**WAO 2.2**

Stalking through the forest, this one found on top of one of this level’s tornado-shaped ‘plateaus’, a handy little elevator going right to the top found in its base, I tried to distract myself from my worries. **Stress Defense** would mean that they would never become *paralyzing*, or to the point of self-termination, but I’d only purchased **Stress *Resistance*** instead of ***Immunity***, so the concerns still pulled at me, That said *full* **Stress Immunity** meant that I would *never* be worried, which had its *own* set of downsides.

And the source of my worries?

The fact that I was the *only* one here with **Stress Defense**, as, *over two weeks later*, not a *single* person had been captured, and instead of -203 points, I was now sitting at -***264***. Without my bonus from surviving WH40k, I would’ve been at *-385*, because compound interest was a *stone cold bitch*, and, at -500, *my ass got repossessed.*

Which was why, even with my **Defense**, I was… *antsy.*

I’d called the Help Desk, who couldn’t give me any *specific* information about the world at large, but had confirmed that, *yes,* capturing their Avatar here in SAO captured them *fully*, and, actually, was *preferred*, as it captured them with their *current system*, as opposed to their ‘waking’ selves, who were unpowered.

So…. What the fuck was the holdup?

Like, I’d expected it to take a little longer, as the Shrouds *were* just ‘rings’, but I’d been clear on how the rings needed *skin contact* to function, and they *did* automatically fit under gloves and such when the players equipped them, so… why no points?

Short of using the Shroud like it was *designed* to work, and going all Tentacle Monster on some poor soul, I was just going to have to *wait.*

So I’d kept busy.

Cooking? Yeah, beyond ‘Behold! I apply butter to bread! I R A Chef!’ level bullshit, the *only* way I could make that work without the system was to take the ingredients and use my own **Essence** to, for lack of a better word, ‘fill in’ the bits of them that were missing, at which point the food became realistic, though… not *quite*, as it reacted *directly* to my will, as I found when I’d fucked up and made bread that tasted like the sandwich I was *going* to make with it, taking a bite of the cut off heel, which told me that I wasn’t making it ‘real’, I was likely doing something *else entirely*.

The kind of thing that, while it was safe for *me* to consume because it was *made* of me, I probably shouldn’t give anyone I was particularly attached to.

On a different track, Sword Skills were *still* absolute bullshit.

**One Handed Sword**’s Skills were active, which made them a bit easier to understand, but also meant that fucking with them often had obvious but *disastrous* results, but **Light Metal Armor** was entirely *passive*, so I could only tell the difference when it levelled up, and, unfortunately, when it did, I was usually focused on other things.

*Like not dying.*

Well, not *really*, as this ‘body’ was just a shell, but I had *zero* idea if I’d just be able to reform myself, given how my attempts to do so for *normal* damage saw the System try to enforce itself on this shell *anyways,* usually splitting the difference, and, if I *died*, would I lose all my progress? Would I have to make a new character? I get locked out of this world? Could I be ‘re-admitted’ after being locked out with the proper rituals carried out by locals? I felt the answer to the last one was *yes*, but I wasn’t sure about all of the others.

And, having hit level six and getting another slot, I’d taken the **Hiding** skill, only because Argo had mentioned how my *already having it* was messing with her **Searching** skill, almost certainly my **Information** or **Trace Defense** at work. This way, I covered myself from being a bit *too* mysterious, while *also* getting closer to the most OP of all builds, *The Stealth Archer*.

Assuming there was archery in this game.

I… really hoped there was archery in this game.

I’d asked Argo to track down how to get **Archery** and **Martial Arts**, so, when she found the second, and *if* she found the first, I’d have an all-round combat build.

By level *twenty*.

*God this game was dumb.*

So, **Hiding** gave myself a ‘visibility meter’ straight out of *Thief*, but also turned me *translucent*, like the Predator, in addition to ‘hiding’ my nametag, though it ‘broke’ if the meter hit zero, which started its cooldown so I couldn’t just pop back into stealth the second I got spotted.

Mind you, I only had a nametag because I *chose* to have one, but it’d be a good excuse if I forgot about it at any point in the future. More interestingly, the Skill was useful as a *decoding* tool because it gave me solid metric for interpreting the code which hung about me like, well, like a *shroud*, interacting with my **Psychic Talent** created hookup into Aincrad’s greater system.

I’d unslotted my **Light Metal Armor** skill, just to see what would happen, and while the Dystem *did* strip the passive benefits from my ‘profile’, the *impression* of them had been left behind in my **Talent**, and, equipping the breastplate, it was doing *something* to protect me more than it normally should’ve, with Weave-world esque ‘I know you’re wearing a breastplate but have some protection for your eyeballs too’ bullshit. Not *quite* as strong as Armor Class would be, that shit downright *omnipresent,* but it was definitely *something*, and slapping the Skill in my third slot, **Hiding** now in my second, re-experiencing it ‘levelling’ had resulted in a Disgea style ‘reset the skill so it comes back stronger’ effect, which, except for being a *massive* time-sink, had… *possibilities*.

