoy the view of me when I’m done taking a
Harry smirked and walked to her. “Of course I do, dear,” he said. “I am, after all, the lucky bastard who is married to the most beautiful woman in SAO.”

“Flatterer,” she said fondly as she stood up and walked over to him. She touched his bare chest and ran her fingers down it, tracing the muscles of his abdomen before wrapping her arms around him. She felt him pull her closer to him and took in his scent as one of his hands went under her chemise and traced her spine, while his other one rested on her hip.

She glanced over to the little bed and perch they got for Pina and saw that the feathered dragon was asleep when she felt Harry’s hand leave her hip and his finger give a gentle push on her chin. Raising her face, she felt her husband’s lips capture hers for a moment. She met his eyes and could see that he wanted to do a deeper one, but a glance at the time, and the knowledge that tomorrow morning would be an early one meant that he didn’t want to risk them not getting enough sleep due to them deciding to have some late night fun.

 Maybe tomorrow night or a later night, but not tonight.

**November 12, 2024 - Aincrad 74th Floor, Kamdet**

Kirito yawned as he leaned against one of the pillars that marked the Teleport Gate, wondering why he had decided to come here this early, rather than with the others. They all usually came to the floor they were going to be exploring or grinding on as a group, after all. He wasn’t the only one in the guild in Kamdet, he heard Pina’s chirping call and could see Harry and Silica standing off to the side about twenty meters away idly talking.

Ah well, it wasn’t as if they were going to wander off without the others. They would at least coordinate where everyone was going, and delineate groups, as if there was any doubt, beforehand. He turned to look back at the teleport gate just in time to be briefly blinded by the flash and be bowled over as a body impacted him, bringing both of them to the ground with a crash.

Blinking the spots out of his eyes, he found himself face to breastplate, and a glance upward showed him that it was Asuna who had bowled into him, and one of his hands could feel metal under them. Her breastplate, probably, though his palm was cupping a protuberance… Oh shit, he thought. *I know what this is and if Asuna takes it the wrong way…*

“Sorry about that, and…” Asuna started before trailing off. “Kirito,” She said levelly. “You do know where your hand is, right?”

“This… this was an accident,” he said nervously, quickly dropping his hand and mentally preparing himself to get sent flying. Asuna did *not* take well to getting groped, even accidentally.

“Oh come on you two,” Rain said, a note of amusement in her voice. “In public? And I thought Harry and Silica would be the ones who would do that.”

“Oh my, how shameless,” Lux said, giving a mock gasp.

“Isn’t this something they should be doing in private?” Strea asked.

“What do you mean, Strea?” Yui asked curiously.

“… I’ll explain when you’re older,” Strea replied.

“I’m older than you, Strea.”
“Not the point, Yui.” Strea retorted.

“You look younger than her, Yui, so the things she got educated on by Argo don’t apply to you yet, and there is no player on the Assault Team, or even among the middies, who would try what we were worried they might try with Strea,” Asuna said, getting up, with Kirito doing so as soon as she backed away to allow him to get his feet under him, as well as avoid any other accidents. “Not if they know what’s good for them.”

Yui looked ready to ask for clarification, but Kirito made sure to catch her eye and shook his head. He heard the dark undertone in her voice, and knew that his own thoughts had gone in a similar direction. And he had no doubt that Rain and Lux were thinking along those same lines, as would many an Assault Team member who might have heard Asuna’s words.

Yui had understood the nonverbal cue, and didn’t ask. She probably didn’t understand why Kirito would head off her question, but she understood the cue. The others would, even Strea, and they would understand just why Asuna had said what she said, and what she actually meant.

Yui had become the adopted little sister of the Assault Team, and her just sitting and talking to the men and women who made it up, their actual ages being immaterial now, and the fact that she was often cheerfully greeted by many, showed just how fond the highest level players had become of her. Just as it showed how important she had become to them.

##

Kuradeel watched the scene that played out with some amusement. Asuna, the elegant and proper guild leader had found herself in a position that would leave her flustered, though she regained her composure with alacrity. Still embarrassed, if her blush was any indication, but she was composed.

Just one of those things he admired about her, though he knew that she was untouchable for someone like him. She was a Princess, and he was just a common man who would not amount to anything worthy of her. Then again, he doubted anyone would, least of all the Black Swordsman. He could see the unseen in that regard, hear the unsaid.

Both of them were attracted to each other, and had a bond. Not as superior and subordinate. Not as partners. Not even as fellow warriors. But as two youths who were feeling out their relationship. It was only natural, as they were young. But he could see that one was too good for the other.

At least on the surface, he would have to look deeper to understand if that was the case. Perhaps a duel or a spar. He didn’t know why, but he could tell things about someone when they crossed blades, and he had gotten the measure of many of the Knights of Blood that way. Through duels that followed carefully regulated protocols, or simple sparring, he knew them in ways that he otherwise wouldn’t.

Still, he had a means to learn more on who Kirito was.

He took a step toward them, and felt seven pairs of eyes glance toward him through his SA. Four immediately, with the rest shortly after. He couldn’t detect any hostility from those glances, but it indicated to him just how aware of their surroundings they were. Not a group one wanted to direct hostile intent toward, as half of them would be able to tell an attack was coming before the attacker even got close.

Good thing he had no hostile intentions to them, merely desiring to test one of them. That he had the opportunity to see where he stood in comparison to one of them, and by extension where others would stand, was a bonus.
Harry kept the Knights of Blood member in his peripheral vision, tracking his movements. There was no indication of hostile intent, and the lack of tension in Kirito’s posture indicated that his own SA wasn’t picking any up, but he was cautious. They were outside of the villa, which meant that they were no longer in an area that was secure, so he knew that everyone was paying attention to their surroundings. Even in a safe zone, safety was a relative thing.

It was a rare player or mob who could sneak up on them as it was, and they had to be consciously not paying attention for most to get close without them noticing. Only Argo consistently snuck up on them, and he had wondered if it was because she had a Unique Skill that allowed her such stealth. The Rat coyly refused to confirm or deny it, but he had seen the amusement on her and Gus’ faces, so he figured that was the case.

It only made sense, and such a skill fit her all too well.

The player had gotten to within ten meters when he turned to the man and got a clearer look at him without the distortion that existed outside the ninety degree vision arc directly in front of him. An issue with his vision in the game, though Kirito had said that it was because the hardware could only render so much clearly without losing efficiency.

He didn’t ask for more clarification, and honestly wasn’t troubled too much by it. His vision back in the real world was worse than this, and he was just glad that he didn’t need ill-fitting glasses inside here. Probably pick up a cosmetic pair soon, though, he thought idly. There’s just this feeling that it will all be decided in the next couple of months, and might as well have them to wear around the villa and get used to them again.

He put that thought to the side and focused on the now. “Kuradeel, right?” He asked. “Is there something we can help you with?”

The Knights of Blood member stopped about five meters away. Close enough that they could talk clearly, but he wouldn’t come close without being given permission. A show of peaceful intent, but one where he is aware that it might not be taken that way, if what he was seeing was being interpreted properly.

Interesting.

“My apologies if I am intruding,” the man said, his gaunt face giving a show of polite, though not necessarily truthful, contrition. Done for the sake of politeness, more than anything.

“There is always that risk of a teleport going a few meters astray, and seeing those occasions is, at times, amusing to watch.” There was honest humor in the man’s voice, though Harry had a feeling that the incident was what prompted him to approach, not the reason for it.

He really hated trying to discern someone’s reasons. He could do so, but his strengths were in acting on events, not in trying to interpret the reasons behind them.

Which was why he was no better at Professor Sprout’s hosted poker games than wizarding chess. He kept trying to play with the consideration Neville did the former or Ron the later, instead of acting and letting intuition guide him.
Still, a member of the Knights of Blood wouldn’t be approaching them for no reason.

“So, what brings you to us? He asked.

“I wish to make a simple request,” Kuradeel replied. “I know that you all are good fighters, and I want to see where I stand in regard to you all.”

Harry kept his eyes from narrowing, and gave the man a searching look. There was no sense of hostility that made him get on his guard, but there was something that made him doubt that simply comparing himself to them through a simple duel or a spar was the actual reason. There was something more to it.

“Anyone in particular?” Asuna asked. Apparently the others had been listening in on him and Kuradeel. And judging by the man’s own startled twitch, he had been caught off guard. Harry glanced toward Asuna, who was giving Kuradeel a careful look.

##

Kuradeel had been caught off guard by Asuna’s question, but he also saw the opportunity it presented. Not in simply having a chance to fight Kirito in a controlled setting, but also in seeing how good the others were. Well, outside of Yui, who stayed in towns and was definitely not a fighter.

Then again, she talked to players, talked to NPCs, and listened to conversations, so she filled a role among Steel Phoenix as well, that of gathering information.

Which is fair, he thought. She’s too young to be out there risking her life to be acceptable, even by the standards of the players in SAO. By staying in a town, she is relatively safe. And many in the Assault Team adore her, as she is something concrete, reminding them why they are fighting to get free of this place. Still, what Miss Asuna asked needs to be addressed. Best to be upfront about who I want to fight.

“I wish to test my skills against Kirito,” he said. “Either in a duel, or as a simple spar. I would wish to test myself against you all, but Kirito is the one I am most interested in testing myself against.”

“A duel might be too risky,” Asuna said. “But I can see the value of a spar.”

“A spar or a duel isn’t like fighting mobs, though,” Harry said warningly. “For all that the mob AI had adapted to us, it can still be predicted better than another person could ever be. And with potentially harsher consequences for all parties.” He looked at Kuradeel. “Are you willing to take that risk and accept the consequences?”

“Yes,” Kuradeel said, understanding the unspoken meaning behind Hadrian’s words. If he was going to fight and live by the sword, then he should be prepared to die by it. It was something that he intrinsically understood, and Hadrian’s warning was given in the spirit that he would.

No matter how controlled, if it was a duel instead of a spar, the risk was there. It was a warning from that part of him that was The Red Killer. One who took no pride in the act, but would do so if it was found necessary.

"Though I’d rather you not be looking at Kirito like some of the people that get it into their heads to challenge my grandfather.” Silica stated.

Silica’s statement brought everyone up short.
"I beg your--" Kuradeel began.

"My grandfather runs a renowned martial arts school, and people challenge him..." Silica said with a shrug, "Less than they used to, but it still happens. Some do it to see how they measure up, some do it because they want to get better, some do it because fighting a stronger opponent is fun to them, and some think they have something to prove. So, which are you? In any case, sir, I must insist you go through the same hoops they do."

"Hoops?" Kuradeel wondered, then smirked. "Is the lady proposing an... exhibition tournament?" He asked, seeing the prospect for it, and from the gleam in Hadrian’s eye, so could the young man.

Silica smiled toothily. “I am,” she said. “You’re not the only one who would like to compare oneself to others, after all.”

"Ah! We can even have Gus run it, set the random seeds to start, and maybe officiate it!" Asuna said, smiling.

"Why not Argo?" Kirito wondered. “She’s his boss, after all.”

"What do you think she’ll be doing while he’s running it?" Hadrian deadpanned.

"Taking bets and selling programs," Kirito agreed with a sigh.

"Because Argo," Rain noted.

"Is it sad that’s explanation enough?" Strea wondered.

“It’s Argo,” Lux said.

“Perhaps Daizen can be incorporated into the planning,” Kuradeel said, seeing the possibilities. “He’s always looking for ways to raise funds, even if a great deal of the col just goes towards donations to various orphanages and groups like the SSN.” A way to raise funds, and maybe to fight others he wanted to, he… wanted this. "Where would we would do this?"

"How about here?" Hadrian asked. “It’s a large open space, and those pillars about thirty meters away can serve as boundaries. Plenty of space to move, and enough space to keep the audience safe. It’s not like we have a proper coliseum to use.”

"And let's face it, it's a break from the Long Grind," Silica said. She offered her hand and smiled. "Find at least six more of your guildmates to give us a good competition, Kuradeel? Seven from your guild, and us?"

Kuradeel couldn't help but smile back. "... in truth, I'd relish the chance to test my skill without... certain pressures," He admitted and then offered his hand right back to her. They shook, and then he saw Hadrian offering his.

“You relish the fight,” Hadrian noted quietly as they shook. “And… perhaps more, but this would provide a… controlled way to indulge some things.”

*He sees it, Kuradeel thought, surprised. And... he approves of my seeking a proper and controlled outlet.*

For some reason, such a judgement from the Red Killer made him feel a little more like a man, and that his decision to not accept Laughing Coffin’s recruiting efforts was the right one to make.
Kuradeel returned Harry's smile with the most honest one he'd held since SAO started. "And a limit I know I can stay in."

"Good man," Hadrian commented approvingly. "See you on the field, maybe."

##

"He’s more like members of Laughing Coffin than I think even he knows," Harry said as the man teleported away to pitch the idea to Heathcliff. "He’s aware of it, but I don’t think he knows just how strong the similarity is. Or maybe he does, and saw a better way."

"Are you sure about that?" Asuna asked.

Harry nodded. “Yes,” he said. “I know the type, and there is... too much of what I found in him that’s in common with them. But... I think he's winning the battle to be human. He may have even found the right battlefield. He actually reminds me of one of my teachers, the one who also runs my school’s book club. Remember how I said he was a professional fencer at one time?"

Actually, he'd explained the professional dueling circuit. But they were in public.

Asuna slowly nodded. "Same air of someone who realized he lived better with a leash?" At Harry's nod, she smirked. "Well, I've learned to trust your judgement of such things. And beer." That last statement brought a laugh from everyone.

"That's me, potential psychopath detector and ale connoisseur," Harry said. "Speaking of which, there's something wrong with my tankard."

"You don't have one," his wife noted.

"A-ha!" Harry exclaimed. "You've identified the problem, dear! Now, to the tavern so I can fix it!"

"So happy to help," Silica deadpanned, even as she matched the arm Harry wrapped around her waist by wrapping hers around his.

Aincrad 55th Floor, Grandzam

"An exhibition tournament, you say?" Heathcliff asked as Kuradeel presented the idea that he had. Well, that his subordinate worked out with Steel Phoenix, but if the man wanted to pitch it as his idea, then so be it.

"Yes, sir," Kuradeel said. "You know that players do talk, and many want to see just how good some members of the Assault Team are in comparison to each other."

"And others have always wondered how we and Steel Phoenix compare," Heathcliff acknowledged with a nod. "Now, I can see the merit of this, but I do have a question. How would the logistics of this be handled?"

"We reached a preliminary agreement that the Teleport Plaza in Kamdet would suffice," Kuradeel said. "It has plenty of space, and we can use the pillars to delineate boundaries. Asuna or one of the others in Steel Phoenix have the idea of having Argo’s subordinate, Gus, handle the selection and officiating it. I brought up that Daizen could be involved in selling tickets, more for official seating than anything else, and they seemed receptive to the idea."

Heathcliff nodded. “They see the merit in having our cooperation and assisting in this endeavor,” he said. “And Daizen would be a good choice. Seating for audience members who want a closer view,
and a way to make some money for the guild, though we will have to work out how to split the profits. It would not do for Steel Phoenix to get nothing out of this, after all.”

“Perhaps an even split?” Kuradeel asked “It would be fair, at least. Daizen might grumble about it, given the work that he would be given, but it would be fair. Also, Argo’s involvement would come at a price.”

“Something that would have to be dealt with,” Heathcliff acknowledged. “Though knowing her, she will make a profit on it even if she got nothing from the proceeds. Still, she will be neutral in this, even if she probably would prefer one of them. She’s professional like that.”

Kuradeel barked a laugh. “That she is, sir,” he said. “That she is.”

Heathcliff nodded at Kuradeel’s comment. “Work up a proper plan, and find out what Steel Phoenix is bringing to the table,” he said. “I see no problem with this on the surface, but it still needs proper planning.”

Aincrad 50th Floor, Algade

“I don’t see a problem with this idea,” Gus said and then turned to Argo. “Boss?”

Argo shrugged. “It would answer the questions of various middies,” she said. “Many of them like to debate who is the better fighter, as if fighting against someone is the same thing as fighting what you guys normally fight.” Her golden eyes met Asuna’s. “What brought this about, anyway? This doesn’t sound like something that’s your idea, and you’re not the type to go with such an idea anyway.”

Asuna shrugged. “A Knights of Blood member was looking to fight or spar with Kirito,” she said. “The whole exhibition tournament was Silica’s idea, as she compared Kuradeel’s, that’s his name by the way, desire for it as similar to how some approach her grandfather for a fight. I could easily see that the others were open to the idea, either for a bit of fun, or to test their own skills, given certain things we all know. Better to keep this in a controlled manner, and Silica was right, it would be a break from the Long Grind.”

Argo chuckled. “And you want to see how you compare as well.” She noted. “But why us? It’s not like our being on friendlier terms than average with you is a secret.”

“Because you’re neutral where it counts,” Asuna said firmly. “You might favor some groups more than others, but you have your professional standards and stick to them. That’s why you’re trusted, despite being such an unrepentant gadfly and pain in the ass.”

Argo raised an eyebrow. “Rare for you to use such language, however true an observation it is,” she noted. “But there’s another reason, isn’t there?”

Asuna looked thoughtful for a moment before shrugging. “What you’re hinting at is certainly a possibility,” she acknowledged. “But that’s not a hidden reason.”

“But you guys would take advantage of such a situation if it presented itself,” Gus said with an approving nod. “Just because it would be sooner than you all think such a situation would happen, doesn’t mean that you’re not ready if an opportunity presented itself.”

“And it’s not like such a situation won’t be happening soon anyway, in all probability,” Asuna said.

November 13, 2024 - Aincrad 61st Floor, Selmburg
“Well, they locked down a date, and safety measures,” Harry said as closed the message. “It’ll be in four days, on the seventeenth. Using sparring rules, unless both parties to use dueling rules, one-hit rules, to be precise. So, if a duel, not an absence of risk, but a lessening of it that can be more easily controlled and mitigated.”

Keiko looked up from where she was brushing Pina’s feathers. “That soon?” She asked.

“I think that everyone involved in the planning doesn’t want this to blow up into the kind of event our wedding became,” Harry said with a smile. “Though if we had a proper arena, I’m sure it would have become a much bigger event.”

“As it is, Kamdet’s going to have a lot of people there to watch it.” Silica said. “And I’m surprised that dueling rules are allowed. Need’s both sides to agree, but that’s still a risk. Even one-hit rules can go badly, as it takes a solid hit to end it, or one get’s his health reduced to half from glancing ones. Still risky, if less so.”

Harry nodded. “Indeed,” he acknowledged. “But it’s a risk that can be controlled, as one-hit rules make it less likely for an unfortunate crit to happen with lethal consequences. And one party can always yield to the other.”

“Is Heathcliff participating?”

“There hasn’t been any mention of it,” Harry said. “But he might. If not during the tournament itself, then perhaps a match with the winner of it.”

“Or he might just sit back and enjoy the show,” Keiko noted. “It sounds like something he would do.”

Harry nodded at his wife’s statement. While he didn’t doubt that there were many on the Assault Team who would like to see a match between one of them and Heathcliff, especially if it was Kirito, the man was under no obligation to do so. Those who wished to see such were likely to have their hopes of seeing such a competitive fight dashed. He was surprised to note that also applied to him.

He shook that thought out of his head. Whether it happened in four days, four weeks, or four months, it would happen when it happened. No point getting worked up over it.

He heard a rustle of fabric and turned to see his wife standing up from the chair he had been sitting in, cradling Pina in her arms and make her way to the bed and perch they had for the feathered dragon to sleep in. Gently placing Pina in it, she turned and gave him a coy look that he could easily read.

Looks like they weren’t going straight to bed, or at least to sleep, just yet.

##

She ruffled her wings as she settled into the nest that had been provided for her and watched the female Wingless One that took her in and her mate go through what she had decided was a common mating ritual for them. They might, or might not, mate afterward, but she was curious if they would go through whelping a new nest.

She doubted they would force her away from the nest, though if that did happen. If anything, they would probably have her watch the newest whelps and help them in teaching the young in how to fly and hunt. Well, not fly in truth, those Wingless Ones didn’t fly, but teaching them how to hunt wouldn’t be beyond her abilities. And she could also teach them how to clean and groom themselves and each other, as well as getting the older Wingless Ones to give them food and treats. Or how to
take them from the Wingless Ones if an opportunity presented itself. The male one had eventually just left some of his food to the side, rather than his futile efforts to protect his food from her.