When I hit level twelve, in a another week or so, I was likely going to slot Argo’s preferred **Searching** Skill myself, to get the *other* end of this equation, which would *hopefully* be my Rosetta Stone into understanding SAO’s code.

Because, to be honest?

*I had no idea what I was doing.*

When I had some more points, or, really, *any* at all, **Science Talent** would probably help, as I only knew the *basics* of coding, but for now… for now I was balls deep in a system that *itself* was more than a little eldritch, but while ***I*** was *also* eldritch, it was very much a ‘just because you’ve got a body doesn’t mean you intrinsically understand *anatomy’* issue.

So, while *normal* coding was complicated, it turns out that when you mixed it with things ‘beyond the understanding of mere mortals’, well, that didn’t exactly fucking *help.*

And I *needed* to understand what I was doing before I started fucking around, for *multiple* reasons.

*Theoretically,* I was able to infuse bits of myself into *others* to empower them, speak through dreams, and form an ‘Omen’ of my own that served as the center of my power, and an ‘Element’ that I specialized in, like **Shub-Niggurath** had her horned female symbol & Fertility, **Hastur #E0B74A** had that yellow Y looking thing & *kind* of had Shepherding if you squinted, and Dishonored’s **Void** #F9F6EE had a fancy half-compass sigil & embodied *Change*, like a friendlier, chiller and all round *nicer* **Tzeentch**.

And I knew *I* could do that too.

But I had no fucking clue *how.*

I’d also changed up my Shroud-granting operation, using my *rapidly* dwindling wealth to hire a few more players. While there *was* a way to use NPCs to do sell items, like the player guides, with my rings straight up *not existing* to those humanoid programs, I couldn’t make it work, and, *honestly*, having *other people* do it made more sense. I’d had them open up two stalls, stalls *not* made out of my Shroud, one a couple streets away from Ol’ Jumpy, another in the main plaza, offering the ‘rings’ for 100 col each, as much as a room at an inn cost, and an amount *well* within the starting cash the tutorial quests, broken as they apparently were, gave, and as much as could be made by killing just a few boars outside of town.

My Seminars had made it clear: *Something Given Has No Value*, and while I’d given out a *lot* of them at first, that was in the initial rush of ‘panic’, saturating the market of lost souls, and that had been good for the first couple of days, but *not* conducive for enticing others to accept them, as if I’d kept giving out the ‘rings’, people would start asking *why.*

Charging a *decent* amount of money, meanwhile, after all the ‘high-risk cases’ had been taken care of, which we outright *told* anyone that pointed out the ‘rings’ *used* to be free yet *now* cost Col, made them seem *exclusive*, but still in reach, and, thus, *valuable*. I’d hired a *third* team to hang around the Suicide Ledge, and grab anyone that tried to use it, dragging them off to the side-street store where they’d talk to them and offer them a ring for 50% off, and purchasable on ‘credit’.

The lowered cost could be explained as charity, with those that stopped those that even seemed to be *considering* jumping always accepting the ‘jumpers’ claims at face value, even when they were obviously putting on a show to get the discount, and about half of those who bought them on credit tried to ‘trick’ me by taking the ring and *never* *paying*.

It was something my employees had gotten fairly annoyed with, even though they *weren’t* making a commission.

My response?

Oh *nooooo*. *Waaaaait. Doooon’t take the rings that will help you.* How *Daaaaaaare* you?

Seriously, if people were *stealing* my Shrouds to wear, that provided even *less* of an iffy moral conundrum then me handing them out. And it was a good thing they’d caught on, as I’d needed to take down the safety-rail.

I’d felt something… *poking* at it one night, not physically, but *metaphysically*, an entity, organic or artificial, checking it and likely going ‘hey, this isn’t supposed to be here!’

I’d collapsed the rail, each Shroud still *connected* to me, even if there were *so* many rings that I couldn’t distinguish between them, but the railing was *unique,* so I could make it two-dimensional, then one, then ‘recalled’ it through dimensions that the game *didn’t* exist in. That wasn’t something I wanted to do too much, because that was where… *other* things dwelt, though that *should’ve* been fine, but, again, was a risk, and not one I wanted to take *that often*.

So, here I was, working on my ‘skills’ **Hiding** as I was killing time, watching my growing debt with trepidation, and feeling the temptation to just enshroud people the *regular* way, subtlety be damned.

Unfortunately, enshrouding NPCs… kind of drove them insane? Well, it turned them into gibbering wrecks, the one wandering guardsman out in the field I’d tried it on having stripped *himself* naked, shit himself despite that not being a thing NPCs could do, cut himself open with his sword to collect his own blood, and then mixed the two bodily substances to start painting Aklo lettering on himself, the eldritch symbols starting to *further* warp the world around him.

I’d kind of… well I *ate* him, *sorta*, more like wrapped him in the Shroud, set it to *blend* to render him into Guard-slurry, removed all traces of my Essence from his form, getting back *more* than I put in, and he shattered into pixels, along with the mess he’d made, as I resolved *not to do that again*.

Though, as he’d ‘unequipped’ them, I *did* get a free weapon and armor set out of it, so… silver linings?

Regardless, Eldritch Experimentations were being taken *much* slower, especially as, shortly after I’d oopsied a cultist, offed him, and high-tailed it, I felt *something* sliding invisibly through the world, hidden from the players, to investigate the anomaly I’d just introduced. If I had to guess, it was some kind of Quality Assurance AI, like Yui, and hopefully *not* Kayaba himself.

That’d been over a week ago and I *hadn’t* gotten visited by any kind of GM or auditor program, so I *figured* I was safe.

Thus, I now continued to cruise along, assassinating monsters to grind my **Hide** and **One-Handed Sword** Skills, in a kind of holding pattern, waiting for something to happe-

***PING***

The sound went off in my head, and I focused, killing the last of the grotesque five-foot tall pitcher plants with *human mouths* known as Nepenthes I was working my through. I then made sure I’d cleared the area, *doubly* making sure not to damage the fruit they dropped, which, like the Killer Ants of Danmachi, would call *everything* in the area on the poor fool’s head if damaged, because, even in the *first zone*, there were Noob Traps.

Which would’ve been fine if they didn’t *actually kill you*.

More ***PINGS*** started to sound, one after another, to the point it was *actually* a little worrying, noting I got the flower-drop required to complete the daily quest and get *another* Anneal Blade, though I’d have to content myself with one to use and one to fuck around with, as only *one person in the entire freaking server* could receive the quest for twenty-four hours after it was accepted, which was… just so dumb.

Going up a tree, and leaning into the natural camouflage of my **Hide** skill, I opened up my mental, *non-*game interface and there, at the top, my current point value wasn’t -264, it was *-227,* ***and dropping*.**

Or rising.

It was getting closer to *zero*.

Tabbing over… yeah, my ‘Retinue’ tab was *quickly* filling, mostly with Tier 2 newbs, but, as the list *continued to expand,* there were the occasional Tier 3’s, giving me *twice* as many points, even with the payout cut in half due to the ‘Reduced Demand’ penalty, as they *weren’t* named characters.

I wasn’t sure *what* had happened to suddenly open the floodgates, but it was with a sigh of relief that the points continued to trickle in, sometimes a couple at once, sometimes with minutes between them, and, as I passed the -200 mark, with just over sixty people captured, out of the *thousands* of rings I’d created and handed out

Invisibly perched on the branch, as more monsters wandered into my killing zone, I smiled.

*It was always good when a plan came together.*

<WAO>

*This was not going how she planned.*

Argo was aware that the situation was odd, but her mom had taught her that you *needed* a plan, or else you were just planning to *fail*.

After all, her *father* hadn’t had a plan, assuming everything would work itself out.

And neither had she.

That’s why Mom left them, for a guy that *did*.

“You’ve got it!” Gai called, as Argo turned, prepping her knife until it glowed, and letting it *fly*, her Hurl carving *right* through the Dire Wolf, her heart thudding in her chest as *another* came for her, leaping, jaws wide, ready to tear her throat out-

Until a very rare, *very* strong sword carved it in two, the monster bursting in mass of pixels, not even *touching* her.

The man sighed, as she could suddenly move again, Gai casually turning as another wolf lunged for him, easily catching the monster’s lunge on the flat of his sword, letting the end rest against his blackened breastplate to brace properly, his free hand snaking out to grab the murderous canine *by the scruff of its neck*, and with a call of, *“Pull!”* took a single step and *hurled* the hundred pound creature into the air, Argo, taking a half second to glance around and make sure this was the *last* of the pack, prepped another blade and hurled it, the Toss Skill sinking the blade *into* the monster, so that when it died, shattering into a riot of colors, it took the 10 Col blade with it.

She got *22* Col in return, the system splitting up the bounty on the wolf between both members of the party, but money wasn’t why the man had dragged her out of the Town of Beginnings.

*XP was.*

Argo had been *fine*, busy managing contacts, expanding her intelligence network, except during their… meetings, which *weren’t dates*, they ***weren’t***, because he was, like *twenty* or something, even if he *was* hot, and muscular, and she *still* remembered how it’d felt to be gathered up in his arms like a princess and carried to-

*Focus, Toma,* she told herself, as the man looked down at her. “So, *remember what I said about Sword Skills?”* he questioned, like a teacher.