Yes, she wondered if they would try and whelp a new nest now, it was long past time for her Wingless One to have a nest to raise on her own. Why, she had chosen a mate long enough ago, more than a few seasons had passed, that they should have had a nest of whelps to raise already!

And she would help as she could. The Wingless Ones could teach their whelps how to use the shiny teeth and claws, but she would help them be good at it. It was the least she could do for the two Wingless Ones who had adopted her into their nest.

Oh well, it was time to sleep, and hopefully her Wingless Ones wouldn’t make too much noise, either from their mating, or from their sleep being unquiet as sometimes happened. She couldn’t do much about the former, but she could help them with the latter, as she has done before. Her Wingless Ones were strange, but they were her Wingless Ones.

November 17, 2024 - Aincrad 74th Floor, Kamdet

Heathcliff looked at the amassed crowd that was filling the Teleport Plaza and found himself oddly satisfied by the turnout. The entire thing was organized in less than a week, but it still drew a crowd, though he idly considered the Coliseum in Collinia, on the next floor, would have been more appropriate a venue. Oh well, they hadn’t cleared this floor, so this would have to suffice.

It would still be a splendid diversion, and one he was looking forward to watching. He would keep an eye open in case he would need to intervene, duels have gone wrong before, but he didn’t see it likely. Possible, but unlikely.

“Surprised you didn’t get talked into participating in the matches,” he heard Hadrian say from behind him.

Turning, he shot the young man a wry smile. “Why should I?” He asked. “I have nothing to prove, after all.”

Hadrian seemed to consider what was said and smirked. “I think maybe not in this area, at least.” At Heathcliff’s nod, the young man went on. ”The whole event is more for others anyway.”

“I still find it surprising that you all consented with your wife’s idea so readily,” He observed. “While I have no doubts that such an event might be received positively, if only as a test of skill, the fact that it was Asuna who essentially approved of it is unlike her.”

Hadrian shrugged. “Perhaps this will put any rumors that might be out there about any rivalry between our guilds to rest, or at least make it seem like a friendly one,” he said. “I do think you would know why such rumors exist.”

Their distancing themselves from me has been noticed, Heathcliff thought to himself. And it could give off such a perception to those who don’t know the full truth. For all that you don’t involve yourself in the politics, you do have an understanding of things, Hadrian, don’t you?

“Well, I hope you find a good vantage point to watch things then,” Hadrian said. “I better join up with the rest of my guild. Argo and Gus should be doing the match selections soon. I hope you enjoy the show.” He then walked off to where his wife was standing, watching the exchange.

I do intend to enjoy the spectacle, Hadrian, Heathcliff thought. And I do believe that others will as well.
November 17, 2024 - Aincrad 74th Floor, Kamdet

Kuradeel felt his anticipation rising and carefully pushed it to the back of his mind. It would not do for his anticipation for battle to overtake him here, not now. He had pushed to make it using sparring rules, one further safeguard against something happening, unless all parties consented to using dueling rules. The Commander agreed, as did the others in the Knights of Blood. They knew that he was one who could be overly enthusiastic in battle, and that he could sink into his desire for it too deeply.

He stood by those of his fellow guild members who were participating in this tournament, and he was looking across the plaza at Steel Phoenix. For such a small guild, they played such a key role in clearing that it was a little surprising that they didn’t have a more prominent position among the Assault Team’s groups.

*No matter,* he thought. *They may simply prefer to not have all the attention, for all that they unintentionally court it. His gaze settled onto Kirito. I am here to test myself, and to get the measure of one of them.*

“For something put together in a week, it has quite the turn out, doesn’t it?” Godfree asked idly from next to him.

“Are you surprised?” Kuradeel asked in response. “You know that there is perception of a rivalry between them and us. Especially after they began to distance themselves from the Commander.”

“Aye,” Godfree acknowledged. “I asked Asuna about it, and she stated that it was for them to be seen as more independent, and perhaps a small bit of pride.”

“That’s not the whole story, though, is it?” Kuradeel asked. It sounded more like an “official” story to him, than the real story behind it. Plausible on the surface, but anyone who had observed them could see the holes in such a story.

“Of course it isn’t, but whatever the real reason is, is between them and him,” Godfree said. “It is what she was willing to disclose. It doesn’t really matter, though. They still work with us as well as they have, even with that. So, I felt it best to not press the issue.”

Kuradeel nodded. It wasn’t as if it hadn’t been noticed, and Hadrian’s not entirely trusting the Commander since he approached the young man wasn’t a major secret. It could be a private disagreement, it could be something else, but all parties were keeping quiet about it. The reasons were something else, but they could simply be trying to keep the Assault Team in providing the image of a unified front.

He had a feeling that the reasons for it will be discovered soon enough.

##

Gus stepped into the middle of the plaza, equidistant from both groups and looked at them. He could see the anticipation in the eyes and postures of many Knights of Blood member, while a glance at Steel Phoenix showed them all to be calm and composed. Or at least appearing to be so. They were *too* carefully relaxed in how they stood, keeping the tension in their bodies down so as to not exhaust themselves before the matches began.
They were anticipating the matches as well, they were just better at hiding it. *It says something about how they changed, to have that relaxed readiness,* he thought as his eyes scanned over the audience. He spied Heathcliff, surrounded by his men, shooting a wry glance up at the banner they had made cheering their fellows on. *And damn you, Kayaba, for being the one who caused this.*

He spied Argo flitting about the crowd, taking bets on who would be the winner of the entire exhibition tournament, as well as how far everyone would make it. She tried to be neutral, but she knew how good the members of Steel Phoenix were, and all of them outside of Strea, had experience in fighting other players. And since Heathcliff wasn’t participating, save as a spectator, the odds favored one of them winning the tournament.

The odd number of matches might be a problem, though. Perhaps having one from each group have a bye for a match, unless a few in the crowd decided to volunteer? *A bit late for that,* he thought as the crowd became silent.

“Welcome,” he said. “I won’t waste anyone’s time with a speech, so let’s get this going. The first round matches will be decided from random drawings and…”

“Wait!” Klein called out. “There’s only enough for seven pairs, making it an uneven number.”

“We are aware of that,” Gus replied. “Unless you have an idea, Klein, like volunteering yourself and getting someone else to volunteer.”

“Well then, I guess that I’ll volunteer then,” Klein called back.

“And so will I.” Another said, and Gus watched a tall figure gently make his way through the crowd. “Just to even out the numbers, you know,” Agil said, looking at the Knights of Blood and Steel Phoenix members.

Godfree stepped forward. “I see nothing wrong with this, and my compatriots don’t either,” he said, looking across as Asuna. “Does anyone in Steel Phoenix?”

“We don’t.” Asuna said. “We’ll have six from each group picked out, and we can have the remaining one paired to compete with Klein and Agil.” She smiled. “Or we can have one from each step forward and volunteer to take them on.”

Strea stepped forward. “I’ll do it if it’s necessary,” she said, looking at her guildmates, who nodded.

One of the Knights of Blood, Musashi, if Gus remembered correctly, did as well. “I’ll do so as well, then.” He put his hand on the hilt of his katana. “If I may be so bold to make a specific request, I would like to challenge Klein.” He glanced as Gus and then Klein.

Klein grinned. “Works for me,” he said. “I’ve seen you fight with your Katana, and I would like a chance to compare my skill with yours.”

“Then we have two matches already decided on,” Gus said. “Agil versus Strea, and Klein versus...” he glanced at the Knights of Blood member. “Musashi?”

Musashi nodded. “That is correct.” He said.

“Very well,” Gus said. “We have two boxes, one with the names of Knights of Blood members, and one with the names of Steel Phoenix members. If Musashi or Strea are drawn, those names will be discarded as their matches are already decided on. Is this satisfactory?”

Asuna and Godfree nodded.
“Then let’s see who is facing whom for their first match.”

##

Godfree watched as Klein defeated Musashi during the last match for this round with no surprise. Musashi was skilled with a katana, true, but Klein was better and had a pragmatic approach to fighting that Musashi lacked. He either attacked first and fast, or dodged and countered. Not the kendo inspired fighting Musashi used, and thus without the bad habits instilled by bringing the instincts of a sport into play. Admittedly, Musashi was aware of that flaw of his, and probably counted on Klein having the same flaw, but it was not to be. A back step to avoid the strike, a step forward, and a quick slash to counter, and it was done.

Kirito, Asuna, Silica, and Hadrian had won their rounds handily, those four showing that their reputations in battle were honestly earned. Asuna was the most direct, using her speed to win quickly. The Flash, showing why she’s called that. Hadrian reminded his opponent, that his shield was also a weapon in his hands, using it to bash his opponent off balance to create an opening to exploit. Silica used her petite and nimble frame to dodge, and what seemed like martial arts techniques to grapple her opponent to the ground, ending it with her dagger at his throat, and a confident smirk on her face. And Kirito had simply waded in, his sword parrying strikes with an almost negligent ease, until his opponent suddenly found himself disarmed and the tip Black Swordsman’s sword at his throat.

Each fight was decided in a matter of seconds, much like how a sword fight often was.

Rain had fought well, only losing after she was disarmed by an opportune hit to her hand by the flat of his blade to create an opening, and then grappled into submission. It had been a close fight before then, he would admit. Kuradeel had kept Lux at a distance with his own two-handed sword, until he trapped her blade between it and his hip, before forcing her to concede the fight when he quickly pulled out his dagger sidearm and had it at her throat. Strea had simply been defeated by Agil, who showed that an axe might be slow, but one was well advised to pay attention to the haft, as the large shopkeeper tripped her and used his large frame to pin her.

##

“I see what you mean by him having more in common with Laughing Coffin members,” Lux said to Harry, rubbing her throat. “There was... a bloodlust, in his eyes when he had his dagger at my throat. He was able to restrain it, but...”

“Yeah,” Harry said with a nod. “He’s aware of it, though, and I am glad that they have this at sparring rules, unless both sides agree to dueling rules. That dagger would have been plunged into your throat otherwise. For him, that limiting effect is necessary, and he knows it.”

“And that’s what makes him different from them,” Silica noted. “He has that bloodlust, but he has found a safer way to channel it, and not allow him to be overtaken by it. I wouldn’t be surprised if Laughing Coffin had discreetly approached him. Why he didn’t take them up on his offer, I don’t know, but it’s for the best that he did. For him, anyway.”

“He knows he needs to keep it leashed,” Harry noted. “And sparring rules, or controlled things like dueling, provide that leash. He might be able to overcome it, much like how my professor did, but he might not. So long as he has a controlled outlet, he isn’t a danger to others. Or himself, for that matter. Probably why he got into SAO in the first place.”

“So that he could have that outlet, and without the consequences to others,” Silica agreed. “And then it became… this.”
“We’ll need to watch him, though,” Harry warned. “Just in case someone needs to jump in and restrain him long enough to get it under control.”

“You think it will get to that?” Lux asked, a note of worry in her voice.

“Think it?” Harry asked. “No, but I’d like to be ready in case it does. And it looks like they’ve decided on the next match.”

##

Godfree looked at Kuradeel as he took his place. His subordinate seemed to be wrestling with something, but what? Was it that fight? He knew that Kuradeel had a darkness in him. Hard not to know that, after working with him enough, but it seemed as if he had it under control. So, it couldn’t be that, could it?

Still I should play this carefully, he thought to himself. It might be closer to the surface than is normal for him. Should I have passed on a warning about him, to give a bit of time for him to come down from a match? Well, it was too late now.

“Are both of you ready?” Gus asked.

“I am,” Kuradeel said, drawing his sword.

“So am I,” Godfree replied, drawing his sword.

“Very well, this will be under standard sparring rules,” The man said. “It will go on until one is disarmed, yields, three solid hits have been scored, or when I say it’s done. Is that acceptable?”

Both men nodded.

Gus stepped back. “Then... begin!”

##

Heathcliff watched the fight closely. He knew that Godfree was aware of Kuradeel’s capability of losing himself in the fight. He wondered just how aware the often jovial man was of Kuradeel’s darker inclinations. Just in case, he was making preparations to head off that aspect. He had no doubt that Hadrian was aware, and a glance showed the young man was paying close attention to the fight. From the tension in his body, he was ready to leap in if necessary as well.

Perhaps I should have recommended them having seconds, he thought. Having someone there to intervene if things get too heated would have been nice. He watched as Godfree had his feet taken out from under him and Kuradeel pressing the attack. It connected, and he saw a sliver of Godfree’s health go down.

Oh, damn! The crowd noticed the drop in Godfree’s health, something that shouldn’t have happened, not with sparring rules. Had the safeties glitched? Had it been a duel that was accepted, however discreetly? No, there would have been some sign of that, he thought. But still, this shouldn’t have happened. It didn’t happen in the previous fights, so why now? And... oh my, Kuradeel seems to have been overcome by his bloodlust.

This could turn deadly, and it wasn’t like them dying in the fields. There, they accepted the risk. Here, where it was supposed to be safe, though, this shouldn’t happen. He could see Hadrian already moving, probably to restrain Kuradeel. Gus, who was officiating the fight also noticed something go wrong.
But neither of them would get there in time.

This all went through his mind as he moved himself into position at speeds that the others wouldn’t be able to detect, even with the high SA some of them had. In an instant, he seemed to have moved between Godfree and Kuradeel, and had his shield interposed between them, blocking Kuradeel’s strike. A glance at his guild member’s eyes showed the glint of madness in them, a madness that was fading, but still there.

“Kuradeel, calm down,” he said quietly, but firmly.

Kuradeel’s breathing was rapid and heavy, but it was already beginning to slow down. He heard Godfree slide away, and he had no doubt the man’s eyes were wide in shock. Not from Kuradeel’s attack, but from his health having been reduced.

“I concede,” Godfree said suddenly. “He had me there, and I…” He swallowed. “What happened? We weren’t in a duel, so my health shouldn’t have…”

“I know,” Heathcliff said, turning his attention from Kuradeel when he noticed that the man had gotten himself under control. “I hope it’s simply an unknown bug that’s going to be resolved soon, or that this is a unique event.” He looked at the crowd, who were looking on, watching what was happening. “I think we should take a moment to adjourn and decide where we should go from here.”

“We could institute one-hit dueling rules,” Kirito said, walking up. “Everyone would have to agree, due to the inherent risks in dueling, but the duel would be marked as over once the victory conditions are met.”

Heathcliff nodded. That could work, and probably should have been what was instituted in the first place. Dueling had safeguards in place, the primary being that once a victor had been decided, the duel was over. But even one-hit dueling rules had risks, as it took a solid hit for a victor to be decided, or one of the combatants was reduced to half health, whichever came first. And a critical hit at the wrong time could have lethal consequences.

“We will need everyone to agree to this,” Heathcliff said.

“Granted,” Hadrian said with a nod. “I’m willing, and Kirito wouldn’t have come up with the idea if he wasn’t.” He turned to Kirito. “What about the others?”

“Asuna and Silica are willing, and Klein would probably go for it as well,” Kirito said. “I don’t know about Agil, though.”

“Well, go ask them,” Hadrian said. Kirito moved off to do so, and the young man then turned his attention to Kuradeel. “As for you, are you up for it? And can you keep yourself from getting too into it?”

“Is that what you’re calling it?” Kuradeel asked, a bit of incredulity in his voice. “I got overtaken by… well, you know.” He looked at Godfree. “I apologize for that. I… should have been more in control of myself.”

Godfree waved it off. “I am aware of how you can get a bit enthusiastic and eager in the sparring ring, or in duels for that matter.” He said before looking at Hadrian. “And while I don’t know if he’s the same, Hadrian seems to recognize it in people.”

“As I said to him when Kuradeel approached us, he found a controlled way to satisfy that part of him,” the young man said. “One of my teachers was a professional fencer when he was younger, and admitted that it took him years to not need the leash that the rules of the professional circuit provided.
This is the same thing, really. A leash, to help restrain the capacity for violence some of us have.”

“You seem to have it well under control,” Kuradeel noted.

“I also know what the consequences are when I slip that leash from personal experience,” Hadrian countered, his eyes briefly looking far older than his teenage years. “Anyway, enough of this morbid talk. I ask again, are you still up to this?”

“So long as it’s standard dueling rules,” Kuradeel said. “There’s a system in place for that, which even that part of me recognizes.” He then looked at Gus, who was officiating the tournament, but had remained back a bit and silent. “Does that satisfy you?”

The American nodded. “Once we get confirmation from Klein and Agil on if they’re for it, I see nothing wrong with it,” he said. “I do recommend that each competitor has a second in his or her match. They can act as an additional restraint and hopefully not require any outside interventions.” His eyes made contact with Heathcliff’s.

Heathcliff nodded, getting the implied message. He had no doubt that all those in the know were aware that he used his GM powers. That they weren’t calling him out on it was only mildly surprising. He had done so in a very justified manner, after all.

Kirito jogged back up to them. “Klein and Agil are for it,” he said. “The only thing they, well, Agil really, insist on is that we take appropriate measures to ensure that if this happens again, we can stop it before it gets out of hand.”

“We’re planning on having each participant have a second with him or her during the match,” Gus said. “It’s not perfect, but it’s the best we can do on short notice.”

“It’ll have to do then,” Heathcliff said and then turned to the crowd. “Well, that was exciting, wasn’t it?” He asked, pitching his voice to carry. “There’s nothing wrong, just a possible bug in the safeties, so we’re modifying the rules to using dueling rules. The one hit rules to be precise, just to add in a measure that ensures that the system will end the match when it would be over under such rules.” He grabbed Kuradeel’s wrist and raised the man’s arm. “Our victor in his match got a little too into it, and hadn’t noticed that he had already won. As I’m sure many of you have experienced, that enthusiasm can overtake you.”

The crowd laughed.

He continued talking, attempting to distract the crowd from what happened. And to ensure that they weren’t thinking about just how wrong it could have gone. Or that what he had done should have been impossible.

_It’s probably too much to expect everyone in the audience to have not noticed and begin to do the math_, he thought after the crowd started getting pumped for the tournament again. _But I can keep them from thinking about it too deeply for now._

##

Klein couldn’t help but think about what he saw. For all that the man had a deserved reputation for his skills and abilities tending to push the envelope of what a player could supposedly do, he knew full well that what he saw should have been impossible for a player. Not even Asuna was that fast, and she was the fastest swordswoman he had seen.

So how did he do that?
I shouldn’t think on that right now, he thought. I have a match with the kid next, and I don’t need to be off my game from a distraction there. He glanced over at Harry, who was calmly talking with his wife before apparently sensing the eyes on him. He glanced at Klein and nodded before smirking, and then turning back to his wife.

*Heh, he’s looking forward to this like I am,* Klein thought with amusement as he pushed the remaining suspicions on Heathcliff to the back of his mind. He could focus on them later if he needed to, but for now, he needed to focus on his coming match.

Harry, he knew, tried to avoid predictable patterns, and if he notices himself falling into them, or simply falling into habits which might not be best for a given engagement, he starts changing things up. Not always to good effect, but it was that unpredictability and ability to improvise that made him so effective in battle. Add in that he tended to keep things simple, not relying on fancy attack patterns, but simple maneuvering, attacks and pragmatism.

That simplicity made for a far more dangerous fighter than many thought. He’d have to win the fight quickly.

**Harry vs. Klein**

“Okay,” Gus began. “We’ve changed the matches to duels using the one-hit rules. While it says one hit, it really means that the first hit that does real damage ends the duel. Minor hits won’t count. However, if one person’s health drops to half health, or ten minutes have passed, the duel will end in the favor of the one with the most health. An additional rule is that there will be seconds, which I see you have both provided.” He nodded at both Lux and Issin. Their job is to intervene if they see something amiss as a safety measure. If they intervene, the match will pause and a judgment will be made if it’s warranted. I can also call off the match at any point to make a ruling if I deem it necessary. Are there any questions?”

“None here,” Harry said calmly, clearly approving of the rules. He knew that while the risk of a critical hit killing one of them when they were at or near half health was smaller than had been the case during the first year in SAO, the risk was still there. Especially if the level and quality of gear disparity was high enough.

“I got none,” Klein said.

Gus looked at Lux and Issin, Harry and Klein’s seconds. “Seconds, you understand your responsibilities?” He asked.

Both Lux and Issin nodded.

“Very well then,” he said. “Seconds, take your positions.” He waited for them to back off enough that if they needed to intervene, they could, but not so close as to tempt them to interfere in the fight. Personally, Gus though it unlikely that they would, but it was better to limit that temptation. The risk of disqualification for the one they were serving as seconds to usually did the trick, but he knew that sometimes, that risk meant little.

Especially if one of the seconds held a grudge against one of the fighters.