*A sexy teacher*, some part of her pointed out, but that part was *dumb*.

“I remember what yah said, *nyah*,” she grumbled, wincing at her own *stupid* verbal tic. She thought it’d be *cute*, Mom agreeing, and, when she was *eight*, it ***was***, and, as only a *half*-Japanese girl, *she’d needed all the help she could get*. But, once she got older it went from ‘Soo Kawaii’ to ‘Oh, the ‘neko’’ *real* freakin’ fast.

She’s stopped doing it, *most* of the time, unless she was stressed.

Which was *most* of the time, especially when Gai was around.

*God, he must think I’m such a freak.*

“Then tell me *what I said,*” he replied, smirking slightly.

“That they’re tools, not, ‘I win’ buttons,” she grumbled. “But if they’re tools, why you don’t *you* use them?” the Information Broker shot back.

“Because I haven’t needed them,” the American winked. “How close are you to level five?”

Checking her heads up, the girl replied, “Halfway there.”

“Then if you could find us another pack, we can get you even closer!” Gai directed, and, with a suppressed growl, she activated her **Searching**, spotting another pack a few hundred feet away, over another hill, and pointed tiredly.

The man just nodded, once more putting a *firm yet gentle* hand on her cloak-covered shoulder, activating his **Hiding** skill, and the little ‘how hidden are you’ meter she’d remembered from the Beta Test popped up in her line of sight as the two of them started walking that way.

Keeping her *own* Skill up, she directed it at her party member, and got the *same* odd sensation she did *every* time she used it on the man, a kind of *slipping* feeling, the informational pop-up taking a half-second longer to show up for him then it did for *anyone or anything* else, both here and the beta test, except for the ring, which *nothing* worked on. The first time she’d used it on him, his Slotted Skills had been glitched out, but now, either because she’d levelled up *her* Skill enough, or because they were in the same Party, she could read them now, the guy having gotten **One-Handed Swords**, because of *course* he did, but his **Hiding** Skill was in his *second* slot, his **Light Metal Armor** his third one, which meant he’d gone for a *Ninja* build, only then he’d gone for armor instead of taking ***Sneaking****,* which actually had nothing to do with sneaking at all, but turning clothing *into* armor to better **Hide** with, so… Bandit build?

Except, if Argo was going to call the man anything, *Bandit* would not be it.

But that was the problem.

She *couldn’t* call the guy, anything, *except Gai*.

And she *didn’t like it.*

Her Mom had taught her that money was power, and information was power, but power, *direct* power? That was *servitude*, that was *risk*, and that was ***danger*.**

When people thought you were ‘powerful’ they *wanted* things from you, they paid close attention to you, and, well, while her father had said, ‘The squeaky wheel gets the oil’, in Argo’s experience, her Mom was correct when she instead stated, ’The stake that sticks up gets *hammered down.’*

So *this* girl didn’t *want* to be powerful, didn’t want to be on the front lines! She, she chose to be an *Information Broker,* ***dammit!*** That way, she’d be the person in the know, the one that no one wanted to get rid of because she was *so damn useful*, but also one with types of info she *wouldn’t* sell so no one decided to try and ‘shut her up’ to keep something from getting out.

Ergo, *Argo* would be the ‘girl-in-the-know’, managing everyone around her, be it friends from old MMO’s, or the network of contacts she’d been busy steadily building, the Town of Beginnings a safe zone, and thus, while she was in it, she was *safe.*

She’d had her position *figured out*, because when the Big Guy throws his weight around, he lived by the sword until he *died* by it, and, as far as she could tell, Gai was very much a *Big Guy*, both physically and, and in *other* ways… except… he *wasn’t.*

Groups were already forming, though they wouldn’t be able to make *Guilds* until the third floor, and the Boss Room had been moved from its original position at twelve-oclock on the map, so who *knew* how long it’d take for them to get there, but other than meeting his ‘helpers’ every day, as far as Argo could tell, *she was the only one he talked to.*

The guy was loud, and acted like someone who was naturally popular, the Information Broker having seen the man swing by the suicide ledge and grab attention in moments, talking to the few hanging around, and taking most of the crowd to his stall with ease. But, while he made it seem easy, that *was* a skill, a *real life* skill, a skill that she knew *she did not have*, only really good at one-on-one convos, and it was a skill that you had to *work* on.

So why wasn’t he working on it *more?*

Why was he always spotted, before today, travelling and fighting *alone?*

More than that, better than that, *worse* than that, had been today.

Argo… Argo really didn’t know *why* she’d come out, *finally* leaving the Safe Zone, where he could do *anything* to her.