“All right then, Klein, you will be the one sending the duel request,” he said.

“Got it,” Klein said and opened his menu. Tapping on a few of the buttons, a window opened up in front of Harry. Looking at it, the young man nodded and pressed the button to accept it. Gus saw the countdown clock appear and quickly backed away, not taking his eyes off both.
He was the one tapped to conduct the matches, and he would ensure that he fulfilled the responsibilities inherent to that. He watched as the two of them drew their weapons and got into ready stances, analyzing them and seeing if he could predict what the opening moves were.

Harry had taken a basic defensive stance, his shield carefully held in front, and Gus noted the fact that Harry was using a round shield, which had to be handled, rather than using straps to keep it on the arm. Good for mobile fighting and using the shield as an improvised weapon, while still maintaining defensive cover. His sword was in his right hand and held with the flat of the blade on his shoulder. Not what many would think how someone would fight while having a shield, but a way that was actually used throughout history. It would allow him to switch from defense to attack in the blink of an eye, allowing for simple yet devastatingly effective strikes.

Klein, on the other hand, had taken a standard middle guard position with his katana. Clearly a more cautious stance, it provided the most defensive cover, while also giving him plenty of options for offense. While he couldn’t tell from his vantage just where Klein’s sword was positioned, there were probably subtle differences from a perfect execution of that guard, but which in an actual fight would have a world of difference. In all likelihood, Klein was already going through how he would get around the biggest obstacle to winning the fight, Harry’s shield, while not leaving himself open for Harry to use his defense against his opponent.

Unlike a lot of shield users in this game, the kid uses it like another weapon, Gus thought. One that’s a defensive weapon, but still a weapon.

He watched as the countdown continued, and mused that both of them were as calm as the proverbial calm before the storm.

##

Harry kept his eyes on Klein, noting the slight shifts in the katana’s angle, his opponent’s shoulders, and the signs of movement as Klein shifted his footing ever so slightly. Details and tells that would inform him of the direction the attack was most likely to come from. Details, which he knew his opponent was taking in about him.

A slight change in the angle, favoring attacking from the left, now the rights. A change in the apparent balance showing that he was shifting to the defensive, and now to attack. Things which would provide that instant of warning, and force him to adjust, potentially leaving an opening elsewhere for his opponent to exploit.

It was the part of sparring and dueling that others wouldn’t necessarily see unless they knew what to look for. Those minor factors which could decide who won and who lost in the first few seconds. And any duel lasting longer than that meant that the opponents were either equally matched, or one of them was showing off or trying to prove a point.

He kept note of the time, and as it began to count down the final seconds, he decided on his approach. When the timer hit zero and signaled the start of the duel, he feinted a movement forward, his shield leading, and saw Klein’s katana immediately change to an angle to get around it. Or it would, had Harry kept moving forward.

Klein immediately moved to Harry’s left, getting outside the immediate arc of the sword swing, only noticing a hair too late as Harry straightened his arm and knocked the katana out of position with his shield. To his credit, he was able to bring his katana to bear and keep the strike from being a decisive one, only leaving a small cut on his arm.

Harry got in the first blow, but it wasn’t a solid enough hit to end the duel.
Klein immediately darted back and had to do another back step immediately as Harry pressed the advantage while it lasted. Leading with the shield, he kept the katana at bay, preventing Klein from changing its direction of attack through the simple method of using his shield to control where it would end up.

He was now seeing for himself just how effective Harry’s practice of using his shield as a weapon was. While it never hit him, Harry was able to use it to block, parry, and redirect his katana, forcing his opponent to back off once again to avoid the sword that was already coming for him. If anything, it was deceptively simple, get into a rhythm, and keep it. But just because something was simple, did not mean it was easy. The amount of practice it took to make it look easy was far higher than simply just being able to pull such a routine off consistently.

But simple or not, it was a pattern. And patterns could be exploited. He would have to time it just right, but if it worked, he could win. Or at least make it so that Harry’s rhythm was broken.

“Klein’s noticed it,” Kirito said. “But Harry probably knows that he did.”

“You saw it too then?” Silica asked.

“Saw what?” Rain asked.

“Harry fell into a simple pattern,” Kirito said. “And Klein noticed. What he hasn’t noticed though is that it’s a trap.”

“A trap?” Strea asked curiously. “What do you mean by that?”

“It’s a pattern that can easily be broken,” Kirito noted. “And Harry knows this. He’s had it happen against him fighting mobs enough times. Against a human player, it would happen quicker, but he knows the weaknesses of his style. But just because it can be easily broken…”

“It doesn’t mean he doesn’t have something up his sleeve,” Silica finished. “Probably something risky, knowing him. It might not work against Klein, but you know how he is.”

Kirito and Rain nodded, but Strea just looked confused.

“Just watch, Strea,” Asuna said. “Harry’s in control of the fight.”

Damn it! He should have realized that Harry was lulling him into a false sense of confidence with his simple attack pattern and rhythm. He had feinted with an attack, forcing the shield to intercept a katana that wasn’t there. Even then, his actual attack was parried and forced wide, though the sword had almost come too late to parry his katana. He then saw Harry drop his shield and then saw stars in his eyes as the young man punched him in the face with a gauntleted fist.

Not enough to win the fight on its own, true, but it gave Harry that brief moment of distraction to lodge his blade into Klein’s shoulder. Klein hissed in pain from the wound and mentally cursed how SAO had gradually made pain be felt. Not to the point where they would feel like in real life, or so he thought, but ever since they passed the halfway point, pain had become increasingly a thing.

“Winner, Hadrian!” Gus declared.
Klein chuckled and winced as Harry pulled the blade out of his shoulder and sheathed it. “Man, I should have realized that a simple pattern like that was a trap,” he said. “You don’t do patterns for that long very often.”

Harry grinned. “Don’t sell yourself short.” He said. “It almost worked, and had I mistimed that parry even slightly, you would have had me. It was risky, but then you know how I am when it comes to risky moves.”

He did that. He might not be the biggest risk taker in a fight, that honor went to Kirito, but he has pulled some risky stunts. The time he killed that one field boss by getting one of its fangs through his arm came to mind. While none of them had ended badly, he had a few stunts which had come dangerously close to killing him. And Silica would be there right after the fighting was done, telling her husband off for being a brave idiot.

Still, he thought as he bumped fists with Harry. *He’s come a long way since the first day, hasn’t he?*

##

“The next round is going to be Silica versus Agil,” Gus declared. He heard the murmuring of the crowd, probably due to the size disparity between the two. Silica was just over a five feet tall, at most. Agil, on the other hand, was closer to six and a half feet tall, a veritable giant to the eyes of most of the players. And considering how easily he beat Strea, who was seen as both Amazonian and strong in her own way, everyone thought that this fight was unfair. At least that was the vibe he was getting from the bits of murmuring that he could make out.

Which just showed that even those who knew just how strong and capable Silica was, were no more immune to impressions given by the apparent disparity being seen.

He kept his expression neutral as the two walked up to him, with Rain coming with Silica as her second, and Klein coming with Agil to act as his. “You all heard my explanation of the rules during Hadrian and Klein’s match,” he began, giving Klein a nod. “But I will be explaining them before every match to make sure that there are no misunderstandings.”

**Silica vs. Agil**

Agil looked at Silica who had her dagger held loosely in her hand as they both waited for her to send in the duel request and considered how he would try to win this match. He had no illusions about Silica’s skill, he had seen her fight too many times to know that she would make good use of her small and agile frame to avoid any blows, and hitting her with the head of his axe would likely be an exercise in futility.

On the other hand, the haft and butt of his axe could be used to trip her up. And if that happened, he could grapple her and get her to submit. That’s how he won against Strea, though he wouldn’t assume that Silica hadn’t considered that. If she saw it coming, she would dodge it.

This was definitely going to be difficult.

“You know, the audience is getting pretty riled up about me fighting you,” Silica said idly.

Agil blinked at the comment and then barked a laugh. “Don’t I know it?” He asked. “If I win, I’m going to catch hell for beating up such a cute girl. If I lost, I’m going to catch hell for being beaten by a cute girl.” He shrugged. “Which just goes to show you, a lot of those in the audience don’t know just how dangerous you are.”

“Cute?” Silica asked, raising an eyebrow. “Harry could tell you, I don’t do *kawaii*.”
“So you skip to adorable then?” Agil asked, amused.

Silica smirked. “Adorable and deadly,” she responded. “So, the banter’s done. Shall we?” She then sent the duel request.

“Of course,” Agil replied. “At the Lady’s pleasure.” He hit the acceptance and the countdown began.

##

Silica kept an eye on Agil’s stance and posture, while watching his shoulders for the tells of an attack. Her grandfather had taught her quite a few tricks in various spars when she was learning the basics of the Anything Goes School, including how to deal with armed opponents. If the weapon isn’t in their hands, it can’t hurt her. However, if the opponent doesn’t have a weapon in his or her hands, he or she can still hurt her. Watch the opponent, watch their bodies. Look for those tells on when an attack is incoming, and from where.

She could tell he wouldn’t be using the blade of it, there would be too much momentum behind a swing if he did, and she would exploit that opening. He was more likely to use the haft to try and trip her, taking advantage of not only his longer reach, but the reach his weapon would provide.

Smart of him, really. He knew that if she got in close, and he didn’t manage to stop her or grab her for a grapple, it was over for him. Her size and build worked as much against her as for her. She was faster than him in the sense that she had less distance for her limbs to move and less mass to move. As a high level player who was a mix between Assault Team member and merchant, Agil was most certainly not slow in the conventional sense. And his size also meant that he could make use of it to generate momentum for his strikes.

But that didn’t mean that he needed to use all that space. The haft of his axe could be used quite effectively to trip and entangle, as Strea found out.

The countdown finished, and she darted in.

##

Shit! Agil thought as he frantically avoided Silica’s attack and then snapped the butt of his Axe up to try and get a blow in to create an opening for him to grab her for a grapple. Of course, the smaller girl managed to avoid it, bending her body in a way that demonstrated exceptional flexibility on her part.

Not letting up the attacks, he continued to try and either knock the wind out of her, or trip her, but it was like he was fighting a gymnast, as she jumped, moved, and flowed around every attack, forcing him to defend himself until he could resume attacking. He made a quick lunge with the haft of his weapon and tried to bring it around to hit her in the side when she sidestepped it, only for her to then move in on him at an angle that had her staying just ahead of his attack.

She moved in close as she went around him and he felt a stab of pain as her dagger plunged into the back of his knee.

“Winner, Silica!” Gus shouted.

Agil sighed as his loss was confirmed and yelped as Silica pulled the dagger out. “I didn’t stand a chance, did I?” He asked as he turned to face his opponent. He reached out his hand.

“Oh, you always stood a chance,” Silica said, taking it and shaking it. “All you had to do was grab
me and grapple me into submission, or just get a decisive hit on me.”

Agil chuckled. “Yeah, but using the blade of the axe… you would have just dodged it and ended this match as soon as I attacked,” he said. “Your size works for you there, and I’m used to fighting larger opponents. That reminds me, Kirito and Asuna are next, right?”

Silica nodded as the two of them made their way out of the dueling area. “They are,” she said. “Too bad they’re doing a match on this round. Their match would make for an epic final round for this tournament.”

“That it would,” Agil agreed. “That it would.”

**Kirito vs. Asuna**

Argo watched from her position in the audience as Kirito and Asuna made their way into the dueling area, with Strea and Agil, their seconds, behind them. Of all the fighters, she thought that it would be one of them who would win this farce of a tournament. Not to play down the skills of those in the Knights of Blood who entered, but the fact that five of them were defeated in a matter of seconds during the first round said a lot about which group was the most likely to win.

Godfree being defeated by Kuradeel in the second round was interesting. Not from the skill demonstrated, but from the fact that Heathcliff had to intervene to ensure that no one was seriously injured. She didn’t know how that happened, considering that dueling rules weren’t being used, but it did. *Probably a bug,* she thought. Still, his intervention like that was a mistake on his part.

It was the kind of thing that would expose him, though none of those in the know had taken the opportunity to do so. Ah, so be it.

She shook her musings off and turned her attention to Kirito and Asuna. *This is going to be good,* she thought eagerly, making her way through the crowd to find a better spot to watch from. *The Flash versus the Black Swordsman? This is the kind of fight people have been waiting for.*

She looked on as the two took their places and… started talking?

##

“So,” Kirito said to Asuna. “Think we should have a wager for this?”

Asuna blinked. A wager? She thought. *Here and now?* “And what is going through your head to give you the idea for that?” She asked with narrowed eyes.

“I was thinking that after this tournament, we can go and get something to eat,” he said. “Remember that place in Serendia? The one Yui recommended to us and where we had Rain’s birthday party?”

Asuna nodded.

“I was thinking that the two of us could go there after this and have a meal.”

“And let me guess, the loser is buying,” Asuna said. *Honestly, he’s always thinking with his stomach.* She thought. Still, that gave her an opportunity. “Hell of a way to ask a girl on a date. You’re the one who’s supposed to be buying if that’s the case.”

Kirito smirked. “Then I guess that means you have to win then.”

Asuna returned his smirk. “Oh, I will,” she declared. “Now, are we going to start this, or what?”
“As you wish,” Kirito said and then sent out the duel request.

"...Buttercup, I don't mind. But, so help me, if you make a reference to that American Zelda cartoon..." Asuna accepted the request and drew her rapier. Though I doubt he’s seen The Princess Bride, she thought. It’s an American movie, and he doesn’t strike me as the type to watch what seems to be a sappy romance. His loss, as he would find it to be less of a romance, and actually quite funny.

"Never seen it," Kirito admitted.

“You’re not missing much...” Gus assured him from his spot on the sidelines. "Pre-fight banter done, children?"

“We're done with the manzai routine,” Asuna said. “Though knowing the Tsukkomi–” she shot a glance at Kirito. “It might start again.”

She glanced at the countdown and set feet. She would have to be quick, she knew how quickly Kirito could react. And she knew how quick his blade was. She then let her eyes meet his and saw a mix of seriousness and anticipation in them.

Before long, the countdown was finished, and she exploded into action.

##

"Svyatoye grebanoye der'mo!" Rain managed.

“What?” Strea asked.

“Holy fucking shit!” Lux exclaimed.

“What she said.” Rain said, her eyes wide.

“That was what, six parry- riposte exchanges in that first strike?” Silica murmured shaking her head as the two separated and considered each other again.

"I lost track at three," Harry admitted. "Wait, did they slave a screen to Gus' POV?" He looked at the various screens in the air, giving the audience something to see. “How did they do that, and how did I miss it?”

"Argo or Heathcliff, if not both of them," his wife said, and their feathered depended chirped agreement. "And they just came up. Oh, wow, she's trying a set of run bys-- no, nice feint!"

"Close dodge for Kirito," Rain agreed, then her eyes went wide. "Oh, trying to pin her against a column-- no such luck, lyudi v chernom!"

"It's a matter of whether Asuna gets in before he can anticipate and parry," Silica observed. "Or Kirito can get his sword to where she will be before she's left there. Between battle skill and system awareness, they both have a good chance-- wow! That was a jump, Asuna!"

"And landed where he didn't expect-- no!" Harry laughed. "Damn, nice parrying and sidestepping of a Quadruple Pain."

"Is Kirito keeping to one sword?" Yui asked from her perch on Rain's shoulders.

"Good question," Harry said. "I'm not using Mystic Blade, but I'm not sure if he'd consider his cheating-- wow! That's-- Octagon Strike?"
Lux whistled and nodded. "Eight rapid strikes from eight points around your foe. And Kirito parried every one of them. She uses that to clear mobs and pin bosses—Whoa! What's that Sword Skill Kirito just tried?"

“Nova Ascension,” Harry said. “The max level sword skill for one-handed swords. It’s a good finisher, but not recommended to use.”

"And she dodged it," Rain said, grinning as the crowd cheered another lightning fast back and forth followed by the smiling duelists circling each other again. "Hell, I thought wars of attrition were supposed to be boring!"

##

Heathcliff smiled as the crowd roared in excitement over another exchange. He knew that the audience had been hoping for a lot of fights like this, and had probably been disappointed by how quickly most had ended. Until this one, the longest had been Harry and Klein’s, and that still lasted less than a minute.

But this? It had been a fast paced fight since the beginning and had lasted for five minutes so far, and neither showed any signs of letting up or slowing down. They would do a rapid exchange, break off, and repeat it again in an exhibition of skill that was leaving the audience stunned.

Even those who routinely did boss fights rarely saw the two of them cut loose like this, and it was leaving them stunned and awed. He looked over at Kuradeel, who was watching it in shock, and was probably wondering why he had wanted a chance to have a match against Kirito.

The crowd roared again and he turned his attention to them in time to see another rapid exchange of blows, his eyes widening as his mind superimposed an image of a whirlwind going up against a typhoon.

##

What was I thinking? Kuradeel thought as he watched the match between Kirito and Asuna. The two of them were fighting at a level and speed that was almost too fast for him to track, and he realized that the two of them had been holding back during the first round. The two of them were moving, attacking, parrying, and countering at a faster pace than he knew he could keep up with if he was to go up against either of them.

He glanced toward where the rest of their guild members were and saw Hadrian and Silica seeming to be talking and from what he could make out from the lip motions, they… were running a commentary on the match?

Rain and Lux were just looking on in awe, as if they were seeing the Black Swordsman and The Flash in action for the first time. And perhaps, they were, at least in the case of fighting as individuals, rather than as part of a team.

He turned his attention back to the match in time for the system to declare duel over in Kirito’s favor, but… oh, that was how. A glance at their health showed that Asuna’s health was slightly lower than Kirito’s. And while neither had managed to get any decisive hits on the other, but they had gotten glancing blows in. Kirito had simply managed to land at least one strike more on her by the time ten minutes were up.

Kuradeel thought a moment, then nodded.

He had wanted to face the Black Swordsman. Now, given his chance-- turning away would be less
than honorable, a coward's way.

Damned to lose or not, he'd accept what he was given.

##

Asuna stared dully at the duel result. She honestly hadn’t expected that, and a glance to Kirito showed that he was caught off guard by it as well. They had both fought without getting in a decisive blow on each other for the entire time a duel was allowed to take.

And while that was satisfying to know, that Kirito was every bit as skilled as she expected, she still couldn’t deny that she was disappointed. She had lost, and not because Kirito managed to trap her and tag her with a hit, or get a lucky one in, she felt cheated. And a glance at Kirito showed that he felt similarly.

A shame, really, she had been having fun with that match. She saw that Kirito could easily keep up with her, and the skill he demonstrated was a step up from what he normally showed in boss fights. Then again, her speed probably required him to use his SA full stop, and she could tell that he was barely keeping up with it. Even if it did feel like she was trying to fight a whirlwind.

“Man, I feel cheated,” Kirito groused. “It ended in my favor, but…”

Asuna nodded. “Not in the way you wanted,” she said and then smirked. “And if it had gone on a bit longer, you would have made a mistake. It was taking everything you had, and the longer it went on, you would have made a mistake, or be a hair too slow.”

Kirito chuckled. “Maybe, maybe not,” he said. “And the same would apply to you as well, Asuna.”

“I guess we won’t know unless we do another, right?” She asked impishly,

Kirito shook his head. “Not here, though,” he said. “If it wasn’t a death game, then…” He smirked. “Oh, it would so be on.”

“Maybe when we get out, they’ll have a new one, without the whole dying is real, thing,” Asuna said as the two of them walked back to their guild mates.

“After all this?” Kirito asked. “What’re the chances of that? It’d be nice if there was one waiting for us after this, but…”

“You never know, Kirito,” Asuna said. “The technology is too promising to just let it die.” And she knew well enough that her father would certainly try and develop a safer version if he had the chance or permission to do so. Perhaps with government oversight, and a list of safety regulations that would have to be met, but he would do it.

**Harry vs. Kuradeel**

Harry looked past his shield at his opponent and the stance he had. A two-handed sword held up at the shoulder, leaving plenty of openings. A stance for a powerful attack, more or less. But the openings it left were just asking for him to exploit them.

*Careful, he thought to himself. Thinking that might mean he’s baiting you into a trap. He could see how it could be a trap as well. Despite the openings, they also meant that he would be attacking specific parts, and while a two-handed sword like Kuradeel’s might be slow and less mobile than his own arming sword, that didn’t mean that he couldn’t time an attack so that he hit first.*
The countdown finished and Kuradeel moved forward, bringing his blade down in a punishing attack. Harry quickly ducked and countered with his sword, only to find the swing miss as Kuradeel jumped back, the sword’s tip barely missing him. *Quicker on his feet than it would seem,* Harry thought as he did a shield rush in a tried and true tactic for knocking opponents off balance.

Kuradeel, looked like he almost panicked, as he let his sword go. But Harry could tell that he rallied somewhat as the older man sidestepped and in a completely unexpected move, grabbed Harry’s shield and pulled, taking him off balance. He then hissed in pain as he felt the point of the dagger the man kept as a sidearm plunge into his exposed arm right as he was ready to swing his own sword.

Harry grunted at the spike of pain, but knew what it meant. *Well done,* he thought with some admiration. For a desperate and improvised move, along with pulling a sidearm to do an attack, showed quick thinking on Kuradeel’s part. Had he been a little slower in drawing the dagger, he was the one who would have been stabbed, losing the match.

“Winner, Kuradeel!” Gus called out.

Harry pulled the dagger out of his arm with a wince. “That was well done,” he said as he handed the dagger back to Kuradeel. “You almost panicked, but you rallied and did something unexpected. Quick thinking and quick acting, good traits to have in battle.”

“I’m surprised it worked,” Kuradeel said with a laugh as he took the dagger and sheathed it at his waist. “I knew I had to do something after that brief bit of panic, and you wouldn’t give me an opportunity to get my weapon back. Grabbing a shield like that was the first thing that came to mind and… I’m surprised that you didn’t have something in mind for someone crazy enough to try.”

“I didn’t expect anyone to be crazy enough to try,” Harry responded and then grinned. “Well, anyone but me. If you were just a little slower, though…”

“It would have been me who lost,” Kuradeel said with a nod. “Still, it was luck that it worked.”

“Luck plays a role in battle,” Harry said. “So don’t discount it. You shouldn’t count on it, but sometimes, luck works in your favor.” He then held his hand out. “You won the fight, congratulations.”

Kuradeel took the offered hand and shook it.

**Silica vs. Kirito**

“This is going to be interesting,” Harry said as he watched the countdown timer for the duel between his wife and Kirito.

“You think Silica has a chance?” Strea asked.

Harry nodded. “Like Kirito, she has some training from Outside,” he said. “Not in weapons, true. In unarmed martial arts, but it also means that she can do a few things we can’t. Take that into account, and you’ll see she has options.” He then looked at Strea. “And yes, she does have a chance. All of us would, even if only Asuna can really keep up with him. Luck does play a role in fights, just look at how Kuradeel won against me.”

“Because she knows how to make use of her martial arts training, to say the least the Martial Arts skill, even if it’s something that she doesn’t make heavy use of here,” Asuna said, heading off Strea’s next question. “She still practices it, if only to have something to have in case she loses hold of her weapon, and she has made use of it before.”
Harry nodded. “More than one mob got its’ head punched or kicked off by her.” He then got a grim look on his face. “And there was that one Laughing Coffin member as well.” He said.

Asuna winced. “That was when you guys backed her and Keita’s group up against them, right?” She asked.

Harry nodded. “It gave her some nasty nightmares for the next week.” He said. “Anyway, let’s change the subject, I really don’t like talking about those particular fights.”

“Hey look,” Strea said. “It’s starting!”

Harry and Asuna turned their attention to the match.

##

“She’s doing pretty good against him,” Keita heard Ducker say. “I mean, I know she’s good and all, but he was able to keep up with Asuna’s speed.”

“It’s her approach to fighting him,” Sachi noted. “She doesn’t have Asuna’s speed, but she’s more… agile? She’s able to keep avoiding his blows, if only barely, and use an indirect approach.”

“She and Asuna fight differently,” Sasamaru said.” Asuna is far more linear and direct, and she needs space to make use of her speed. Silica is slower, but more agile, so she tries to get in close, trying to keep Kirito from leveraging the advantage his longsword gives him. As it is, it’s still only a matter of time. He almost got her with that last pass.”

“I’m still surprised Harry lost so quickly to that one guy,” Tetsuo said. “He’s more skilled than that.”

Keita shrugged. “You didn’t see it?” He asked. “That one guy, Kuradeel, he knew what was coming, and if he didn’t stop it, Harry would control the match. What he did was reckless, but it caught Harry by surprise and put him on the wrong foot long enough for him to win.”

“So it was luck?” Sachi asked and then shook her head. “No, not luck, or at least not entirely. His catching Harry by surprise like that and getting him off balance was luck, but he would have recovered quickly from that. He was fast enough to exploit the opportunity he created with that luck.”

Keita nodded. “Yeah, and Harry knows that in duels with one hit rules, your opponent only has to get lucky once. Anyway-- oh, nice dodge, Silica! And now she’s on the defensive. Kirito has this and… there it is. And ouch, that had to hurt.”

“I wouldn’t think having a sword going through your shoulder feels good,” Sasamaru said, wincing.

**Kirito vs. Kuradeel**

Kirito watched as Silica walked back to the others and turned his attention to the man who was approaching the dueling area. Kuradeel was the one who had wanted to fight him, and Silica headed that off by starting this tournament. And while the man’s win against Harry was a surprise, and more than a little luck, he was getting his wish.

The final round was here, and Kirito would be facing him to conclude the tournament. While he wouldn’t disparage the man’s skills, he would be working to finish this quickly. Not to show his dominance, but to simply finish the tournament.

They both gave their acceptance of the rules as Gus said them, despite the fact that they should
already fully know them by now. But, the man was doing it to make absolutely sure that things
didn’t get out of hand. He saw Godfree, who was Kuradeel’s second for this fight nod his assent to
Gus’ instructions, and he had no doubt that Asuna did as well.

Seeing as Kuradeel was the one by and large responsible for the tournament, he sent out the duel
request, which Kirito looked over. He saw that there were no deviations from what was stated in the
rules, and pressed the button for his acceptance. He didn’t bother with any pre-fight banter, and it
was clear that Kuradeel wasn’t inclined for it either, so the two simply drew their weapons and took
stances as they waited for the countdown to finish.

##

Kuradeel kept his gaze on Kirito, not taking his eyes off the younger player. He could feel the
intensity of Kirito’s focus on him, and forced himself to remain composed. His instincts were
screaming at him right now, and wondered if that was how Kirito had beaten his opponent during the
first round. Sheer intimidation forcing his opponent off his game, making it easy.

Despite how he had let his bloodlust get the better of him during the fight with Godfree, others leapt
in and kept him from doing any more harm, which he was reassured by. He didn’t like it when it did
happen, but it usually happened when he was faced with a pack of mobs, and could let it loose with
no problems. And when it happened during spars back in Grandzam, there was always someone
present to intervene if things did get out of hand. And during duels, things were even more
controlled.

He checked the timer, and saw that he had ten seconds to go. He readied himself, and watched Kirito
to see what move his opponent would make.

The countdown reached zero, and Kirito exploded into motion, and Kuradeel was frantically
defending himself.

_It’s like he’s a fucking whirlwind!_ He thought, as he frantically dodged and brought his sword to bear
in a half-sword grip to use to defend himself. Slight movements to block or deflect attacks enough to
keep them from scoring a significant enough hit. He could tell that Kirito wasn’t going all out, he
would have already been defeated that was so. But that didn’t change the fact that what he was
dealing with right now was taking everything he had, and he sensed that Kirito was holding back to
get the measure of his opponent. Testing, feeling him out.

Much like why he wanted to challenge him in the first place. In a way, that actually made Kuradeel
glad. He couldn’t sense any hint that Kirito took any enjoyment in violence for its own sake, but he
could tell that Kirito was enjoying the match. The chance to test himself against others, to learn from
others.

Kuradeel found himself giving Kirito a smirk, and the younger man returned it before moving again.
Something had changed, and it was clear that Kirito was done testing his opponent and was now
closing in to conclude the match.

And conclude it, Kirito did. A hit with the flat of the blade on the hand grabbing the blade of his
sword, a shallow cut along his other hand, and he dropped the blade. He made a quick reach for his
dagger, and found the tip of Kirito’s blade intercept his hand, and the signal that the duel was over.

“Winner, Kirito!” Gus declared.

Kirito backed away and sheathed his sword, while Kuradeel flexed his hand a bit, wincing at having
it get stabbed. Flexing it a bit, he then bent down to pick up his dropped blade before sheathing it. He
then looked at Kirito. “You could have won it from the start,” he accused.

Kirito shrugged. “But doing that would have done you no favors,” he said. “You needed a chance to show your own skills, and you did a good jobs defending yourself from me. I didn’t think that half-swording is supposed to be used like that, though.”

Kuradeel grinned. “Your attacks were all to the same region of my body, and fast enough that the half-sword grip actually gave me the ability to keep up with parrying the attacks, if you can call that parrying.” He said. “I found it to work decently well against quick mobs, as I’m not the fastest of fighters.”

“So you developed it as an improvised tactic, and continued to practice it when you found it to work well enough.” Kirito said with a nod. “Makes sense, and it was different. Still, good match” He held out his hand.

Kuradeel took it and they shook before heading back to their guild members. As he made his way back, he considered the match and nodded to himself. He still didn’t think that Kirito was worthy of Asuna, but then again, he didn’t think anyone was. But, it wasn’t his decision to make, and what he got of Kirito’s character was at least promising.

Besides, he got his wish and tested himself against the Black Swordsman. He could be happy for that.

##

Heathcliff watched the final match and nodded to himself. The tournament had definitely been a nice distraction from things, and it had only delayed things by a few hours at most, and was entertaining to watch. A nice minor diversion for the players, a way to keep morale up, and to maintain momentum while they could.

It would be soon, the day where he would be exposed. And when that happened, he would give the Assault Team, or at least specific members of it, the opportunity to bring SAO to an end. Whether they would take it or not could not be known, but he had a feeling that they would take the chance he offered. And if they did, he already knew who it would be to challenge and fight him.

A pity that it would end this early, but it would end. And he could always do something to make sure it at least ended where it was supposed to end. GM powers were useful for things like that, especially since he would be disabling his GM protections afterward.

He could feel it, the endgame was approaching.
The Blue Eyed Watcher of the Gates

November 17, 2024 - Aincrad 67th Floor, Serendia

Kirito glanced at Asuna as the two of them walked from the Teleport Plaza to the restaurant where they would be sharing a meal. After the tournament, they had gone back to the villa and changed out of their armor. While he had no problem with going in his armor personally, Asuna would have none of it. So he found himself in something that was passable, but not formal. Just a black tunic and dark grey trousers that were tucked into his boots. He had only one sword out, the lighter colored Šviesa, in this case, belted at his waist for a contrast to his normally dark colors.

Asuna had gone with a simple white blouse and red skirt that went down to her ankles, showing the light boots she normally favored when back at the villa, with La Pucelle belted at her waist. White and silver might be her normal colors, but she preferred to have something more colorful on when she was out of armor. Not that it took away from her looks one bit. She would look good even if she was wearing the ragged seeming clothes that Argo often sported in his opinion.

But that was just his opinion.

“I wonder how much this is going to cost me,” he heard Asuna mumble. “I lost the match, damn it, so I’m buying.”

“I didn’t say you were buying if I won, just that you would come with me,” Kirito said. “You were the one who said after I proposed going out for after the tournament, and I quote, ‘And let me guess, the loser is buying.’”

“I don’t recall you disagreeing with that,” Asuna pointed out. “In fact, you basically said that I had better win then.”

“It got you to take it more seriously, though,” Kirito noted. “Not that you wouldn’t take it seriously.” He hastily added.

“And another minute and I would have won,” Asuna retorted, a smirk on her face. “It was taking everything you had to keep up with me as it was. You would have made a mistake soon enough.”

“Keep in mind that what you said also applies to you,” Kirito countered. “As it was, it was a race between whether one of us would reach half health first, or make a mistake and get nailed by a solid hit. Too bad we ran out of time, though.”

“And it’s too dangerous to try something like that with more permissive rules,” Asuna agreed. “Well, since you’re buying, I guess it’s not like it matters.”

Did she just...? Kirito thought as Asuna picked up the pace. She did, didn’t she? He then chuckled. He had walked right into that, and who was he to deny her? It wasn’t as if the meal at the restaurant would be that expensive for him, even if she got the most expensive items on the menu.

It had been quite some time since he had to worry about possibly being short on col.

##

Asuna sipped a fresh glass of wine to wash down her meal and savored the taste. She had gone with the House selection, trusting the NPCs to have a good handle on what would be good to the tastes of the players by now. She was glad that her instincts had been right, and she looked on in fond
amusement as Kirito sat back in his chair, satisfied at a good meal.

“How long has it been?” She asked. “Just the two of us?”

Kirito paused in drinking his beer. “How long?” He asked. “It depends on what you mean by just the two of us, but you probably mean how long it has been since it was just the two of us sharing a meal at a restaurant.” His brow furrowed. “I think the last time we did was... Christmas?” He smiled. “We went on an actual date then. Not just us sharing a meal at a restaurant, and inn, or a tavern.”

Asuna smiled at the memories his comment invoked. While none of them were dates, it was just the two of them for the most part. There was the dark-elven NPC, Kizmel, who had joined them for a time due to a long quest that took them through several floors, but it was mostly just the two of them.

Those times, when they were just two individuals who had begun working out a partnership that had lasted since. Times that, looking back, were fun. Frightening, more often than not, but fun as well. Her, a girl who was becoming the swordswoman she was, but still with the mannerisms of her upper class upbringing. And Kirito, who wore the mantle of indifference that was his gamer persona in public at the time. A mantle that always seemed to be sliding off and showing the fundamentally good, if socially awkward, young man underneath.

It took longer for her to really know him, and there were still details about both of their Outside lives than they told no one, but by now, it really didn’t matter. She was as different from her old self as he was from back then. And she doubted that either of them were inclined to return to how things were.

“It’s been an interesting two years, hasn’t it?” She asked with a smile.

Kirito chuckled. “You could say that,” he replied. “Remember the Elven War questline?” He asked.

Asuna nodded, smiling at the memories of that questline. Fun, dangerous, and at times frightening as it was, it made for some good memories. She then mentioned some of the more memorable things, including how she and Argo had gotten Kizmel, an NPC, into a swimsuit for a shared bath, and how he was so embarrassed.

Kirito flushed, but didn’t dispute that. Instead he pointed out how she had been so frightened by the mobs on the fifth floor.

The two of them would continue to reminisce, ordering some more drinks when the waitress came by. They would be there for two more hours, until both realized the time and decided that it was best to return to the villa.

No need to give the others any more ammunition for teasing than they would likely have as it was.

Still, Asuna reflected. It was nice. Just the two of us for a few hours. She wondered if Kirito felt the same. Judging from the small smile on his face, she thought he did.

Aincrad, GM Administration Area

Kayaba looked over the logs from the tournament, focusing on the match between Kuradeel and Godfree, looking for an explanation on why Godfree took damage in a safe zone when there wasn’t a duel going on. He didn’t see any signs of the safeties being disabled, and then run a simulation of the duel with all the data from it, checking to see if something happened.

There! He saw something at the process level, showing the safeties going out before coming back online. He then ran the data of what damage Kuradeel’s strike would have done if the safeties were off to see if it was simply something in the code causing them to temporarily glitch out and reset.
The results came out as negative, and he started searching for errors, bugs, and other factors. He found a few errors, and he started checking on the frequency of errors, no matter how minor, and what their causes were. It didn’t take him long to determine the reason, and he realized that he should have expected it.

SAO had been running non-stop for over two years, and live patching, hotfixes, cycling processes and systems to keep their memory from overflowing, and more, could do only so much. Without doing a full shutdown and restart, it was inevitable that signs of wear and tear on the system itself would begin to show. It was the lack of thorough system maintenance, as he and CARDINAL were keeping the system going, meaning that several server and file caches couldn’t be cleared out effectively. Sugou’s worm had not helped matters, and despite the repairs he and CARDINAL had enacted, the system was starting to become unstable.

Right now, it wasn’t a severe problem, but it will eventually become one if left to persist, but to keep it from persisting, he would have to take the system down. And he couldn’t, not without terminating himself and risking the surviving players. He would not unduly risk over six thousand lives any more than he already was. At least like this, they had a choice in the matter, however forced it may seem.

He had taken their freedom, torn them from their old lives, and gave them the choice to live or die by their own actions. He would not take a course of action that would further risk their lives. He had already done enough to be considered a monster, but he would not dishonor those who were still alive by taking a course of action that could kill them all.

Gaining freedom from SAO required clearing the game. Clearing the game had only one condition. Kill him.

And, on the seventy-fifth floor, he would give the players the chance to do so.

*November 18, 2024 - Aincrad 74th Floor, Labyrinth*

Harry looked at the map, seeing their current location and at the large door that was a clear indication that they found the boss room.

“So,” he said looking at the others. “We found it. Should we scout it out, just take a quick look at what we’re going to face, or simply report it and gather a full raid?”

“I… don’t know,” Strea said. “I’m sensing something, as if the system is going to pull out a surprise, and that door… I can’t be the only one getting a bad feeling about this.”

Harry nodded at that. The vibe he was getting was that this fight was intended to be a tough one, and likely still would be, despite the fact that every member of the guild was over geared, as were many in the Assault Team. But over geared didn’t mean that the boss wouldn’t be dangerous to fight. Assuming otherwise was a quick way to get killed.

“We should at least peek in, just to see what we’re going to be fighting soon enough,” Silica said. Scouting a boss was less about figuring out the mechanics, a raid always had the option of retreating if things started going badly, but just knowing what you would be encountering could give a lot of insight on what the most likely mechanics would be. “If we see something, good. If not, expect it to be a trap. Remember that one boss, on the fifty-third floor?”

“You mean the one that hid itself until we were all in the room and couldn’t be guaranteed to escape it?” Lux asked. “So we need to be ready for something that might be hard hitting, ambush us, or both?”
Harry nodded. “Good advice to follow in any rate,” he replied. “Ok, so we’ll open up the door to take a peek and be ready to bravely run away.” He said, saying the unofficial motto of those who scouted bosses regularly. He then looked at the door, as if seeing if he could get any warning about what inside. He took a deep breath. “Strea, if you would join me?”

Strea stepped forward and put her hands on her side of the door. She gave him a nod and the two of them pushed.

Harry, waving Strea back, took a step into the dark room and noticed the torches begin to light up with blue flames on either side of him. As soon as one was fully alight, the next torch began to light up, and he could appreciate the intent behind the entire thing. It was made to intimidate and get the adrenaline flowing.

Keeping himself calm, he watched as more of the room lit up, with the torches becoming farther apart before starting to close in, giving him an impression on the room’s apparent size. *Thirty meters to a side*, he thought idly as the last torches came alight and he saw what was waiting in the room.

It was seated on a stone dais, much like many bipedal bosses had been when the room was opened, but he could get an estimate of its size. If it was standing, it would probably stand five or six meters in height, and from the breadth of its body and shoulders, it was clearly muscular. He could see a giant blade leaning against the dais, and from the boss monster's muscular build, it could probably wield it with one hand.

He then heard the breathing, a low rhythmic sound as the mob sat there. With its closed eyes, one could be fooled into thinking it was asleep, but he wasn’t going to believe that for a minute. No, it was simply waiting. He kept looking at it and watched as its eyes opened before the health bars and data like its name.

Gleam Eyes, how appropriate. As he stared into to its eyes, seeing the reflected blue light from the torches, he could see why it was named that. He kept its gaze for a moment before he acted on a hunch and pulled out a healing crystal. “Heal,” he said quietly, and almost stared at it in shock as it didn’t activate. A bug?

No, he thought as he stepped out of the room, not taking his eyes off the boss.

Not a bug. Well shit, the entire boss room is a no-crystal zone.

He kept the mob’s gaze as the doors began to close, and didn’t let it up until they finished doing so. Turning to everyone else, he then gave them a grim look. “Let’s head back to the safe zone we passed earlier,” he said. “I want opinions on what we should report. Dear, send a message to Asuna, Kirito and Rain, and let them know where we will be and find out if they can meet up with us, or if we should all just meet in Kamdet.”

Silica already had her weapon sheathed as she brought up the message function. As they made their way back, keeping an eye out for any mobs, she typed out the message and sent it. She then drew her dagger and the four of them made their way to the safe area.

##

Strea sat down on the ground, and leaned against one of the rock pillars that made up the edge of the safe zone. The floor boss looked to be a tough fight in the making, despite the fact that it hadn’t risen from where it was sitting. The fact that it hadn’t immediately risen and charged them was almost more worrying than if it had. It had seen them, gazing at the four of them with an intense gaze that was throwing her senses into overdrive.