*Which was kinda hot-*

***Shut up,*** she told that *stupid* part of her. Tomo’s next closest friend *Kirito*, and *that* guy was an *industrial-sized douchebag*, but one that liked to brag and trade barbs, which had made him an *invaluable* resource in *any* game he was in. And so, when they met yesterday, when Gai had talked to her, made the case for why she should let him *help her,* mixing in concern for her with barefaced *selfish* considerations, as her gaining levels, and thus Skill Slots, would make it easer for her to work for *him*, she’d agreed.

She wanted to say that was a mistake, but even *that* was too certain a statement about the man.

“I’ll charge and draw aggro,” Gai told her quietly, as they were only thirty feet from the next wolf pack. “Remember, only use Sword Skills when you can afford being *still*.”

He didn’t just leave, expecting obedience, like some players she’d dealt with would, but waited for her to nod, and only then, *soundlessly*, took off, and she could *barely* see him until, in a single strike, he killed one of the wolves outright, severing its spine, then another, then a *third* as the mobs started to react, leaving only three left in a *second*.

All without a single Sword Skill.

Which meant the man, apparently, had experience *killing wolves with longswords*. If he was a Beta Tester, with a bit over a month beforehand, and then another three weeks… no, she’d seen Kirito fight, the boy having had Kendo training, and what Gai was using was *still* nuts, as if he was a Beta Tester, and he wasn’t, as she *would’ve remembered him,* he should be using *more* Sword Skills, not *none at all.*

Focusing herself, she hurled a blade at one of the wolves, which *wasn’t* enough to kill it, despite her **Blade Throwing** skill having cracked rank *forty* from only being *three* a few hours ago, but a second throw, then a *third* finally put the beast down, breaking, her knives returned back to her inventory, but, while Gai had killed the second, he let the last one charge her, *the jerk*.

Well, she had enough health she’d be fine even if it got her, as the ‘Dire Wolf’ attack pattern was hit and fade, which made them bad in *groups*, but it was just the one now. If she’d used her Hurl skill, she wouldn’t’ve been able to do anything to stop it, but, having done it freehand, she was able to turn and face her attacker.

Which, from the approving look Gai was sending her… *was the point*.

***Asshole.***

Grabbing another knife from the inside of her cloak, and prepping Hurl, Argo let loose the glowing blade, which sent spinning *incredibly* fast, like a mobile buzzsaw, and carved *right* through the Dire Wolf, which shattered, the blade continuing to fly *towards Gai.*

*Ha!* she thought, knowing the damage wasn’t enough to *really* hurt him, but she’d like to see how *he* handled getting caught with his pants dow-

He caught it.

He… just grabbed it.

Out of the air.

*…Oh shit.*

*Oh* ***shiiiiiiiiiiiit.***

That, that *wasn’t possible*, not if you were playing the game the way you were *supposed* to. Not unless he was like, she didn’t know, some super-secret government assassin or something, and able to handle things like this without *blinking*, like some sort of James Bond type, and he *wasn’t.*

Was he?

*No,* Argo thought. If he had been, been some sort of *CIA* agent then he wouldn’t be such a, a *nerd,* as she’d gotten him talking when they’d worked together, and Gai was a guy *who liked to talk.*

Only, did he ever *say* anything?

Well, *he did,* but never about *himself*, which meant he *might* be a spook.

Or…

Or he might be ***Kayaba****.*

And… And it fit.

‘Gai’ had known details about the game that *she’d* never heard of.

‘Gai’ had found not just a hidden dungeon, but the *developer room,* in *hours.*

‘Gai’ had started with an *obscene* amount of money.

‘Gai’ went out of his way to make sure people *didn’t get out of SAO,* even if, yeah, *suicide was bad,* but if there was no one left, there’d be no one to play Kayaba’s *stupid game, would there?*

‘Gai’ had handed out things that helped keep people calmer, but didn’t really *help*, and that ‘infinite creation’ glitch could just be some console command shit to just make tons of them, which was *also* why, when she’d mentioned they were being sold on the black market, he’d *laughed*, saying that was okay, as long as people got help, he was fine with it.

‘Gai’ was *unrealistically* buff, and hot, and there was *no way* he actually looked like that IRL, like he was some kind of *Greek God,* only American.

‘Gai’ had those, those *threads*, that no one *really* commented on, but she’d *heard* how he pulled ropes out of *nowhere*, to save that one jumper, and then outright *made extra architecture.*

Who could do that, but the ***Game Master?***

*She’d* approached *him*, and while she’d seen ‘Gai’ and ‘Kayaba’ in the same place at the same time, ‘Kayaba’ had just been a giant cloak, and ‘*Gai’* had been the only one that got his references.