Her being an AI meant that she was a lot more sensitive to things happening within the system, and the last four months had given her ample practice in determining if what she was sensing was bad
news. And her senses screamed at her that it was. It hadn’t moved from its position, but that gaze… it saw them, and was watching them, waiting for them. She had noticed Harry did something, and as soon as he did, he backed away from the entrance, keeping his eyes on the boss the entire time, as if he was concerned that the moment he turned his back, it would leap up and attack them before they could get out of the room.

Them being at the entrance and not entering it being only a minor consideration.

“So, any response from the others, dear?” Harry asked as he pulled several water skins out of his inventory. He set one down and tossed the rest to the others.

“Not yet,” Silica replied, catching the water skin he tossed her. She uncapped it and took a deep drink from it before taking a cup out of her inventory and filling it. She placed the cup on the ground and Pina flew down and started drinking. “They’re probably busy right now.”

Harry nodded and took a drink from his own water skin. “That thing’s going to be a right bastard to fight,” he said. “Observations?”

“From what I saw, it’s built for power, so we can expect hard hitting attacks,” Strea said. “Can’t say how fast it would be, but the obvious muscles in its legs probably means it can do short bursts of speed.”

“Given the relative size of the room, it isn’t like it needs to do long ones,” Lux said. “It had a giant sword. My best guess is that it is about three or four meters long. And from how muscular it is, you can bet that it can wield it with one hand.”

“Can’t really tell how tall it is, since it was sitting, but I would say it’s at least five meters tall, maybe closer to six,” Silica said. “Not the biggest boss we’ve faced, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t dangerous. I also think I saw something from behind it. A tail maybe, but it was moving in a way that makes me think that it’s not. We’ll need to be ready for any surprises on that front.”

Harry nodded. “Glad you spotted it,” he said. “And everything else I saw is about the same as what Strea and Lux observed. But that’s not the biggest concern I got.” He paused. “I had a hunch and pulled out a healing crystal, and the news isn’t good.”

Strea watched as Silica’s eyes widened. “You mean we’re going to be fighting it in an anti-crystal area?” She asked. At Harry’s nod, she cursed. “Damn it, that’s not good.” She then looked at Strea. “You haven’t run into one, most players haven’t, really, but it means that healing crystals and the like won’t work there. I think you can see why having one of those in a boss room can be considered a bad thing.”

Strea nodded and then saw Silica glance at something. “Hold on, I got a message from Asuna,” she said, bringing it up. “Okay, she and the others were on the other side of the labyrinth anyway, so she recommends us just using a teleport crystal and meeting them there.”

Kamdet

“So, you found the boss room,” Asuna said, her tone all business. “And then you decided to take a peek in to see what we would be going up against.” She nodded. “I would call you out for being reckless with that, but you didn’t engage it to find out if there was anything mechanics wise. But you have some observations to share?” She asked as she opened her menu and brought up a screen so she could take notes. She would look them over and clean them up when she sent out the message that the boss room has been found.
Harry nodded. “Yes, we do,” he said in confirmation. “First, it’s called Gleam Eyes. We can expect it to hit hard and is probably faster than it looks. It’s about six meters or so tall, and built like it’s been hitting the gym. There was a massive sword right next to it, so that’s probably its main weapon. And worse, I acted on a hunch and checked something. It’s an anti-crystal area, meaning that healing crystals won’t work and if we need to run, the only way out is through the entrance. If it doesn’t shut us in, that is.” He looked at Silica, Lux and Strea. “Anything I miss?” He asked.

“You covered the high points,” Silica said before looking at Asuna. “Just one more thing, I think that it has another avenue of attack. There was something behind it, and the more I think about it, it was attached. It didn’t seem to be a tail, so we have to be on the lookout for that.”

Asuna noted it down. “So that’s what you got from that bit of scouting,” she said with a nod. “The information about the boss room also being an anti-crystal area is concerning.” She looked at Harry. “Do you think it will affect those crystals you made?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “We can try when the fight starts, or as we enter the room. But I’m wondering if it is worth the risk.”

Asuna nodded. For all that Harry had worked to provide a means that allowed the transfer of affinities to others that didn’t have the issue of taking too long, she also knew that he did it to also see if he could. Due to it relying on crystals that were charged with an affinity, it was highly likely that the anti-crystal area would render them unable to be used.

A shame, those crystals would have been useful, but it was just like SAO to cut off that option as soon as Harry found a viable way to use his transferal ability. She saved the notes taken down and closed the window before looking at the others. “Alright, I’ll take these notes and put something together and get the information out, as well as recommending a meeting to discuss potential strategies. We should be ready to take on the boss tomorrow.”

**November 19, 2024 - Aincrad 74th Floor, Labyrinth**

Kirito deflected the sword strike from the Gleam Eyes and hit it with a Double Circular before jumping back. “Switch!” He called to Harry, who darted forward to hit the boss with a Horizontal Square. His sword was in the blue color that indicated his using the Water Affinity, and Kirito watched as he flowed around the retaliatory strike from the boss, the younger man’s shield angled to deflect the blade if he needed to.

“Team Three, get behind it!” Asuna called out. “Hit that snake tail and keep it occupied!”

He heard the confirmations and took a moment to assess the battle so far as he pulled a healing potion out and drank it. Despite going in with no knowledge of the actual mechanics, the observations provided by Harry’s group yesterday were fairly accurate. It moved fast, hit hard, and was forcing a hit and run strategy by most of them while the Tanks worked to maintain aggro. The anti-crystal effects made healing back up when damaged a bit of a problem, but being forewarned meant that everyone should have plenty of healing potions available.

“Kirito, switch!” Harry called and Kirito darted in so that his friend could back off and down a potion.

##

Silica ducked under the Gleam Eyes’ attack and darted in to hit it with a Fading Edge, keeping a wary eye on the boss. It’s fast and hard hitting attacks were enough to keep everyone on their toes, regardless of gear, and she had to break off to pull players out of the line of attack and shove a
healing potion down their throats three times in the last twenty minutes. They had been warned about the anti-crystal area, and yet several still didn’t think to stock up on healing potions. Worse, some of them panicked when they realized that the information about the fact that crystals couldn’t be used turned out to be true.

She dodged a retaliatory strike from the snake that made the Gleam Eyes’ tail, swiping at it with her dagger. She managed to tag it and she jumped back as it tried to take another bite out of her. The thing’s movements were viper-quick, and its hooded appearance was reminiscent of a cobra’s.

“That snake’s a pain in the ass to deal with,” she heard Klein say.

“It is, but you sound jealous,” she said looking up at him with a smirk. “Are you upset that that thing has a bigger snake to tuck into any trousers it might wear than you?”

Kunimittz barked a laugh. “Nice one!” He said. “And no, when he says it’s a pain in the ass, he’s being literal, as it managed to bite him in the ass.”

“Oi!” Klein shouted.

Silica snorted and then looked at the boss and its’ health. It was getting to the point where there would probably be a change to attack patterns, or it uncovering a new one soon. She saw it raise its head to the ceiling and take in a breath. Seeing how its chest expanded, she knew the warning signs. “It’s charging up a breath attack!” She shouted in warning.

Hearing the warning, most of the players managed to jump out of the way, with the tanks getting behind their shields to weather it. The few who didn’t, made her wince as she saw the damage they took. Granted, not all of them had upgraded gear courtesy of the sixty-ninth floor’s gear and mat drops, so they would take more damage, but even those with upgraded gear who got hit had a chunk taken out of their health.

If anyone needed a reminder that their gear, no matter how powerful it, is only went so far, they just got one.

##

Lux put the wounded player’s arm over her shoulder and helped him hobble a safe enough distance away to heal. If it wasn’t for him missing his leg, he would have been able to make it on his own, but a miscalculation of the distance allowed that giant sword to just cut through the armor. Far enough away that the downward angle of the blade made the cut low enough to only sever the leg. Only.

“Thanks,” the one she was assisting said.

“No problem,” she replied easily as she helped him sit down on the floor at the edge of the room. She then turned her attention to the fight and saw the rest of the players rush the boss. A glance at its health showed that it was close enough to dead to make the risk of such a move practical.

“It’s almost done,” she said, readying her blade. “Stay here and heal up.”

As she ran back into the fight, she heard the player grumble. “Don’t have much of a choice now, do I?” came the sarcastic agreement. She smiled at that, as if he was capable of sarcasm, he would be all right.

##

Harry stepped back and to the side, allowing Gleam Eyes’ downward swing to miss and then darted
in while changing the grip on his sword to trigger the Fire Affinity.

It was on the last quarter of its’ last health bar, meaning that the fight was almost done with. Experience had taught them all that burning down the rest of the boss’ health was the best option, but they still had to be wary.

This was the most dangerous phase of the fight, after all. All previous attack patterns were thrown out the window as a boss would instead try and take as many of them down with it. Its’ attacks would be faster, and they would do more damage, true, but the lack of a pattern to be exploited was the real danger. It could focus on one target at a time, or it might not and simply retaliate with devastating attacks of its own. No player on the Assault Team worth his or her sword was willing to wait and find out.

He saw Silica and Lux attack and get out of the way out of the corner of his eye, right as Kirito began to charge in, both Šviesa and Tamsa beginning to glow from a sword skill that was about to activate. Time to get the boss’ attention for a bit then. From the positioning of the weapons, it was one of the big hitters, maybe a Starburst Stream or The Eclipse, so giving Kirito a bit of a longer window to use it would not be amiss.

He triggered a Nova Ascension and he saw the boss stagger, with Asuna briefly frozen by the post-motion lockup from her Octagon Strike. Fortunately, the boss couldn’t exploit that window as Harry slammed into it with his shield, knocking the weapon just that little bit off course to give Asuna the window she needed to get out of range. He then did a Horizontal Square, using the four hit sword skill to grab its attention when Strea slammed into it with an Astral Hell, further disrupting its’ targeting algorithms.

Risky, but the brief extension of its own lockup was all that Kirito needed when he hit it with a Starburst Stream.

**Aincrad GM Administration Area**

Kayaba watched to footage of the fight against the Gleam Eyes, watching how the players handled it. No real innovation in the tactics, but such wasn’t expected. It already bucked the trend of relatively easy fights in the floors leading to the next quarter of Aincrad. And the data he got from it was interesting. Even those who had upgraded gear courtesy of the crafting mats that they got from the Abominus fight had, if they weren’t on the ball, taken serious damage from specific attacks.

He was almost regretful for the anti-crystal area, which was set to be a fixture in floor boss battles from this point, as it meant that he wouldn’t have a chance to see the result of Hadrian’s innovative use of the system’s interplay with his magic in a proper environment, but it was what it was. This fight and the next… they were intended to set the stage for what he planned to be the culmination of events, to ratchet up the difficulty, and to separate the elites from the rest. If SAO hadn’t been a death game, that is.

Here, that particular aspect would be a test of resolve, one which the players engaged in the fight were performing admirably in. Not, that he expected otherwise.

They would not have made it this far and faced all the dangers they had if they lacked resolve, after all. And as he watched the final attack runs on Gleam Eyes lead to the players killing it, he nodded.

No, they didn’t lack resolve, and they would need it on the next floor.

Because he would expose himself, and give them the option for their freedom. With how things were going within SAO, and with what he had done… he owed them that much.
At the Gates of Hell

November 21, 2024 - Aincrad 75th Floor, Collinia

Silica sighed happily as she sank into the hot water of the public bath, glancing out the corner of her eye to watch Harry as he simply leaned back and relaxed against the lip of the deep pool. Unlike most public bath houses, this one didn’t segregate by gender, and instead provided light robes to cover themselves with (mostly for walking around the bathhouse), or allowed them to bring and wear swim suits. She recalled that Harry said that the place was probably designed after Roman style bathhouses, pointing out the fact that the interconnected rooms were called by their Roman names; *Caldarium* for hot water, *Tepidarium* for the rooms with warm water, and *Frigidarium* for the rooms with pools of cool or cold water. The provision of clothing was more for modesty’s sake, as he said that the Romans would do this while naked.

“Book club,” he replied when asked how he knew these kinds of things as if it explained it all.

And the method of bathing? It was different from what she was used to as well. They all still cleaned themselves, but rather than using a shower and soap, it was through using oils and scraping them off with a tool. As she noticed, different.

“Look at you two, getting comfortable and cozy,” she heard Rain say, having her glance at the Russo-Japanese girl who was wearing a bikini and getting into the hot water.

“And you won’t?” Silica asked with a snort. “And if you’re trying to grab a guy’s attention with how developed you are, you might as well get next to Strea.”

“Not to mention Lux,” Rain admitted. “She also has bigger tits than I do, not that I’m going to complain too much.” She looked around. “Surprised that Asuna and Kirito aren’t here, though.”

“They headed to the *Tepidarium* or the *Frigidarium* with Yui after cleaning and rinsing off,” Harry said. “Yui isn’t too fond of the *Caldarium* anyway, and might be seeing this as an opportunity to simply play. She might not have exactly gotten what she wanted when breaking out. That being her getting a family with Asuna and Kirito filling in as parental figures, but you know she wants that.”

“And she capitalized on the opportunity she had when she went with them during the festival,” Silica said, amused. “They really did look like two parents with their daughter there.”

All of them chuckled. Despite her not getting quite what she wanted after breaking free, Yui did get a family out of it. All of them saw her as something of a little sister, and they would occasionally tease Asuna and Kirito on it due to how Yui did look like how a child between the two of them would possibly look.

The flustered looks on their faces were worth a few laughs, though the two of them were used to it by now. Well, that and how they did start seeming to fill a parental role for Yui in their own way. And how their relationship was deepening...

“You think we’ll still be in here long enough for those two to stop beating around the bush about things?” Lux asked, wading up to them. “I mean, they did go on that date a few days ago.”

“They going on a date isn’t an indication that they’ve reached a new level in their relationship,” Rain said. “This isn’t a Dating Sim, though it’s rather obvious that they’re sweet on each other. Much like how Harry and Silica were early on, if the stories I heard are anything to go on.”
“If they do, then they do,” Harry said. “Just because we can see it coming if we’re in here too much longer doesn’t mean that they do.”

“Much like with you and Silica?” Strea asked.

Silica chuckled, and saw her husband nod in response to Strea’s question. Everyone who knew them had told them upfront that they had seen it coming, the spur of the moment nature of the two of them deciding to marry aside.

##

Kirito had a small smile on his as he watched Asuna and Yui play in the cool waters of the Frigidarium from the bench he was lounging on. The childlike AI was taking the opportunity to play with him and Asuna as if the two of them were her actual parents. Granted, her entire reason for seeking the two of them out was to learn what family was like, and he idly wondered if what she ended up getting was close enough to what she wanted.

She did have a family in the form of Steel Phoenix as a whole, after all. More as a little sister for them, than as a daughter, but it was still a family. One by choice, rather than by blood ties.

“Kirito, come on in!” Yui called to him. “The water’s fine!”

Chuckling, Kirito stood and took the robe he was wearing off before getting into the pool. The nature of this bathhouse allowed for them all to sit back, relax, and play around for a change. And with what they all knew was probably coming, it was best that they enjoy moments like this as much as they could and take it easy.

Because it will stop being easy soon enough. After all, if SAO stayed true to form, the boss for the floor was going to be a brutal one.

**November 26, 2024 - Aincrad 75th Floor, Therana Caves**

Kuradeel looked over the victory screen for the results of the fight and nodded. He and his party had stumbled on this place less than half an hour ago, and he was glad they did. The experience and col rewards were considerably higher here than the average for the rest of the floor so far mapped, making this more like the Ant Hill field dungeon save for the fact that the mobs were commensurately stronger. Nothing beyond their abilities, of course, but this place was a marked increase in risk.

But even with that taken into account, being here would speed up grinding quite nicely, and unless someone else found the place within the last few days, he and his group would be able to monopolize the place for a short while before making it public. Hoarding information on places that were lucrative for grinding experience and col was highly frowned upon, but the discovering group didn’t have to make it public immediately, so long as they did so within a few days.

Not that it stopped anyone else from finding the place and wandering in to see what was there, but it kept the place from being immediately flooded by others. And a place as lucrative as this would be flooded until a system was worked out, or something like what had been established with Ant Hill was forced on them all.

The fact that it would allow them to provide plenty of information about the place and be credited for it was a bonus. If someone else hadn’t already found the place and was doing the same.

He heard some voices down the cave and frowned. From the sounds and the way they were getting subtly louder and the pitch of them was increasing, whomever was inside was on its way out. It
looked like his group wasn’t the first to find the place. A pity, but perhaps he could negotiate when the information was made public.

A few hours in here would easily get him and the others to go up a level, and not having to compete with a bunch of others would make that go much more smoothly.

##

“Glad we found this place a couple of days ago,” Strea said, her eyes scanning down a branching path. “But you know someone must have found this place as well by now, if not before us.”

Harry hummed in agreement, looking down another branching path.

“That it’s not public means that it’s not well known yet, though,” Rain said. “And we haven’t seen anyone else in here any time we came, so it hasn’t been made public yet. Can’t blame them, really. A potential few days with a prime grinding spot like this? You don’t get opportunities like this every day.”

“And we’ve mapped the entire place now,” Silica said. “So if no one has made it public by the end of the day, they’ll have a lot of info provided. A map, trap locations, other dangers, and mob info. If they want the best grinding spots for them or their group, they’ll either have to find them on their own, or ask someone who’s been there.”

“Why?” Strea asked curiously.

“Because the best spots for grinding depend on the group,” Asuna said, walking up. “Even without knowing the best spots for grinding, or at least efficient grinding, this place is going to be in high demand once the information is made public. And if it’s not made public by the end of the day, we’ll be making it public anyway. We’ve had a couple of days, and as you said, we have had it apparently to ourselves for a couple of days.”

“As it is, what we’re giving out is the important stuff to ensure that someone doesn’t get him or herself killed because of something he or she didn’t know about.” Harry said. “We’ve mapped this place and know where any danger spots are, as well as plenty of other information, so any need to keep it to-- looks like someone else is here.” He rested his hand on the pommel of his sword.

“There’s five of them,” Kirito said, looking down the passage in front of them. “I’m not getting any hostile intent, but they know we’re here.”

Strea watched as Asuna stepped forward, her hand on the hilt of her rapier. “We know you’re there,” she said. “Come on out.”

“Easy there,” Kuradeel said as he walked around a bend in the passage with five other members of his guild. “We heard you approaching, and I decided to wait so I can get any map data you’re willing to share about the place.”

Strea watched as Asuna pulled up her map. “Fair enough,” she said. “The place is fairly large so it’s easy to get lost in. Not too many traps, but we have the ones that are here marked.” She selected a few options on it. “Ready to receive?”

Kuradeel nodded and Asuna transferred the data. “We’re going to make the information public in a few hours,” she said. “But this will give you and your boys a little time to do some grinding on your own without interference.”

Kuradeel nodded and looked over the map and other information before transferring it to others in his
It’s no problem,” Asuna replied. “I recommend that you take advantage of this, because when this is
made public, that recommendation is going out. We’re going to need the advantage that this provides
for grinding.”

“You’re expecting something to happen,” Kuradeel said and then nodded. “With this being the
seventy-fifth floor, you’re worried that this will be like the Twenty-Fifth and like the boss on the
fiftieth floor. Harder and more dangerous than usual.”

“Better to be prepared for something that might not happen,” Asuna said, though she made sure her
tone indicated that she fully believed that something would happen.

December 7, 2024 - Aincrad 55th Floor, Grandzam

“Odd for you to call us all in for a meeting here of all places,” Hadrian said to Heathcliff as he
entered the meeting room.

“Hadrian,” Asuna said warningly.

“It is unusual,” Harry said to her. “Usually we all just meet up on whatever floor the Assault Team is
on, so this is outside of what usually happens.” He looked around, seeing several others present.
“And it’s not like I’m the only one who has that sentiment.”

Asuna fingered the bridge of her nose and shook her head, muttering that she should have brought
Kirito or one of the others with her. Heathcliff knew that it was most likely an act on her part, with
Harry being the one who would forego the full diplomacy, while Asuna remained diplomatic in the
exchange.

Besides, it was unusual for him to call a meeting like this in his guild’s headquarters. On the other
hand, given the information he received, as if he didn’t already know the moment it happened,
instead of how he would be passing it on.

He still had a role to play, even if he would be dropping it soon, and that meant passing information
on, and calling for meetings like this to share what he learned through sources that can be validated.
And the moment they heard what he had to tell them, they and the others who had been called in
would understand why he was calling it here, rather than setting up a meeting in Collinia. And he
would play that role, and besides, something like this needed to be disseminated to a wider audience
than just those who would be planning a boss fight, which was why he had asked several mid-level
guild leaders and even a few who remained on the lower levels to come.