Like, if *that* wasn’t the most blatant Sock Puppet she’d ever seen, *Argo didn’t know what was.*

So, Kayaba hadn’t known her, *before,* but, oh, *god*, him making ‘friends’ with an information broker let him release *anything* he wanted people to know, true or not, and they wouldn’t suspect it because it was *her* saying it, *not Kayaba.*

And, like, the ‘Gai’s’ ‘real’ name was ‘Norman Lee Man’, which was just, just *so obviously fake,* and he ‘claimed’ to be a Gaijin, a *foreigner*, but the man spoke *perfect freakin’ Japanese* the time that she’d fallen back into it without realizing it!

No, the man acted like he spent *years* here, because he *had,* ***when he’d built it.***

Hell, he’d *just* given her a speech on the weaknesses of Sword Skills that she hadn’t even *thought* of, and, and she knew how *fast* it took to level up her skills, but they were going up *too fast*, and it wasn’t a ‘release version’ thing, as she’d talked to others, confirmed her data, but, while she’d been here, out here with him, she’d been *shooting* up in levels, like he was somehow *helping her increase her Skill ranks faster than should be possible*.

Almost like he was *editing her character*, so ‘subtly’ that it could be explained away.

Except she was *Argo the Rat* for a ***goddamned*** *reason*.

But… but what did she *do* with this?

Confront him?

Because calling out Kayaba’s Alt?

***Probably not going to go well.***

God, that even explained how the man *always* seemed to know where she was, whenever they met, even when she was hidden away in corners and out of sight *despite* him not having the **Searching** Skill, as he was *using GM tools*, and that half-second delay with the scan was *clearly* him… greenlighting it, and directing it to his ‘character’s’ stats, and not his *real* ones!

So… what should she do?

Should she… should she *seduce* him?

Like, Kayaba was *supposed* to be some kind of young genius, making his first million when he was only eighteen, so, so it wouldn’t be like what her *Mom* suggested, where, after she found someone new, someone *better* than her father, the woman had told Tomo that she was leaving her behind because the girl just *didn’t have anything to offer,* unless Tomo… unless she was willing to do *that* with the rich forty-something fat bastard.

But Kayaba *killed people*, he *trapped them all here*, but, maybe she could convince him to let everyone go?

God, she *really* didn’t want to, though.

“Good job,” the guy who was *probably Kayaba* smiled, walking towards her. “You’re starting to get the hang of it, I think.”

***You’d know****,* she couldn’t help but think.

Except she showed *something* on her face, as he slowed, asking, “Something wrong, Argo?”

… *screw it.* “So… How long do you think it’ll take?” she asked, *knowing* she was playing with fire, but she was an Information Broker for a reason, and she *had to know.*

“Level six? Maybe another dozen packs or so. We’re *kind* of power-levelling you, but this game doesn’t have any kind of level weighting mechanic, which is kinda *dumb*, but I’m willing to abuse it to help you,” he smiled, *knowing what she meant.*

Or… did he?

“No, I meant *this,*” she repeated waving upwards, adding, “SAO.”

Argo watched his expression *carefully*, looking for a knowing smirk, maybe a ‘well it depends on how good everyone is’ deflection. But, instead, the man frowned in concern, shaking his head, and, while he *did* smile, it was that of a fragile hope, like he *wasn’t* the one responsible for all of this, like *Dad* used to wear, hoping that Mom would come home.

“With any luck, we’ll knock this level out in another month or so, since everyone’s getting their feet under themselves,” he offered. “Once everyone gets *organized*, it won’t be *easy,* but from the maps Kayaba let slip, the levels get progressively smaller, so, once we start cracking secrets and getting strategies down, I’d *like* to say we’ll be done before the end of the next year. Hell, it’s almost Christmas *now*, but, with any luck, we’ll be ringing in twenty-seventeen in the *real* world.”

Argo’s thoughts *ground* to a halt. *Wait.* ***Wait. WHAT.***‘You… you really think that?’

Gai grimaced. “I might be being optimistic. I mean, it’s been three weeks and they *still* haven’t found Illfang, wherever the *fuck* he is, but, again, this floor is *literally* the largest one out of all of them, so that, along with everyone figuring out what they’re doing, should cut down on the time requirements for each additional floor we clear. Like, not linearly, I don’t think they’re *all* gonna be nice and wide open like *this,*” he waved around them, “but, well, it *should* help.”

“Liking your optimism. Kind of need that now, nyah,” Argo replied, almost automatically, “But, you, you really think we can do it? Be out by the end of Twenty-***Seventeen?****”*

“I mean, *maybe* twenty-eighteen,” he gave, obviously not wanting to say it, but wanting to be fair, before looking at her, directly, in that soul-piercing way of his, like he wasn’t just looking at her avatar, he was looking at *Tomo herself.* “Argo, one way or another, I’ll make *sure* we get out of this deathtrap*.*”

And she *wanted* to believe him, wanted to *trust* him, despite herself, despite how she knew you couldn’t really trust *anyone,* like Da-, like *her father* ***refused***to learn, and if she was correct, being friends with the guy who could *actually get them out* would guarantee that at least *she* survived, but… but now there was another *thing*, yet *another* layer of… *otherness* to the man that confused her, *scared* her, and ***intrigued*** her in equal parts, in a way that pointed to him *not* being Kayaba.

But it made him something far, *far* stranger.

*Because it was December, yes, but it was December* ***Twenty-Twenty-Two****.*

**<WAO>**

God it felt good to get out of debt.

That initial flood had tapered off, but I still kept Capturing people at a slow but steady rate, allowing me enough to pick up a few more **Defenses**, and, on a whim, a **Pocket Space** and **Apartment**, though I hadn’t had time to check them out.

Because, after over three weeks of searching, they’d *finally found the Boss Room.*

Turned out, some of the pillars at the edge of the map, holding up the countless floors above us in a way that realistically *wasn’t possible* were hollow, which was *even less possible*, and while most of the dungeons they held were decent, one held Illfang at the top, guarding the doorway to **Level 2**.

It was pretty obviously a *Beta Tester* that had found it, able to recognize the Floor Boss and high-tail it out of there, though I supposed maybe someone read the guide and realized what it was from the name floating above its head.

Though, given how *many* of them there were, all of them being far as possible away from everything else, that *alone* explained how long it took to find, even with the Beta Testers using every cheat and exploit they could to power-level themselves.

On the bright side, I’d bound Argo, who was only a Tier 2 at the time, only giving me *two* points instead of three, but, as a *named* character, she *didn’t* get slapped with the ‘Supply and Demand’ penalty, so that was nice.

What was nicer was the fact that, with the **Martial Talent Sharing** I’d picked up, I could help her out a *lot*, as the Sword Skills uptick rate was effected by *that* **Talent** as much as it was **Psychic Talent**. My own training in Basic had taught me a metric *fuckton* about fighting, my ‘Philosophy of Combat’ Seminar, taught by the twin gods of Kratos and Futsunushi, serving as a firm foundation, the other dozen after that getting me better at fighting animals, monsters, and most of all *people*, which, given the Kobolds I’d run into poking around the ‘pillar dungeons’ myself, I’d put to good use.

And the Kobolds were *definitely* a step up in the general fighting capability of local monsters, enough that I’d been ready to dissuade Argo from helping with the Illfang, though, when I’d suggested she *not* go, the blonde had given me an odd look and informed me that she was okay with me helping her get *stronger*, but she was ‘a logistical girl, not one of those Valkyrie types, nyah’.

Having *met* Valkyries, they didn’t really *have* a type, some being boisterous amazonian fighters, some absolute *cunts*, some valley-girl like martially oriented fangirls, and some little better than *vultures*, but there was no real way to *explain* that, so I’d just nodded and thanked her for the intel, looking forward to next week’s meeting, and not just because I was now no longer in debt, or the fact that’d be getting another infusion of Col from my ‘Company Salary’.

Either way, the ‘copy from your enemies’ aspect of **Martial Talent** worked on the Kobolds, which *helped*, not me, but my Bound, even if the **Talent** didn’t *really* jive with individual skills like Horizontal and Thrust, only teaching you how to use them as *the Kobolds* used them, which was in a *stupidly* telegraphed and ill-timed manner.

While bad, **Martial Talent** would make unlearning those flawed habits easy once they started realizing they *were* bad, and with exposure to a competent teacher. Thing is, even *having* those bad habits was *still* better than what I’d seen from some of the chucklefucks I’d seen around the Town of Beginning. I’d ended up having to take a couple days to organize a training camp of people, who I *also had to fucking pay*, to run classes for absolute noobs, since, again, *the tutorial was broken*.

Seriously, the number of players who tried to tried to capture Frenzy Boars because ‘they wanted a pet piggy’ were… well it was *more than one,* and telling them they’d have to wait until Floor 8 to get the Companion Animal Quest had helped, *mostly*, even though *some* idiots had wanted to do it anyways because, and I quote, “I don’t need a Skill to be one with nature!”

Having followed the dumbass, and killing the Boar right before it killed *her,* she’d yelled at me for “slaughtering that defenseless animal who was just following its natural instincts!’. Trying to explain that this was all *programmed,* and thus, *not natural in the slightest,* hadn’t helped, as she’d turned out to be one of *those* vegans, so I’d let her go.

A minute later, the Frenzy Boar following its programmed instincts, she died to the ‘defenseless’ construct’s ‘harmless’ charge.