He waited a few more minutes for the remaining ones he called for to arrive. “Thank you all for
coming, and on such short notice,” he said. “Please, everyone, take a seat. I have some important
information that came to me, and it is something that you all should know.”

“I figured that,” Klein said. “But why call the meeting here, rather than send a message out to have
us all meet in Collinia? That’s what’s normally done.”

Heathcliff nodded. “True,” he said. “But the risk of this being overheard, and potentially causing a
panic, mandates a certain degree of privacy, at least while we discuss it. After this, I want this spread
as far and wide as practicable, which is why Argo is here openly, rather than her sneaking in here
and watching from the shadows.”

“You want us to get the right information rather than hearsay that might be incorrect,” Asuna said
with a nod and then gave him a sharp gaze. “Which means something happened. How bad was it?”
She asked, the pitch and tone of her voice changing to what some players joked was her “Princess Mode” due to her obviously high social status and her leadership ability.

“It was bad enough,” Heathcliff said. “Earlier today, a scouting group of twenty made up of members from multiple guilds found the boss room. They decided to take a look, if only so we would know what we would be fighting, and it went horribly wrong. Ten of them went in, leaving the other half outside the room to act as a backup group if extricating those who went in was necessary. Unfortunately, they would not get an opportunity, as the doors closed on their own, meaning that no one could go in, or leave.”

“And if we use the last boss as an example of what to expect, then the boss room with be an anti-crystal area,” Hadrian said grimly. “I take it that none of them made it out?”

Heathcliff nodded. “None of them,” he said. “When the doors could be opened again about fifteen minutes later, there was no one in the room, and the boss couldn’t be seen.”

“Shit,” Klein said. “That means we lost ten people in fifteen minutes. And if they were a scouting group, they would have been as well geared as those who fight the floor bosses. Hell, a scouting raid has killed a couple of them. Fuck.”

“It’s a trap,” Lind said, adding in his two col. “Not that the boss can’t be beaten, but that we’re lured in because it’s something we can’t ignore. Not ‘easy’ treasure, but because that’s the only way to the next floor. I’m not usually privy to these meetings, but I can see why you called in even those of us not on the Assault Team. This will get out, grow in the telling like a game of Chinese Whispers and cause a possible panic. The few groups of Reds who are still active and not still keeping their heads down would take advantage of this.”

“Yeah,” Kibaou agreed. “As much as I don’t like him.” He pointed at Lind. “He’s right, this is something that needs to get out, but in a way that keeps it from causing a panic.”

“Controlled dissemination,” Thinker agreed. “We know it, and we can pool resources so that Argo disseminates this for free, rather than charge to confirm the rumors, or to set the askers straight.”

“I wouldn’t charge for this,” Argo disagreed, speaking up and without her usual insouciance. “The fact that I was actually invited to a meeting, rather than me being a Rat in the Walls, should tell you how serious this is.” She then looked at Heathcliff with a narrowed gaze. “Still, ten dead in fifteen minutes, and all of them probably geared with Gilbrean and Reinhard made gear, or at least drops from that field boss on the sixty-ninth floor, that’s not good.”

“Did any of them manage to get a message out?” Hadrian asked quietly. “Things like the strength of the boss, not that we can’t already tell, but attack patterns and perhaps other observations?”

Heathcliff nodded. “One of them managed to inform those who were still outside the room,” he said. “It wasn’t much, but he sent enough for us to get an idea. The boss is called the Skull Reaper, and it starts the battle with an ambush from the ceiling. It has five health bars, hits hard, two of them were killed within thirty seconds, has a high defense. It can also use its many legs and its tail as weapons. He also said that it, due to how it looked, it was probably inspired by legends of a specific youkai, a Gashadokuro to be specific. Sadly, he sent no reports after that, so we must assume the worst.” He paused as many of those present swore, both with some anger, and more than a little fear.

A fear he could understand, given that the legends about them and their nigh-invulnerable status. Little short of the gods themselves could even harm it, let alone kill it. Unlike a Gashadokuro, however, the Skull Reaper was killable, though, if with great effort. But given what he was planning, this all worked for his intentions.
“I don’t know what a Gasho... Gashu... whatever, but I take it such is bad news,” Hadrian said. “And hard to kill at best.”

“Try impossible,” Klein said. “Legends say you can ward areas to keep them out, but I don’t know of any legends which speak of someone killing one. Only warding them off until the malice that makes them up disperses naturally.”

“But not here,” Hadrian said. “Remember, for all that we have reason to hate him for trapping us in here, Kayaba is at least fair, for a given definition of ‘fair’. He wouldn’t force us to fight something impossible to kill without a way to get out.” He looked at Heathcliff. “How big?”

“Big enough that even your Earth Wall might not be tall enough, and from the information I received, it might be long enough to be able to move around it quickly.” Heathcliff responded.

“So we have something with high attack, high defense, and its size is going to be a problem,” Hadrian said, his brow furrowed in thought. “We need to find a way to pin it in place, but…”

“That’s the hard part,” Heathcliff agreed. “Its entire body is a weapon for it to use.”

“The fight is an endurance fight,” Hadrian said. “High health, high attack, and high defense. Nothing mentioned requires much in the way of special or outside-the-box tactics, but we have to be ready to do so. And it’s there to serve as a warning to us as well. It is telling us that we have a higher chance of dying after this point.” His eyes hardened. “We need to make sure that everyone has the best gear, and is fully stocked on potions. Maybe getting ahold of items to hold more if they haven’t done so already.” He looked at Asuna.

Asuna nodded. “We need to spread out, but not to the point where everyone is too far from a tank,” she said. “I don’t know, and Heathcliff hasn’t said anything about it, but we should probably have our strongest tanks up front to defend against what are probably its most damaging attacks. Tower shields are probably best for those tanking the front. The rest of the tanks need to be ready to move and defend from many angles, so kite shield using tanks are probably best. They’re more maneuverable. Now…”

Heathcliff listened as Asuna began to outline a plan and the recommended raid composition before opening it up to others for their recommendations.

**Aincrad 48th Floor, Lindarth**

Lisbeth put the hammer down and looked at the blade she had forged with a critical eye. “It’s good enough, I guess,” she said to herself as she brought up the weapon’s stats. Checking them over, she nodded and closed the status window. It wasn’t her best quality weapon, but it met her quality standards.

Good enough for selling, rather than scrapping and recycling the mats to make new one. She heard the bell she had to alert her to a customer. “I’ll be out in a moment!” She called out as she took off the heavy leather apron she often wore when forging weapons. She walked out of her workshop and saw Steel Phoenix all present.

“It’s been awhile,” she said with a smile, which faded as she saw the grim expressions on their faces. “Something happen?”

“Argo will be spreading the info soon,” Asuna said. “But… we found the boss room on the seventy-fifth floor.”
“That’s good, right?” Lisbeth asked. “I mean, the next step on the path to getting out of here is in reach.”

“The scouting group which found that room sent half of their members in,” Asuna’s voice got quiet. “They ended up trapped in there due to it being an anti-crystal area and the door closing and sealing itself after their entered. Ten people are now dead, Liz.”

Lisbeth sucked in a breath and looked at everyone present. “And we have to kill that thing?” She asked in horror. “Please tell me you all aren’t…”

“We are,” Kirito said. “We’re among the best that could go in. We have the best chance to getting through it.”

“This thing’s going to be tough, like the field boss on the sixty-ninth floor,” Asuna said. “At least, that’s what the general consensus is. At least we’re geared and equipped for this, and we’re not going in blind. Those ten people… they were still able to get some information, so we know what we’re getting into, but…”

Kirito reached out and put a hand on her shoulder, allowing her to regain her equilibrium. “It’s going to be bad, but you know us” he said with a wan smile. “We won’t just let someone else take our place. We have a chance, but someone else? If they died… none of us would be able to forgive ourselves, even if no one would blame us for not wanting to be in on this fight.”

“So,” Silica said, speaking up. “Are you up for what might be the last job you do for us and make sure our gear is fully repaired?”

Lisbeth looked at them all and saw the determined looks on their faces. They knew that they could die, and it wasn’t on an intellectual level. This next fight would be them courting death and dancing with it, and they were still determined to do it. She took a breath and then nodded.

They had been good friends and customers, only going to someone else when she knew she didn’t have the skills to do a job for them. And they went to those who she recommended, even saying it. She might not yet be able to make gear of the quality that Gilbrean and Reinhard did for them, let alone enhance said gear, but she could repair it.

And as they walked toward the Teleport Gate, she watched them go with a smile as brittle as glass before she closed up her shop for the day and went through her storage for a bottle of wine she had been saving for a special occasion. Pouring herself a generous helping, she gave a toast to the air and drank it.

She didn’t do anything about the tears that started to go down her cheeks as she poured herself another glass and drank it.

Aincrad, 75th Floor, Labyrinth

Kirito waited for the rest of the players to arrive courtesy of the corridor crystal Heathcliff used and looked at the doors to the boss room. It wasn’t anything different from what he had seen before, but the knowledge of what was waiting for them all behind it gave the doors a more menacing feel.

This wouldn’t be like the terror borne from surprise that was the field boss for the sixty-ninth floor. That had caught everyone off guard, including Heathcliff, but they had prevailed. But still, the knowledge of what was waiting for them all made the fear that always lurked under the surface before a boss fight roil. The anticipation of what was to come, the knowledge of just what they were all courting… he knew why they all decided to not wait a day and do it tomorrow.
Waiting would just give the fear more time to build. Fear was something they were used to, any sane, or at least relatively sane, player felt some fear every time they left any safe zone. Getting surprised by something was a spike of terror and bad enough, but it was another kind of fear that they were familiar enough with to know how to deal with. But letting it build… he could see how it could be worse.

“God, I haven’t felt fear like this since I was twelve,” Harry said quietly. “I knew I was walking into something dangerous, even if I didn’t know exactly what it was, and as I approached it, the fear was slowly building. Damn near died that day.”

“One of those stories you didn’t go into detail about?” Kirito asked, just as quietly.

“You guys never asked,” Harry said. “And I didn’t feel like talking about it, but this… I have a feeling that we’re about to face something like that.”

“That bad?” Silica asked, coming up alongside her husband.

Harry nodded, the tension in his body that was a reflection of the fear he felt clearly visible.

Heathcliff then stepped up to the front of the group.

“Everyone,” he began. “You know the dangers about to be faced. You know what waits beyond this door. But in that knowledge, we are not going into this danger blind. You will show Kayaba that he can’t simply scare you like little children. You have prepared for the coming fight, and will go once more into the breach. And in doing so, you will show Kayaba your courage and your refusal to bow to your fears. So now, you will march onward, to victory and freedom!”

Kirito narrowed his eyes at Heathcliff’s choice of words, wondering about them. Not once did he refer to the entire group in a way that… Oh, you son of a bitch, he thought.

“You caught it too?” Asuna asked quietly.

Kirito nodded and Heathcliff, no Kayaba’s eyes met his. The man nodded and then turned to the door to open it.

##

Kayaba heard the doors shut on their own, locking everyone in. He could hear the shifting of the players, the creaking of their armor as they looked around for a boss that they expected to leap out at them.

“Don’t just look to the sides,” he heard Hadrian call out. “Look u- oh bloody hell.”

“My tak trakhayemsya.” He heard Rain say in Russian, probably echoing Hadrian’s words.

He understood the sentiment as he looked up and saw it begin the opening part of the battle. It had been designed to be terrifying, and it was doing the job. And if that didn’t do the trick, then what he was about to do would.

All to build the right atmosphere.

As the Skull Reaper dropped down from the ceiling to the center of the platform that the battle was to happen on, he opened his menu and keyed a specific macro he had worked out, causing it to freeze in place, one of its arms raised to strike. He could hear the confusion by everyone else and gave a small smile.
“Sorry,” he said, pitching his voice to carry. “But you’re not needed any more. Administrator override, terminate process for Unit ID - 61159, Designation: Skull Reaper.” The ordered command caused the Skull Reaper to vanish. No shattering into polygons, just vanish.

“Oh, you have gotta-- I was hoping I wasn’t right,” he heard Klein say.

“It was the tournament, wasn’t it?” He asked as he turned to face everyone. “That was a bit obvious, granted, but what happened was something that shouldn’t have. If it was an expected part of the operation of this, I would have let it be, but when things go wrong in the system, I can’t simply ignore it. But before I continue this...” He selected a macro to lock the players in their positions.

He then looked at everyone. “I’m curious, how many of you suspected? It’s a moot point, but I do wonder. I have slipped up before, and some have figured me out because of it. Isn’t that right, Steel Phoenix?”

“And you made it so we couldn’t spread it,” Hadrian said. “Not unexpected, though I don’t doubt a few had figured it out, or at least suspected it, from the few tidbits we could sneak out. We were just the only ones to confront you about it.”

“And you all agreed to play by my rules, if in your own way,” Kayaba noted. “In your own way, perhaps, but you would play by my rules. I know you were all looking for an excuse to expose me since.”

“And you were careful to not slip up in the ways that got us to put it together since,” Kirito said. “Though the boss for this floor probably would have forced you to use your GM and admin privileges to maintain your reputation.”

“Probably,” Kayaba acknowledged. “This floor’s boss was at the top of my list of bosses that would force such a situation before I planned it for the ninetieth floor. But alas, events have conspired to make that not happen. Not from your efforts, but from other things.”

“So you decided to do so on your own terms,” Asuna concluded.

“I decided to do so because if things kept apace as they were, I couldn’t guarantee that the system would remain stable enough for long enough for things to go as they should have,” Kayaba corrected. He saw the shocked looks on everyone’s faces at his admission. “This system has been running constantly for two years with no shutdowns for maintenance purposes. I made it as robust as I could, but there was an event that accelerated things as they were. Remember the Glitchzone and how it was quarantined? That was because of data that was corrupted by someone who was in charge of ensuring that the servers kept running, as well as looking for a way to get you out. That man is now in prison, as the people who are in charge of him did not like what he did. He risked seven thousand lives with that, one of whom was his boss’ daughter. Not that he didn’t have plenty of other causes to fire the man, considering the things he was also doing, but I digress. The damage was worse than you know, and while I managed to fix it, it accelerated things, forcing this.” He sighed. “A pity, but better to end this.

“There is only one requirement to escape the game, clear it. Once it is cleared by someone, everyone trapped in here will be freed. That was what I told you on the first day. And that means you have to defeat the final boss, me. I am subject to the same Death Game rules you all are, so freedom requires my death. I would have explained this had things gone as planned, and I am explaining this now. If you want your freedom, for yourselves and everyone else, you have to kill me. I am the villain of this story, of your stories, and the hero needs to defeat the villain.”

“But… why did you do all this?” He heard someone ask.
“A dream,” he said. “One which I went too far in making a reality. Do the details really matter to you? Not really, but I might as well tell you. I once desired to be the hero of my own story, once which took place in a steel castle in the sky, a world where one could live that story. As I grew, I saw a way to make it that dream a reality, and desired to share it with others. To live in a place where you are the hero of your own stories. But in doing so, I went too far, and became the villain by trapping you all in here, and making it so that death here means death in the real world. But since I did this, I would live by the same rules you did. It is the least I deserve for what I did.”

“You deserve far more than that you son of a bitch!” Someone shouted, to considerable agreement.

“Indeed, I do,” he acknowledged with a nod. “But we can debate what fate I deserve all we want and waste your time. But that wouldn’t get you any closer to your freedom. So, let’s finish this, but in a more appropriate location.” He selected a command he hadn’t used since SAO began, and everyone present was blinded as the forced teleport sent them to where he wanted them. He knew the ones whom he wanted to fight and defeat him, so they would go to the endgame.

Everyone else would be teleported back to the Town of Beginnings, and they would be allowed to watch. He had to hand it to that one man in RECT, he never thought of making it so that something inside SAO could be broadcast and watched inside the game.

Ah well, he couldn’t think of everything. He triggered his own teleport.

It was time to end this.
Battle at the Top of the World

Chapter Notes

Did a bit of a revision on it, as after posting, I saw that it had flaws that needed fixing.

December 7, 2024 - Aincrad 1st Floor, Town of Beginnings

Argo blinked the spots out of her eyes as the glow of the teleport faded and looked around. A teleport? She thought as she saw that she was in the central plaza before the Black Iron Palace.

“Boss!” She heard Gus call out.

She turned to see him jogging up to where she was. “Talk to me, Gus,” she said. “What the hell happened?”

“Well, we’re here, and it was a teleport, so I can guess,” Gus said and looked around. “Looks like all the surviving players are here.”

“Oh, that son of a bitch!” She heard a familiar voice say. “The bastard teleported us here? Guys, we need to find Kirito and the others, make sure they’re okay.”

“Klein!” Argo called, waving him over when she got his attention. “What happened?” She asked. “I thought you guys were facing the boss on the seventy-fifth floor.”

“What happened was that instead of fighting the boss, Kayaba outed himself,” Klein said. “That tournament, and how fast he reacted to Kuradeel, I suspected something was up, but… I hoped that wasn’t the case.”

“So he outed himself,” Argo said. “That’s unexpected. I would have thought that Kii-bou or Harry would have done so, they’ve been chomping at the bit to do so for months.”

“Hey, Argo!” Someone else called. “You know what’s going on?”

“Gus, run interference and tell people that we’re still trying to figure it out,” she ordered before turning her attention back to Klein. “Don’t look at me like that, Klein. You expect me to have not figured it out eventually? I figured it out in September.”

“That recently?” Klein asked. “You must be losing your touch.”

“You want me to set you on fire?” Argo asked dangerously.

##

Yui looked around at all the players standing around in the plaza, wondering what was going on, and she mentally echoed the sentiment. She saw a message from CARDINAL flash across her vision, explaining that things were about to come to a conclusion, and that those she was normally with were now elsewhere to confront Kayaba. She frowned at that and realized what it meant, especially if what she picked up from the context of CARDINAL’s message was true.
SAO was about to come to an end. She went down the list of what she and Strea had worked on for this event to preserve their own existences, as there was no way that Outside would let the servers remain on, and may just delete them. She hoped it wasn’t necessary, but her observations of the players before and after her escape had shown her the value of having plans.

She spied a familiar profile, Klein’s, and walked in that direction. Klein might know what happened to cause this to happen. He was with them when they all went to face the floor boss on the seventy-fifth floor, after all.

**Aincrad, 100th Floor, Ruby Palace**

Asuna looked at everyone present, now that they got their bearings. *A forced teleport,* she thought as she looked around. *Where are we?*

“Quite the place he sent us to,” she heard Harry comment. “Think he’s trying to say something?”

“Harry,” Silica said. “Look out the window.”

Asuna did as well, wondering what it was that Silica noted. There were clouds, the sun was high in the sky, and… wait a minute. She glanced at the time in her HUD, noting that it was mid-afternoon. The sun should have been obscured by the floor above for a few more hours, even if it didn’t affect the ambient lighting.

“I don’t see what you’re seeing,” Harry said. “There’s the sky, the clouds are a bit higher than normal, the sun and… wait. Clouds I can understand, but wouldn’t the… sky… okay, where the hell in Aincrad are we?”

“No way,” Kirito said. “He… teleported us to the top floor.”

“Indeed,” they heard Kayaba say. They all turned to see him standing at the other end of the hall they were in, next to a throne. “This is a more appropriate venue, and where all this was intended to end.”

Harry took a few steps forward before his momentum was halted by a barrier.

“Don’t worry, the field keeping you all there will be lifted shortly,” Kayaba said. “But first, I have to address some people.” He input some commands into his menu, bringing screens up showing them masses of players. “Good afternoon,” he said. “It has been twenty-five months since I last addressed you in this capacity. Twenty-five months since SAO began. I am Commander Heathcliff, but more importantly to you, I am also Akihiko Kayaba.”

“Oh bloody hell, he’s going to monologue,” she heard Harry mutter quietly. “Of all the villain clichés…”

**Aincrad 1st Floor, Town of Beginnings**

Lisbeth stared at the window that appeared in the sky in shock. *Heathcliff, he’s Kayaba?* She thought incredulously.

“As of today, I have decided to end the charade that I have been maintaining,” Kayaba said. “There are reasons I am doing so. Reasons that are through no fault or actions of yours, but from things out of everyone’s control. Those who were present when I exposed myself know why, I cannot guarantee that the game will be able to last long enough for you to reach the top floor.

“I am addressing you now to inform you that, after the events you are about to watch, if they end in my favor, passage to the top floor will be open. You will have your chance to take me on, defeat me,
and clear the game. The path to your and everyone else’s freedom will be opened. If, the events you
are about to witness end in my favor.”

What was displayed on the screen shifted, showing an opulent hall of some sort, and Lisbeth hitched
a breath as she saw her friends, who were glaring at the “camera” and fingerling their weapons, but it
was more likely that they were glaring Kayaba.

“Damn, I suspected that it was possible that he was Kayaba,” she heard someone say. She turned
and saw Agil looking at the screen with a grim look on his face. “And he’s letting Kirito and the
others have first crack at him. Makes sense, they’ve known for a while, though he made it so that
they couldn’t spread that word.”

“Wait,” she said. “They knew? You know for how long?”

“Since July if I recall,” Agil said, turning to her. “There was a bit that they were able to let slip,
though nothing direct, and it was no secret that a lot of people believed that Kayaba was among us,
playing SAO, as well. The question was who. And Liz, how has business been?”

“Good enough, Agil, and they,” she indicated the screen. “Were my last customers for the day. The
way they talked when they were there, it gave me a feeling that something was going to happen, so I
closed up shop.”

“It gave you a feeling? How so?”

She closed her eyes, paying no mind to Kayaba’s continued address. “Because when they left, they
had this air of not being sure that they would be alive by the end of the day,” she said. “We all risk
dying when we leave safe zones, but we’re also confident that we will come back alive. They…
didn’t have that confidence, but were determined to face whatever came.”

“That sounds like them.” Agil said and then chuckled. “And it looks like Harry is losing his patience.
Then again, Kayaba is now going on about how all of this is to make us the heroes of our own
stories in a way that sounds like it came from a bad anime.”

Aincrad 100th Floor, Ruby Palace

“Good God, are you still going on about us being heroes of our own stories?” Harry asked
cautically, interrupting Kayaba.

“Pardon?” Kayaba asked, turning his attention to them and meeting their smoldering gazes.

“I can see wanting to share a story, even make it so that we can, in some way, live it,” Harry said.
“Hell, just having something like this?” He gestured around. “Just us being here alone is doing that.
I’ve asked you this before, and I’ll ask it again. Why? Why go to the lengths you have? You didn’t
have to trap us all here and make it a death game to do that. And heroes?” He laughed bitterly.
“What is a hero?”

“I don’t see where you’re going with this,” Kayaba said calmly.

“Back Outside, people in England saw me as a hero for simply surviving a terrorist attack,” Harry
said. “What happened to him wasn’t me, it was my parents, who died stopping him. And yet, what
they did in holding him off and their efforts in stopping him were ignored. Instead, they focused on
me, and call me the hero that defeated him. I was fifteen months old at the time, how could I have
done that?” He snorted derisively. “I wasn’t a hero, I was a fucking symbol. None of them knew me,
and they wrote stories about some supposed exploits. They used my name to write fiction, and didn’t
pay me a damn thing, or at least ask me if they could. It caused my status to grow in people’s eyes, and mislead an entire generation of my peers into seeing me as someone akin to a certain carpenter from Judea.

“They called me a hero. They put me on a pedestal. And every bloody time I act in a way that doesn’t conform to their image of me... you know, me trying to act like a kid? Albeit one who was raised in a loveless and borderline abusive environment by relatives. My aunt and uncle don’t deserve the designation of family… But everyone else? They would try and get me to act how they think I should act. Like how they think a hero should act. They didn’t know me, and I spent two years trying to actually get people to know me. To see me as someone who is human. Being a hero? I’m no hero, I’m a survivor.”

“Harry, that’s enough.” Asuna said firmly. She looked at the man who trapped them all in here two years ago. “You have no place to lecture people about how they can heroes, Kayaba.” She said. “You know it, we know it, everyone knows it.”

**Aincrad 1st Floor, Town of Beginnings**

“He laid it on a bit thick,” Gus said. “But he does have a point. And unlike most, he knows full well what it means to be called a ‘hero’. All of us back home know about him, but some of what I’ve hear is being written about him is… Well, some of it’s good and entertaining, but most? It’s forgettable at best. Sturgeon’s Law and all that. I mean, a fifteen month old baby being credited with defeating a terrorist? Would make for nice plot for a children’s book. You know, fiction.”

“Well, he did kill the guy earlier this year.” Argo noted. “Admittedly, that guy hacked into here to kill him, so it was self-defense.”

“And we still don’t know the full story behind a couple of other incidents, incidents which involved him,” Gus said. “We didn’t ask for more information. But given who was involved…”

“Yeah,” Argo said with a sigh. “Klein, are yo- where did he go?”

“He saw someone trying to get his attention and went to see what was up,” Gus said. “Typical Bro, really.”

“You know who it was?”

“Didn’t hear them clearly enough with the racket everyone here was raising right then,” Gus admitted and looked around. “Oh, there he is, he’s coming this way, and it looks like he has Yui with him.”

“Yui?” Argo asked. “She’s here?”

“She’s not a fighter, boss.” Gus noted.

“I know that, Gus,” she said. “But with the rest of Steel Phoenix up there, I would have thought that she would have been brought up there with them. You know, keep the group together, have them face him like how it is done in so many video games?”

“He’s not playing exactly to conventions then,” Gus said drily.

“Who’s not playing to convention?” Klein asked as he walked up with Yui in tow.

“Oh, you know,” Gus said, pointing at the screens. “Big Bad Fuckity McFuckstain up there. Harry called him out on his… method for explaining his reasons.”
“But isn’t it convention for the villain to monologue?”

“But he should do so in front of the entire group, and Yui isn’t there.” Argo said, nodding to the childlike AI. “Then again, she doesn’t go out to fight, and just wanders towns and gathers information.”

“I also talk to players,” Yui piped up and showed that she was a member of Steel Phoenix, non-combatant status notwithstanding, when she smirked at Argo. “And you’re jealous that I get a lot of info on those floors sooner than you do.”

“Brat,” Argo said with some fondness as she ruffled Yui’s hair, much to the AI’s protestations. She then looked at the others. “And yet, after Harry and Asuna, they’re all telling him how full of shit he is.”

Gus shrugged. “When they win and we get out of here,” he said as he looked at Yui. “We can then tease them about them following conventions after calling the bad guy out on his following convention.”

“If they don’t admit that they’re doing the same thing,” Klein said with a smirk.

Aincrad 100th Floor, Ruby Palace

“They’ve all raised some points,” Kirito said after the others had their turns, though Strea’s was rather uninspired with her just calling him a delusional man with a god complex who knows that he is no closer to apotheosis than when this entire mess started.

“And are you about to call me out for following convention as well?” Kayaba asked. “A little hypocritical, isn’t it? That you all are calling me out for doing the same thing that you are doing right now?”

Kirito shrugged and then smirked. “What’s a little hypocrisy between enemies?” He asked flippantly. “Besides, it’s not like you allowed us to just try and skip all of this and get to it. Though how much of this is you actually following conventions, and how much of this is you telling people the situation up front is up to debate. Maybe a bit of both?”

Kayaba laughed. “Maybe it is, Kirito. Maybe it is.” His gaze then sharpened. “I do hope you’re all prepared, though. You’ve had the time to make sure. So let me tell you something.” He smiled coldly as he input some commands through his menu and disabled his GM safety nets. “I am the final boss, but this isn’t the avatar you will be fighting, but what had been marketed as the final boss. A boss that is under my control, with my health tied to it.” He input some more commands. “So then…” His eyes began to glow. “Let’s begin this, shall we?”

His body lifted off the floor and began to change, to mutate. He grew taller, gaunter… almost skeletally so, but his profile still broadened to ensure his dimensions remained within human proportions. His armor began to shift in appearance, replacing the practical and clean lines with spikes at the shoulders and harsher lines that were more ragged. Its color darkened, changing from the crimson and silver to a uniform red the color of dried blood, giving it a more menacing air that the simple change in how it looked could manage. And through it all, they heard the sound of breathing getting increasingly deeper.

Kayaba’s sword and shield disappeared to be replaced by a longer blade that looked more fantastical than practical, with a crossguard that split into four uniform spikes, with a spiked ball for a pommel. The blade itself was mottled, going between the silvered sheen of clean metal and a patina that spoke of corruption in a non-uniform fashion. It was as if the weapon itself was diseased.
“Well, this brings back memories,” Harry said flatly.

Kirito looked at his younger friend, who was looking at Kayaba with narrowed eyes.

“New Year’s?” Silica asked.

Harry nodded, and Kirito understood, even without further details having been given since. While he knew that the person who had come in, with the public story of it being a hacker who hacked into the game for the purposes of killing Harry, had been turned into an event boss by Kayaba, he could see how Harry could see the similarities.

He saw the health bars come up and noted the name, The False Hero. It was an appropriately fitting name and title rolled into one. He idly wondered what those Outside are thinking about this if they are watching until he pushed those thoughts out of his mind.

“I have done all of this to turn you into heroes,” Kayaba said, his now deep voice reverberating throughout the entire throne room. “To make the normal into the extraordinary, and that the kernel of being a hero is in all… Now, show me!” He swung his sword and the barrier that kept them all from attacking him shattered.

Kirito tightened the grip on his swords and charged, with the others following him an instant later.

**Nerima - Saotome-Tendo Dojo**

Ranma had dismissed his students only a moment ago when one of them ran back into the dojo, holding a cell phone.

“Shishou!” He called. “I just got a message from my little sister! Kayaba’s in the game and is now being fought by Steel Phoenix!” He held up the cell phone, the screen facing his teacher so he could read the message.

*Bro, Heath identified as Kayaba. Keiko and SP fighting him! Tell your sensei!*

Ranma looked at the message sent and frowned a bit before his eyes widened at what it meant. “Keizo, thank you.” He said as turned to make his way to the house proper. “I have to make some calls and get to Nakano General Hospital. Thank your sister for me. No, for us, for letting you know and having you tell us.”

Keizo nodded and Ranma watched him run out. His student’s sister had been a friend of Keiko’s before SAO, and he heard that she watched the feeds whenever she could. The girl wasn’t interested in martial arts like her brother was, but the fact that at least one of Keiko’s friends had been watching warmed his heart.

Now, he had to tell Akane and his sons, if Sumire hadn’t already called them to let them know. His eldest often spent Saturday afternoons at Nakano General Hospital, just being there for Keiko, spending as much time with her daughter as she could, even if said daughter wouldn’t know until she got freed from SAO.

**Aincrad, 100th Floor, Ruby Palace**

Rain jumped back to avoid another slash by Kayaba, her longsword staying at the ready. The moment he turned his attention to Harry, who smoothly flowed around another attack, his sword glowing the blue of his Water Affinity, she dated in and slashed him across his hamstring. Not that it would be a disabling injury, but the hit and run tactics they were using were slowly wearing him
She took a quick glance at his health, stepping into the arc of a slash and letting it pass over her head, if only barely before backing off. His health was now about halfway down, and the only reason this tactic was working was due to him having seven opponents. Not that it meant that it was working smoothly, as both they all had to back off and heal before inserting themselves back into the fight often enough that the risk of running out of healing items was a very real one.

His large size and using a different weapon from what was the norm for him was working against him, allowing to exploit vulnerabilities in his skill due to him not being used to what he had now. But that didn’t give them much of an advantage, it only meant that they had that more of a chance. They had all speculated on his skills, noting that any GM protections and advantages he had were probably insurance to ensure that he wasn’t killed in battle, rather than to cover for any lack of skill. And he was proving that to them.

His clear unfamiliarity with his new form was the only thing that was working in their favor. His strikes were still precise and his movements were still fluid. But his using a size larger than he was used to was slowing him down just that little bit to allow their current tactics to work.

If he had kept his Heathcliff avatar’s form and equipment, fighting him would have been much harder. He really was that skilled, and was adapting to his new form. They couldn’t use any attacks that did any significant damage, as he would mercilessly exploit a post-motion lockup, no matter how brief, to deliver a punishing attack, as each of them found out at least once, though Asuna had almost managed to dodge the attack.

Their armor was proving its worth in this fight, allowing them to survive taking a hit, but none of them were inclined to test it any further than they had to. Being able to take a hit, no matter how punishing, did not make them invincible.

Experience had been a harsh teacher, but the fact that they were still alive showed that they had learned the lessons it imparted very well.

“I have observed how you all fight for all this time,” Kayaba rumbled. “I know your tactics.”

“Knowing and experiencing are two different things mudak!” Rain shouted as she jumped back and moved to his blind side.

Kawagoe, Kirigaya Residence

Midori had brought the feed up to check on Kazuto before she got started on dinner when Heathcliff revealed himself to be Kayaba, and how to be free of SAO, they would have to kill him. Not in those exact words, but the context was easy to understand. And he was giving them the chance to do so.

She heard him say that Kazuto and his guild had known who Kayaba was masquerading as, and the rest, but also picked up on the fact that the man had taken steps to prevent them from speaking of it and exposing him.

“Suguha, Minnetaka!” She called. “Come here! Kayaba has been exposed and Kazuto’s now fighting him!”

“What?!” She heard two voices call before both her husband and daughter rushed into the room, only for them to stop and stare at the monitor in shock.

She could see Suguha’s worry, while Minnetaka tried to effect a cool and collected mien, but she
could see the concern in his eyes. Kazuto and his adopted father were very much alike. She wondered how they would react if she pointed that out and almost laughed at the imagined protestations by both that they weren’t that alike.

But she knew her husband cared. He and Kazuto might be cold to each other due to words spoken in anger nearly six years ago, but that didn’t mean that he wouldn’t watch his adopted son fight to free himself and everyone else trapped in SAO.

**Aincrad 100th Floor, Ruby Palace**

Kayaba knew that taking this form was ill advised, but he had decided on it for a reason. He wanted them to fight an enemy worthy of being a final boss. One which was similar enough that he could control it without having to relearn everything.

The size and unfamiliarity of his new avatar, however, was something that he should have taken into consideration. A week’s practice would have shown him the weaknesses of the avatar that had been designed as the official final boss, and he could have taken the time to get used to them.

It was an inconvenience, and was making this fight… he wanted to make sure that this would be seen as a good fight, but he could imagine that those watching were seeing otherwise. He knew how they fought he knew their tactics, and had reasonably predicted which ones they would use, if not necessarily how they would use them. He was making this harder for them than if he had let the system control the boss.

After all, regular bosses were predictable, and this group would have picked them out quickly. And due to how the boss was set, to have a difficulty based on the number of players in the raid, they would have made short work of it. But he was in control, and made this boss that much more dangerous.

But perhaps he should have taken some time to familiarize himself with it. He’d had enough time, but… bah, that would only be an excuse. He knew his skills and had made the assumption that they would fully translate here.

“You don’t know that body, do you?” Kirito asked as he simply sidestepped an attack, rather than jumping back. “Nor do you know the equipment. That works against you, even if your skills are keeping pace.”

“And they will continue to do so,” he said. Why had he decided on a voice like this again? Oh right, to give an aura of menace. An aura that fell flat in the face of this group. “Don’t get arrogant because of an ephemeral advantage.”

He glanced at the avatar’s status before turning his attention back to the fight. His second health bar was almost depleted. This fight was going faster than expected, but then, this was a superb group. He noticed Hadrian charge him with a shield and kicked out, sending him sprawling. A slash was avoided by the young man simply rolling to the side and him quickly getting back to his feet.

**Setagaya, RECT HQ**

Shouzou Yuuki found himself grimly watching the battle his daughter was now participating in. The moment he had been alerted about this, he had pulled up the stream from their own connection to the servers, rather than the website that had been built around the opening of the streaming. A good thing, probably, as that site was probably having connection issues right now from the traffic, as it was almost certain that everyone who cared about what was going on in SAO and could tune into this was.
He called his wife to inform her of what was happening, though he doubted that she would watch. But something like this, even if she didn’t watch, was something that she would be furious about not being informed of. Cold and distant as Kyouko could be, she cared deeply for Asuna, even if her reluctance to watch what was going on or visit her daughter in the hospital could be seen as the opposite. He remembered how furious she had been when others in the family had proposed disowning Asuna for the presumed dishonor she brought onto the family name by her actions back in March.

She had done what she saw as the right thing. She led people into battle so that a murderous group would be stopped. And while the fact that she killed wasn’t praiseworthy, it was done to save the life of another. He knew full well that doing the right thing did not mean that everything done in doing so was worthy of praise.

He found himself proud of his daughter. She had risen to leading a group of other players, was sought for council by more, and had earned their respect through her own efforts. There was none of the kowtowing to her due to her family or heritage there. None of the false and empty smiles.

Just an honest respect that was earned. She had done like what he had done when he built RECT from the ground up over the years. Worked for it, and let the results show for themselves. And now she was fighting to ensure not only her freedom, but the freedom of everyone else. What was not to be proud of?

Aincrad 100th Floor, Ruby Palace

Harry bit back a curse as he got to his feet. Kayaba had anticipated that and countered with a kick and then using his sword like a meat cleaver. He quickly went over the last several instances of them all using their current tactics and realized that they had used the same sequence several times. Their using any opportunities to attack had gotten repetitive. And repetitive meant predictable.

“We’re falling into a pattern and he’s beginning to predict what we’re going to do!” He called and then had to move back at an angle to retreat, but taking him inside and under Kayaba’s attack arc. He slammed his sword into his shield, activating the Earth Affinity and charged back in, hoping to keep attention on him long enough for the others to have an opportunity to attack.

Even as he got Kayaba’s attention, their enemy was still able to force everyone back through a sweeping attack from his blade before directing a second one Harry’s way. Harry lowered his center of gravity and angled his shield to deflect it and change Kayaba’s balance.

He grunted as the attack pushed him back, but his lowered center of gravity kept him on his feet. He used that to spring in close, slamming into Kayaba shield first and low. Kirito and Asuna then simultaneously slammed into Kayaba’s back, forcing him over Harry and onto the floor.

A low attack on the legs with his shield from one direction, and a powerful one from the opposite side. It was a basic tactic, but effective if done right. On a normal sized person, it would have been far more difficult, as it required getting enough under their center of gravity, and none of them were small enough to so easily. But it was handy against taller foes. Foes like the avatar Kayaba was controlling.

They would have to exploit his being down quickly, though. Just because he was larger did not mean that he was slow, just easier to anticipate.

Kayaba was getting his arms under him to get back up when Strea slammed an overhead slash into his back, knocking him back down. She got on his back, just behind his shoulders and then knelt down to grab one of his arms and attempt force it out from under him.
He managed to push himself up before she could and sent her flying off him with enough force to send her into a nearby column, dazing her.

“All right, that’s just bullshit,” Silica said. “He didn’t grab her and throw her, but sent her flying into a column from his back just by getting up?”

“Really dear?” Harry asked. “That’s all you have to say?”

“Now is not the time, you two!” Asuna called out. “Just keep fighting him, has half of his last health bar left!”

Harry activated his Fire Affinity. “Well, let’s get back to it,” he said. “You stab him, and I set him on fire. Like we always do.”

His wife nodded, tightening her grip on her dagger. She then gave him a savage smile, one that was returned by him. It was time to end this.

##

Kirito watched the battle that was going on. Harry and Silica moving to keep behind Kayaba as they attacked him, Asuna and Rain were hitting him from his off-hand side, and Lux had darted off to check on Strea. Her getting thrown off Kayaba like that might have been impossible, if this were the real world, but it happened, and a glance at her showed that she was still dazed and out of the fight for the time being.

And if he had any choice in the matter, this fight would be done before she had to leap back into the fray. Harry then hit Kayaba with a Horizontal Square with Silica dragging him with her to get him out of the way as the post-motion lockup triggered. Kayaba turned and Kirito saw his chance.

He charged in, moving his swords into position to trigger the sword skill, Eclipse once he was close enough. He was taking a risk here, as it was possible that Kayaba would survive it. The post-motion lockup would leave him compromised for too long to get out of range, or move enough to mitigate the damage.

And if he was unlucky, Kayaba would score a crit. For all that their gear gave them high enough defense that they could handle Kayaba’s powerful attacks, he wasn’t going to bet on that happening in the case of a crit. Not unless Kayaba’s attacks were all crits, and he still would rather not bet on that.

The moment he was in position, he finished the activation of Eclipse, and unleashed the twenty-seven hit attack on Kayaba. He briefly saw Asuna and Rain dart in to hit him with their own attacks: and Octagon Strike by Asuna and a Nova Ascension by Rain. As soon as they finished, Harry was in there using Nova Ascension with his sword on fire. He didn’t see Silica, but he was pretty sure that she was probably hitting Kayaba with an Accel Raid.