Heck, technically, she *was* correct, as she hadn’t needed a Skill to be ‘one with nature’, in that everything in nature eventually *died.*

<<NonDairy\_Queen>> had at least served as an example to *everyone*, including the people I’d hired to train, that any of the ‘you can’t die to the first enemies’ rumors that’d been spread were *absolute horseshit*.

As her ‘ring’ had dropped, not shattering with the rest of her, I’d dismissed it, the loss of the potential capture not as bad when I’d gotten two more while I’d been dealing with her, and I’d moved on.

Keeping *track* of all the Shrouds I’d made, I found, was *impossible*, only ‘unique’ creations, like the ones I kept on me, and Argo’s ring, discernable from the background eldritch ‘noise’ of this plane’s pseudo-reality. I’d added extra runework to the blonde’s ring, my knowledge of such things… *basic* at best, but I’d slapped together a warning array that’d let me know if she was injured, able to mold it in the baker’s dozen dimensions required to completely craft the runework, instead of the three it *seemed* to exist in.

More than that, if the Information Broker ever dropped below ten percent health, it’d turn itself into a battle-suit, *subtlety be damned*, because… because I liked Argo. Not *liked* like, I’d barely known her for a month, but she was a smart cookie, fun to work with, *and* fun to tease, which was something I found myself doing more than I normally would. Then again, I was *no longer human*, and that meant different instincts, urges, and visceral reactions to various things, like *consuming souls*, which I was *still* working to get a handle on, even now.

So it was partially because of those differing instincts, but mostly because of my *own* nature, that I liked spending time with the little intel gremlin, the girl hiding underneath that heavy cloak and those baggy clothes of hers, hiding potions, knives, poisons, and who knew what else within them. As such, while having to explain her ‘Ring’ turning into a *lot* more might slow down my general capture rate, as people started looking at them askance, it’d be worth the hassle to keep *her* alive, and if she was attacked by *players*, well, I’d hunt them down, Shroud them, sell their asses for extra points, and get her something nice to apologize.

Maybe a **Template**?

Eh, I’d build that bridge when I came to it.

Now, though, I made it to the amphitheater we were supposed to all be meeting in, right on time, and there were… seven people?

Yeah, there was the leader guy, <<Diabel>>, who had *very* blue hair, so I was in the right place, at least.

The number of people with unnatural hair colors had been explained by Argo, as the Nerve Gears had scanned us, *not* done any kind of genetic sampling, so if you’d dyed your hair IRL, it showed up as the ‘natural’ color here. I vaguely remembered there being some kind of societal taboo *against* doing that in general, with a lot of cosplayers using *wigs* instead, but I’d never actually *been* to Japan, just picking it up through the tainted osmosis of the internet, so it was highly possible I was *completely* off about that.

Walking up to the man in question, I still asked, “Um, is this the meeting for the Floor Boss?”

“Yeah!” he agreed turning with a gregarious smile. “Glad to have you…” the man trailed off reading my nameplate.

“Call me Gai,” I smiled in return, the joke an accidental test of character that I’d started leaning into, not only if they called me by the slur over my head, but *how* they did so, something my **Communication Talent** had a *field day* with decoding.

“Well…. *Gai,* thanks for showing up,” the man replied, “but I’ve found that with these people times are more… *suggestions*, so we’re not starting for another hour, or else I’d have to re-explain things over and over. If you want to go grab a bite to eat, we’ll be starting *then*.”

The man was hesitant, trying not to offend me, clearly hoping for as *many* people as possible. “Used to be a high-school teacher, trust me, *I understand,*” I reassured him, and the proto Raid-leader sighed in relief. “I’ll just grab a seat and wait. Needed to reorganize my inventory anyways.”

“Good! Glad to have you!” he grinned, waiting for me to step away before he went back to reading the guide that *I helped write*, preparing himself for his pitch.

I knew that, if I’d introduced myself as the guide’s composer, I could *probably* take over this little shindig, my read on the man as being someone who was exasperated, nervous, and *more* than a little at the end of his rope, but I wasn’t here to be the Hero, I was just here to help *others* survive.

And I’d been doing a *pretty* good job flying under the radar, if I did say so myself.

Grabbing a seat off to the side, and halfway up the benches, I opened my menu while, in reality, I stretched my senses wide open, seeing my surroundings with more than two eyes, as another few players had arrived.

Out of the ten currently present, two had my rings, and only one of them was Bound, with Diabel being *neither*. That said, given these were supposed to be the *top* tier of players, and I’d been handing them out to the ones *so bad* they’d decided to log out of *life itself* rather than play the game, that made a certain degree of sense.

So, things were progressing, but in a *much* better place than they would’ve been otherwise.

*Yeah,* I thought to myself.

*I got this.*