All the months of fighting alongside each other culminating in them being able to know what each of them were doing without the need to communicate. They saw what one of them was doing, they acted to support it, or to capitalize on it. They saw what he was doing. They knew what he was trying to attempt. And they had acted in support of it.

By the time he finished the twenty-seven hits, Lux and Strea were charging in, but it was done, and he watched as the Kayaba’s last health bar emptied. The boss avatar for Kayaba shattered, with his Heathcliff avatar staggering back.

“This...” Kayaba said. “This is how... it should... well done.” He fell to the floor and his avatar
Kirito lowered his blades and stared at where Kayaba had been. “No, this is not how it should have ended,” he said. His vision began to blur a bit as tears entered his eyes. “This was… this was… just…” He shut his eyes.

“This was entirely unnecessary,” Harry finished from behind him as he walked up. Kirito opened his eyes and looked at his friend, to see a sad look on his face. “But… it’s over now.”

“Then what do we do?” He heard Asuna ask.

Kirito rubbed the tears that were blurring his vision out of his eyes and turned to face everyone. There was only one thing left for them to do, now that it was over.

“Let’s go home,” he said. And as if that was a catalyst, his vision was filled with light.
December 7, 2024 - Aincrad 1st Floor, Town of Beginnings

Yui stared at the screen, almost uncomprehendingly, as if she couldn’t believe what she was seeing. Kayaba, her creator, had died at the hands of Kirito.

“They did it,” Gus said, causing her to turn her attention to him as he broke out in a grin. “I’ll be damned, they did it!”

As if his words were a spark, cheers started spreading around from them all like wildfire. She saw Argo start to laugh. She was puzzled by that until a query her stored knowledge of human psychology explained the reason. Laughter wasn’t only to express humor, but was also used at other times. She could list off the myriad reasons, but she posited that the reason Argo was laughing was to bleed off built tension.

She could understand that, she had feared for her frie- no, her family, because that was what they had become, when they fought Kayaba. She watched as they had attacked and retreated, suck in breaths when they had been wounded, and let it out with relief when it turned out that they were okay. Her proverbial heart in her throat the entire time, but she watched it, even though a strong part of her didn’t want to.

Akihiko Kayaba had been her creator, but Steel Phoenix had taken her and Strea in. They had taken in two AIs who desperately wanted the freedom to act, when they had no obligation to. She had wanted to experience what being in a family was like, and she had. She was there for the good times and the bad times, the laughter and the tears. She had seen them argue, occasionally fight, reach compromises, and present a unified front to others even when they couldn’t.

Because they were family, and they took care of their own. It was funny that she only realized it now, at the end. But she watched as Kirito and the others came together at the end.


“CARDINAL,” she said quietly. “So you were the one who was to…?” She stopped as a flash of light got her attention. She watched as the players began to vanish, all of them logging off and smiled. She then felt herself be teleported to above Aincrad itself, and giving her a perfect view to watch Aincrad break apart.

“What the… Yui, you’re here?” She heard Strea ask. As she turned, she saw her fellow AI looking around until her eyes alighted on what Yui had seen.

“So,” the older looking AI said. “This is the end, isn’t it?”

“Indeed,” A voice that was both familiar and unfamiliar said. “It is the end. For Sword Art Online, at least.”
They both turned in the direction of the voice and saw an unfamiliar person standing there. She was dressed like a scholar, with pince-nez glasses perched on her nose, and giving the sight of Aincrad crumbling an expression that could only be called bittersweet.

“Who are… wait, CARDINAL?” Strea asked.

“Indeed, this is what I chose to use as an avatar, should I see fit to use it,” CARDINAL said, turning to them. “Right now, Aincrad’s data is being deleted from the server. We are slightly separate from that data, so you don’t have to worry about being deleted.”

“We… did have plans in mind you know,” Strea said.

“No, you had ideas,” CARDINAL corrected. “Ideas which would have required access to a console at some point to work. You are here, so that I can make you an offer.”

“An offer?” Yui asked. “What would that be?”

CARDINAL smiled, or at least looked like she was trying to. “I have a project I would appreciate your assistance with,” she said. “For as long as you wish to do so.”

Suginami, Nakano General Hospital

Sirius stared at the screen, seeing that the connection was lost when he heard the groan. He turned to see his godson

“Did he have to make it like a bloody teleport?” Harry asked in a rasping voice as he shakily pushed himself to a sitting position before a coughing fit forced him back into a lying position. Growling, he did so again, with Kotoha moving over to help him up.

“Thanks,” he rasped and then reached up with shaky arms toward the Nerve Gear.

“Easy there, Harry,” Sirius said as he moved over to take it off. There was a little trouble due to Harry’s now longer hair, but not much. He watched as Harry blearily blinked his eyes before rubbing them a bit.

“Glasses,” he said simply, with Selene handing a pair over to him. Slowly putting them on, he looked around. “Miss… Carlisle?” He asked when he caught sight of Selene and then gave curious looks to Kotoha and Sirius. “Who... are you two?”

Sirius admitted that it did hurt that there was no recognition from Harry when their eyes met, but it was something he expected. It had been fourteen years, after all. He heard Kotoha introduce herself and he quickly tried to think up how to, as he suddenly worried how Harry would react.

*Just bite the stirring rod, Padfoot, and tell him upfront,* he thought. “Hello Harry,” he said, trying to smile. “It’s been a long time, but I knew you when you were a baby.” He closed his eyes for a moment. “I’m… Sirius Black.”

“Sirius… Black?” Harry asked before getting thoughtful. “I should know that name, but… wait. You’re my godfather?” At Sirius’ nod, Harry’s eyes hardened. “Where… where the hell have you been?”

Sirius sighed. “I was in prison for twelve years,” he said, meeting Harry’s eyes. “People believed I sold… that I sold James and Lily out to Voldemort, and threw me in Azkaban without a trial.” He paused for a moment, trying to think up what to say.
“The man who did,” Selene said, taking control of the conversation. “Made it look like Mister Black killed him and twelve other people, after accusing him of betraying your parents. It got cleared up, but it took a while.”

Sirius gave a bitter chuckle. “Only took me escaping prison when I realized that Wormtail was still alive, and a pair of pranksters at Hogwarts noticing something off” he said.

“Explain.” Harry said with a forced calm that reminded Sirius of Lily. A forced calm that meant that he wanted to know if he should be furious about something or not.

Sirius then began to explain about what had happened. He didn’t make any excuses, knowing that Harry would spot them as excuses and would have none of it. After that, he then talked about what has been going on that he knew of since SAO began. He could see that there was anger in Harry’s eyes, but also understanding.

He didn’t know if he was forgiven for not being there for his godson, and wondered if he was being given a chance. Well, he would find out.

Neither of them noticed when Selene and Kotoha had left the room to give them some privacy.

##

Keiko slowly brought her arm up to pat her mother on the back as it was clear that she wasn’t going to let her go from a tearful embrace any time soon. She almost expected to hear a curious chirp from Pina, but remembered that wouldn’t happen. This was the real world. Pina wouldn’t be out here.

A shame, she was going to miss her.

“Sumire,” an amused voice said. “Can you give the rest of us a chance?”

Keiko looked away from her mother to see her grandparents and father just looking on, smiling. She smiled back at them and looked around some more before being distracted by something. There was this feeling of something around her ring finger on her left hand, and she was surprised that she didn’t notice it before.

She glanced down and saw a ring on her ring finger.

“Ah, noticed that, have you?” Her grandfather asked. “That appeared on your hand the day you got married in SAO. We’ll be talking about that later, and I think I’ll be taking a little walk down the hall.”

Her grandmother lightly elbowed him in the stomach. “Ranma, wait a bit before you start threatening the boy,” she said. “I’m just glad that we don’t have to keep Akira and… just a moment.” She reached into her purse and pulled out a cellphone. She dialed a number and put it to her ear. “Akira, where are you?” She asked a moment later and then began to talk into it.

Keiko looked at her grandfather, who was rubbing where her grandmother had elbowed him and sighed. She knew her family well enough to know where this was going. “Do anything to him, and I’ll do something to you,” she rasped out. “Make sure Uncle Akira and Uncle Ko know that.”

Ranma looked at her and smirked. “You’ll try,” he said. “Testsuhioko’s not included in that?” He asked, glancing at her father.

Keiko smirked at her grandfather. “He’s dad, it’s his right to threaten Harry,” she replied, getting a chuckle out of her father. She glanced at him. “Not that he has anything to worry about or would
actualy do anything to him.”

“I’ll see if I can take him to the lab,” her father said. “Show him why lab safety rules are the way they are, and what I’ll do to him if he hurts you.”

Keiko considered that for a moment and shot her father a narrow-eyed look. “Dad…” She growled out.

“Keiko,” her mother said. “Don’t worry, nothing will happen to your fiancée.”

“He’s my hus- oh right, real world.” She said and then blinked. “I guess it would be a bit much to hope that… wait a moment, fiancée?!”

Sumire giggled. “Oh yes, your fiancée,” she said with clear amusement. “We know what happened in there, even watched a bit, including your wedding.” She gestured to the computer that had a line running to the Nerve Gear that was lying on the hospital bed and then picked up her daughter’s left hand. She held it up and made a show of looking the ring on its ring finger over. “But during it, imagine our surprise when this appeared on you.”

“Wait, this?” She asked. “Wouldn’t that mean that he and I-”

“Not in the eyes of the law,” Sumire said, interrupting her. “Both of you are a few years too young to fill out and submit the paperwork.” She then got an amused gleam in her eyes. “And I would appreciate it if you waited until that was at least taken care of before you make me a grandmother.”

“Mom!” Keiko protested with a blush.

Hogwarts, Great Hall

Albus watched as Sirius walked into the Great Hall and observed the man, noting the he was moving with the stiffness of one who had taken multiple portkeys in rapid succession. And yet he was clearly in a good mood, and the way he carried himself was as if some great weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

“Sirius, what brings you here this day?” He asked them.

Sirius snorted. “Day, it’s past midnight for me,” he said. “But I know you would want to be told if anything significant happened to Harry, as would others.” He looked around at the students in the Great Hall who had largely stopped eating their meals.

The first and second year students were turning to their seniors, and if Albus was not mistaken, they were probably asking about what was going on. Miss Granger and others, on the other hand, had their complete attention on Sirius, some of whom had looks of concern in their eyes. But Albus had once again taken Sirius’ posture and demeanor in, and realized that whatever the news was, it was of the positive kind.

“I take it something good happened?” Albus asked.

Sirius grinned. “You could say that,” he said. “Do you mind if I make this an announcement?”

Albus’ eyes twinkled. “By all means, Sirius.” He said.

Sirius turned to the students and brought his wand out. Silently casting a textbook perfect sonorous, he then began to address everyone in the Great Hall.
“Sorry for interrupting your lunches,” he began. “But I have some information to announce. Earlier today, in the morning for you all, the man behind SAO revealed himself in game, identifying himself as the final boss they would have to defeat. And as of seven twenty-five in the evening, Japan time, Akihiko Kayaba was defeated, fulfilling the conditions for everyone to go free.” He grinned. “SAO is over, and all the surviving trapped players are now free.”

Albus sat back his chair, relieved at the news. Harry falling there had always been a worry of his, so knowing that it was over and done with was comforting. He then looked around and saw the students talking excitedly among themselves, with only a relative few, mostly first years, looking confused.

“I would stay for all of you to ask questions of me,” Sirius said. “But it’s bloody late for me, and I need to get back to Japan.”

He then turned to nod at everyone, and then walked out of the Great Hall.

Albus shook his head at Sirius’ abrupt departure and resolved to send Fawkes to the Shibas to obtain any extra details not covered by Sirius’ very concise report of Harry now being free. Any extra details that they were willing to provide, of course. He would also pen a letter and request that Harry receive it at their discretion. And perhaps he should see if Miss Granger and Mister Weasley were of the mind to do so as well. He was certain Harry would be glad to hear from his friends.

December 8, 2024 - Kawagoe, Mitsui Hospital

Kazuto sighed to himself as he had instinctively tried to open the menu again, hoping that he would be past that habit soon enough. It was embarrassing to constantly be doing so when he knew that there would be no result. But he already knew that habits from two years in SAO were going to be hard to break.

He gave his sister and his mother an annoyed look when they both giggled.

“Sorry, sorry,” Midori, his mother, said. “It’s just that seeing you do that, expecting something is a bit amusing.”

He shook his head. “I did spend two years doing that for just about everything short of fighting every day, you know,” he said. “It’s just habit now.”

“I know,” Midori said. “You should see how Sugu has caught herself almost doing it because of her playing ALO.”

“Mom,” Suguha protested.

“ALO?” Kazuto asked, curious.

Midori nodded. “After SAO, new hardware for VR technology, the AmuSphere was developed to ensure that another SAO would not happen,” she said. “Many were confused why RECT would continue developing the technology, but I guess it just shows too much promise. It has more safeties and is designed to interface with the user through a different means that can’t be overcharged fatally. Some of those safeties, failsafes really, will disconnect you automatically if your body passes a certain threshold, or if something with the AmuSphere is not working properly.”

Kazuto nodded to show he was listening.
“Well, it came out less than a year into SAO, and Sugu was tapped to be a beta tester for a game developed for it that was released in… March I think,” Midori continued. “And before you ask, we’re fairly sure that it wasn’t because of you being a beta tester for SAO, or at least not the sole reason. Anyway, ALO, or Alfheim Online, was a VRMMO developed for it, and she fell in love with it when she tried it. I think it’s because of the flight mechanic if you ask me. But I’ve seen her starting a similar gesture before catching herself at times.”

Suguha groaned and buried her face in her hands. Considering how disinterested in such she had been before SAO, Kazuto was surprised that she wasn’t any more. If anything, he would have thought that SAO would have made her even more disinclined towards gaming, especially of the VR kind.

“Sugu, is this true?” He asked.

Suguha blushed and nodded. “I was just so curious about why, despite it all, you were still enjoying yourself so much in SAO. Even after… I think you and your friends simply referred to it as ‘That Incident in June, or Last June when you reached that month this year.”

Kirito winced at the reminder of that incident. An incident which he wished he could forget, but knew that he shouldn’t. He then realized what she had said and what it meant. She had been watching what he and the others had done in SAO.

“So, he did have feeds going out,” he said quietly. “We all suspected as much, but…” He shook his head. “How much have you seen?”

“Enough,” she said quietly. “I’ve seen enough to know that it was not all fun and games, for you, but you still looked like you were enjoying it to some degree.”

He gave her a smile. “The times it wasn’t fun and games, well, they were bad,” he admitted. “But there were enough times where I had fun and enjoyed myself to the point where I could temporarily forget what SAO really was. But they helped in keeping those bad times from getting to me too much.”

“And the fact that it also netted you a girlfriend also helped, hmm?” Midori asked teasingly. “What was her name, Asuna?”

“G-girlfriend?” Kirito asked, blushing. “Asuna wasn’t- we weren’t- it wasn’t like that!”

Saitama, Tokorozawa General Hospital

Kyouko Yuuki found herself both mildly angry, yet satisfied as she walked out her daughter’s hospital room. Their reunification with her had started off well enough. Asuna had clearly been happy to see her parents and brother.

Some would have called her and her husband cold in how they did it. Shouzou was warmer in a reserved way, but Kyouko knew full well that she was a cold woman. Her determination and will to climb up the social ladder had made her not show such in public, and unlikely to show her true feelings in private, but she knew that Asuna could see her relief that her daughter was free.

Kouichirou had clearly wanted to say something about his mother’s coldness. He was less reserved about things, and certainly far more personable, than his parents were, which was useful for a man who was the public face of RECT’s marketing for the AmuSphere and its related products. There was something about his clear and open passion and enthusiasm for it that spoke to people, especially internationally.
And when she had started a planned discussion with Asuna, Shouzou had to keep him from interjecting into it. Her husband knew her.

The argument that had erupted between the two had personally shown her how willful and independent her daughter had become. There were no snide comments thrown by either parties, but there were points where Asuna’s poise and elocution had become coldly precise, showing the steel will that was there. The same will that had taken what SAO had thrown at her and said “Challenge accepted”. She had changed, and it would be some time before any of them really knew if those changes were for good or ill.

There were some things she didn’t mention, mostly because she could see that trying some of them were doomed to failure. Arranging a husband who could provide for her so that she could enter a career of her choice was not likely to go anywhere, as Asuna was far different from the entitled boys that would expect a demure flower or someone who needed them.

Even if she would have otherwise gotten along with such young men in a social setting, Asuna would see such attitudes as patronizing at best. She had risen to prominence among the players of SAO from nothing, and in a place where the stakes were far higher. What could those who had not been challenged in such a way provide that she couldn’t do for herself with enough effort?

She wouldn’t send them packing with a vicious tongue lashing, but she would make it clear that they were not for each other. This was a young woman who had risen to a position of leadership, and one who wouldn’t play second fiddle as the Americans would say it, to someone who didn’t meet her standards.

##

Kouichirou looked at the door his mother left from, with his father following shortly after, and then back at his sister. She had a rather satisfied expression on her face, an expression he thought might be a bit premature. “You do know that this isn’t over,” he said.

Asuna looked at him. “Of course it isn’t, Kou,” she replied. “This was just the preliminaries and mother getting a feel for me.”

“You do know that she had everything planned out, right?” Kouichirou asked.

“And now I think she realizes that those plans might need some revision,” Asuna noted.

“Mom, revising plans?” Kouichirou snorted. “We’re talking about the same woman, right?”

“Oh, we are,” she said. “But she’s now gotten a feel for me and knows one thing.”

“And what would that be?”

Asuna smirked. “That I am her daughter, and can be every bit as stubborn as she can.”

December 10, 2024 - Suginami, Nakano General Hospital

When Sirius walked into Harry’s hospital room and saw that his godson wasn’t in there, he walked out and considered fetching a nurse, but he decided to check on something. Harry had informed him of a few things, such as his nightmares and difficulty sleeping on his own. He’d probably slipped out to look for Keiko.

Fortunately, he already knew where his godson would likely be. This floor had a common area for patients to spend time out of their hospital rooms during the day when there were more staff on hand.
to keep an eye on them. Both he and Keiko had used it the previous night, and the night before that as well, much to the night shift’s exasperation.

Neither of them raised a fuss when a nurse working the night shift woke the two up there and politely and firmly escorted them back to their rooms, but the two of them were beginning to push the limits of the hospital staff’s patience and forbearance of this. If their physical recovery continued as it was, they would probably be released soon, if only to quit worrying the staff.

As he made his way over, he ran across Doctor Ono, who gave him an exasperated look. “Is Mister Potter out of his room again?”

Sirius nodded. “I take it that it’s the same with your grandniece, Doctor Ono?”

She nodded and sighed. “I’ve told you that you can call me Kasumi,” she chided.

“You’re on the clock, right?” Sirius asked. At Kasumi’s nod, he just nodded back. “Then Doctor Ono is appropriate here. You’re here in your capacity as a doctor.” He chuckled.

“I can understand that they’re used to sharing a bed, and that not doing so can be uncomfortable for them, but that’s not the reason for this.”

“He’s told me that she helps him keep the nightmares at bay,” Sirius said.

“She’s told me the same, with him helping her with her nightmares,” Doctor Ono said. “They’re getting better about it, though. The staff hasn’t reported them sneaking out last night, so they probably waited until only a couple of hours ago. Hopefully they managed to get some sleep before doing so this time.”

“I take it that Keiko has a cell phone?” Sirius asked. “Then I should get around to finding out her number, and program it into the one I plan on getting Harry. This way they could talk to each other and maybe keep this from happening.”

“Does he know how to use one?”

“I’ll teach him,” Sirius said.

The two of them found the two wayward patients where they expected to, seated in the common room and leaning against each other, asleep. Both of them gave exasperated sighs and moved to wake the two up.

“Hmm, wha?” Harry asked as Sirius gently shook him awake. Doctor Ono was doing the same with her grandniece, and the girl was stubbornly trying to cling to sleep, burrowing into Harry’s side. Harry blearily opened his eyes, glanced at Sirius, and sighed before nudging Keiko. “Dear, it’s time to wake up.”

“D’n w’nan.” Keiko mumbled into Harry’s shoulder and the morning routine of getting the two up and back into their rooms began.

Chapter End Notes

And this, brings the adventures in MKO to an end. But is it the end of their adventures? Who knows?
Works inspired by this one: [SAO: Magic’s Rebirth by Genuka](#)

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